

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

The Barak Valley forms the southern part of the state of Assam in India's north eastern region surrounded by hills on three sides and has a riverine international border with Bangladesh on the other side. Before independence and partition of India it was a part of the larger Surma Valley. The state of Assam is composed of three physical divisions, namely the Brahmaputra Valley, the Barak Valley and the Hill range. The two valleys derive their names from the respective main rivers, the Brahmaputra and the Barak flowing through east to west in the valleys. The hill region formed by the Karbi Anglong and the North Cachar Hills stand separated the two valleys from the middle. The Barak Valley region shares its border with North-Cachar Hills district and the state of Meghalaya in the north, the state of Manipur in the east, the state of Mizoram in the south and the state of Tripura and the Sylhet district of Bangladesh in the west. The plain tract covering Cachar and Hailakandi district of Barak Valley were earlier known as Cachar plains. It is surrounded on three sides by hills and only on the lower side it is exposed to Karimganj district which till 1947 was integrally included in Sylhet district without any natural barrier. In fact, the tract is a geographical extension of Sylhet.<sup>1</sup>

Karimganj which forms the part of Barak Valley had been the eastern portion of the British district, Sylhet. Thus the history of Karimganj is the integral part of the history of Sylhet. During the rule of the Great Mughals the Faujdar of Sylhet was a feudatory holding the fief according to the pleasure of the Nawab of Dacca. At the close of the Muslim rule the Nawab of Murshidabad was the supervising overlord to whom the Nawab of Dacca owed his allegiance. The southwest part of Sylhet had been a part of the principality of Tripura and the eastern one once formed the part of the Kachari Kingdom. Kachari ruler Yasonarayana fought against Islam Khan, Nawab of Dacca during the rule of Emperor Jahangir at Patharkandi

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<sup>1</sup> Suparna Roy, *Land System and Management in the Colonial period*, New Delhi, 2007, P. 7.

Karimganj district. All the territories of the west of the plains of Cachar were ceded to the Mughals by the Kachari prince after his defeat. The Mughals set up a strong military outpost at Badarpur. The Badarpur Fort Commanded the strategic position of the Lushai Hills (Mizoram) and the Borail ranges (Kachari Kingdom). Captain Verelst (later on the Governor of Fort William) advanced to Manipur to put a check upon the aggressive Burmese in January 1763 from the Badarpur outpost.

So far as the history of trade and commerce in colonial Surma-Barak Valley is concerned it is very scanty. Before the British occupation of Cachar a good overland communication system was not feasible and therefore external trade though existed was very much limited. Moreover the geographical barrier and political situation were not conducive to external trade. If we go through the economic condition of Cachar before the advent of the British we find a very gloomy picture. In the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there followed a scramble for succession between three Manipuri brothers. During 1816-24 in the wake of first Anglo-Burmese war Cachar become an arena of political conflict when the Burmese occupied Manipur, Cachar and Assam, the British declared war against Burma. Meanwhile in 1824 by the treaty of Badarpur which was concluded between Gobinda Chandra and the British, Cachar become a protected tributary state under the colonial rule. The assassination of Gobinda Chandra offered a golden opportunity to the British to annex Cachar into their territory by a proclamation in August 1832. The political situations helped them in taking such decision. After the annexation of Cachar, the supreme Government appointed Lieutenant Fisher as its Superintendent with the Headquarter at Dudpatil. However, in pursuance of the expressed desire of the Governor General Lord Willam Bentinck, Cachar was placed under the control of Dacca and the Head quarters of the Superintendent was shifted to Silchar in 1836.

The political situation was no doubt bad but the socio-economic situations were from bad to worse. Besides this, Cachar was depopulated during the Manipuri devastation and Burmese wars. Following the assassination of Raja Gobinda Chandra in 1830 many people fled away to Sylhet and other safe places. Between 1800-1830 there was large scale

depopulation in the district of Cachar. Amalendu Guha stated in his 'The Medieval Economy of Assam' that, "There was a terrible depopulation in course of the civil wars, 1770-1809 when half of the population was wiped out. Again the atrocities committed by the Burmese occupation forces during 1817-1825 further reduced the remaining number by one third or so. The census that followed British annexation of Ahom territories in 1826 yielded in that year account of only 7 to 8 lakhs, half of this concentrated in Kamrup laying west of Baranadi. Allowing for gaps this figure could be revised to one million..... working backwards from 1826 bench mark, local historians have estimated the mid eighteenth century population of the area at 2.5 million". This sounds reasonable if not a little on the low side. Whereas J.B. Bhattacharjee found that towards the end of the rule of Raja Krishna Chandra the economic structure of the Dimasa Government was in a decaying state and the new taxes were imposed to meet crisis. The advent of British meant a change Government. Along with change in government there was also change in the pattern of trade and commerce.<sup>2</sup>

It is evident that some amount of external trade was on way with Bengal and neighbouring hill tribes during peace period. Prior to the construction of the Assam-Bengal railway, communication with the outside world was kept up by the steamer through the Barak river. In the colonial period, internal trade of the Valley is carried out at local markets by indigenous inhabitants and external trade is chiefly in the hands of foreign shopkeepers. There were petty bazars in almost every tea garden for convenience of the imported tea garden labourers. The Bengal traders brought to these places commodities like rice, salt, tobacco, brass-ware etc. which were exchanged for caoutchouc, cotton, ivory etc.

So far as the merchants section is concerned most of them are natives of Sylhet or Bengal and very few numbers are from the united provinces and other parts of India. The number of Marwari Merchants is also very small. Though there were no big industries in the valley but a large number of important cottage industries existed in this valley. There were many articles which were imported from different places like rice, cotton goods, salt,

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<sup>2</sup> Suparna Roy, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 7-8.

hardware's, tobacco, brass-ware, ivory, bee-wax, various articles of luxury etc. The important articles of export were tea, timber and some other forest product.

Therefore the proposed research work intends to study in depth the intensity of both external and internal trade of the valley as well as to find out different traders and merchant communities involved in pursuing trade and commerce. The proposed study will investigate the articles of export and imports. The proposed work will also explore the trade routes as well as means of transport and communication for trade and commerce.

## **1.2 Review of Literature**

Research studies on trade and commerce in Surma-Barak Valley are rather scanty and inadequate in this Valley. Scanty references are available on the trade, commerce and communication over Surma-Barak Valley. Reviews of some important works on trade and commerce in Surma-Barak Valley are noted below: -

W.W. Hunter's *A Statistical Account of Assam, Vol-2* (1998), has given brief sketch about the trade and commerce in Surma-Barak Valley. He discussed both the principal markets and goods of the Surma-Barak Valley. This book elaborately discussed different trade centre of wholesale business in the valley. Most of the business is transacted at the bazars. Almost all the bazars are situated on the banks of the rivers. From the local hats or markets, the Beparis collect the local products and store them in the trade centre. The wholesale traders import goods from the various trade markets outside of the valley and purchase local goods for export. He also discussed the important fairs or melas in this Valley.

Suparna Roy's *Land System and Management in the Colonial Period* (2007), has given a brief sketch about geography, Land revenue systems of Cachar on the eve of British rule as well as socio-economic condition of Cachar and Sylhet. But no reference has been made on the trade system of the Valley. The book also deals with land revenue and administration in colonial Surma-Barak Valley.

Amlan Baruah & S.B. Roy Choudhury's *Gazetteers of India, Assam State* (1999), has mentioned the important local articles and its relations with Swadeshi movement. According to the author; the Surma-Barak Valley is no doubt a rich region in regard to her natural resources in raw materials but her financial resources are poor and people are in the main agriculturists having certain cottage industries by way of subsidiary occupation and means of earning. The pressure on the soil through gradually increasing is not yet great. There is therefore hardly any prospect of building up an artisan population in the valley capital and labours are therefore both wanting in valley.

Achyutcharan Choudhury's *Sreehatter Itibritta* (1992), discussed about the Surma-Barak Valley's Geographical location, principal agricultural items, trade-commerce, industries, local inhabitants and their religion and education the important pilgrimage centre etc. This book also elaborately discussed the different ruling dynasty, land system, socio-economic and religious culture over the Surma-Barak Valley. Sreehatter Itibritta has focused on the company's rule and its effect over the valley.

Upendra Guha's *Kacharer Ithibritta* (1972), gives a very brief review of the trade and commerce of the Surma-Barak Valley. He discussed people, language, education, important agricultural items, trade commerce and communication. The book mainly deals with transport and communication of the valley. The author described communication in the Surma-Barak Valley was not well developed though all the forms of communication were in use. There was no road which could be used for all the year round. The river Barak and Surma and their large tributaries were the only means of transport of the boats carrying the goods. The cost of transport goods was high. The tributaries of Surma-Barak were not at all navigable in the upstream and during the rainy season because of strong currents plying of loaded boats were extremely risky.

E.A. Gait's *A History of Assam* (1992), has given very brief account about the trade and commerce in Surma-Barak Valley as well as socio-economic and political condition of Cachar and Sylhet. He mainly emphasized the import and export items and communication of

the valley. He observes that the valley trade was carried on in the markets. There were petty bazars in almost every tea garden for convenience of the imported tea garden labourers.

Suhas Chatterjee's *A Socio-Economic History of South Assam* (2000), has given a brief sketch on trade commerce and communication of the Surma-Barak Valley. He mainly discussed about the Surma-Barak Valley's geographical location, principal agricultural items, industries, local inhabitants and their religions and education, the important pilgrimage centre etc. This book also discussed the different ruling dynasty, land system, socio-economic, religion and culture over the Surma-Barak Valley. The book also focused on the company's rule and its effect over the valley. According to the author the political situation in Surma-Barak Valley was no doubt bad but the socio-economic situation was from bad to worse due to the colonial policy.

B.C. Allen's *Assam District Gazetteers, Cachar, Vol-1* (1905), has given a brief account about the trade and commerce in Surma-Barak Valley. He mainly discussed the Internal and external trade of the valley and different types of trader. The internal trade may be sub-divided into two categories, wholesale trade and retail trade. According to B. C. Allen the trade in the Barak was almost entirely in the hands of the Marwaries and in the Surma Valley, the Sahas of East Bengal are the prominent traders. There is therefore, not much capital lying idle which can be drawn out. There is no doubt money-landing to some extent and in some places the rate of interest is too high, but the amount of money invested in money lending is very large.

Kamarunnasa Islam's *Aspects of Economic History of Bengal* (1982), has given an account about the ancient and modern trade and commerce in the Surma-Barak Valley. The author observes that the foreign trade in Surma-Barak Valley was limited to a vague tradition in which facts and fictions were hopelessly blended. Yet this record seems to take pleasure in depicting that glorious tradition rather than to enumerate dry facts of internal buying and selling in home markets. This book also elaborately discussed about the import and export articles and important market of the valley.

Suhas Chatterjee's *the status of Economy of the Chiefs in Mizo Chiefs and the Chieftdom* (2004), has given a brief Sketch on economy of the hill tribes of South Assam. He mainly discussed the important items of import and export in the hill region in Surma-Barak Valley. The author highlight the hillmen of Surma-Barak Valley had a good conception of trade both internal and external. There was political stability and free flow of consumer goods. The attitudes of the British officials towards the poor hillmen also have been sympathetic.

H.K. Barpujari's *The Comprehensive History of Assam Vol.- IV* (1963), has given a brief sketch on trade, Commerce and communication of the Surma-Barak Valley. He mainly discussed the principal export and import articles and communication. The only important articles of export was tea, which is shipped direct from the gardens and timber, agar wood, oranges, betel nuts etc. the important articles brought in to the valley were rice, salt, flour, sugar, cotton piece goods, kerosene oil, coal, iron, steel etc.

B.B. Hazarika & S.B. Roy Choudhury's *Assam District Gazetteers Cachar District* (1986), has given an account about the ancient and modern trade and commerce in the Surma-Barak Valley. He discussed about the import and export articles and the important market of the Valley. This book also elaborately discussed the internal and external trade of the valley. The external trade is again sub-divided into overseas trade and interstate trade of the different agricultural and industrial products of ancient Barak Valley, the major part would no doubt be required for direct or home consumption and were of course use up on the spot. The economic system gave prominence and preference to production for domestic use, as against production for exchange.

A.R. Choudhury's *Sylhet and its Trade with Highland Neighbours* (1972), has given a brief account about the trade and commerce in Surma Valley. The book mainly focused on transport and communication and the Company's rule and its effect over the Surma Valley. B. P. Chakrabarty's *Annexation of Cachar* (1832), has given an account about the political history of Cachar during the British period. He mainly discussed about the people, language, education, important agricultural items, trade, commerce and communication of the Valley.

H. K. Barpujari's *Assam in the Days of Company* (1977), gives a very brief review of the transport, communication internal and external trade, trade routes, trade centre and industries of the Surma-Barak Valley. Barpujari observes that the industries of Surma-Barak Valley are of very small importance. They include weaving, the making of rough pottery, bell-metal utensils, iron hoes, daos, etc. and simple agricultural implements.

### **1.3 Objectives of the Study**

The aim of the present study is to explore and examine the pattern and volume of trade and commerce in Surma-Barak Valley during the colonial period. The main objectives of the study are: -

- a). To examine both the external and internal trade of the valley.
- b). To explore the volume of trade.
- c). To find out the principal items of imports and export.
- d). To investigate the role of trade centre.
- e). To find out the means of communication for both internal and external trade.

