

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS

At the close of the 18th century, the plain of Cachar was dominated by the different group of tribes. They were mainly the Dimachas, the Kukis, the Reangs, the Manipuris, the Kochs, etc. The rulers of Cachar belonged to the Dimacha group. They remained scattered all over the North-Cachar Hills and in the northern plains of Cachar. They migrated to the south late. The Bengalis are a majority community in the Surma-Barak Valley. Under the Assam Official Language Act, Bengali is the official language for the undivided Cachar district. Captain T. Fisher, the Superintendent of Cachar recommended in 1834, Bengali to be the official language of the newly acquired Colony. But in 19th century, the Bengalis did not command majority in Cachar. However, the influx of Bengalis continued unabated since the days of Rani Chandraprabha. She had an eye on finances and encouraged Bengali settlement to increase the revenue.²²⁰

Cachar became a cynosure of the emigrant Muslims. There was a steady rise of solvent Muslim gentry all over Cachar especially in the south. The Muslims in Sylhet and in East-Bengal had been under the oppressive administrative set up of the Hindu Land Lords and they had neither social status nor the sustainable economic anchorage, let alone their emancipatory identity. When Gobinda Chandra ascended the paternal throne at Khaspur, the Muslims by then got entrenched themselves in a comparatively sound footing. Several of them were solvent petty landlords and engaged in small business concerns. The money has its own status and naturally, the impoverished Bengali-Hindu commoners in the rural belt of Cachar began to clamour for favour and protection of the Muslim gentry according to the general principles of the law of demand and supply. The law and order situation in Cachar, a waterlogged disconnected country, was always bad. So, the local Hindus railed round the Muslims for protection. The privileged Bengali Hindu Community (the Assamese Brahmins by then got merged with their Bengali counterparts) because of their bourgeoisie habits and apathy towards manual labour failed to prosper despite the royal Subventions. In a country where

²²⁰ Suhas Chatterjee, *Op. Cit.* P. 27.

living condition was hard and where there was little scope of extending their talents in other profitable fields, the indolent caste Hindus began to degenerate. The rate of decadence of Bengali Hindus was directly proportional to the rise of the enterprising Bengali Muslims. Thus, during the closing years of the Kachari rule the Muslims became a dominant factor in the socio-political set up of the society. Finance is the prime mover of the political administration, so, the Kachari administration had to feel the pressure of the strings of the Muslim nobility who had already established their triumphant presence.²²¹

In the Pre-British period, the economic condition of Cachar was a very gloomy picture. In the beginning of the 19th century, there followed a scramble for succession between three Manipuri brothers, Marjit, Chaurjit and Gambhir Singh. During 1816-24 in the wake of first Anglo-Burmese war Cachar became 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 Gobindachandra and the British, Cachar became a protected tributary state under the colonial rule. The First Anglo-Burmese war came to an end by signing the Treaty of Yandaboo in February 1826 between the British Government and the King of Burma. Under its provision Cachar was restored to Gobindachandra who agreed to pay Rs. 10,000 annually to the British. Allured by the vast economic resources of Cachar, the British began to fish in the troubled water in Cachar, the revenue of which was then calculated 3 lakhs. 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 head quarter at Dudpatil. However, in pursuance of the expressed desire of the Governor General Lord William Bentinck, Cachar was placed under the control of Dacca and the head quarters of the Superintendent was shifted to Silchar in 1836. In addition to the political chaos and confusion which was prevailing in Cachar before the annexation of British. E. A. Gait (1992) in his. "Notes on the Moral and Material Progress of

²²¹ Suhas Chatterjee, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 92-93.

Assam” has mentioned that Surma Valley was liable to severe floods every year and devastation caused by flood was so very great that little was in the valley.

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 (1972) 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 1817-25 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 lying 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 sound reasonable if not a little on the low side. Whereas J. B. Bhattacharjee (1977) 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 in Government. Along with change in Government there was also change in revenue administration. So tradition was replaced by change under the colonial rule. This change is the other name of modernization. It evokes its kinship with the concept like ‘development,’ ‘growth,’ ‘evolution,’ ‘progress,’ ‘change,’ ‘advancement,’ etc. Modernization as a process of change in societies of pre-colonial Barak Valley was governed by the historical dialectics where the process of transformation of societies and culture was linked both to continuation of traditional activities, under changed situation in Cachar, and modification of the old circumstances with new activities. This is called an innovative change as Marx and Engels believe.

