CHAPTER I

A Brief Profile of Barak Valley in South Assam: Geography and Administrative History

Barak Valley presents an epitome of the larger history of Assam in North East India. According to Sujit Chodhury,\(^1\) three southern Assam districts of Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi commonly known as the Barak Valley, is a pointer to the fact spoken by T.S.Eliot of “contrived corridors and cunning passages of history. So there is nothing unusual if social and cultural boundary does not conform to the political identity imposed on it at a given point of time through a trick of history.” Politically, the Barak Valley is a part of Assam, but it has nothing in common with Assam proper i.e. the Brahmaputra Valley. Also, the region differs in all respects from other units of North East India.\(^2\)

Located South eastwards of Meghalaya, Barak Valley comprises three districts of Cachar, Hilakandi and Karimganj in South Assam. It is separated from the Brahmaputra Valley (Assam) by the hilly tracts of the North Cachar Hills district (now Dima Hasao) at approximately 24.8 and 25.8 N longitude and 92.15-93.15 E latitude. The valley is bounded by North Cachar Hills district (of Assam) and the south-eastern tip of Meghalaya on the north, Manipur state on the east, Mizoram and parts of Tripura on the South and Bangladesh on the West. We often come across references being made to this area as Surma Valley, after a branch of the river Barak

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called Surma, which flanked the Sylhet town\(^3\) (now in Bangladesh), particularly during the colonial period. The valley referred to, could have encompassed areas between the Surma and the Kushiara in Sylhet (now in Bangladesh). In this light, Barak Valley would include not only areas on both sides of the Barak in Cachar, Hailakandi and parts of Karimganj districts in South Assam, but also extends to some areas in Sylhet District. In 1874, S. Choudhury writes,\(^4\) when Assam was organised as a province by the British, two Bengali-speaking districts of Sylhet and Cachar were carved out of the Bengal Presidency and incorporated in Assam to meet the revenue deficit of the newly formed province. The twin districts were then placed under a commissionership and came to be known as the Surma Valley Division.\(^5\) However, at the time of the partition of the country in 1947, the major part of the Sylhet District (leaving Karimganj to India) was transferred to East Pakistan (Bangladesh) and the name Surma Valley has fallen into disuse.\(^6\) The Indian portion of the Valley is known today as Barak Valley named after the principal river Barak of the tract.\(^7\) But for all practical purposes, S. Chodhury in his book\(^8\) remarks, that Surma-Barak Valley forms a single cultural unit.\(^9\) To reconstruct the past of the Barak Valley, he continues to write, “frequent references to Sylhet becomes obvious. There is a dichotomy between the political boundary of the present day and socio cultural legacy of the past.”

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\(^4\) S. Chodhury, *op cit.*, p.xi.
\(^6\) J.B. Bhattacharjee, "The Ancient Political Structure of the Barak Valley" in *North Eastern Hill University* (Henceforth, NEHU) *Journal of Social Science and Humanities* Vol I No 1, p.2.
\(^8\) S. Choudhury, *op cit.*, p.xi.
This chapter intends to provide the geographical and administrative characteristics of the Valley which had gone a long way in shaping and “influencing the historical and social evolution of Barak valley.”

In ancient times, the entire Barak-Surma Valley was known as “Shrihatta Mandala” or “Shrihattarajya” at different points of time. Its geographical structure covers three districts of Assam viz Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj; the Jatinga Valley of North Cachar, Jiri Frontier Tract (Jiribam) of Manipur, Kailasahar-Dharmanagar areas of Tripura and four districts of Bangladesh, namely Sadar Sylhet, Maulavi Bazar, Habiganj and Sunamganj. The Valley is a natural extension of the Bengal Plains. Niharranjan Ray aptly summarises the situation:

The Barak-Surma Valley is nothing but the northern extension of the Meghna Valley (Dacca- Mymensing-Comilla). There is nothing like a natural boundary between these two valleys and that is why, the traditions and culture of these districts of East Bengal so easily spread into Sylhet and Cachar in ancient and medieval periods. Even now the society and culture of the Hindus and Muslims of Sylhet-Cacharis bound with the eastern districts of Bengal in one thread.

The physical feature registers only a slow and gradual change as one travels from this valley to anywhere in Bengal and vice versa. The alluvial geological

2. J.B. Bhattacharjee,”The Ancient Political Structure of Barak Valley” op cit., p.2.
3. Ibid., p.2.
formations, the natural vegetation and the climate conform to the neighbouring districts of Eastern Bengal.\footnote{14}{J.B. Bhattacharjee, “The Ancient Political Structure of Barak Valley” op cit., p.2.} According to J.B. Bhattacharjee, the Jatinga Valley of North Cachar, the Jiribam area of Manipur and the Kailasahar Dharmanagar area of Tripura are just extensions of Barak Surma Valley in the hills.\footnote{15}{Ibid., p.2.} While the plains tract, along with the neighbouring districts like Comilla (Tripura), Chittagong and Noakhali was commonly designated as South East Bengal known in ancient time as “Samantata”, the Barak-Surma Valley tract situated on the extreme corner of Bengal was known in ancient time as “Shrihatta Mandala or Rajya”, which in popular usage it was designated as “Ishan Banga” (North East Bengal).\footnote{16}{Ibid., p.2.}