### **1.4 Data and Methodology**

Empirical method has employed for the work. Content analysis has been done and both primary and secondary sources were used. Various articles published in dailies, periodicals magazines, seminar papers books and scholarly articles are also used. The main source of the research work is based on various sources. The secondary sources are books; other sources also used in this research work are some periodical, details etc. regarding primary sources like various records and data and statistics which are kept in the regional archives, Indian Council of Historical Research Library, Guwahati, North Eastern Social Research Centre Library, Guwahati, National Archives, New Delhi and Assam State Archives have been visited for the study.



## **1.5 Research Questions**

The present study seeks to answer the following research questions: -

1. What were the main items of export and import?
2. Whether the balance of trade was favourable to the native?
3. To what extent native industries suffered due to colonial revenue policy?

## **1.6 Organization of Chapters**

The study is organised into the following chapters:

Chapter - I is the introductory chapter which includes Survey of literature, objectives, Research questions, methodology nature and scope of the study, the land, people and the geographical history of colonial Surma-Barak Valley.

Chapter - II, Internal and External Trade of the Valley.

Chapter - III, Important items of Imports and Exports.

Chapter - IV, Important Trade Routes and Trade Centre of the Valley.

Chapter - V, Transport and Communication of the Valley.

Chapter - VI is concluding chapter which present a Summary of the findings, the conclusions emerging from these findings and suggestions put forwarded on the basis of the study.

## **1.7 Land, People and Geography of Surma-Barak Valley**

The term 'Barak Valley' is of very recent origin. Indeed, Barak Valley is the post-partitioned undivided Cachar district in Assam. However, the big Cachar district for administrative convenience got reorganized on 1 July 1983 and again on 11 October 1989. The two more districts Karimganj and Hailakandi respectively were, created out of Cachar. The new districts had been the sub-divisions of Cachar. The Cachar on the other hand formed a part of the Kachari Kingdom of the past.<sup>3</sup> Before independence and partition of India, it was a part of the larger Surma Valley. It is surrounded on three sides by hills and only on the lower side it is exposed to Karimganj district without any natural barrier. In fact, the tract is a

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<sup>3</sup> Suhas Chatterjee, *A Socio-Economic history of South Assam*, Jaipur, 2000, P. 1.

geographical extension of Sylhet. As it is inhabited by the Indo-Aryan population, the settlements in Cachar plains caused in early times by the immigrant peasants from Bengal in their North-Eastern march to the farthest limit of the Indo-Gangetic plains, in search of agricultural land. In fact now divided between India and Bangladesh the Cachar -Sylhet region is a single valley formed by the Barak River. In the British period it was called Surma Valley after a branch of the river, which flanked Sylhet town and the undivided valley was the homeland of a common dialect group of Bengali.<sup>4</sup>

The Surma-Barak Valley is no doubt a rich region in regard to her natural resources in raw material, but her financial resources are poor and it is an oft-repeated complaint that her people are not suitable for expert labour. In fact, the large majority of them are not willing to work as labourers of any kind on receipt of monthly wages in any factory or plantation. The largest and the most important industries of the valley was Tea, which was mostly run by European capitalist with labour almost entirely imported from the other parts of India. Except in a few localities there is not a rich landed class while the middle class is composed entirely of professionals such as lawyers etc. and man in the service of Government or other employees. The trade in the Surma-Barak Valley is almost entirely in the hands of East Bengal people. Here is, therefore, not much capital lying idle which can be drawn out. There is no doubt money-lending to some extent and in some places the rate of interest is too high, but we do not believe that the amount of money invested in money-lending is very large.

The people are in the main agriculturists having certain cottage industries by way of subsidiary occupation and means of earning. The pressure on the soil though gradually increasing is not yet great. There is therefore hardly any prospect of building up an artisan population in the province capital and labour are therefore both wanting in valley. The Tea industry has attained almost phenomenal prosperity within recent years. Investment in the industry is now considered to be very sound but the purely indigenous tea concerns of decent proportions are yet very few indeed. There is growing willingness on the part of the natives of the province to invest in this industry but sufficient capital cannot always be collected. On the

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<sup>4</sup> Suparna Roy, *Op. Cit.* P. 8.

other hand, Indians not belonging to the province having capital at command are gradually acquiring existing tea properties and opening out new concerns even under unfavourable circumstances.

For establishment of some new industries in the valley as have distinct promise of success both capital and labour will therefore have to be obtained mainly from sources outside the province, and it is for this reason that special facilities and attractions such as favourable land tenures and special labour laws have to be provided to draw capitalist for some industrial undertakings in Surma-Barak Valley. Some of the cottage industries of the valley have been in existence from time immemorial. That they have not died out yet inspite apathy and various other unfavourable circumstances is due mainly to the strong attachment for hereditary callings. This old unorganised industries are not less important for the economic advancement of the people than the larger industries that can be developed. In this connection, we cannot do better than quote the following from Sir John Hewett's opening address at the national conference held in 1907: -

“While it is the duty of the state to do all that it can legitimately do to foster the establishment of the large industries, it is no less its duty to resuscitate and put new life into the arts and handicrafts that still vitality in them by re-organizing them on modern lines and by placing at the disposal of those engaged in them the practical applications of modern scientific discoveries.”<sup>5</sup>

The economic organisations in the Pre-British Barak Valley had been similar to that of the other parts of the Indian continent. According to Abul Fazal (Ain-i-Akbari) India's economy was divided broadly into two classes-rural and urban economics. In Barak Valley there was no town. Thus, it was a simple domestic form of economic organisation in the rural society. Population was sparse particularly in Cachar. The area is available for cultivation per head was greater in the Pre-British era, the people rarely attempted to producing more with the view to become wealthy. They were satisfied with the production to meet his requirements only. They were happy with the food and drink and clothes. Because of the predominance of

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<sup>5</sup> A. K. Agarwal, *North-East India (an Economic Perspective)*, Allahabad, 1985, Pp. 20-27.

Hindu philosophy in the people's mind set, Muslims not excluded, there had been apathy towards better life. Brahminical Hinduism instead of upholding the value of wealth downgraded it. That led to stagnation in agricultural production. The potential was, however, very great. Thus, when more people get settled into Karimganj and when restriction on immigration in Cachar was gradually lifted by the British authorities there was a sharp rise in the agricultural production. There is truth in the statement of the British authorities that until the British developed communications and organised the trading, the commercial communities did not arise. That was particularly true in Cachar. In Karimganj the commercial communities Sahuji were there but they had less interest in grain trading. Large scale grain trading began since the days of the Burmese War (1824-26).<sup>6</sup>

The trading and commerce of Barak Valley after the annexation had been characteristically different from the picture of the presidency of Bengal. The trade of Bengal declined after the British annexation. According to Bernier the kingdom of Bengal had a hundred gates open for entrance of wealth, but not one for departure. The English fleeced the trade of Bengal. But the trade of Barak Valley flourished. Not only this true about the tea industry but also about the agricultural production and cottage industries.

Generally speaking, the population of Sylhet was sparse. The pressure of population in Karimganj was even less. Here lived like Cachar many tribal people, the Kukis, Khasis, Jaintias, Manipuris, Tipparas and Reangs. The Bengalis were there but the caste Hindus like Cachar were a minority. And, in fact, the large scale immigration of caste Hindus to Karimganj took place when the tea estates began to flourish in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, the process began with the consolidation of British rule in Sylhet. The process of consolidation was somewhat delayed in Sylhet because of discommunications and rebellious attitude of some mighty Muslim landed gentry. Dewani was granted to the east India Company by the Mughal Emperor in 1765 and such Sylhet along with Bengal Suba

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<sup>6</sup> Suhas Chatterjee, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 144-145.

become a part of Company's dominion. It was at first tagged the jurisdiction of the District Magistrate and Collector Dacca.<sup>7</sup>

Although Sylhet may at times have formed part of the ancient Kingdom of Kamrup, it was never during the historical period included in Assam as the term was understood prior to 1814. But when the chief commissionership of Assam was created in that year, Sylhet was incorporated in the new province. It is therefore necessary to refer briefly to its ancient history. This unfortunately is very obscure. Sylhet is scarcely mentioned in the old legends, but from the circumstance that Bodo-speaking tribes are found both north and south of it, it may be conjectured that in early times it was inhabited by people of the same stock and was ruled by Bodo Kings. The tract north of the Kushiara River was at one time divided into three petty Kingdoms-Jaintia, Laur and Gaur or Sylhet proper. The later word perhaps survives in the, "Goarar Jangal," the name of two old embankments which run from the Ghogra to a former bed of the Barak River in the Rajnagar Pargana of Cachar. The more weirly of these embankments is in places a hundred feet broad at the base and ten feet in height and there is a buried brick wall 140 feet long by six feet broad. There is a tradition that they were erected by some invaders called Goars.

The tract south of the Kushiara was often under the Kings of Tippera. According to a document purporting to be a copy of two old copper-plates (no longer available) found in possession of a Brahman who claimed to be a descendant of one of the original grantees, Dharmaphas and Sudharmapha Kings of the mountains of Tippera made to certain Brahmans grants of land situated in the former case, between the Kushiara, Barak and Haskata rivers and in the latter or both banks of the Manu. The kings in question were the eight and ninth rulers of Tippera according to the local Rajmals, of which an analysis has been given by the Rev. J. Long.

The conquest of Gaur by the Muhammadans is ascribed by tradition to Shah Jalal of Yemen. The legend is well known, but it contains scarcely any historical facts. The saint is

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<sup>7</sup> Suhas Chatterjee, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 21-22.

said to have died in 1189 A. D. But on the other hand, he is said to have come to Delhi during the reign of Sultan Ala-Uddin and to have gone to Sylhet with the army commanded by Sikandar Shah, the Sultan's nephew. This tradition is confirmed by a Muhammadan inscription of 1512 AD in which it is said that the conquest of Sylhet was effected by Sikandar Khan Ghazi in the reign of Firuz Shah of Bengal in 1303 AD. It may therefore be concluded that the north-west portion of Sylhet fell into the hands of the Muhammadans in the part of the fourteenth century.

The name of the conquest Hindu king is given in the Shah Jalal legend as Gaur Gobind, Gaur or Gor being, it is alleged, the name of his capital, as it was also of the country. Rajendralal Mitra identified him with the Gobind Deb of the Bhatara copper – plates but this seems unlikely. The latter was succeeded on the throne by his son Ishan Deb and the identification is possible only if we assume that the conquest was incomplete, and that, while one part of his dominion passed under Muslim rule, the other part remained independent, at least for some years.

The Governor of Sylhet in the days of the independent Kings of Bengal held the rank of Nawab. Under the Mughals, Sylhet was governed by an Amil. The official was subordinate to the Nawab of Dacca, but he was himself known locally as Nawab. The Amils seem to have been constantly changed, and the names of about forty of them can still be gathered from their seals. One of the best was Fasad Khan, who held office at the end of the seventeenth century and constructed numerous roads and bridges, which still bears his name, records its construction by him in 1805 A.D. or 1673 A.D.

Sylhet was the birthplace of Chaitanya, the great Vaishnava reformer of Bengal, and of Advita, another famous Vaishnava divine of Raghunath Siromani, the logician, Vaninath Vidyasagar, the grammarian, and other men light and learning. In early time the Sylhet district supplied India with eunuchs, but Jahangir issued an edict forbidding its inhabitants to castrate boys.

Sylhet passed into the hands of the British in 1765, together with the rest of Bengal. Thirteen years later, Mr. Robert Lindsay became Collector, after he had been only two years in the country, by means of an intrigue in the Dacca Council, which was at that time in charge of Sylhet and his vivacious accounts of its condition at that time is reproduced in the Lives of Lindsays. At that time there was little silver or copper in circulation and the revenue of the district amounting to Rs. 2,50,000 was all paid in cowries, or small shells, of which 5,120 went to the rupee. The management of this ponderous currency was most troublesome, and its storage and transport of Dacca, where the cowries were sold by auction occasioned a cost of no less than ten percent, exclusive of depredations on the passage down. In those days the company's servants were allowed to trade on their own account. Mr. Lindsay soon made a fortune by dealing in lime, while he at the same time, relieved the officials at Dacca of the vexatious business of disposing of a cargo of 1,280 millions of cowries. He obtained the lease of the lime quarries in the hills below Cherrapunji from the Khasi chiefs who owned them, used the cowries to meet the charges for extracting and burning the stone, and paid his revenue at Dacca in rupees realized from the sale of the lime in the markets of Bengal.<sup>8</sup>

Mr. Lindsay experimented with the cultivation of indigo and the silk worm, but he was not very successful, owing to the heavy floods. He also grew some coffee but did not persevere in its cultivation. He imported a quantity of wheat and distributed it amongst a number of Zamindars but they did not attempt to plant it out. The crops in his time were generally good in 1781, however, there was an exceptionally heavy flood, which swept away the granaries and reduced the people to such straits that one third are said to have died of starvation.