Special socio-political circumstances were favourable to the colonial rulers of Cachar as embodied in the Superintendents and the Deputy Commissioners to make changes keeping in view the sentiments and the tradition of the people. So an all round change was unthinkable. Labour of the people was to be counted. Social institution, structure and culture are all products of human labour. A new society and culture began to emerge out of the pre-colonial systems. But the colonial masters were prompted by their profit motive. So a tussle of interests seemed imminent with the existence of the peasants, labourers, masses on the pole of poverty and the masters on the other pole of affluence. From the very beginning, the colonial administrators were guided by their own economic interests in Cachar. Captain Fisher made a rough survey of the cultivated land under his charge of which a total of 20,663 acres were assessed at Sicca Rs. 20,101 equivalent to Company's Rs. 21,441 excluding an additional area of about 9000 acres revenue free as baksha, Debatter etc.²²²

Originally, Bengali caste Hindu settlement in Cachar is traced to the settlement of an unknown priest in the employ of the royal household Bikrampur village. Captain Fisher gave the name 'Bikrampur' to his adopted village because he was originally the inhabitant of Bikrampur, Dacca. When the settlement took place is not known. But it was during the Sojourn of Raja Tamradhwaja at Khaspur during Ahom-Kachari War. Very likely, the settlement was made in 1706. The contemporaneous Bengali settlement of Kalain Pargana followed soon.

The Muslims who became the dominant community in Cachar within a century of Bengali settlement were few and far between when the Bengalis began to settle in Cachar plains. The Muslims made their initial settlements near the western borders of Cachar i.e. adjacent to Sylhet district a portion of which now comprises the modern Karimganj district. They were landed gentry and known as Panchgaia Bhuiya, Dater Bhuiya, Naktar Bhuiya, Gherati Bhuiya etc. according to the name of their occupation or location. Mention may be made in this connexion that the word datir is an Assamese word and the Barman aristocracy till then, because of close association with the Ahoms, preferred Assamese then Bengali.

²²² Suparna Roy, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 117-119.

So long Maibong was the capital of the territory, Cachar plains like the hills were more or less excluded areas and it was extremely difficult to get a hukumnama (permission) from the court for a permanent settlement. To the hillmen no permission was necessary because they were migratory tribes dependent on shifting cultivation. The transference of capital to Khaspur in the plains completely changed the scenario of restricted emigration. Both the Hindus and Muslims from Sylhet since the days of Lakshmidhara entered Cachar in large numbers. The speed of colonization reached its zenith during the administration of Raja Krishnachandra. The populous villages Dudpatil, Barenga, Banskandi, Udharband etc. were established during that period. According to U. C. Guha (1972), Raja Lakshmidhara, divided the Kacharis into pitriacharis and matriacharis. He conferred the title Barua on the Kachari aristocracy. According to the same author the Assamese influence impelled him to do so. However, Cachar being a Bengali dominated area where the title Barua did not command special respect among the Bengali commoners, the holders of that title gradually gave it up.

The Bengalis of Karimganj were divided into caste and lower caste Hindus. The Brahmins and Kayasthas were the caste Hindus. The Vaidyas were included within the Kayastha fold. Some Sahas for their sound finances had the recognition of the caste Hindus. The caste Hindus of Sylhet were mostly Saktas but the other castes followed Vaisnavism. Thakur Santaram under the patronage of land owner Kanuram spread Vaisnavism in Sylhet in the second half of the 18th century. But the supremacy of the Saktas remained as before. Because of the strict vigilance by the Brahmins the society was free from the religious corruption which plagued the Brahmaputra Valley of that time. The Brahmins discharged all the functions of the priestly class and they were held in high esteem. Other than the priestly duties some of the Brahmins accepted Zamindari and medicine as their profession. The Kayasthas were the educated class and mostly the Government Servants. The post of Mohorar was their monopoly. They were clever and intelligent. The Vaidyas were the Physicians and known as Kaviraj and were respected persons. The patient after recovery paid the Kaviraj the new cloth, brass pitcher and money. Some Brahmins were also in the profession of Ayurveda. The Sahas according to Saradacharn Dhar (1992) were the socially degraded Kayastha, some

of them earned money in trade and the rich among them were called 'Sahuji'. But subsequently they assumed the title Das.