The geographical feature of the Valley is singularly diversified and beautiful. To Rev. J.H. Morris, “in no part of Assam” he writes, “is more beautiful scenery to be found.”\footnote{17}{J.H. Morris, The History of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists Foreign Mission: To The End of the Year 1904, Indus Publishing Company, New Delhi, 1910, Reprint, 1996, p.213.} The spectacular landscape, of Barak Valley consists of the plains, the hills, the intermittent highland (locally called tillas) and lowlands full of water called 'Bheels' or "haors". Morris highlighted, that the valley is covered with a perplexing network of sluggish streams and liable to deep flooding in the rains. It appears to be a vast deltaic expanse, whereby during the rainy season, the torrents that pour down from the neighbouring hills, together with the heavy local rainfall, converted the entire surface into an ocean of waters; "the tillas or raised sites on which the villages are built, appeared as small islands in the midst of the placid sea".\footnote{18}{Ibid., p.213.}

The principal river of the valley, the Barak runs through it, along with its branches the Surma, and Kushiara, parts of which are navigable throughout the year.
Originating in Manipur, the Barak river enters Barak Valley a little towards the southern point of Jiribam (Manipur)/ Jirighat (Assam) area on the eastern fringe. As indicated in the *Physical and Political Geography of Assam*:\(^{19}\)

Barak River rises in the Borail Range to the North of Manipur.

Its source is among the southern spurs of the great mountain mass called Japvo, on the northern slopes of which are situated the most powerful villages of the Angami Nagas.

The Barak winds its way from east to west right through the district (Cachar District)\(^{20}\) upto Bhanga (beyond Badarpur-ghat) in Karimganj District where it bifurcates into two-the Kushiara flowing westwards (Sylhet District) corresponding Karimganj District and the Surma- taking a North-Western course in Sylhet and Sonamganj Districts (Bangladesh) corresponding the Jaintia Hills and East Khasi Hills Districts of Meghalaya. According to Fisher \(^{21}\) the village Bhanga derived its name without question from its position at the fork of the Soorma and Kushiara rivers, where the latter bursts from the former and rushes towards the Bhatta country. Fisher also wrote that Bhanga means to walk through water or mud, as well as to burst or break and the expression is therefore applicable to the inundation. \(^{22}\)

The Barak is from one hundred and fifty to two hundred yards wide navigable all the year round for small boats, and during six months of the year would be so for any sized boats, including steamers. \(^{23}\) Though the Barak, at times, exhibits its wrath through the fury of floods, the people of Manipur and Barak Valley are sentimentally attached to the river.

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\(^{19}\) Assam Government, *Physical and Political Geography of the Province of Assam*, Shillong, 1896, p.16.


\(^{22}\) Ibid., p.839.

During its long course of more than five hundred miles through the Barak-Surma Valley, the Barak receives innumerable tributaries from the Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills, North Cachar Hills, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura. The Jiri that took its rise on the southern slopes of the Borail near Haflong and the Madhura rising from the same range joined near Silchar. On the other hand, Jatinga which rises south of Haflong debouched in the plains at Panighat and then through Borkhola receiving Dalu on the left bank fell into Barak beyond Joynagar. Other branches are the Lukha, Hari, Piyain, Bogapani and Jadukata from the Khasi and Jaintia Hills which flow to the Surma branching out of the Barak. On the south it receives the Sonai, Dhaleswari and Katakhali from the Lushai Hills. The Longai, from the Tippera Hills drains into the Kushiara – a branch of the Barak. Barak becomes Dhaleshwari in the Mymensingh District, joins Brahmaputra, (called Jamuna in Bangladesh) merges into Meghna and finally flows into the Bay of Bengal. J.D. Hooker observes:

The anatomising rivers that traverse it flow very gently and do not materially alter their course; hence their banks gradually rise above the main level of the surrounding country, and on them the small villages are built, surrounded by extensive rice fields that need no artificial irrigation. The communication is at all seasons by boats in the management of which the natives are experts.

26 Ibid., p. 156.
27 Assam Government, Physical and Political Geography of The Province Assam, op cit., p. 6.
28 Ibid., p. 7.
29 J.B. Bhattacharjee, “The Ancient Political Structure of Barak Valley” op cit., p. 3.
The Valley is surrounded on three sides by high mountains and ranges of hills. In the Physical and Political Geography of Assam, the British officials reported: 31

To the north of the valley stands the steep face of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the plateau of which rises very abruptly from the plain to a height of 4,000 feet, the table land presenting when seen from Sylhet, an almost level line. Near the eastern boundary of Sylhet, the plateau recedes into the interior of the hills and a new barrier the angular and serrated range of the Barail or “Great Dyke”, takes its place as the northern boundary of the valley. This range gradually increases in height and precipitous character as one proceed eastwards, and at the eastern extremity of Cachar takes a curve to the north east, thereby forming the main axis of the Naga Hills, and eventually merging in the Patkoi. To the east the valley is shut in by the mountains of Manipur a continuation of the succession of parallel ridges, lying north and south, into which the Arrakan Yoma Range divides as it approaches the Himalayas. On the south also these parallel ridges extend for some distance into the alluvial plain, gradually retreating as the river emerges from Cachar into Sylhet, but still preserving their uniform meridional direction, until the Bengal district of Tipperah is reached.