The military force at first consisted of about a hundred up country sepoys, but the climate was prejudicial to their health and the mortality amongst them was very heavy. Mr. Lindsay accordingly obtained sanction to replace them by a locally recruited Militia corps which he accompanied himself whenever very difficult task had to be performed. On one occasion, during the Muharram, the Muhammadans in Sylhet rose and set fire to the town in

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<sup>8</sup> Achut Charan Choudhury, *Srihatter Ithibritta*, Calcutta, 1992, Pp. 13-32.

several places. Only fifty of the Militia were on the spot, but with these Mr. Lindsay marched to the place where the crowd had collected and dispersed it, killing the ringleader, who attacked him with a sword, by a shot from his own pistol.<sup>9</sup>

The Surma Valley is a flat plain about 125 miles long by 60 wide, shut in on three sides by ranges of hills. The river from which the valley takes its name rises on the southern slopes of the mountain ranges on the borders of the Naga Hills District, and flows south through the Manipur hills. At Tipaimukh, it turns sharply to the north and takes a tortuous course, with a generally westward direction, through the Cachar District. On the western boundary of Cachar it divides into two branches, the northern of which is known as the Surma, and flows near the Khasi Hills past Sylhet and Chhatak, till it turns south at Sunamganj. Southern branch, called at first the Kushiara, again divides into two streams, known as the Barak and the Bibiyana or Kalni, but both branches rejoin the Surma on the western boundary on the province. The chief tributaries of the river on the north, after it enters British territory, are the Jiri and Jatinga from the north Cachar Hills and the Bogapani and Jadukata from the Khasi and Jaintia hills. On the south it receives from the Lushai Hills, the Sonai, and the Dholeswari with its second channel, the Katakhal and the Singla, and the Langai.

The western end of the valley lies very low and at Sylhet the low-water level of the Surma is only 22.7 feet above the sea. The rivers are raised by deposits of silt above the level of the surrounding country, and are lived with villages, which in the rainy season appear to standing in a huge lake. Further east the country rises and fields covered with sail (transplanted winter rice) take the place of swamps in which only the longest stemmed varieties of paddy can be grown, but even here there are numerous depressions or haors as they are called, in the lowest parts of which water remains during the dry season, and which can only be used for grazing or the growth of winter crops. In western Sylhet, the houses of the villagers are crowded together, gardens and fruit trees are scarce, and the scenery at all seasons of the year is tame and uninteresting. Cachar and the eastern portion of Sylhet have on

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<sup>9</sup> Upendra Guha, *Kacharer Ithibritta*, Guwahati, 1972, Pp. 91-97.



the other hand, much to please the eye. Blue hills bound the view on almost every side, the villages are buried in groves of slender palms, feathery bamboos, and broad-leaved plantains and even in the dry season the country looks fresh and green. The level of the plain is broken up by low ranges and isolated hills, and here and there beds of reeds and marshes lend variety to the scene. Little or no forest exists in Sylhet but there are extensive reserves in the south and east of the Cachar district.

The Surma-Barak Valley is an alluvial tract, in which the process of deltaic formation has not proceeded so rapidly as in the rest of the Gangetic plain. Disastrous floods were more common at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century than they are at the present day, and it seems possible that the general level of the district may have been appreciably raised within the last hundred years, by the sitting up of depressions and the sediment deposited by the rivers in their annual inundations. Low ranges of hills, which for the most part consist of upper tertiary sandstones, project into the valley from the south, and its surface is dotted with isolated hills called *tilas*, from 50 to 200 feet high composed of layers of sand, clay and gravel, often highly indurated with ferruginous cement. In the centre of the Assam Valley the soil consists of a light layer of clay superimposed upon beds of sand. Further back from Brahmaputra, the alluvium is more consolidated, and here and there are to be found the remains of an older alluvium of a closer and heavier texture, which corresponds to the high land of the Gangetic plain.

The climate of Surma-Barak Valley is characterised by coolness and extreme humidity, the natural result of the great water surface and extensive forests over which evaporation and condensation go on, and the close proximity of the hill ranges, on which an excessive precipitation takes place. Its most distinguishing feature is the copious rainfall between March and May, at a time when precipitation over northern India is at its minimum. The year is thus roughly divided into two seasons, the cold weather and the rains, the hot weather of the rest of India being completely absent. From the beginning of November till the end of February the climate is cool and at no period of the year is the heat excessive.

In the Surma Valley the thermometer in the winter is from five to six degrees higher than in upper Assam, but during the remainder of the year the climate of Sylhet is fairly cool. Cachar has a higher mean temperature for the year than any other district in the province. On the Shillong plateau thermometer seldom rises above 80<sup>o</sup> in the shade at the hottest season of the year, and ice forms on shallow pools in the winter nights. Fogs, occur in the Surma Valley, but are not as common as in central and upper Assam, where at certain seasons of the year they are a serious impediment to steamer traffic. In the Surma Valley the prevailing wind is from the south-west, except in the months of April and May when it has a north-east direction. The total amount of rain that falls in Assam during the year is always abundant but is sometimes unfavourably distributed. In the Surma-Barak Valley the average rainfall at Sylhet is 157 inches, and at Silchar 124 inches. To the south of the Valley precipitation is less pronounced, but deluges of rain fall on the southern slopes of the Khasi Hills and pour down into the valley.

Storms often occur in the spring months, generally accompanied by high winds and heavy local rainfall, but seldom take the form of destructive cyclones. Two such, however, visited the country at the foot of the Garo Hills in 1900, destroying everything in their path and killing 44 people. The province has always suffered more from floods than from a failure of water supply. The rainfall, which is everywhere heavy, is in places enormous and the rivers frequently unable to carry off the torrents of water suddenly precipitated on their catchment areas. In Mughal times the country in the neighbourhood of the upper portion of the Barak Valley was protected by an embankment, but at the western end of the Surma Valley, it has always been always impossible to restrain the torrential foods and the whole surface of the plain goes under water. In 1781, a sudden rise of the rivers wrought such utter desolation that, in spite of the efforts of Government, nearly one third of the population died of famine, but though inundations annually occur no such calamities have been known of recent years. Surma-Barak Valley has always been subject to earthquakes. Severe shocks were felt in 1896 and 1882 and in 1875 some damage was done to houses in Shillong and Guwahati. Nearly all

masonry buildings in Guwahati and Sylhet were completely wrecked. Two Europeans and 1,540 natives lost their lives in Sylhet.<sup>10</sup>

Captain T. Fisher was appointed the Superintendent of Cachar plains in 1832. The North Cachar Hills were under the possession of Tularam Senapati, the step brother of Gobinda Chandra and David Scott, the Governor General's Agent recognized the claim of Tularam over the hills, notwithstanding the potests from Gobinda Chandra. The strong administration of Fisher restored law and order in Cachar. Before his administration Cachar witnessed internecine feuds of the warring Manipuri Princes, foreign attack by Muslim invaders and finally the Burmese aggression. Political fabric of the principality suffered a severe jolt. A large section of the settled population left Cachar for shelter in the British district, Sylhet or Tripura. Nor merely there was a social chaos which engulfed the petty state but there was also complete absence of economic activities. Fisher's administration restored confidence among the people. The Kachari refugees came back to their lost homes as they found safety of their life and property under the benign rule of the British Superintendent.

Cachar was relieved of its former political chaos but the hangover of the past did not die out so soon though there had been over all marked improvement of law and order. In the extreme south and in the east where population had been sparse and where the writ of the British administration did not reach the people, because of geographical disruptions, the law of the jungle still prevailed. However, the law breaker of those marshy swamps and jungles were conscious of the fire-power of the security forces of the company and they restrained themselves according to the situation.

Fisher belonged to the survey Department of the British army. He was a genius. He tried his best to restore order but he was aware of his responsibilities as the first administrative officer of a newly acquired colony. For the development of the colony he introduced a set of economic reforms to increase the revenue Cachar was annexed to the British dominion not as a revenue district. Having been a non-revenue district the rules and regulations of Cachar

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<sup>10</sup> *Provincial Gazetteer of Assam*, Published by the Dept. of Historical & Antiquarian Studies, Assam, Pp. 2-9.

administration was totally different from a revenue district. The Superintendent was all powerful. Fisher exercised his political power with full force to achieve his political goal. But, for the economic development, he took steps cautiously. He measured the total cultivable land and fixed the land revenue taking into consideration the revenue principles at the old Kachari Kingdom. He did not abolish the Khel altogether but made it more workable to suit the needs of the colonial economy. He worked out a comprehensive census of the district and used it for his administrative convenience.

Fisher changed the British administrative headquarters from Dudpatil Chateau to Silchar. Infact, Fisher is the founder of the Silchar city. He shifted the Cachar tehsil Kuchari from Dudpatil to Silchar. He also set up the permanent prison and a military post near the prison. Modern Silchar grew out of the tehsil Kuchari and the military post. Ultimately, the prison was shifted to other place. The vacant place was handed over to the merchants who converted it into a flourishing market complex, the largest in South Assam.

The Superintendent of Cachar was invested with the additional charge of the Frontier Officer. In those days there was no External Affairs ministry of the Government. Yet, the administrative officers of the Company's frontier areas had to deal with the matters which came under the foreign department. The hill tribes who lived beyond the adjudicated frontiers of the Company were not under the political jurisdictions of the British authorities. The Superintendent had to maintain relations with them. Fisher and his successors had to maintain relations with them. Moreover, in those days a considerable part of the population had been hill tribes with their own primitive ways of living. As Cachar was a non-revenue district administered by the Superintendent under special rules, the doors of Cachar were closed for the emigrants. However, the authorities permitted restricted emigration with a view to the economic development of the district. But the Superintendent was always conscious the evil effect of population influx upon the backward indigenous peoples especially the tribal people living in the plains and in the hills.<sup>11</sup> Captain T. Fisher restored order in Cachar. The evacuees returned home, Mafiosi and the mercenaries were unceremoniously squeezed out; people

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<sup>11</sup> Suhas Chatterjee, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 6-7.

breathed fresh air in peace and amity. His successor's Manwarring and Burns were also strong administrators.

Fisher in June 1834 wrote his famous letter to the commissioner, Dacca suggesting some measures for the establishment of schools in Cachar. He suggested that some deserving persons be sent to Calcutta or Serampore for the purpose of training. The administration also adopted certain measures to check the flood. Floods visited Cachar in 1834 and 1836. J. G. Burns settled the dispute over the Raja's property. He requested E. M. Gordon, Commissioner of Dacca on 25 April 1834 for the establishment of schools. The places most suitable for schools in Cachar are the 3 thanas viz. Silchar, Hailakandi and Katigorah and the large parguna of Sonapur. He hoped that the children of amlas and hungers on in Cachar could easily be admitted in the schools. Burns also disposed of the case of bribery charged against the Judge of the lower court, Krishnaram Vitra Daloi. He requested the Commissioner of Dacca to send the convicts from Dacca, Maymensingh, and Sylhet for the construction of road in Cachar. The labour was shy hwe. Accordingly prisoners were sent and the roads were here were constructed. In his letter to Gordon (29-10-1838) Burns advocated the shifting of the British cantonment from unhealthy Lakhipur to Silchar. The proposal was accepted. The shifting of the cantonment had its spin offs upon the law and order issue of the town and its adjoining areas.

In June 1839 Captain E. R. Lyons joined as the Superintendent. He straight-jacketed Rajkumar Sitambar Singh, a over mighty Manipuri subject who was bent upon oppressing the poor Kukis of Cachar border. He imposed a levy of Rs. 48/- per kulbah for poppy cultivation. Improvement in the order in rural Cachar attracted the outsiders to get settle in Cachar. The price of the land soared high during the time of Lyons. It was jumped for Rs. 6 to 40 per hal in May 1840. This steady upswing in the land price was the outcome of the confidence in British administration. Lyons wrote, *"I think that the inhabitants of Cachar are satisfied that they get justice."*

The enumeration of the people were taken up and in February 1842 it turned up to be 80,000 souls. A sensational even took place at that time in Cachar that the two prisoners Gowra, a Hindu from Dacca and Muhammad Ruffee from Tipperah, Captain Lyons. But the plot was discovered. In 1843, the five year settlement of land expired and new settlement continued for 15 years. Captain G. Verner succeeded Lyons on 8 July 1847. The people of Cachar, like their counterparts in upper Assam, were addicted to opium which had been a cause of concern to the early British administrators. Verner was faced with another menace the large scale use of puchaye. Silchar town was notorious for the drunken brawls.

During the administration of Lyons, yuvaraj Chandra Kirti of Manipur along with his mother took asylum in Cachar. The Rajmata Kumudini had been a source of trouble to the Company officials. Similarly, the vanquished queen Induprabha was also a fly on the ointment of the Company's administration. She made repeated petitions to visit different places of her former kingdom in the guise of a pilgrimage which the company officials did not permit. She also requested to visit Manipur her mother country. Verner permitted her because the situation in Manipur was quiet. The administration of Verner was preoccupied with the Lushais.

Verner was succeeded by Captain R. Stewart. He was the last Superintendent and stayed in Cachar for long, upto 1867. During his time in 1856 the tea gardens were established which transformed the entire scenario of Cachar from a marshy, jejune, fallow land to a prosperous country.<sup>12</sup> He and his successor John Edgar augmented the collection of land revenue. They were also very much in thick and thin with the Lushai affairs as frontier officers.

Bengal Government was happy to witness the overall development of Cachar. By dint of perseverance Captain Stewart was successful in making revenue deficit of Cachar into a viable revenue unit. The total revenue yield during the last year of Stewart's assignment had been Rs. 91,000/-. The Commissioner, Dacca Division was highly impressed by Stewart's achievement and recommended the conversion of Cachar into a Revenue district, under the

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<sup>12</sup> D. Dutta, *Cachar District Records, Silchar*, 1969, Pp. 52-53 and 89-92.