There were Napits (barbar), Tailis (oil miller), Phulmalis (gardener), Khumbhakar (potter), Kamar (blacksmith), Gope (milkmen), Barui (betel growers). These people were of lower castes but in the Navasakha class. The higher castes used to take water from them. The Kaivartas (fishermen), Sonar (the goldsmith), Dhopas (washermen), Dome (the basket makers), the Chandals (meat sellers), and the Tantis (the weavers) belonged to the lowest stratum of the society. The title Choudhury was a respectable title of the landed aristocracy since the days of Mughals. The old titles like Kanungo, Sikdar and Purkayastha also commanded respect. The small landed gentry were known as Tapadars and Talukdars. In fact, there was no zamindar in Sylhet (excepting one) but any land owner paying the rent above Rs. 500/- was called Zamindar, the owner paying the rent of Rs. 50/- and above was a Mirasdar and those who paid rent less than that were known as Tapaders and Talukders.²²³

From ancient times, agriculture was the most vital economic activity in Surma-Barak Valley. It provided food to the society and land revenue to the government. There were various kinds of systems prevailing in India. When the British obtained Dewani in 1765, they found that the peasantry i. e., cultivated their land. They paid a fixed share (which varied from time to time) to the collectors of revenue. The collector, in turn, deposited the collected revenue with central Government after deducting his approved expenditure. After the Central Government had weakened and the regional officers established themselves as the defacto rulers of their respective jurisdictions, their junior officers also behaved in the same way. As a result of the continuing chaotic situation, the collectors of revenue became Zamindars. They continued to collect the revenue and maintain law and order after the company became the Dewan. The Company simply appointed British supervisors in different Zamindari. A Revenue Board was also instituted in 1780 which regulated the revenue collection.

²²³ Suhas Chatterjee, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 110-111.

In Cachar, there was no Zamindar like Bengal. The authorities of Fort William did not introduce Zamindary System in Cachar after its incorporation into the British dominion. The Khel system in Cachar received its finishing touch at the hands of Raja Gobindachandra who divided Cachar plains into 7 revenue districts known as Bikrampur Khel, Garher Bhitara Khel, Dudpatil Khel, Jaipur Khel, Kalain Khel and Hailakandi Khel. Formerly, the Kheldars were known as Ujirs. Krishnachandra termed the Khel as raj. The Moktar was in charge of collecting the revenue and responsible from his omission and commissions to the state through the Ujir. During the rule of Chandraprabha, Ujir was an honest tribal aristocrat serving the state on a purely temporary basis. An assistant who had been a tribal was to assist the Moktar in discharging his duties. Such assistants were known as Chutia Peadah. Krishnachandra fixed the rent of the land taking into account the entire produce. He fixed one sixth of the produce as the rent.

The Moktars were powerful, greedy and oppressive but they were made powerless to the Bengali ryots of the Raja, the most solvent section of the Raja's Subjects. The Bengalis both Hindus and Muslims paid rent directly of their community to the state through their own Khelma laskars or Choudhuris. Thus, they remained practically outside the control of the financial officers of the state. The Raja, however, remained the legal head of the administration and if necessary could punish the errant Bengali tax payers or their collecting agents. But that power was sparingly used. On the other hand the Raja conferred enormous financial power on the Mazumdar of Bikrampur and made him the Bar Mazumdar and as such above all the choudhuris of the state. Thus, the system provided an effective check upon the royal interference into the fiscal affairs of the Bengalis. The Bengali fiscal agents according to Nirupama Hagzer (1984), a Dimacha Scholar, misused their privileges to deprive the tribal rulers.

When Cachar was annexed to the Company's dominion Captain Fisher made a survey of the cultivable land and fixed the rent at the rate of Rs. 3 – 12 – 0 per Koolbah or hal. Fisher fixed the rent of the 253 hals, Khatne land of the elder Rani at Rs. 1,000/- only. The land settlement was made again in 1840 which divided the land in Cachar as class one and class

two lands. The rent was reduced to Rs. 3/- per hal. But the mirasdars collected Rs. 6/- from the ryots. Lyons requested the Government of Bengal to raise the revenue to Rs. 4/- per hal. He also recommended the acquisition of the land of Rani Induprabha in return of a suitable compensation but the Rani declined the proposal. It would not be wide of the mark in the light of the meaty low down of captain Lyons that during the sticky patch of transaction of transfer of power from the native Raj to the Company's administration corruption in the high place was a way of life in Cachar. The royal ladies during the Kachari Raj not infrequently interfered into the financial administration of the state.²²⁴