The Borail Range, which connects the North Manipur Hills and the Khasia Range, along the north of Cachar district forms a continuous wall along the North of the Barak Valley varying from 2,500 - 6000 feet in height. 32 Of the hills to the south of the Barak, the principal are the Bhubans which vary from 700 - 3000 feet in height; the Bhubans run north and south at a short distance from the eastern boundary. 33 The plain tract of the valley is also broken up by two long ranges running north and south called the Rengtipahar, and the Tilian Range. The hills forming the

33 Ibid., p.364.
Tilian range being from one hundred feet to five hundred feet in height. The Sarishpur or Sriddheswari Hills stretched in a continuous line to Barak forming the western boundary varying from six hundred to two thousand feet. All of these hills are formed in ridges and peaks with precipitous sides covered with trees. To quote Hunter:

In shape, the hills are ridged or peaked, some of them form long even ridges, others bristle up into peaks and a few are saddle baked i.e with an elongated summit of which the two extremities are higher than the intervening space. Their slopes are extremely precipitous, notably the Bhuban Hills. Most of the hills are covered with forest jungle.

The hills were clothed with dense forest growth and jungles such as timber of various kinds, bamboos of many kinds, cane, reeds and thatching grass. In the jungles, there are also all kinds of wild animals – elephants, tigers, buffaloes, bison, hogs, deers etc. The presence of wild animals indicated the place as remote and wild that could have attracted a renowned hunter, conservationist, naturalist Jim Corbett to Cachar district’s Loharbund forest for a big game shooting. The physiography thus imposed a formidable barrier that the valley remained in the wilderness for long.

Surrounded on three sides by ranges of Hills, Barak Valley opens itself to the plains of Bengal on the fourth without any natural barrier. For such geographical reason, the Barak Valley as already stated, became a social and cultural extension of

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34 Ibid., p.364.
37 Ibid., p.260.
38 Telegraph, July 2009.
Bengal.³⁹ In this context, the influx of migrants extended to the Valley from Bengal in early times in its “spontaneous march to the furthest limits of the fertile plains of the delta.”⁴⁰ This rendered the Valley a natural geographical continuity with the rest of Bengal and enhanced the domination of the Bengali culture of the Gangetic plains in Barak Valley. The Barak Valley therefore is an extension of eastern Bengal geographically, culturally and socially.⁴¹

II

The Nidhanpur Copper Plate serves as the first indisputable material evidence to reconstruct the socio-political scenario of Barak Valley.⁴² According to the inscription, a part of the Valley was known as Chandrapuri Vaishaya in the late fifth or early sixth centuries A.D. and had been under the rule of the successive Bhaumaka- Naraka rulers from Bhutivarman to Bhaskaravarman.⁴³ Other regions of the valley, on the other hand, were under the rule of the Samantata rulers, as evident from the Kalapur inscription of Marudanatha issued in the late seventh or early eight century A.D.⁴⁴ Between the eighth and the eleventh century, the region often played a dominant role in the political developments of eastern India as the core zone of the famous Harikela kingdom.⁴⁵ In the tenth century, Srichandra of the renowned Chandra dynasty of the eastern Bengal, incorporated a major portion of the Valley

⁴¹Ibid., p.64.
⁴²S. Chodhury, op cit., p.xiii.
⁴³Ibid., p.xiii.
⁴⁴Ibid., p.xiii.
⁴⁵Ibid., p.xiii.
within his kingdom. The two Bhattera inscriptions of Govinda Keshavadeva and Ishandeva, revealed the existence of an independent Srihatta Rajyawithin which the entire geographical length and breadth of the Barak-Surma valley (which may include the three districts of Assam, viz. Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj, the Jatinga Valley of North Cachar, Jiri Frontier Tract (Jiribam) of Manipur, Kailasahar-Dharmanagar areas of Tripura and four districts of Bangladesh, namely, Sadar Sylhet, Maulavi Bazar, Habiganj and Sunamganj) was incorporated. Bhattacharjee writes, “the history of the Valley during this period represented the pan–Indian culture continuum; the political organisations were in Brahmanical model of state formations and the foundation of the local society must have been laid during that period.”