Bengal Government. In recognition of the service of Stewart he was promoted to the rank of a major. In 1867 Major Stewart was appointed by the Lieutenant Governor, Bengal as the Deputy Commissioner, Cachar. As a general rule the military officers headed the administration of the special category districts like Cachar. Their pay and allowances were defrayed by the military department. But a revenue district was a civil district under a civil officer. So a civil officer was to replace Major Stewart.

Despite its small size, scanty population and a very poor revenue, Cachar situated on the frontiers of Bengal had its importance from the administrative point of view. Moreover, the high potential of tea industry in Cachar needed an imaginative officer at the help of its administration who would be able to face the challenges of the time in right earnest. The selection fell on young talent John ware Edgar ICS, a promising student of economics from Cambridge. He was the recruit of the 1862, batch in the Indian Civil Service. He began his career in Dacca and proved his mettle by writing some standard papers in the Calcutta and London journals on tea industry. Edgar was also a highly connected person in London. In Dacca as Assistant Commissioner, Edgar edited and rewrote the Dacca Blue Book. He left the imprint of his genius in the Dacca Blue Book. That job, his economic background and his experience in Dacca made Edgar a suitable officer for the new post in Cachar.<sup>13</sup>

The Barak Valley situated on the extreme North-Eastern part of India and the Assam provinces was made up of several elements (1) The Assam Valley never was subjected to Regulation law. (2) The Goalpara district was really one of the valley districts, the part of which was old Bengal territory permanently settled and the part was acquired as the Eastern Dwars after the Bhutan war in 1866. (3) The districts of Sylhet and Cachar, the former being old Bengal territory and in part permanently settled and the Karimganj district of Assam which formed the part of the present Barak Valley, was then a subdivision of the Sylhet district. Cachar was under the princely regime before 1832, which had its own land system. But in the colonial period it was made a temporarily settled area.

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<sup>13</sup> B. C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers*, Shillong, 1905, Pp. 51-59.

The present district of Cachar is composed of the plain portion of old Cachar excluding the hill tracts of North Cachar Hills and the four thanas namely Karimganj, Badarpur, Ratabari and Patharkandi of British Sylhet which were left with India after partition of India in 1947. The district of Cachar was formally annexed to the British territory by proclamation on the 14<sup>th</sup> August, 1832 and was then placed under the administration of a Superintendent, subordinate to the Governor General's Agents in Assam. Captain Fisher of the survey department was appointed the first Superintendent of the district.

The history of land revenue assessment and management of Cachar is the history connected with the Kachari rule of the district. The plains of Cachar lapsed to the British in 1830 on the death of Govida Chandra, the last Raja without heirs. British authority has gradually extended itself over the hill tracts at various times and the last annexation that of Tularam Senapati's country was being affected in 1854.

During the rule of Dimasa Kings of Cachar, the King was the owner of the land and alienated by the occupants or inherited by their heirs. These rights were experienced by simply on sufferance and were liable to be overridden by the superior rights of the sovereign. No proper land tenure and land revenue system evolved during this period, leaving the tract for independent experimentation by the colonial masters over the subjects. That sometimes created reaction from the people, as it did not often suit their interest. First settlement of the Hindus in the district is placed in the reign of Raja Suradarpa Chandra. The tradition runs that in his reign an Assami-Hindu named Bikram Rai was sent from the capital of Dimapur into the part of Cachar now known as Bikrampur to encourage the Bengali immigrants from the west. Among the founders of colonies established by them, the name are mentioned of Asu Thakur from Pratapgrah in Sylhet and the ancestor of the family now represented by Gulal Khan Choudhury from Tipperah. When Kartik Chandra came to the throne the number of colonist was considerable. As land was plenty, rents were extremely low in comparison to the areas of Sylhet and in the beginning it was mostly in kind. The rent was fixed at 12 annas for each hal. Kartik Chandra raised the rate for the hal to Rs. 3 and it is said that Govinda Chandra, the last Cachar Raja obtained from some lands as much as Rs. 6 per hal or about



2s.6d per acre<sup>2</sup>.<sup>14</sup> Revenue was at first paid in the form of labour and part of the produce, as was the practice in the time of Ahom rule in Assam, Sylhet and other places of the country in the pre colonial era.

The British administrators, keeping their imperial policy in view, sought to introduce a system of land revenue that might suit their own purpose, which at the same time might not create dissatisfaction among the native people. Guided by this sentiment and practical utility, sometimes the British authorities wish to blend the existing pattern with the new outlook thereby encouraging the natives into accepting the newly introduced Land Revenue System. Gradually they adopted some measures that brought the Land Revenue System to conform to a policy of consolidation. The basement of the Land Revenue Policy is the history of a continuous process of survey. Settlement and Re-Settlements. Here, the attempt has been made to focus the settlement of land in the Silchar Tahsil of the Cachar District during the Colonial period.

South Cachar was integrated into the British colonial dominion from the former Heramba Government in 1832, where land was held in guilds, called khel by groups or families supervised by the elected Mukhtars. Between 1832 and 1843 the British authorities adopted various methods and experiments of strengthen the settlement of land in the newly acquired territory. One of such measures was the introduction of the Tahsildari system following which Cachar had been divided into three Tahsils viz. Silchar, Hailakandi and Katigorah. Immediately after the British annexation, the Sadar Station of the Cachar District was fixed at Silchar.

Among the three Tahsils of the District, the Silchar group was the largest one, surrounded by North Cachar Hills or the north, Hailakandi, chatle and Banraj groups on the south Manipur state on the east and Katigorah group in the west. The Silchar group was again subdivided into nine parganas with 412 villages. The parganas were Barkhola, Jainagar, Rajnagar, Barakpar, Sonapur, Udharbondh, Banskandi, Rupairbali and Lakhipur. For the administrative convenience the lands were divided into Agricultural, Residential and Trade

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<sup>14</sup> Suparna Roy, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 8-9.

sites. The earlier settlements with regard to Agricultural lands were generally charged at rate which was equal to that in the neighbouring villages. Similarly, Residential and Trade sites had been divided into as many classes as was permitted by circumstances.

The system of assessment came to be known as the soil-unit which was basically based on (a) the prior determination of the total assessment which appeared on general consideration, an area could bear; (b) the distribution of the new assessment so decided on among (i) the groups in the area; (ii) the villages in the group; and (iii) the fields in the village. In this connection the first step was to divide the area into a number of geographical and homogenous groups. Afterwards a classification of lands within the village was to be decided according to the relative values assigned to the various classes by the villagers themselves and their relative values had to be decided in some common principle. This came to be recognised as the soil-unit. The process of assessment finally consisted of each village in a group of new incidence per soi-unit which was called ‘Unit –Rate’ having its regard to the comparative circumstances of each village. Thus the Tahsils of Silchar, Hailakandi and Katigorah were divided into four circles each and rates were determined in accordance with the assessment capacity of each circle. The rates for the first class were the same for each Tahsil, but there was a difference between the Tahsils rates and the land was divided into four classes, viz. (i) Homestead and garden (ii) Paddy land (iii) Tea and (iv) Waste land.

According to the rule 2 of the Re-Settlement Rules the definition of the villages was- “The class in which the bulk of the rice lands of the village are placed shall ordinarily be considered to be class of village.” S. C. Banerjee in his re-settlement Report of the Cachar District 1894 made the following classification.

Description of Land	Area in bighas		
	<b>Homestead</b>	Class	I
Class		II	14,811
Class		III	9,216
Class		IV	4,782
<b>Total: -</b>			<b>52,365</b>

Description of Land	Area in bighas		
	<b>Rice</b>	Class	I
Class		II	135,795
Class		III	87,189
Class		IV	40,924
Class		V	4,119
<b>Total: -</b>			<b>444,464</b>

Description of Land	Area in bighas		
	<b>Other Crops</b>	Class	I
Class		II	27,754
Class		III	16,105
Class		IV	12,665
<b>Total: -</b>			<b>88,506</b>

Description of Land	Area in bighas		
	<b>Waste</b>	Class	I
Class		II	28,643
Class		III	51,287
Class		IV	105,828
<b>Total: -</b>			<b>232,201</b>

**Source:** Ratna Dey, "Settlement of the Silchar Tehsil" published in the proceeding of 16<sup>th</sup> session of the North-East India History Association, Pp. 142-143.

The above statement showed the total area held by ordinary Raiyat as 6.14 P.C. Homestead, 62.13 Rice, 10.38 other crops and 31.5 waste lands. (See Appendix – 2)

One of the most important features of the settlement of 1894-99 was that it was based on a Cadastral survey where a Theodolite traverse of the village boundaries was carried out by a professional survey party of Amins under a civil party of settlement headed by Deputy Collectors.

In settlement of 1900, the rates fixed for 15 years were: -

<b>Homestead</b>	6 to 13 annas
<b>Rice</b>	4 to 11 annas
<b>Other cultivation</b>	4 to 8 annas
<b>Waste</b>	1 to 2 annas

**Source:** Ratna Dey, “Settlement of the Silchar Tehsil” published in the proceeding of 16<sup>th</sup> session of the North-East India History Association, P. 143.

In 1917, the lands of Silchar group had been classified into six rates: -

<b>Bari</b>	Good homestead	8 to 3 annas
<b>Bhit</b>	Good homestead	5 to 11 annas
<b>Sailura</b>	Land growing transplanted winter paddy	6 to 15 annas
<b>Asraura</b>	Land growing broad caste winter paddy	5 to 12 annas
<b>Chara</b>	Land adjoining homestead	4 to 10 annas
<b>Patil</b>	waste	1 to 3 annas

**Source:** Ratna Dey, “Settlement of the Silchar Tehsil” published in the proceeding of 16<sup>th</sup> session of the North-East India History Association, P. 143.

Sub-letting pargana by pargana as disclosed in the assessment of the Silchar group: -

Sl. No.	Name of Pargana	Total Settled area including Baksha but excluding Tea & waste in the Tea gardens	Net cropped Area, area excludes subletting for tea		Area sublet settled area Col. 3	Area sublet P. C	P. C. Tenancy to total cultivation at last Re-Settlement
			4	5			
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
		<b>Bighas</b>	<b>Bighas</b>	<b>Bighas</b>			
1	Barkhala	29,009	24,073	4,144	14.28	17.21	8
2	Jainagar	18,899	13,510	1,310	6.93	9.70	4
3	Rajnagar	18,239	11,591	257	1.41	2.22	6
4	Barakpar	75,208	50,325	1,607	2.14	3.19	5
5	Sonapor	51,726	40,000	1,662	3.21	4.06	9
6	Udharbond	7,537	38,542	5,218	10.98	18.54	11
7	Banskandi	21,806	19,347	3,449	13.90	17.83	8
8	Rupairbali	39,287	24,697	1,648	4.20	6.67	13
9	Lakhipur	61,718	41,271	5,525	8.95	13.41	28
<b>Grand Total</b>		<b>366,379</b>	<b>264,196</b>	<b>21,820</b>	<b>6.77</b>	<b>9.30</b>	<b>12</b>

**Source:** Ratna Dey, "Settlement of the Silchar Tehsil" published in the proceeding of 16<sup>th</sup> session of the North-East India History Association, P. 144.

The classification was undertaken by the patwaris themselves; under the supervision of superior Kanungos and Assistant Settlement Officers who had to check a large proportion of land classing at the stage. (See Appendix – 1)

In comparison with the last Re-Settlement of the Silchar Tahsil the surveyed area had increased from 7,87,874 bighas to 7,78,449 bighas. The area settled in Mirasdari terms had increased from 4,834,890 bighas to 5,00,486 bighas. While the area of Baksha land had been decreased, un-settled waste area open to settlement had increased from 36,116 to 62,917 bighas due partly to the reservation of grazing grounds and partly due to the survey of new

villages. As regards the various kinds of crop a comparison with the other groups would make it clear.

	<b>Aus</b>	<b>Sail</b>	<b>Asra</b>
Katigorah	10.27	44.03	24.39
Hailakandi	18.53	43.71	14.50
Silchar	5.69	56.98	9.56

**Source:** Ratna Dey, “Settlement of the Silchar Tehsil” published in the proceeding of 16<sup>th</sup> session of the North-East India History Association, P. 145.

The selling value of the land in the Silchar group varied inversely from its distance to the river Barak along with its distance from the Sadar Station. A clear picture of the selling value of the different parganas will make the point more clear.

(1) In Barkhola pargana, the average price of rice land raised from Rs. 60 to 100 and from Rs. 30 to 40 in case of flood affected villages.

(2) In most of the villages of Jainagar, there was a decrease in the value to less than Rs. 60 and raise up to Rs. 80

(3) In Rajnagar, the limits were more or less the same, though land in riverside villages fetched up to Rs. 100<sup>15</sup>

The district of Sylhet was a thickly populated district. Land was a scare commodity. But Cachar district had enough fallow land and number of population was very very small. This factor induced the peasant of Sylhet to extent the cultivation to this tract gradually and pitch settlement in the reclaimed areas. There was no natural barrier between Cachar and Sylhet and the Cachar portion of the Valley was neither directly covered by an existing local state to create a political barrier nor was it then people by any other ethnic group. The social boundary of Sylhet was expanded as an uninterrupted historical process through familiar

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<sup>15</sup> Ratna Dey, “Settlement of the Silchar Tehsil” published in the proceeding of 16<sup>th</sup> session of the North-East India History Association, Shillong, 1986, Pp. 140 -145.

terrain over the land which was suitable for cultivation then prevalent in Sylhet and the adjoining districts of Bengal.