The pre-colonial land systems of Sylhet was concerned it appears to have been conquered by a small bond of Muhammadans in the reign of the Bengal King Shams-ud-din. The Supernatural powers of the last Hindu King, Gaur Gobind, proved ineffectual against the still more extra ordinary powers of the fakir Shah Jalal, who was the real leader of the invader, although he subsequently made over the active management of secular affairs to the nominal leader Sikandar Ghazi. After the death of Shah Jalal, the district as then constituted was included in the kingdom of Bengal and put in charge of a Nawab. In the reign of Akbar it passed into the hands of Mughal Emperor and from that time onwards ruled by an Amil who was locally known as Nawab, subordinate to the Nawab of Dacca. Sylhet had come under Todarmal's famous assessment in the reign of Akbar. All the territories of the west of the plains of Cachar were ceded to the Mughals by the Kachari Prince after his defeat. The Mughal set up a strong military outpost at Badarpur. The population of Sylhet was sparse and in fact the pressure of population on Karimganj was even less. The large scale emigration of caste Hindus to Karimganj took place in the second half of the 19th century when tea estate began to flourish. However, the process began with the consolidation of British rule in Sylhet. In Sylhet the process of consolidation was somewhat delayed because of dis-communication and rebellious attitude of some mighty Muslim landed gentry. In this situation Dewani was granted to the East India Company by Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II in 1765 and as such Sylhet along with Bengal Suba became a part of the company's dominion. Next the Bengal

²²⁴ Suhas Chatterjee, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 145-149.

Regulation of 1793 which is also known as permanent Settlement was introduced in Sylhet along with other parts of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa.²²⁵

So far the currency was concerned the Mughal currency of Sicca taka was the normal currency. The Ahoms, Tripuris, Jaintias and the Kacharis minted their own coins with the knowledge of the Emperor and maintained parity with the central currency. For the commoners, however, cowries were the currency. They were a good and long standing medium of exchange. The circulation of the gold and silver coins was strictly limited to the aristocracy and merchants. In 1717 Mughal Emperor, Faruk Siyar conferred upon the East India Company the right to trade duty free subject to the payment of a small tribute Rs. 3,000/- per annum. The Emperor issued dastaks excepting goods from the customs check. The company also got the right to mint money at the Murshidabad. The Company minted taka whose value was slightly lower than the Mughal Sikka taka. Thus, the British Currency taka appeared in the market of the Presidency of Bengal. British rupee gradually replaced the Mughal currency especially after the granting of Dewani. Granting of Dewani by the Emperor to the East India Company had been a land mark in the history of India. The structure of the Mughal administration remained as before but an additional post of Dewan was created who was the Collector of Revenue and Controller of trade and Finance of the Bengal presidency.²²⁶

The economic condition of the people considered to be fairly satisfactory. The soil was fertile, the rainfall regular and abundant, and the bulk of the cultivated land lies above the risk of flood. Communications were fair, and last most important fact of all, the cultivator finds a market for his produce at the various bazaars scattered about the district, to which the garden coolies come to satisfy their wants. At the time of the last re-settlement, an attempt was made to divide the villagers into the following five classes: -

(1) Mirasdars who derive their chief income from rents. (2) Mirasdars who sublet part of their land but are substantial cultivators themselves, (3) Mirasdars who cultivate the whole of their land and neither sublet nor rent, (4) Mirasdars who have to rent land in addition to

²²⁵ Suparna Roy, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 14-15.

²²⁶ S. S. M. Desai, *Economic History of India*, Bombay, 1989, P. 4.

their own holdings, (5) tenants who own no land. Less than 2 percent of the total number were included in the first two classes. Nearly two-thirds of the whole fell in the category of peasant proprietors who neither paid nor received rent, less than a seventh in Class - IV, and rather more than a quarter were found to be landless tenants.

In Surma-Barak Valley, the bulk of the land resembles that found in the broad belt of permanent cultivation in Assam, and the staple crops are *sail* and *aus*, which correspond to the *sail* and *aus* of the other valley. The western portion of Sylhet becomes one great swamp in the rains, and is only fit for the cultivation of *aman*, a form of long-stemmed paddy. A fourth kind of rice called *sailbura* was grown in the large haors or basins. It was sown at the end of the rains and harvested about May and gives an exceptionally large yield per- acre. Sugarcane was often grown on low land, and mustard on old high land near the village site, where it not unnaturally gives a poorer outturn than that of the fertile river banks.