The decline of the Shrihatta Rajya in the 12th century A.D. ushered in a new era of historical development of the Barak-Surma Valley. It marked the period of political disintegration and rise of petty states in the Valley which consequently brought about a change with regard the geographical limits of the entire Barak-Surma Valley which was once under a single political organisation. Kamaluddin Ahmed is of the opinion that such a political situation bears the testimony of division of the valley into western and eastern portions. The western portion forming lower valley, comprising modern Karimganj district of Assam and Sylhet division of Bangladesh, was divided into a network of small principalities ruled by Aryanised chieftains which emerged out of the autochthon tribe, while the eastern

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46 Ibid., p.xiii.
48 J.B. Bhattacharjee, “Pre-Colonial Political Structure of Barak Valley” op cit p.65.
49 Ibid., p.65.
portion comprising Cachar and Hailakandi districts of Assam forming the upper valley was brought under the nominal suzerainty of the Indo Mongoloid Tripuri state.\textsuperscript{51} Hence, during the period from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century after the fall of the Shrihatta Rajya the valley was politically bifurcated against its geographical setting.

In the beginning of the thirteenth century A.D., the Lower Valley (famously known as Sylhet during the medieval and also the colonial period)\textsuperscript{52} was parcelled out among a number of petty kingdoms ruled by Aryanised tribal chiefs such as Laur and Gaur or Sylhet proper. They were both purely localised states. Laur state was situated on the North-Western corner of the lower valley, while Gaur, the most famous of all the local states was situated in western part of the lower valley or Srihatta proper.\textsuperscript{53} It included the whole of North Sylhet, the Sylhet town and vast areas in the east and south of the town.\textsuperscript{54} This region consequently became an administrative unit of Bengal Sultunate after the extension of the Turkish rule in the early 14\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{55} Again, with the extension of the Mughal rule in the mid seventeenth century, the region became a revenue cum administrative unit called Sarkar and later Chakla under Subah of Bengal of the Mughal Empire.\textsuperscript{56} Hence, the region came under the rule of the Bengal Sultans from the fourteenth century to the mid seventeenth century and the Mughal rule from the mid seventeenth to the eighteenth century. The Mughal rule continued upto 1765 A.D when the colonial

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\textit{Ibid.}, p.218. & \\
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J.B. Bhattacharjee, “The Pre-colonial Political Structure of Barak Valley” \textit{op cit.}, p.69. & \\
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Kamaluddin Ahmad, \textit{op cit.}, p.220. & \\
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rule was founded in Bengal with the assumption of the Dewani of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa by the East India Company.\(^{57}\)

The upper valley region, on the other hand, was never submitted to the overwhelming power of either the Turks or the Mughals during the period under review. The region instead witnessed the rise of three Indo Mongoloid state formations developed by the Tipperah, the Koch and the Dimasa.\(^{58}\) Most of the territories of this portion of the Valley came under the nominal control of the Tripuri royal house. The decline of *Srihatta Rajya*, gave an opportunity to the Raja of Tripura to establish his control in the areas of the Valley adjoining his state. The Tripuri *rajas* exercised their control over the eastern and southern sectors of the Upper Valley,\(^{59}\) till the 16th century A.D. when their sphere of influence in the Valley came to an end after Chilarai, the brother of the Koch king Naranarayan, conquered the region and put it under the charge of one of his officials.\(^{60}\) Chilarai, in his north-eastern campaign successfully defeated the Tipperahs and left the annexed territory with a contingent of Koch soldiers under Kamalnarayan. Within no time Kamalnarayan freed himself from the overlord and started functioning as an independent ruler from Khaspur, his capital.\(^{61}\) The story of the invasion of this region by the Koch is confirmed by a tradition current amongst the Dehans, a small tribe of the Cachar District, who claimed to have descended from the Koches who invaded the district.\(^{62}\) This petty kingdom was later amalgamated with the Hiramba kingdom through a matrimonial alliance. Raja Jasanarayan, the most powerful Dimasa king of

\(^{59}\) J.B. Bhattacharjee, “The Pre Colonial Political Structure of Barak Valley” *op cit.*, p.71.  
\(^{60}\) S. Chodhury, *op cit.*, p.xiv.  
Maibong, occupied a portion of the Barak Valley bordering North Cachar Hills, which extended up to Pratapgarh in modern Karinganj district claiming himself as the "Conqueror of Srihatta".\textsuperscript{63} Bhim Singha, the last Raja of Khaspur, on the other hand, grew old and his only daughter, named Kanchani, was married to Prince Lakshmi Chandra of the Dimasa royal family of Maibong following which, the Khaspur and the Maibong states merged into one\textsuperscript{64} and the capital of the united Heramba Rajya was shifted to Khaspur. C.A. Soppit tells us clearly that “.....about the year 1750 the Raja, his court and the barmans (the aristocracy) crossed the Borail range and established the Raj in the plains at Khaspur.”\textsuperscript{65} Ever since, Khaspur became the capital of Heramba, the kingdom was called by the people of Sylhet as "Kachar Kingdom" and the ruling Dimasa tribe as the Kacharis.\textsuperscript{66} In the mean time, a series of Ahom invasion rendered this kingdom weak and disintegrated. All the more, Cachar became the scene of a struggle for supremacy between the Manipuri brothers, Marjit, Chaurjit and Gambhir Singh who had been driven from their own country by the Burmese. This furthered the process of decadence of the Kingdom which ultimately led to its annexation by the British in 1832.