In the early British records Khel have been described as agricultural guild, corporation and commonwealth formed primarily for agriculture. A Khel was also set up for mining, fishing and elephant trapping although they had to be affiliated to the Raj in which the particular Khel was located. The principle of such association was purely commercial, though not in modern sense of the term. It depends on the basis of voluntary co-operation of a number of persons for the purpose of carrying a special undertaking acknowledging no other nexus except community and interest and they had some obligations to the ruling power. These obligations consisted in, firstly the payment of the revenue and secondly the discharge of some customary services. The most important aspect of these Khels were their democratic ideas and secular attitude. But this development was not allowed to continue in colonial period by the machination of the Superintendents and Deputy Commissioners. The Khel began to receive its gradual disintegration at their hands.

In course of time, the number of Khels increased, but not in the British period and the groups of adjacent Khels were joined together into larger unions making the second stage in the development of principle of voluntary association in the revenue system of Cachar. The Khels developed an understanding among themselves to resolve mutual disputes and to effect concerted measures for security against external threats and invasions. All the Khels in a particular locality formed a union, called, Raja, through a process of social contact. In course of time the number of Raja became ten to cover between themselves the entire tract and the Cachar plains come to be known as the land of dash-raj. The Mukthar of the constituent Khels elected Raja Mukthar with various titles like, Choudhury, Majumder, Baralaskar, Barbhuiya, Chotabhuiya etc. all according to the status and importance of the unit. The Choudhuries or the head of the Khel got two hals of land free, the Majumder one half hal, the Laskar one fourth hal and Barbhuiya and Mazarbhuiya six Kiyars.

The Raja did not interfere in the affairs of the Khel and the Mukhtar was the Channel of communication between the Raja and the Raiyats responsible for execution of all order in the Khel, taking charge of abandoned talooks and collecting the Government revenues. The constituent members were obliged to pay collective revenue and to discharge services including the supply of labour for state enterprise. Such payment or supplies were also made through a Mukhtar who is elected by the members and confirmed by the Raja. He was generally the leading personality in the corporation and responsible to the Raja for the dues of the unit. So obviously this officer was the liason between the Raja and the Khel. The Mukhtar were locally known variously as Bhuiyan or Laskar. A Khel was autonomous or self governing for all purposes. In this process one after another Khel came into existence till the natural limits of the plains at the foot of the hills was reached. Though, there may not be direct interference but indirectly it was done by the various functionaries.

Mukhtar carried into execution all order of the Government in respect of the Khel, took charge of the abandoned talooks and collected the state revenue and in return, held rent free grants enjoyed honorary titles and had the authority to confine and punish the defaulters. It is evident that the headman of the Raj and Khel were primarily responsible for the revenue which was collected in the following fashion.

A Kachari peon was sent to the house of the headman with a demand for payment. The headman then sounded a drum or fired a gun if the demand was urgent. When the people come together the revenue was forthwith collected. Defaulter after being allowed a short respite, were arrested and brought before the Raja. If it appeared that they had no means, the Sharers in the talooks or separate estate were invited to enter upon the defaulter's land on condition of satisfying the arrears. If they declined, the holding was given to the khel. If the khel failed to pay, the land lapsed the Raj, which could not refuse. In no case were outsiders admitted. The term khel also applied to within certain localities, which either had to supply the Raj with certain definite commodities such as betel nuts or firewood of rents of which were assigned to certain functionaries of state.



In 18<sup>th</sup> century local chronicle gives an account of one Kalicharan who was a Brahmin but turned to be a trader and trade with distant markets brought him fortune. He brought in a few families of porter, carpenter, weaver, blacksmith, goldsmith and other artisans and established a karkhana-nagar (Industrial Township) at a place called Kalinagar on the Bank of Barak. Raja Ramchandra allotted to him several hundred Kulbah of land to set up a large estate. Kalicharan paid rupees one thousand annually to the Raja as revenue and he was allowed to nominate three representative to the UI (assembly). His estate came to be recognized as Khel. So, vocational mixture came into existence either for better or worst and marching rapidly towards change from tradition.<sup>16</sup>

There were khelma or bara-khel, the entire revenue of which went to Raja, the Maharani's khel, one fourth of which went to Raja's Chief wife and three fourth to the Raja himself. There were Shangjarai or younger brother's khel and so on. If the revenue of a tract were devoted to religious purposes, that was again khel, thus were the Vichingcha khel devoted to the support of the worship of Kali the Bhishnughar khel to that of Lakshmi-Narayan. The paikan khel was the name of an estate, the rent of which was devoted to the expenses of worshipping the goddess Rana Chandi. So khel was a complicated union with multifarious functions of the society with diverse type of members. The work was agricultural and commercial mainly in Cachar sector and it was invisible in Sylhet sector before 1765. With the introduction of colonial rule both the areas witnessed separate type of land systems and reforms and experiments went on in land systems in Cachar from 1832 and in Sylhet from 1793.

However, after the British annexation of Cachar when the khels were liquidated and the land was privatized the final blow to the peasants Raj came as embodied in the khel. In the conflict between this khels and colonial process the former ultimately had to surrendered to the latter. The little republic merged itself into broader British system and the process of

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<sup>16</sup> *Assam District Gazetteers, Sylhet*, Published By the Dept. of Historical & Antiquarian Studies, Assam, Pp. 17-23.

change began in Cachar. It welcomed the outsiders as land was then plenty. The British officers, therefore found that the larger portion of the Cachar plains was uninhabitants.<sup>17</sup>

Captain Thomas Fisher assumed the charge of Cachar in July 1830. He introduced changes, which were thought extremely necessary. Revenue collection of Kachari Kings was not at all satisfactory. Collection had fallen off due to the political chaos and foreign invasions. The land revenue system in Cachar even after the annexation by the British was materially different, as Zamindari system was not extended to Cachar. The land revenue system in Cachar was akin to that of the Ahom Kingdom where there was Paik or Khel system. The Assamese Paik was not involved in Kachari principality.

With the annexation of Cachar the Kheldar lost their position as the land in the khel developed to the East India Company. The Government distributed the land directly to the individual on a specific rent. For all practical purpose, the Ryotwari system instead of Zamindari system was introduced in Cachar according to the recommendation of Captain Fisher, the Superintendent of Cachar. But that was not in case of Karimganj. Karimganj which forms the part of Barak Valley had been the eastern portion of the British district of Sylhet. Thus the history of Karimganj is the integral part of the history of Sylhet. Sylhet had come under Todarmal's famous assessment in the reign of Akbar. The south west part of Sylhet had been a part of the principality of Tripura and the eastern once form the part of the Kachari Kingdom. Kachari ruler Yasonarayan fought against Islam Khan, Nawab of Dacca, during the rule of Emperor Jahangir at Patharkandi. All the territories of the west of the plains of Cachar were ceded to the Mughals by Kachari prince after his defeat. The Mughals set up a strong military outpost at Badarpur.

In Sylhet, land was divided into several categories. Actually East India Company received the Dewani from the Emperor in 1765 and accordingly Sylhet along with Bengal Suba was included into the administration of the company. At the time of its annexation Sylhet was administered by a Fauzdar under the Nawab of Dacca who was on the other hand,

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<sup>17</sup> Suparna Roy, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 9-15.

under overall Supervision of the Nawab of Bengal at Murshidabad. The area of Sylhet in 1765 was 2861 square miles. Later on, some areas were added to it from Jaintia, Cachar and Maymensing.

The Srihatta Sirkar headed by a Mughal Amin assisted by a Naib Nawab collected the revenues and deposited the amount into the treasury at Dacca. But they were directly responsible to the Nawab of Bengal in Murshidabad for any fault. The Amins of Sylhet were all temporary officers. Notwithstanding the elevated status of the Amin of the Sylhet Sirkar as frontier officer, collection of revenue from the Marshy, jejune troublesome Sylhet had been poor and W. W. Hunter in his statistical Account of Assam (Sylhet) writes, "The district yielded little revenue to the Government beyond a few elephants, spices and wood".

During the Mughals, Zamindary system was by and large the system all over India. Mughal Zamindary system was different from the British Zamindary system. The term zamindar is derived from the Persian 'Zamin' (land) and 'dar' (lord). However to some scholars the word is derived from zimba. In ancient India the term was Visaya Pati. In Assam the word Visaya is still in vogue meaning an officer. The Mughal historians have called the Baro Bhuyans of Bengal Suba as Zamindars. Mughal Zamindars were not the actual owner of the land and had no absolute right over the property they were temporary possessor of the land and derived its benefit under the pleasure of the emperor. They were also temporary officers could easily be divested of the post and the property. As the people of the eastern districts of Bengal were litigious the land of one zamindar got transferred to other frequently.

In Sylhet, land was divided into several categories. They were Kharej yielding direct revenue to the state treasury through the zamindars. The land of the talukdars. The talukdars were the intermediaries between the tenant and the zamindars. They collected the revenue from the tenant. The estate of the talukdar often devolved to the government for deferred payment. Divested taluks could be converted into a zamindary land. The permanent settlement made the position of the talukdars very weak. But in Sylhet in the absence of big zamindars the position of the talukdars remained unaffected and the talukdars (locally known as

zamindars) were the influential and the solvent middle class, the backbone of the Hindu society.

Another category of the land known as Lakheraj (La means no and Kheraj means rent). That was rent free land. In the Pre-British days the Muslims rulers or the Hindu rulers of Tripura of Jaintia granted lands to individual or organisations, for discharging certain religious or social duties. The following were Lakheraj land 1. Devottar – land granted to a temple. 2. Brahmottar – land granted to a Brahmin. 3. Mohattaran – land was granted to an individual for his excellence viz. in medicine, poetry, heroic feat etc. Mohattaran and Inam were the same. 4. Vaisnavottar – land was the land granted to the vaisnava akhras, Satras etc. 5. Cheragi – the land granted for the purpose of maintaining a mosque or memorial. 6. Piran – land was granted to the Muslim mendicants. 7. Fakiran was the land for the Fakirs. 8. Khanebari or Khosbas land was the land for constructing garden house of the nobility. 9. Kha erat land was granted to individual or organisation for the benefit of the society 10. Aa – ema, land was the land for the propagation of Islam. 11. Nankar was a special kind of land granted to a person holding an honourable post or for one's service to the state. There were Choudhury nankars, Zamindari nankars, Talukdari nankars etc. However, in the era of permanent Settlement Chakran or mojrai land, was also included into the category of nankar despite there had been some differences between those two categories.

The Bengal Regulation 1793 (Zamindary System) recognized the above rent free land (Lakheraj) with slight modification. According to the section 8 of the said Regulation a Lakheraj above 100 bighas was declared void and the land over 100 bighas devolved to the Government and the status quo was maintained upto 100 bighas. There was another category of land known as Intermediary ownership of land. Here the tenant had to pay the rent. They were mostly taluks. The Taluks were under the talukdars who paid the fixed rent to the Zamindars as tenant and enjoyed the excess of the rent after his payment to the zamindars.

There were different types of taluks namely Kaiemi, Pattani, Sikimi, Makbari, Haola, Miras, Karkon taluks. During the time of John Willies a rough settlement of land was made

and the rent for the permanent settlement was fixed as per Act 1, 1793. But Willies did not take into account the uncultivable jungle land. Later on, gradually, the settlement of such waste lands were made and completed by 1804. Under the instructions of the Revenue Board, Dacca in 1802, the collection of Sylhet measured the cultivable rent free land left out in the permanent settlement and acquired a huge quantity of such land to include them under the purview of taxation. Those were Elam land and redistributed to the tenants. A portion of such Elam land was converted into the land of permanent settlement in 1804. The new land was known as the Halabadi taluks. During the period (1807-1812) many such lands were distributed on a permanent basis and were known as Halabadimumadi taluks. By the Act 2, 1819 the Government requisitioned lands were distributed to the tenants as per Act 1, 1793 and such lands were termed as Bajafta mumadi the land was leased out but in case of khas mumadi the land was sold to the tenants in return of a price.

With the introduction of Bengal Regulation 1793, the ryots became the owner of the land with valid pattas. In 1765, Sylhet was included in the Dewani of the East India Company. By the rules and regulation of Dewani, Sylhet Fauzdar remained in charge of civil administration but the British resident became the collector of revenue. The collector deposited the revenue into the valut of the Revenue Board, Dacca. The first few residents were the former members of the above Board. Because of disconnexion and turbulent nature of the Muslim riyats the Dacca Board neglected Sylhet district till 1824. Cachar was under the British sphere of influence at that time but it was a protectorate state with its own independent administration so, the East India Company did not introduce the Zamindari system in Cachar. Moreover, the land tenure system in Cachar was altogether different from Sylhet.<sup>18</sup>

Regarding the population of colonial Surma-Barak Valley, there is no longer any scarcity of population. In the Cachar plains the density is only 201 to the square mile, but the country is much broken up by hills and marshes and of recent years it has become necessary to throw open considerable areas of reserved forest to meet the demand for cultivable land.

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<sup>18</sup> Suhas Chatterjee, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 148-152.