The majority of the hill tribes cultivate on the Jhum system. A patch of land was cleared with axe and fire, the soil is hoed up and the seeds of the hill rice, chillies, cotton, millets, gourds and other vegetables dibbled in among the ashes. The same plot is seldom cropped for more than two or three years in succession. After this time the weeds spring up in great luxuriance and further cultivation would destroy the roots of bamboo jungle upon the growth of which the land depends for its fertility. Jhums are left fallow for as long a time as possible. The shortest period is four years, but it is generally extended to eight or ten.

The agricultural implements during the colonial period were all of a very primitive character and include a wooden plough with an iron-tipped share, wooden rakes and mallets, a rough bamboo harrow, sickles, bill-hooks, knives and baskets. Winter rice is sown in carefully-manured beds near the homestead, which at the commencement of the rains form brilliant patches of green in the landscape. While the shoots are growing, the cultivator ploughs his fields some four or five times, reducing the soil to a fine puddle of clay and repairs the low mounds intended to retain the water. In the hill areas the seedlings are planted out in handfuls by the women, who can be seen up to their knees in mud, stooping for hours together under

the burning summer sun. As the crop grows, it covers the plain with a rich carpet of green, turning towards the end of the year to a fine yellow. When ripe, the grain is cut off near the head, tied in bundles and carried slung from bamboos, to the homestead, where it is threshed out by cattle as occasion requires. *Bao* or *aman* and *ahu* are sown broadcast, but the yield is usually smaller and the quality of the grain is not so fine. Mustard requires four or five ploughings and when new land is broken up the cultivators have to press down the high grass jungle and wait till it is sufficiently withered to catch fire. Sugarcane is a crop which though yielding good returns, entails a considerable amount of labour. The land is generally ploughed twice for pulse, but the seed is sometimes sown broadcast over fields that have just yielded a crop of rice. The plants are pulled up when ripe, left to dry for a week or ten days, and brought in at the leisure of the cultivator.²²⁷

There was not much improvement in the trade position of the valley during the subsequent years till independence except in case of the import trade. Though the valley is no doubt a rich region in regard to her natural resources in raw material, but her financial resources were poor and it is an oft-repeated complaint that her people were not suitable for expert labour. In fact, the large majority of them were 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 province as tea, which was run mostly by European capitalists with labour almost entirely imported from the other parts of India. Except in a few localities there was not a rich landed class, while the middle class was composed entirely of professionals such as lawyers etc. and men in the service of Government or other employees. The trade in the Barak Valley was almost entirely in the hands of the Marwaris and in the Surma Valley the Sahas of Bengal were prominent traders. There was, therefore, not much capital lying idle which can be drawn out. There was no doubt money lending to some extent and in some places the rate of interest was too high, but the amount of money invested in money-lending was very large. The people were mainly 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 was therefore hardly any prospect of building up

²²⁷ Provincial Gazetteer of Assam, *Op. Cit.* Pp.43-45.

an artisan population in the province. Actually, the growth of population in the valley and negligence of the foreign rulers towards the indigenous industries were the causes for the increase in the volume of import trade. Foreign articles such as mill made cloths and yarn oil and others flooded the local markets and sold at cheaper rates and become more popular. The import trade remained generally in the hands of foreigners, who carried the articles by steamer through the Surma-Barak and by rail.²²⁸

The hillmen of Surma-Barak Valley had a good conception of trade, both internal and external. They sold their surplus agricultural, forest and domestic products in the trade marts of Cachar during the days of Kachari Raj. Lakhipur, Jiri, Udharband, Sialtek, Tipaimukh and Sonaimukh Bazars were known to the Nagas and the Kukis and the Dimachas. They purchased the necessaries from the Bengali and Manipuri traders. Bengali traders supplied them guns and gun powers and materials for making the gun. The tribals also purchased salt, tobacco, agricultural field implements and utensils. The commerce of the hill men of Cachar border had never been one way traffic. Thus, the hill trade was altogether different from the basket economy. The Mizos were migratory, the Dimachas were semi migratory gerontocratic community well conversant with the rules of trade. There had been steady development of hill trade since 1826. There was political stability and free flow of consumer goods. The attitude of the British officials towards the poor hillmen also had been sympathetic.²²⁹