Though Sylhet passed under the company’s rule in 1765, the British did not take any interest in the neighbouring kingdom of Cachar till during the twenties of the nineteenth century when the Burmese attack on this Kingdom threatened the safety of Sylhet.\textsuperscript{67} Governor General Amherst pointed out that if Cachar passed under the Burmese, the safety and security of Sylhet would be threatened. Realizing

\textsuperscript{64}S.C.Ghosal, History of Cooch Behar, Calcutta, 1942, p.172, also in J.B.Bhattacharjee, Ibid., p.77.
\textsuperscript{65}C.A. Soppit, A Historical and Descriptive Account of the Kachari Tribe in North Cachar Hills, Shillong, 1885, p.5.
\textsuperscript{67}D. Datta, op cit., Vol I, p.1.
the implication of the occupation of Cachar by the Burmese, the Court of Directors decided to occupy Cachar as a tributary kingdom. A Accordingly, the British signed a treaty with Govinda Chandra on 16th March, 1824 at Badarpur by which Govinda Chandra, as a tributary ruler, agreed to pay Rs 10,000 to the British annually. However, caught up between the rebellions of Tularam and the threat of attack by Gambhir Singh, Govinda Chandra’s reign had always been in an insecure condition. He was soon assassinated in 1830, and leaving no heir, either natural or adopted, the country was annexed by the proclamation on the 14th August, 1832. in compliance, “with the frequent and earnestly expressed wishes of the people”.

In its subsequent history, Cachar much resembles Assam. Act VI of 1835 (like Act II of that year in the Assam Valley) placed it under the control of the Sadr Court and Board of Revenue. It was administered by a superintendent, who in 1833 was vested with the powers of a magistrate and collector and in the same year it was transferred from the supervision of the Commissioner of Assam to that of the Commissioner of Dacca. In 1874, as already stated, when Assam was organised as a province, the district of Sylhet and Cachar were tagged with Assam. Both Sylhet and Cachar were then placed under a commissionership and came to be known as the Surma Valley Division. Karimganj, Sadr Sylhet, Maulavi Bazar, Habiganj and Sunamganj were all subdivisions of the Sylhet District in the British period when Silchar, Hailakandi and North Cachar were sub divisions of the Cachar District. The administrative division continued to exist up 1947. In 1947, at the time of Partition, of the country, the major part of the Sylhet District leaving Karimganj to India was

68 Ibid., p.10.
69 Assam Government, Physical and Political Geography of the Province of Assam, op cit., p.79.
71 Assam Government, op cit., p.79.
72 Ibid., p.79. Also J.B.Bhattacharjee, Cachar Under the British Rule, op cit., p.74.
transferred to East Pakistan (Bangladesh). The Muslim majority areas of Sylhet were transferred, after ascertaining the views of the people through a Referendum. Sylhet with the exception of four thanas of Karimganj, Rathabari, Patharkandi and Badarpur, was put to referendum. Altogether 2,39,619 votes were polled in favour of the partition and 1,84,041 against. Thus the partition became a fait accompli. The Karimganj sub-division consisting of Karimganj, Rathabari, Patharkandi and Badarpur, was transferred to Cachar which continued to be a part of Assam. After independence, Cachar had four sub divisions, namely Silchar, Hailakandi, Haflong and Karimganj. The Haflong sub division was subsequently separated from Cachar and eventually constituted into the district of North Cachar Hills (now Dima Hasao). The entire Cachar District was divided into three sub-divisions, viz Silchar, Karimganj and Hailakandi until 1983. The Karimganj sub-division of Cachar became a separate district of Assam on 1st July 1983 and on 11th October 1989, Hailakandi sub-division was also declared as a district of the Valley. Today, these three districts-viz, Cachar, Karinganj and Hailahandi of Assam are together known as Barak Valley lying on the southern most part of Assam in North East India.

It is therefore understood, that the political formations since the pre colonial period disturbed the geographical feature of the entire Barak Surma Valley. Nevertheless, the social formation coincides with the geographical limitation of the Valley, all along. To quote S. Chodhury:

Socially and culturally, Cachar plains always maintained its close contact with neighbouring Sylhet throughout these periods of political disruption. It is for this reason, the Hiramba royal court accepted Bengalis as the language of administration and culture even

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74 S. Chodhury, *op cit.*, pp.xiv-xv.
when its capital was situated at hilly Maibong. When the capital was shifted to Khaspur, the royal house encouraged settlements of the Bengalees for economic advancements of the kingdom and the same policy was followed by the British. In 1874, when the districts of Sylhet and Cachar were tagged with Assam, the Governor General promised to protect the linguistic and cultural identity of the Surma Valley. The Indian National Congress also recognised this fact and hence district Congress Committees of Sylhet and Cachar were put under the jurisdiction of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee till 1947. Today, the Bengali-speakers form 80 percent of the population of the Barak Valley. This demographic fact manifests the culmination of a historical process which was started in the earliest historical period.75