The district of Sylhet is fully people and in the Habiganj Sub-division the density rises to 583 to the square mile which for a purely rural population must be considered high.<sup>19</sup> There seems little doubt, prior to British occupation of the country, the population was extremely sparse. Reference has been already made to Pemberton's estimate of 50,000 souls as the population of the plains. In 1855, a rough census was taken which gave a total of 85,000 inhabitants. This estimate was apparently too low and ten years later Edgar calculated that, including the coolies who had been imported in considerable numbers since that date, the total population was about 1,52,000 souls. The first regular census was taken in 1872 and the abstract below shows the population returned at that and at each successive census and the percentage of increase in each decade,<sup>20</sup> ---

<b>Barak Plains</b>		
<b>Year</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Percentage Variation</b>
1872	205,027	-----
1881	293,738	+43.3
1891	367,542	+25.1
1901	414,781	+12.8

<b>Barak Hills</b>		
<b>Year</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Percentage Variation</b>
1872	30,000	-----
1881	20,120	-----
1891	18,941	- 5.8
1901	40,812	+115.4

**Source:** Suhas Chatterjee, A Socio-Economic History of South Assam, P. 170

<sup>19</sup> *Provincial Gazetteer of Assam, Op. Cit.* Pp. 22-24.

<sup>20</sup> B. C. Allen, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 43-44.

Actually, Sylhet is both the most populous and most densely peopled district in the province, and it is the largest in area except two of the thinly peopled hill tracts. Its population is very nearly 2 million and nearly equal to that of the seven other plains districts put together, it is not only disproportionately, large but also in unwieldy and unmanageable through the want of communication between its parts and its division into two or more districts can only be a question of time.

The following table shows the area, population and density of Sylhet district, and the order in which the stand under head: -

<b>Sylhet</b>	<b>Area</b>	<b>Order</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Order</b>	<b>Density</b>	<b>Order</b>
	5,440	1	1,969,009	1	361.95	1

**Source:** Census Report of India, 1872-1921, P. 27.

The following table shows the distribution of population by thanas in the Colonial Barak Valley: -

<b>Thana</b>	<b>Population in 1901</b>	<b>Population in 1891</b>	<b>Difference</b>	<b>Area in square miles</b>	<b>Population per square mile</b>	<b>Number of persons censused on tea gardens</b>
<b>Silchar</b>	162,094	1,40,461	+21,633	706.09	229	63,947
<b>Lakhipur</b>	83,821	73,041	+10,780	266.91	314	27,408
<b>Katigora</b>	55,969	54,171	+1,798	674.76	82	10,365
<b>Hailakandi</b>	112,897	99,869	+13,028	414.00	272	27,343

**Source:** Census Report of India, 1872-1921, P. 27.

The area of district was furnished by the Survey Department and does not tally with the sum total of the areas of thanas, as the latter figures were obtained from District officer. The boundaries of the district were changed in 1904, and the present areas are 3,565 square miles.<sup>21</sup> (See Appendix – 3)

The following table shows the General statistics of population by subdivision in the colonial period: -

Years	Silchar Sub Division		Hailakandi Sub Division	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
1	2	3	4	5
<b>Population</b>				
<b>1901</b>	157,984	143,900	58,822	54,075
<b>1891</b>	142,472	125,201	51,901	47,968
<b>1881</b>	211,821	-----	81907	-----
<b>1872</b>	75,767	63,589	34,606	31,065
<b>Variation</b>				
<b>1891 - 1901</b>	+15,512	+18,699	+6,921	+6,107
<b>1881 - 1891</b>	+55,852	-----	+17,952	-----
<b>1872 - 1881</b>	+72465	-----	+16,246	-----

*Estimated Figures*

**Source:** Census Report of India, 1872-1901, Pp. 28-31

<sup>21</sup> *Census Report of India*, New Delhi, 1872-1921, Pp. 27-31 .



The following table shows the Religion, Civil Condition of population by subdivision in the colonial period: -

	Silchar Sub - Division		Hailakandi Sub - Division	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
1	2	3	4	5
<b>1901 Religion</b>				
<b>Total Hindus</b>	111,813	102,366	33,556	31,229
<b>Shahaj Bhajaniyas</b>	529	384	820	728
<b>Other Vaishnavas</b>	30,983	27,762	11,168	10,030
<b>Saktists</b>	34,990	31,291	9,940	9,200
<b>Sivaites</b>	8,568	7,207	1,195	948
<b>Muhammadans</b>	42,150	37,128	24,905	22,515
<b>Animistic</b>	3,474	3,981	313	311
<b>Total Christians</b>	494	407	40	16
<b>Anglian Communion</b>	213	123	23	11
<b>Minor Denominations</b>	200	233	6	2
<b>Other Religion</b>	53	18	8	4
<b>Civil Condition</b>				
<b>Unmarried</b>	82,894	55,179	31,547	20,025
<b>Married</b>	67,915	64,401	24,859	24,690
<b>Widowed</b>	7,175	24,320	2,416	9,360
<b>Literacy</b>				
<b>Literate in Bengali</b>	12,409	540	4,805	143
<b>Literate in English</b>	1,342	80	299	14
<b>Illiterate</b>	143,396	143,278	53,630	53,915
<b>Languages Spoken</b>				
<b>Bengali</b>	89,030	79,192	45,438	41,411
<b>Dimasa</b>	3,742	3,678	164	161
<b>Manipuri</b>	19,594	18,947	3,196	3,025
<b>Eastern Hindi and Hindustani</b>	36,808	33,865	9,367	8,782

Source: Census Report of India, 1872-1901, Pp. 34-38.

At first sight it looks as though the census of 1879 must have been far from accurate, but though no doubt it was not complete, its errors were less serious than one might be tempted to suppose. Immigration was proceeding vigorously at this period and in 1881 it was calculated that only 13.6 percent of the gross increase that had occurred since the preceding census, was due to natural growth. This was less than the natural increase in the district, as a whole, during the next decade, which was said to be as much as 18.2 percent. The bulk of the increase between 1891 and 1901 was due to the excess of births over deaths, and the number of people born and censused in the plains increased 15.6 percent. A considerable proportion of this increase was no doubt due to the offspring of females born outside the province, of which there were more than 42,000 in Cachar in 1891. The general result is eminently satisfactory. A century ago the eastern end of the Surma Valley was very sparsely peopled, but the population has grown with remarkable rapidity, and outside the reserved forests there is little land remaining in the plains available for settlement. The population of the hills is small, and is very nearly stationary, the number of persons enumerated there in 1901, excluding the temporary visitors working on the railway, being only a few hundred more than the population of twenty years before. The following statement shows the growth by subdivision during the last two decades: -

	<b>Population</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Variation</b>
	1901	1891 – 1901	1881 - 1891
<b>Silchar</b>	301,884	+12.7	+26.3
<b>Hailakandi</b>	112,897	+13.0	+21.9
<b>North Cachar</b>	20,490	+8.0	-5.8

**Source:** Provincial Gazetteer of Assam, P. 25

101,252 persons or 24 percent of the population of the plains in 1901, had been born outside the province. The great majority of these persons are coolies and about three-fifths of the total came from the neighbouring province of Bengal, Manbhum, Hazaribagh, Bankura and Ranchi being the districts most strongly represented. There were also a large number of

immigrants from the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, half of who came from Ghazipur and one fourth from Azamgarh, and over 12,000 from the central provinces. Apart from the garden Cooly and the Bengali trader, the number of immigrants is not large. There were a few Kabuli traders, a class that earned an unenviable notoriety in the Kalachara dacoity of 1904, a few Nepalese, and a few traders from Rajputana and Ajmer-Merwara. In North Cachar no less than 40 percent of the population in 1901 had been born outside the province, but they were merely temporary visitors engaged on the construction of the railway, and have long since left the district. Cachar, as a whole, gains largely by inter-district migration. In 1901, it received 28,988 persons and sent out 7,259 emigrants, the net gain being 21,729.<sup>22</sup> The majority of emigrants go to Sylhet and the Naga Hills and are probably cultivators who move their homes across the district boundary. The same presumably holds good of the immigrants, the great majority of whom come from the neighbouring of Sylhet (25,971) and the state of Manipur. The number of people born in Sylhet and censused in Cachar only increased by 2,259 during the last decade, but this does not represent the total amount of immigration that has taken place. Assuming that the death-rate amongst Sylhettis settled in Cachar in 1819 has been 40 per mile per annam, it would have required the transfer of 8,500 people merely to keep the figures at the level of that year.

The proportion of women to men in the Cachar plains has always been low, as will be seen from the following figures showing the number of women to a thousand men at each census since 1872: 1872 – 857, 1881 – 873, 1891 – 891, 1901 – 913. This is, however, largely due to the disturbing effect of immigration and if this factor be eliminated and the proportion calculated on the number of people born in Cachar and censused in the province, it rises to 1881 – 979, 1891 – 974 and 1901 – 976, a ratio which at the last two enumerations was 14 per mile higher than that prevailing in the plains districts of the province as a whole. In North Cachar, amongst the indigenous population, the proportion of women very slightly exceeded that of men.

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<sup>22</sup> *Provincial Gazetteer of Assam, Op. Cit.* Pp. 20-33.

The Characteristics castes of the Surma Valley differ from those in Assam, though many are common to the valleys. The great cultivating classes of Sylhet are the Das who often use the prefix Sudra and Halwa. The Sudras are many of them members of the Das caste, but there in Sylhet a genuine caste that has no other name composed of people who were formerly the slaves of Brahmans and Kayastha. The members of the Navasakha or respectable profession castes, most strongly represented are the Telis or oil-pressers, the Goalas or Cowherds, the Napits or Barbers, the Baruis or tetel-leaf growers, the Kumhars or Potters and the Kamars or Blacksmiths. The Baidyas are theoretically the doctors and socially occupy a position immediately below the Brahmans. The Shahas are by tradition liquor - sellers but in Sylhet they are the chief trading caste, and many of them have amassed considerable wealth, in Assam Valley they are ordinary cultivators and Brahmans take water from their hands. The Namasudras or Chandals are a fishing and boating caste. The foreign castes most numerous in 1901 were Bauris, Bhuiyas, Bhumij, Chamars, Ghatwals, Kurmis, Mundas, Oraons, Santals etc. Nearly all of these persons had originally been brought up to Assam to work on tea-gardens. The following castes are also numerically strong: Koches, Rajbansis, Kalitas, Nadiyals, Ahoms, Jugis, Kewats, Chutiyas etc.<sup>23</sup>

Normally the Hindus all over India follow the caste system. There were four castes. But the Bengali followed the two caste system, the Brahmins and the Sudras. The Vaidyas and Kayasthas were below the ranks of the Brahmins, but enjoyed a status almost equal to the Brahmins. In Sylhet there was no separate Vaidya sub caste and they had social and marriage intercourse with the Kayasthas. Among the Brahmins and Kayasthas there were numerous sub castes. A. C. Choudhury in his *Srihatter Itibritta* had vividly described the different castes. There was however, rigidity in the caste system in the Sylhet portion of the Barak Valley.<sup>24</sup>

Unlike Sylhet, Cachar witnessed less rigidity in the caste system. In the Sylhet portion there were so many castes and sub castes among the Hindus, in Cachar during our period of study the population was sparse. The Brahmins who were the head of the Bengali society were only a microscopic minority. They like the Brahmins of Sylhet were mainly engaged in

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<sup>23</sup> *Provincial Gazetteer of Assam, Op. Cit.* P. 33.

<sup>24</sup> F. Hamilton, *An Account of Assam, Guwahati, 1940*, P. 67.

religious duties; however, some of them were in administration. They were very few Kayasthas in Cachar and in fact, no Vaidyas. Following the examples of the rulers of adjoining Tripura the Rajas of the Kachari Kingdom appointed the Kayasthas into the posts of revenue administration in the plains and conferred upon them the titles of Choudhury and Mazumder. The Raja's normally conferred the title Chakravarty to those Brahmins who had been close to the court. The most of the Hindu population comprised of the lower castes. The boat man and fisherman were the dominant communities. The Baruis (betel growers) also had their brisk business.

Notwithstanding their numerical strength these people suffered from many social disabilities regarding the dress and ornaments. According to the British reports these people had been dirty and lived in filth. Both the sexes indulged in drinking country beer and smoking. They were also addicted to opium. The habit of eating opium was not limited to the lower castes it was prevalent among the higher castes and the hillment to boot. The lower castes had been, in fact, the wages slaves of the Raja and his henchmen. Their economic and social status improved considerable after the annexation of 1832.

In Cachar, there were many yugis. The yugis, according to Ballal Charita by Gopal Bhatta, got demoted into the ancharaniya class because of their loose customs. The yougis trace their origin to the Saiva Saint, Gorakshanatha. They assumed the title 'Nath'. They buried their dead bodies and had no Brahmins. Only, the educated person having the knowledge of the Shastras discharged the functions of the priest. They were known as Mohanta. The principal occupation of the yougi, had been weaving. In Cachar, initially, they were weaver but as they became land owner and they gradually gave up their traditional occupation to become cultivators. This shifting of occupation made them prosperous. The yougi of Cachar, unlike their counterparts in Sylhet or other parts of Bengal, are comparatively advanced. The yougi migration in Hailakandi had been late. The yougis of Eastern and Western Bengal had to face severe competition from the imported cotton goods but the Cachar yougis for their land owing status enjoyed some privileges of the upper caste and were saved from the economic impairment which followed the British rule.

Child marriage was prevalent among the Hindus and according to B. C. Allen, there had been a tendency among the Cachar Muslims to get their daughters married early. The Muslims of Cachar were mostly the migrants from Sylhet and all of them were Sunnis. They were divided into Seiad, Pathan, Seikh and other mixed classes according to English writers. Manipuri Muslims also lived in Cachar. The Muslims were according to Allen free from the Hindu superstitions but in Hailakandi areas they donated money for the Hindu worship of goddess Sitala. Unlike Eastern Bengal, “the number of people converted to the creed of Islam on religious ground is said to be extremely small.” In Cachar, as land owning gentry, the Muslims had a better social status than the majority of the lower caste Hindus. Divorce and widow remarriage were permitted among the lower caste Hindus and Muslims but the solvent Muslims having status, like the caste Hindus, normally detested such practices. Muslims and lower caste Hindus paid bride price.