The hillmen acknowledged the British currency. However, the ivory was also the hill currency dealing with the external trade. In domestic trade the principal currency was the mithun. The piglet, salt, packets, iron bar, shawl or a basket of paddy also used as currency in the internal transactions. The volume of external trade of the Mizos of Cachar border alone was Rs. 8,000/- in 1879. The average tribal family consisted of 7 persons and its domestic surplus was about 30% of the total income. The valuable articles of hill commerce were ivory, India rubber, food grains, bamboo timber, elephant hides, bess wax, honey, ginger, fruits etc. The lure of trade brought the head hunting Lushai, kukis into the ambient of the civilization leading to a tension free border of British Cachar. The Superintendent Cachar in 1850

²²⁸ Economic Report of Assam, *Op. Cit.* P. 1.

²²⁹ D. Dutta, *Op. Cit.* P. 135.

informed the Secretary, Bengal Government. The Commerce also helped increasing the better understanding between the plains people and the hillmen. The hill commerce was dependent upon infrastructure. It was principally a riverine commerce. However, the British authorities and the authorities of tea estates improved the surface road to facilitate the commerce of both the people of the plains and hills. The impact of infrastructure upon the Cachar trade during the sixties of the 19th century had been revolutionary. The hill men did not lag behind to seize the opportunity. For the infrastructural development in Cachar the credit goes to Captain R. Stewart and especially to John Edgar.

Despite their heavy engagement those two officers did their stint to improve the economy of the hillmen living in Cachar and in its immediate neighbourhood. Edgar set up 6 hill markets in 1870 on the foot-hills to facilitate Lushai commerce and encouraged the Lushai chiefs to sell their forest products in those markets. He also ensured the safety of the Bengali traders trading with the Lushais. Direct beneficiary of Edgar had been the powerful house of Sukpial, leader of the Western Lushai clan. The Kukis of the Tripura-Sylhet borders had been less fortunate and had to be contented with the relief they received from the British authorities of Sylhet. The hills of Karimganj yielded good revenue because of the rich forest products and the hillmen like Halams, Tipras reaped the benefit from the forest trade. The Dimacha living in the hills had been comparatively backwardness had been the political trouble as well as the lack of enterprise of the Dimach quam.²³⁰

The trade and commerce of Surma-Barak Valley had always been a riverine one. Both the internal and external trades are carried by the river. Trade was carried under two sections, internal and external. The external trade is again sub-divided into (a) overseas trade and (b) interstate trade. Of the different agricultural and industrial products of ancient Surma-Barak Valley, the major part required for direct or home consumption. The economic system gave prominence and preference to production for domestic use, as against production for exchange. But when a surplus over the domestic needs was left over or when the production of any commodities was in excess of household requirements, or was a particular speciality of

²³⁰ Suhas Chatterjee, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 204-206.

the region. It may well have been utilised for export, just as any commodity which was not available in home production in sufficient quantity could be imported.²³¹ This must have been the natural origin of trade in Surma-Barak Valley.

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 was carried out at local markets by indigenous inhabitants and external trade is chiefly in the hands of foreign shopkeepers. There were petty bazaars 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.²³² So far as the merchants section was concerned most of them were natives of Sylhet or Bengal and very few numbers are from the United Provinces and other parts of India. The number of Marwari merchants was 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, hardware, tobacco, brass - ware, ivory, bee - wax, various articles of luxury etc. The important articles of export were tea, timber, rice, oranges, agar wood, spices, vegetables etc. and some other forest product.

In order to encourage tea cultivation the Government created revenue free or revenue paying concessional rates by setting waste lands in perpetuity. The Waste Land Settlement Rules were first framed in Assam in 1838, and these rules were modified during 1860-1880. In 1864, the Junglebari or Waste Land Reclamation Rules were introduced. In 1875, the Government of India, with the consent of the Chief Commissioner modified the Reclamation Lease Rules of 1864. The Rules of 1876 applied only to the special cultivation and it was finally decided in 1882 that leases for ordinary cultivations should be in a form somewhat

²³¹ Kamarunnasa Islam, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 133-134.