III

The beautiful landscape and enchanting natural scenery of Barak Valley witnessed waves of migration of people coming from multiple directions at different points of time. It is not known for certain who the earliest inhabitants of the Barak Valley were. S. Chodhury in his book holds that from indirect evidences, it is presumed by scholars that the earliest settlers in the Valley were Austric-speaking people. They were followed by groups of people speaking different varieties of Tibeto-Burman speeches whose phased migration started quite early and continued till the nineteenth century.76 According to Sujit Chodhury, the basic stratum of the society of the Barak valley was perhaps formed by the fusion between these two groups.77 He stated that, the antiquity of Siddheswar Kapilasram near Badarpur and existence of archaeological remains at Bhuvan Hill prove that Puranic Hinduism

75 Ibid., pp.xiv-xv.
76 Ibid., p.xii.
77 Ibid., p.xii.
accommodating local elements had spread over the region before the thirteenth or early in the thirteenth century. This state of affairs proves that some Hinduised people, might be of miscegenous origin or Indo- Mongoloid origin were inhabitants of these pockets. 78 During the thirteenth century, the Aryanised Bodosub tribe of the Tibeto-Burman ethnic group of the Mongolian stock absorbed the earlier Austric cultural group of people originally inhabiting the region. 79 In the 16th century, in the short span of the Koch rulea small number of the Koch, locally known as Dehan, migrated to Cachar during the invasion of Chilarai of Cooch Behar when the Khaspur state came into existence under Dewan Kamalnarayan. 80 Their number increased marginally during the Moamaria Rebellion 81 in the Assam Valley, when the Raja of Cachar offered settlement to some fugitive families. 82 Another interesting feature occurred during the rule of the Dimasa king. J.B. Bhattacharjee has mentioned that about fifty Dimasa families moved to the plains with the Raja when the Dimasa capital was shifted from Maibong to Khaspur in 1750 A.D. following the merger of the Khaspur state with the Heramba (Dimasa) state. 83 They were joined by a few more families during the political turmoil in North Cachar Hills in the 1820’s. 84 TheseDimasaor the Kachariconstituted a numerous population in the Valley.

The Valley is yet peopled by the Bengalee who had developed settlements as a result of the natural movement towards the east. The Valley, writes

78 Ibid., p.236.
79 Ibid., p.236.
81 Moamaria Rebellion (1769-1806) was the 18th century conflict between the Morans adherents of the Moamara Sattra and the Ahom kings. This led to widespread popular discontent against the Ahom kings and nobles in which the Ahom king lost control of the capital.
82 Ibid., p.14.
84 Ibid., p.14.
J.B.Bhattacharjee, provided ideal conditions to be the homeland of a cohesive group of people who are “ethnically, linguistically, and culturally” identical with the plains dwellers over an extensive territory beyond Sylhet.\textsuperscript{85} He observes:\textsuperscript{86}

The Bengalee population must have in a remote period of history gradually spread from west to east and ultimately reached this extreme frontier region of Bengal.

The Bengalee population began to increase during the Kochrule, when some Brahmins from Sylhet were appointed as priests in the temples of Kancha Kanti and Shyama in Udharband.\textsuperscript{87} Again, at some stage of the Dimasa rule, more Bengalees immigrated into the valley to occupy the fallow lands bringing them under cultivation. In addition, the Dimasa ruler himself encouraged migrations from Bengal.\textsuperscript{88} He was of the view that without the influx of immigrants from Bengal there could be no increase in the revenues of Cachar, since the indigenous people were too few and miserably poor to develop the resources of the district.\textsuperscript{89} The Dimasa Raja allowed them to practise their own customs, usages and institutions and they enjoyed much autonomy in their respective parganas.\textsuperscript{90} These autonomous units, on the other hand, influenced the Dimasa settlers, including the members of the royal family to embrace the Hindu way of life accepting many of the Bengalee ethics.