There were no pucca Mosques. They celebrated Id with pomp. The Hindus had all the festivals like, Durga Puja, Lakshmi Puja, Kali Puja, Saraswati Puja etc. but Manasa or Bishari Puja, was most popular. Manasa was worshipped on the last day Sravana. Similarly, on the last day of Chaitra the village folk celebrated Charka festival displaying several feats of martial art. During the Moharram month of the Muslim calendar, the Muslims resorted to Jari dance and song.

The peculiarity of the Bengalis living here irrespective of caste and religion is that almost all of them had common titles, Chaudhury, Mazumder, Biswas, Bhuiya, Laskar etc. are common among both the Hindus and Muslims (including the Manipuri Muslims). The Hindus had, however their caste titles but majority of them were in favour of the agrarian titles. Raja Krishnachandra showered lavishly those titles upon his subjects in return of money to the status hungry rustic folks. The last monarch of Cachar also followed the food steps of his predecessor.

Like the Bengalis, the Manipuri Hindus of Cachar were also the followers of Bi-Caste system. They were a Vaisnavite Community following the Gaudia Vaishnava order. The positions of the Manipuri Brahmins were not as high as that of the Bengalis. The Koch Rajbangsis followed the Mono-caste system. Manipuri priests acted as their Brahmins. However, some Bengali Brahmins also acted as their Priests. But the influence of Manipuri Vaisnavita religious culture was dominant over the Koch of Cachar. The Dimacha also followed Mono-Caste system. They called themselves Kshatris. The Burmans, accepted the Bengali priests as their religious gurus but the Dimachas in the hills had their own priestly class. The Hinduized Reangs, Halam Kukis also had one caste and the degraded Bengali Brahmins often acted as their priest. However, they followed their tribal custom and the need for the Hindu priests was nominal.<sup>25</sup>

Of the total population of the province, 56 percent were returned as Hindus, more than half of whom professed the milder tenets of Vaishnavism. This form of Hinduism is especially prevalent in the Assam Valley, where its gosains or principal priests occupy positions of great influence and dignity. The gosains generally lives in a satra or College surrounded by his bhokots or resident disciples. In some of the smaller satras celibacy is not enforced, but in the larger colleges neither the gosains nor the bhokots are allowed to marry. The Satras are not educational institutions like the Buddhists monasteries of Burma, nor do the inmates wander abroad into the neighbouring villages to solicit alms. The gosain of a large Satra is the spiritual head of a wealthy and powerful college and is looked up to as the ultimate authority in religious and social matters by thousands of villagers, many of whom live miles away. In most of the larger Satras the presiding gosain is a Brahman, but in some of the smaller institutions he is a Kalita or Kayastha.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *Provincial Gazetteer of Assam, Op. Cit.* Pp. 34-37.

<sup>26</sup> *Annual Administration Report of the Department of Industries, Bengal for the year 1850 -1941, Pp. 172-177.*

The following table shows the birth place, race, Civil Caste by subdivision in the colonial period: -

	<b>Silchar Sub-Division</b>		<b>Hailakandi Sub-Division</b>	
	<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>
1	2	3	4	5
<b><u>Birth Place</u></b>				
<b>Born in district</b>	102,448	100,250	43,295	420,41
<b>Born in other parts of provinces</b>	13,579	5,473	4,586	1,857
<b>Born in Chota Nagpur</b>	10,983	11,225	1,803	2,210
<b>Born in other parts of Bengal</b>	16,042	13,908	3,684	3,841
<b>Born in united provinces</b>	7,418	5,864	4,483	2,600
<b>Born in Central Provinces</b>	5,074	5,383	675	1,175
<b>Born in Nepal</b>	357	110	16	5
<b>Born in Elsewhere</b>	2,083	1,687	280	346
<b><u>Race and Caste</u></b>				
<b>Bauri</b>	5,042	5,427	1,430	1,441
<b>Bhuiya</b>	4,324	4,236	598	533
<b>Brahman</b>	1,771	1,072	436	311
<b>Chamar</b>	3,698	3,608	1,578	1,840
<b>Dom Patni</b>	14,475	13,941	6,185	6,175
<b>Eurasian</b>	16	19	-----	-----
<b>European</b>	169	50	35	14
<b>Goala</b>	2,503	2,206	621	558
<b>Jugi</b>	3,720	3,391	2,035	1,902
<b>Kachari</b>	2,083	2,019	50	-----
<b>Kayastha</b>	3,285	1,706	448	267
<b>Kshattriya</b>	2,133	2,175	3,375	2,935
<b>Kuki</b>	1,715	1,712	175	177
<b>Mali</b>	1,258	948	1,011	938
<b>Manipuri</b>	14,657	13,964	4	-----
<b>Munda</b>	3,676	3,433	174	207
<b>Musahar</b>	2,633	2,905	763	730
<b>Naga</b>	1,031	1,433	-----	-----
<b>Namasudra</b>	4,127	3,491	2,978	2,863
<b>Santal</b>	4,307	4,167	713	775

Source: Annual Administration Report of the Department of Industries, Bengal for the year 1850-1945, P. 172.



In Barak Valley, the Muslims were mostly the migrants from Sylhet of Tippera districts of Bengal presidency. They were hardy and industrious and expert cultivators. Cachar witnessed the rise of some important Muslim nobility during the last two monarchs of the principality. Gulu Mian of Barenga, a village near Silchar had been a powerful merchant and landed gentry. He was very powerful, expert in one upmanship to disstablize the political fulcrum of the principality. Actually, the most of the Muhammadans migrants in the Surma-Barak Valley, at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century by the conquered of Sikandar Ghazi who was largely assisted in his enterprise by the famous Muhammadan Fakir Shah Jalal. This man was a native of Yemen in Arabia and was sent by his uncle to Hindustan with a handful of earth and orders to settle in the place in which the earth was similar to the sample he took with him. The ground of Sylhet proved to be of the quality desired and Shah Jalal settled in the newly conquered territory. A fine-mosque, which is thought to be a peculiar sanctity, has built over his tomb, and a monthly grant is made by Government for its support. The tombs of the 360 disciples of the great fakir are to be seen in almost every portion of the town. Abdul Gani Mazumder another merchant from Dacca wielded great influence upon Govinda Chandra, the last ruler. Notwithstanding the political power being concentrated into the hand of the weak and malfunctioning Hindu bureaucracy during the pre-colonial period, it was the raising Muslim gentry, because of their number and comparatively better financial status, had become the power centre and thus arbiter of the principality.<sup>27</sup>

Socio-economic carapace of the Muslims got secured with the annexation of the principality into the British dominion. To revive the economy of war ravaged Cachar the aim of the British administrators since the days of Captain T. Fisher had been to increase the land revenue. And that could only be achieved by reclaiming waste land and by encouraging intensive cultivation of virgin soil. Thus the authorities of Cachar encouraged immigration of the land hungry, virile Muslims from the neighbouring populous districts. The Muslims being traditionally expert cultivators willingly came to sparsely populated Cachar for settlement.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> W. W. Hunter, *Statistical Account of Assam*, Vol. - II, New Delhi, 1990, Pp. 395-397.

<sup>28</sup> Kamarunnasa Islam, *Aspects of Economic History of Bengal*, Bangladesh, 1984, P. 107.

The staple food of the people is boiled rice, eaten with pulse, spices, and fish or vegetable curry. Among the well-to-do, pigeon or duck occasionally take the place of fish, but fish is a very common article of diet in the plains and is said to be a substitute for ghee, which is not very largely used. Goat's flesh is eaten by Muhammadan and Hindus alike, while venison is always acceptable, and in parts of the Assam Valley by no means rare. The restrictions on the eating of flesh are not so stringent as in upper India and even respectable Brahmans take duck, pigeon and goat. Fowls like beef are debarred to the Hindu, and so are sheep. An orthodox Brahman in that district will only take food once between sunrise and sunset, but this rule is not observed in the Assam Valley. Domesticated pork is of course forbidden by both Hindu and Muhammadans, but the lower Hindu castes will sometimes eat wild pig. Tea drinking is very common especially in the early morning. Sweetmeats usually consists of powdered grain mixed with milk, sugar and ghi. The hill men and the aboriginal tribes, eat flesh of all kinds, even when nearly putrid. Dog is generally considered a luxury by them, and lizards, snakes and insects are appreciated, but milk is very seldom taken. The ordinary form of dress for a villager a cotton dhoti or waist cloth, with a big shawl or wrapper, and sometimes a cotton coat. Women in Surma-Barak Valley wear a petticoat, a scarf tied round the bust and a shawl. In the Surma-Barak Valley women wear a sari, a piece of cloth about 15 feet long and nearly 4 feet broad, this is fastened round the waist to form a petticoat and then brought over the head and shoulders so as to cover the rest of the body. Chemises and bodices are also sometimes used. The dress of the middle classes does not differ materially from that of the ordinary villagers but a superior material is employed and shirts are usually worn.

The house of the ordinary villager consists of three or four small and ill-ventilated rooms, built round three sides of a court yard. The walls are usually made of reeds plastered over with mud, the roof of thatch supported on bamboos, the floor of mud. In the Assam valley the materials required for the construction of a house do not, as a rule, cost the proprietor anything but the labour of procuring them, but the houses are small and generally badly build. In the Surma-Barak Valley, the villagers take more trouble; the cottages are raised on high plinths, are well thatched, and have an arched roof tree to resist the storms.

Brick houses are rare and the dwellings of the middle class are in the same style, but larger and of better quality, than the cottage of the villager. The furniture of the cultivating classes is simple and consists of a few boxes and wicker work stools, brass and bellmetal. Cooking utensils, earthen pots and pans, baskets and bottles and in the Assam Valley a loom. The villager sometimes sleeps on a small bamboo machan or platform and sometimes on a mat on the floor, but the middle class have beds, tables and chairs in their houses.

In the Surma-Barak Valley, the ordinary amusements of the people are Chees, dice and cards and the women of the lower castes take part in dances known as gopini Kirton. Singing and a rude form of music are a constant source of pleasure, and in places there are simple theatrical performances. In their own home the Manipuri's are devoted to the national game Hockey on horseback, which is simply polo on small ponies, played with seven aside, with no goal posts, and with a disregard of the rules which are necessary in the interests of the safety where bigger ponies are employed. In Cachar they seldom have an opportunity of playing Polo and have to content themselves with Hockey on foot.

In the Surma-Barak Valley the villagers indulge in boat races in long canes, manned by from fifteen to twenty pairs of paddlers, who keep time to the songs of a man who dances in the centre of the vessel, and beats a pair of cymbals. The Khasis are much addicted to archery competitions and are very skilful with the bow and the Nagas amuse themselves by putting the weight leaping and exercises on the horizontal bar.

Hindus burn and Muhammadans bury their dead. Some animistic tribes follow the Hindu custom unless the death has been due to an infectious disease, when they are afraid of the infection being carried in the smoke of the funeral pyre, others burn while a few tribes simply throw dead bodies into the jungles. Some tribes preserve the corpses of their wealthy men for several months after their death. They are placed in wooden coffins inside the house and the liquid matter is carried off through a bamboo. The faithes, who live in the Lushai Hills smear a greasy preparation over the body, which preserves and hardens the skin. The corpse is

then dressed in its best clothes and in the evening is brought outside the house and rice beer is poured down its throat. This disgusting performance is sometimes continued several weeks.<sup>29</sup>

In Barak Valley, with the exception of an insignificant tract of level land in the angle formed by the junction of the Kapili and the Doiang, the whole of the North Cachar sub-division, which covers in area of 1651 square miles, is hilly country. The area of the two remaining sub-divisions of Silchar and Hailakandi, which is generally classed as plain, is 1,913 square miles. It must not, however, be supposed that the whole of this very considerable area is actually level land. The Silchar sub-division includes the southern section of the Assam range, a belt of hilly country, with an average width of six or seven miles, containing peaks between three and four thousand feet in height. On the eastern frontier there is the Bhuban range, which covers a considerable area, and rises in places to over 3,000 feet above the level of the sea, while on the west of the Hailakandi valley, the Chhatachura or Saraspur hills stretch in a continuous line to the Barak. Almost the whole of the country north and south of that rivers is, moreover, dotted over with low ranges, or isolated hills called tilas, which rise like islands from the dead level of the alluvium, and it thus follows that a large proportion of the Cachar plains is not level land at all.