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., p.81.
\textsuperscript{87} J.B. Bhattacharjee, \textit{Cachar under the British Rule, op cit.}, p.16.
\textsuperscript{88} H.K. Barpujari, \textit{Assam in the Days of the Company(1826-1858)}, North Eastern Hill University Publications, Shillong, 1996,p.102.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., p.102
\textsuperscript{90} J.B. Bhattacharjee, \textit{Cachar Under the British Rule, op cit.}, p.74 also A.S.R. File No636 of 1872.
Nevertheless, the valley remained thinly populated until at least the eve of the Company’s rule. This is because permanent settlement could not fully develop due to the geographical nature of land not congenial for permanent habitation and the predominance of tribal form of cultivation.\textsuperscript{91} Arable land was extremely scarce due to the presence of thick forest across the alluvial basins of the Barak and its tributaries. Also, the physical nature of the Valley made it the regular prey of devastating floods caused by the Barak and its tributaries.\textsuperscript{92} Moreover, after the fall of the Tripura king, the plains of the valley became densely forested because people living in the plains left their home and hearths to save themselves from the frequent raids of the hill tribes.\textsuperscript{93} G. Verner the Supeintendent, in his letter to A.G.M.Mills, Sudder Judge and Special Commissioner on deputation, reported that the inhabitants of the plains to the south of the valley were in constant alarm and dread of the tribes of the Kookie who resided both within the boundaries of the government and without to the south and south east in the independent Tipperah Hills and in the Munipoor territories. They used to come down and attack the villages in the plains, massacre the inhabitants, take their heads, loot and burn their houses.\textsuperscript{94} Hence, at the time of its annexation by the British, the Valley was left deserted by its inhabitants. To understand the condition of the valley, a brief description of the valley was given by U.C.Guha only eighty years after the annexation of the valley by the British. To quote him:\textsuperscript{95}

\textsuperscript{91}Ibid., p.236.
\textsuperscript{92}Ibid., p.236.
\textsuperscript{94}D. Datta, \textit{Cachar District Records}, Asiatic Society, Kolkata, 2007, p.274, No 208 of 1853. These aggressions used principally to be made after the death of one of the Kookie Rajas, where the having human heads to bury with him is in the idea of the Kookies a matter of great consideration.
\textsuperscript{95}U.C. Guha, \textit{op cit.}, also referred by Kamaluddin Ahmed \textit{op cit.}, 235.
Then (1832) the population of Cachar (modern Cachar, Hailakandi and North Cachar Hills districts of Assam) was not more than 50,000 and quantity of farable land was not more than 60,000 bighas. Then the district of Cachar was full of wild and ferocious animals and forests. Very few and organised subjects living in the valley would always remain in a situation of about to run away leaving all belongings as they would have no other alternative to protect themselves from anarchy and raids of hill tribes.

A drastic change took place only after the annexation in 1832. The period resulted in a substantial increase in population and a gradual opening of the Valley in various fields. Bengaleesettlers began to migrate to the valley to cultivate the arable lands in respond to the invitation of the Britishers. Pemberton, reported:  

It is from the densely populated district of Sylhet that we must look for settlers for the extensive tract of still unoccupied land in Kachar, which lie on the southern side of the Barak river. There is perhaps no district in India, in which the subdivisions of land has been carried to so great an extent as in that of Sylhet and where as Captain Fisher has justly observed, in one of his letters “a great proportion of the population is wasting its strength, in the cultivation of inferior lands, which afford but a miserable sub-sistence to the ruyut, and contribute little or nothing to the public revenue.

Gradually, people came to the Valley of their own accord in small numbers monthly to better their condition, the favourable terms on which land might be the chief inducement. In course of time, to develop the vast fertile but fallow land in the valley and to improve the revenue, Fisher, made every effort to increase the

97 D. Datta, Cachar District Records, op cit., p.139.
population. With the approval of the Government of India, he extended invitation to the cultivators of adjacent districts in Bengal even extending to Burdwan and Birbhum. The newcomers received lands on liberal terms and formed part of the permanent population in the Valley. To attract settlers, letters were issued through the respective district officers to the effect:

That the country of Cachar had been permanently annexed to the British dominion, that the tax would be levied at the rates analogous to such as had been adopted, that the settlers would get good jungle lands rent free for 1,000 days, and at the end of the settlement would be concluded for the portion brought under cultivation to which the holder would acquire a propriety right as a talukdar or zamindar and that were an outlay was made for draining or filling marshes, clearing forests, the period during which the land would be allowed to remain rent free would be extended to five years etc etc.

In response, many more newcomers poured into the Valley. In this connection mention may be made of an interesting finding at the Silchar District Record room which indicated the transfer of the Jaintia population in 1837.

Next to the Bengalee, the Manipuri formed a predominant population in the valley. G.Verner reported that a considerable portion of the inhabitants of the valley were the “Munnipoories” (Manipuri) who resided mostly in the eastern paragnasof Luckypore (Lakhipur), Baskandy and Roopaiballee and who were usually quiet and well behaved. A good number of Manipuricame to the valley during the Burmese

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98 F.P.P. 18th June, 1830, No 59; Referred by J.B.Bhattacharjee, Cachar Under the British Rule, opcit., pp.210-211.
99 J.B.Bhattacharjee, Ibid., p.77, also F.P.P. 3rd September, 1830, No.38.
100 D. Datta, op cit., Vol II, p.265.
occupation of Manipur since 1818 whereby some of them settled permanently.\(^{101}\) Since then waves of migration took place subsequently as Manipur was in turmoil for a long time. Pemberton in his report remarked: \(^{102}\)

Manipur was doomed...to devastating visitations of Burmese armies which have nine or ten times swept the country from one extremity to the other. In the war of succession which broke out in 1812 amongst the Manipuri brothers-Chaurjit, Marjit and Gambhir Singh, the Burmese intervened and set up Marjit as the ruler under the suzerainty of the king Ava. The remaining brothers fell upon Cachar and drove its ruler Govinda Chandra to seek protection under the British Government. Soon Marjit, like Chandra Kanta got tired of the Burmese tutelage and was forced in 1819 to flee to Cachar. From this period until 1823 Cachar was the arena on which the several Muneepooree brothers...contented for supremacy...the inevitable result of their disputes was the most serious injury to the country...cessation of Agricultural pursuits and the flight of a considerable portion of the inhabitants to Cachar.