The Bhuban hills are continuation of the Lushai system and run almost due north along the eastern boundary of the district to the junction of the Jiri and the Barak. The main range contains peaks varying from two to three thousand feet in height, and throws out a continuous succession of spurs on either side to the east and west. The Rengti hills like the Bhubans, project from Lushai system and are separated from the Bhubans by the broad valley of the Rukni and Sonai. Shortly after entering the district they throw out a well-defined spur towards Baruncherra on the west but the main range continues northwards past Cooly Ghat, and then takes a sharp bend westward to Jafirbund. Throughout the whole of its length the Hailakandi valley is shut in between two ranges. The first section in the south-west is known as the Chhatachura range and starts from the peak of that name, whose summit is 2,087 feet above the level of the sea. The hills gradually decline in height, and the middle section, which

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<sup>29</sup> *Provincial Gazetteer of Assam, Op. Cit.* Pp.40-43.

bears the name of Saraspur, is only 1,000 feet above sea level, while near the Barak, where they are known as the Badarpur hills they are only a few hundred feet in height. A little to the east of the Chhatachura range runs another and outer range of much lower hills, different sections of which are known as the Katlicherra, Alexanderpur and Latakandi hills. South of Jafirbond almost the whole of the Hailakandi sub-division east of the Dhalaswari is dotted over with low hills, but the actual range, which stretches northwards from the southern frontier of the district to the Barak and bounds the Hailakandi valley on the east, is known under the following names going from south to north: Jhalnacherra, Baruncherra, Rupacherra, Nunaikhal, Hasiura, Kalacherra, Bandukmara, Mohanpur and Rabatabad hills. North of Jafirbund these hills are very low and different sections of the range are also separated from one another by considerable intervals of level land. The Bhuban range and the hills to the south of the Hailakandi Valley are covered with forest and dense bamboo jungles, and take the form of narrow ridges with steeply sloping sides, which here and there bristle into peaks. North of the Barak the outlying spurs of the Assam range have level summits covered with a rich and fertile soil. Many of these hills have been cleared and planted out with tea, and tea is also grown on the low hills or tilas which are dotted about over almost every portion of the plain except the valley of the Sonai.

The principal river of the valley is Barak, which rises a little to the east of Mao thana, on the southern slopes of the lefty range which forms the northern boundary of the Manipur. From there it flows a westerly and southerly course to Tipaimukh, when it turns sharply to the north and for a considerable distance forms the boundary line between Cachar and Manipur. After its junction with a Jiri, it turns again to the west, and flows a tortuous course across the centre of the district till Sylhet is reached at Badarpur. From Badarpur to Haritkar the Barak forms the boundary between the two districts, but the latter place the rivers divides into two branches and the southern arm, which is known as the Kusiya crossed the frontier of Sylhet. The northern branch, which is called the Surma continues to from the boundary of Cachar as far as Jalalpur. The total length of the Barak from its source to its confluence with the old stream of the Brahmaputra near Bhairab Bazar is about 560 miles, but of this only 120 miles lie through or on the borders of Cachar. In the cold weather the Barak is in places extremely

shallow, and the river flows between steep banks which rise to a height of 40 or 50 feet on either side. After heavy rains in the hills it is subject to strong freshets, and the level of the water sometimes rises 20 or 30 feet in a surprisingly short space of time.

The Barak receives numerous small tributaries from the hills through which it makes its way, but the Jiri is the first important affluent to join it in Cachar. This river rises in the north Cachar Hills, and flows a course of 75 miles to its confluence with the Barak, during the greater part of which it acts as the boundary line between British territory and Manipur. Its principal tributaries are the Jhinam and the Digli or Kumruna, which drain the hills immediately to the west.

A little to the west of Lakhipur the Barak receives the Chiri or Langkhua which rises on the southern slopes of the high range near Haflong. The next important tributary is the Madhura or Bongpai which joins it a little to the west of Silchar town. The Jatinga River is well known as the railway line has been carried up its valley. It rises south of the Haflong and flows west and south through the hills till it debouches on the plain at Panighat. From here it flows through the Barkhola Pargana and after receiving the Doloo on its left bank, falls into the Barak nearly opposite Jaynagar, after a course of 36 miles. West of the Jatinga there are numerous small streams which drain the country south of the Barail, but are of little importance once except as drainage channels. The principal rivers on the south are the Dhaleswari and the Sonai. The latter rises in the Lushai Hills and after a tortuous northerly course of 60 miles, falls into the Barak at Sonaimukh. As far as Maniarkhal it flows through forest land, but from this point to its mouth its banks are fringed with villages.

The Dhaleswari also rises in the Lushai Hills where it is known as the Tlong. It used originally to flow along the west side of the Hailakandi Valley, and fall into the Barak a little to the east of Badarpur. A former Raja of Cachar is said to have diverted its course a little above Rangpur, and the old channel is now filled up for the distance of about one mile after the commencement of the new channel, which is called Katakhal. In spite of the fact that the lower reaches of the Dhaleswari are completely cut off from the river that issues from the

Lushai Hills, the bed still contains a considerable quantity of water, and between June and September a boat of four tons further can proceed above Hailakandi town as far as Ainakhal. The Katakhal flows along the east of the valley and falls into the Barak near the Shalchakra. The banks are steep and high and the channel of the river deep, but it is liable to sudden freshets, which occasionally do some damage to the villages in the neighbourhood, and small embankments have been erected on two or three gardens to prevent the spill water from injuring the tea. The country between the Sonai and the Katakhal is drained by the Rukni, a tributary of the former river, and the Ghagra which falls into the Barak.

North of the Barail the principal drainage channel is the Doiang, which rises near the Mahur station and flows a tortuous course through the centre of the sub-division. From its junction with the Langpher river near Lamsakhang it forms the northern boundary of the district till it falls into the Kapili, which for the greater parts of its course acts as the western boundary of the North-Cachar Hills. The principal tributaries of the Doiang are on the left bank of the Dalaima, the Langlai and the Langyen. On the right bank it is joined by the Mahur, with its tributary the Mupa, and the Langling. During their passage to the plains these rivers present the phenomena usually to be observed in hill streams. The channel is full of rocks and boulders which in conjunction with the rapidity of the current, render them useless for the purposes of navigation. The rivers roar their way towards the lower levels, but though they add much to the charm of the surrounding scenery, and carry off the rainfall of the hills, they do not as yet contribute anything towards the material development of the country.

The general appearance of the Suma Barak plains is extremely picturesque. On the north, east and south they are shut in by range upon range of purple hills whose forest clad sides are seamed with white landslips and gleaming waterfalls. There are none of those wide stretches of unbroken plain which form so tedious a feature in the landscape in many parts of India. Low hills crop up here and there above the alluvium, rising like rocky islets out of a summer sea, and in one direction or another mountain always bound the view. To the south much of the country is still covered with primeval forest. Further north the higher land has been cleared and planted out with tea, while the lower levels are covered with rich crops of

waving rice. Here and there swamps and bils, with clumps of elephant grass and reeds, land variety to the view. The Barak winds through the centre of the plain, its surface dotted with the white sails of native craft, and its banks for the most part lined with villages. These villages are buried in groves of slender areca plums, broad-leaved plantains, and feathery bamboos and at all seasons of the year the country looks fresh and green. The hills in North Cachar rise as a rule in steep slopes covered with forest and bamboo jungle, but rocks and precipices are seldom to be seen.<sup>30</sup>

The following description of the marshes of the valley, which is taken from Sir William Hunter's work, is stated by the Deputy Commissioner to be still substantially correct. The process of silting up has, however, advanced considerably during the last twenty years, and in the Bakrihawar high ground has been formed on which permanent villages have been established. In addition to the ones mentioned by Sir William Hunter there are the following large bils in the Hailakandi sub-division: Bawa, 2 square miles, Churgul, 2 square miles, Kuliala, 1 square mile, Chunati, ½ square mile.

There are no artificial water courses or lakes in the Surma-Barak Valley, but the Chatla Fen, during three or four months of the rainy season, swells into a lake like sheet of water, navigable by the boats which supply rice to the neighbouring tea plantations. It is difficult to give an estimate of the area of this piece of water, as it varies much from year to year and it is not easy to determine where the actual bil begins and where marsh-jungle ends. Its dimensions may, however, be approximately stated to be about 12 miles in length, and two miles in breadth at the widest part. The Chatla Fen plays so important a part in the physical - geography of Barak Valley that an account of it as it appears in the rainy season and of the land-making process which is steadily going in its swamps may not be found uninteresting. The Barak River enters Cachar from the east as a considerable stream, overcharged with silt, and in its course through the district it receives the torrents from the Naga Hills on the north and the Lushai territory on the south. As soon as the periodical rains set in, both the Chatla and the Hailakandi valleys turn into swamps. For the time they manage to discharge a good

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<sup>30</sup> *Provincial Gazetteer of Assam, Op. Cit.* Pp. 113-134.



deal of their water into the Barak, but as this river receives its freshes from the eastward, it rises above the level of the two valleys and instead of relieving them of their drainage pours its own floods into them. Its rise and fall are so sudden, that within 24 hours the direction of the water changes, and the current, which in the morning was streaming out of the marshes into the river, comes rushing back into the fen before night.<sup>31</sup>

The climate of the Surma-Barak Valley is not so pleasant as that of Brahmaputra Valley. The rainfall is extremely heavy, but the temperature in the rains is considerably higher than that recorded in Dibrugarh and the winter is not nearly so cold and bracing as in the northern valley. The average maximum temperature in January is under 78<sup>0</sup> Fahrenheit, but this is nearly 7<sup>0</sup> higher than that recorded in Dibrugarh and though the mornings are so cold and sometimes foggy, the Sun at midday and in the early afternoon has still considerable power. In March the temperature begins to rise but heavy rain in April and May prevents the development of anything in any way resembling the hot weather of upper India. Between June and September the climate is far from pleasant. The average maximum temperature during this period is nearly 90<sup>0</sup>, the average minimum nearly 77<sup>0</sup>, and though these temperatures in themselves cannot be considered high, they are most oppressive in an atmosphere surcharged with moisture. During these four months no less than 78 inches of rain fall at the headquarters of the district, and, shut in as it is on three sides by hills, the air of the plain resembles that of a vapour bath. In October, the nights begin to grow a little cooler but the sun is still very hot in the middle of the day and it is not till the middle of the following month that the cold weather can be said to have regularly set in.

The average maximum and minimum temperature recorded each month in Surma-Barak in the following table: -

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<sup>31</sup> H. K. Barpujari, *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vol. - IV, Guwahati, 1963, Pp. 73-77.

	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December	year
<b>Maximum Temperature</b>	77 <sup>o</sup> .8	80 <sup>o</sup> .7	80 <sup>o</sup> .0	88 <sup>o</sup> .5	88 <sup>o</sup> .7	89 <sup>o</sup> .4	90 <sup>o</sup> .2	89 <sup>o</sup> .5	89 <sup>o</sup> .8	88 <sup>o</sup> .7	84 <sup>o</sup> .8	79 <sup>o</sup> .7	<b>86<sup>o</sup>.1</b>
<b>Minimum Temperature</b>	52 <sup>o</sup> .3	55 <sup>o</sup> .6	63 <sup>o</sup> .2	69 <sup>o</sup> .2	72 <sup>o</sup> .5	76 <sup>o</sup> .2	77 <sup>o</sup> .2	76 <sup>o</sup> .8	76 <sup>o</sup> .4	72 <sup>o</sup> .3	63 <sup>o</sup> .6	55 <sup>o</sup> .0	<b>67<sup>o</sup>.5</b>

**Source:** Assam District Gazetteers Cachar, P.13.

In almost every month there is a marked difference between the temperature of the Surma-Barak Valley and Brahmaputra Valley and the average maximum for the year at the later place is 5 degrees and the average minimum 3 degrees lower than that recorded at Silchar.

The average annual fall at Silchar is 121 inches, but near the foot of Assam Range it is not far short of 170. The storm clouds sweeping up the valley are, however, stopped by the Barail, and it is on its southern slopes that most of this aqueous vapour is precipitated in the form of rain. At Haflong, immediately to the north of this wall of hills, there are but 77 inches in the year, and at Maibang the annual fall is as little as 55 inches. November to February is the only four months in the year that can be considered dry, as the spring rains are unusually heavy. In March, Silchar receives nearly 8 inches, in April, nearly 14, and in May no less than 16 inches, and this before the bursting of the regular monsoon. June and July are generally the wettest months in the year, but August runs them very close.

At Silchar, the wind generally blows from the north-east in the morning and from the south - east in the afternoon. About the end of February stormy weather sets in, and in March there are often thunder storms, and not un-frequently heavy falls of hail which do much damage to the tea. In April and May, these storms become less violent, and at no season of the year do they assume the form of cyclones or tornadoes.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *Assam District Gazetteers, Cachar*, Published by the Bepstist Mission Press, 1905. Pp. 31-37.

The following table shows the rainfall recorded at certain selected stations in the Valley: -

<b>Months</b>	<b>Average Rainfall in Inches</b>			
	<b>Sylhet in 4 Years</b>	<b>Bikrampur in 9 Years</b>	<b>Silchar in 43 Years</b>	<b>Hailakandi in 29 Years</b>
<b>January</b>	0.28	0.28	0.64	0.70
<b>February</b>	1.40	2.34	2.32	1.75
<b>March</b>	5.69	9.95	7.93	8.26
<b>April</b>	9.23	19.25	13.56	12.96
<b>May</b>	7.60	22.83	15.72	15.79
<b>June</b>	15.42	27.35	20.39	19.69
<b>July</b>	11.50	27.81	19.98	15.61
<b>August</b>	10.17	24.82	18.69	16.49
<b>September</b>	12.21	20.95	13.95	12.12
<b>October</b>	3.42	9.21	6.40	5.90
<b>November</b>	0.55	1.69	1.31	1.10
<b>December</b>	0.01	0.27	0.54	0.60
<b>Total of year</b>	<b>77.48</b>	<b>16.675</b>	<b>121.43</b>	<b>110.97</b>

Source: Assam District Gazetteers Cachar, Pp.15-17.

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