They were all the more encouraged to settle in the valley during the British period. A large number of Manipurivillages were established by Fisher in the eastern part of Cachar.\(^{103}\) The Manipuri were encouraged to settle in the frontiers as demanded by the Government to cope with turmoil of the Kuki as the Manipuri who, on being supplied with a few firearms, were able to protect not only themselves but also the less war like plainsmen behind them.\(^{104}\) Several Naga and Kukiclanstoo began to settle in the Valley during the early years of the Company’s Rule. The Katcha Nagahave long been in the habit of frequenting and coming down the Oadarbund (Udharbund) bazaar in the district for the purpose


\(^{102}\) B.R. Pemberton, *op cit.*, p.36.


of trading.\(^{105}\) In May 1831, a Naga clan of 100 families en-masse migrated to the Valley from Kachha Naga territory (referring to the zelliangrong area of Nagaland and Manipur) and settled in the neighbourhood of Lakhipur (eastern part of now Cachar District).\(^{106}\) The British authorities extended gratuitous financial support for their rehabilitation. Similarly in March 1831, a body of Kuki consisting of 250 families came down to Cachar and were settled by Thomas Fisher, in the hill areas of Cachar. In the following years, there was a general exodus of Kuki, across the Valley, who settled themselves in several colonies, particularly in the North Cachar Hills. The Lushai, as well, made their way into the valley. In 1881-82, a famine broke out in the Lushai Hills. The great famine of 1882, caused by the depredations of rats, prompted the Lushai chiefs to depute envoys to Cachar to obtain supplies. The impact of the famine was so great that several Lushai families migrated to Cachar. Haricharan Sarma, a native Bengali, influential in local administration, played a role to open up the Lushai land in the valley.\(^{107}\)

An important point to take note of, is that, the workforce in the tea gardens of the Valley, too, contributed to the unique population composition. With the coming of the Tea Plantation in the Valley, the planters discovered that the local labour force was not adequate for ensuring the rapid progress of the gardens and a need was felt to import labour force from outside. Hence, the inflow of a large number of labourers took place from 1863 onwards. People from Bengal, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh were imported into Barak Valley through agents, referred to as Coolie Recruiting Agents, operating in the drought-

\(^{105}\)Ibid., p.196.  
\(^{106}\)Ibid., p.196.  
affected areas, having their head office in Calcutta.Labour market grew tremendously in the region with much prospect for the planters. All these immigrant communities according to Bhattacharjee, have adopted the valley as their homeland, speaking the local dialect of Bengali known as Sylheti and the various communities living here have reinforced each other’s culture and traditions.

With the passage of time, tribes from neighbouring areas migrated to the valley and settled there. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, a number of tribes from the neighbouring states had their presence in Barak Valley, particularly the Cachar belt. The Pnar tribe who had migrated from nearby Meghalaya (southern slopes of Jaintia Hills - a part of the erstwhile United Khasi and Jaintia Hills District) had also established themselves in the Valley since long. The Punjis in which they live are found dotting the present day three districts of Barak Valley – Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj. They cultivate pan i.e. betel leaf and established betel leaf cultivating villages in all the three districts. Yet not much is known about the Pnar and their Punjis in the Valley.

As could be gathered, there had been no attempt to delve into the history of these ‘Pnar Punjis’. The survey of literature reveals that the Pnar in Barak Valley are still out of academic research. Though, extensive researches were conducted on the Pnar of the Jaintia Hills, the Pnar living away from home in Barak Valley, in South Assam, have been neglected altogether. Hence, this study attempts to draw our attention to the hidden facts of these Pnar and their Pan Punjis which have remained ambiguous for long. The focal points calling for questions in the research work are, therefore, those circling round the circumstances leading to migration of the Pnar,

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the factors facilitating the migration process, settlement and livelihood. Besides, the study also focuses on earlier Khasi-Jaintia settlements which encouraged the migration of the Pnar to the Valley. An interesting point of the study is, though *Pan* Cultivation and trade had necessitated mingling and interaction with other communities in the plains, the Pnar continued to retain their culture, tradition and beliefs.

The research work aims at the following:

1. To study the motivating factors for the Pnar to settle in different areas of Barak Valley.

2. To study their settlement and livelihood with *Pan* Cultivation as their mainstay.

3. To study their society, culture and religion.

4. To study their relation with other communities.