²³² B. B. Hazarika and S. B. Roy Choudhury, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 193-194.

different from that laid down in the Rules of 1876. As a result very large areas of land were taken up for tea cultivation under the Junglebari Rules.²³³

The Socio-economic condition of the people of Surma-Barak Valley was not so much satisfactory in the 19th century. With the end of the 19th century, under the impact of colonial economy and exploitation a change in the lot of the people of valley seemed in the offing. The Cachar region of Assam was under Ryotwari system. But even in this system we find a class of revenue collector who is known as Mirasdars, emerged as the virtual landlord of the area. The extra economic coercion like abwabs, nazarana, hod-beggari etc. were also practiced by Mirasdars. The practice received encouragement from the continuous immigration of landless peasant from Sylhet. Occupation of lands by tea planters and Settlement of ex-tea garden labourers converted Cachar into a land short area which enhanced the oppression of the Mirasdars. The situation became more complex gradually. The increase of population, opening of tea gardens, growth of towns, bazaar and numerous homesteads had cut down the size of the arable lands. There turned a great section of cultivators into a landless peasantry. To pay the revenue peasant had to go to the money-lender for borrowing money to clear their arrears.²³⁴

In fact, the socio-economic rural superstructure built by Edgar, driving wedge between the different segments of the society, continued long after the independence. The conservative bastion of the reactionary Islamic society of rural Cachar owes its origin to John Edgar. It is true that all the blames of feudalism or social melanosis cannot be conveniently attributed to Edgar; social psychopathology often played its part. But a man with deep farsight, standing on the threshold of time failed to realize that rigidity of his system with its concomitant social malfunctioning might lead to a blockade of social progress.²³⁵

We notice a glaring contrast between Cachar and Brahmaputra Valley so far the buoyancy of the economy of the two regions. The administrative Report 1872-73 of the

²³³ Suparna Roy, *Op. Cit.* P. 121.

²³⁴ *Ibid.* Pp. 121-122.

²³⁵ B. C. Allen, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 78-79.

Bengal Government indicates sharp rise of prices in the Brahmaputra valley and the increase quota of rice importation from 0.3 million to 0.7 million mounds but Cachar was free from that slump. On the other hand, because of Edgar's measure, rural Cachar after feeding her own population could sold its surplus to the tea estates and army commissariats. This was indicative of the rapid growth of rural economy in Cachar. Local production helped the tea merchants as well as the administration because the cost of procurement of rice in Cachar was much less than the Brahmaputra valley. The Cachar tea estates as well as the army stockades were saved from the dependence of imported rice. Edgar's settlement, however, had a social demerit as it upset the poise of the demography of the local population from which the Assam Valley escaped unscathed. A point however, was pertinent to mention in this connection that the village Muslim gentry bolstered up by Edgar, whatever may be their social clout, because of their economic stability came forward to fill in the political vacuum created after the dissolution of British Empire in India.²³⁶ As economy was the driving force of democratic political functioning the Muslim rural gentry in Cachar, because of their stable and cogent society control, was the safety valve of the political system of Barak Valley.

Moreover, the overall economic picture of the principality of Cachar on the eve of annexation (1832), in the context of a comparative analysis had been grim. Political instability, civil wars, foreign aggression and brigandage battered its economy. Corruption and financial mismanagement was the order of the day. According to Hunter Krishnachandra's territory yielded revenue of Rs. 1,00,000/- annually but during the years preceding the Burmese invasion the income from revenue dropped to as low as Rs. 20,000/- per mensem. There had been further fall of revenue in the years 1826-1827. However, Upendra Chandra Guha has described that the prices were much lower during the rule of Krishnachandra. Besides being an important economic document Guha's list gives a glimpse of the contemporary social picture to boot. The people of Cachar were by and large addict to opium and hasis which is an index of poor health, morality and living condition. It is no wonder that the first shop in Silchar (1834) town had been a liquor shop. The reports of Burns and Lyons are also indicative of the huge sale and purchase of hard drinks and sleazy stuff in the

²³⁶ A. K. Agarwal, *Op. Cit.* P. 168.

domestic markets and village marts. The socio-economic canvas Cachar, however, was changed under the strict but persuasive administration of urbane John Edgar. The economic demands of the immigrant urban elite were altogether different from the natives and their vibrant life style had its concomitant effect upon the hitherto closed mindset of claustrophobic people living under the moriband, gerontocratic hand up society.²³⁷

The communication in the Surma-Barak Valley was not well developed though all the forms of Communication were in use. This was due to the isolated location of the North-East India which is linked with rest of the country by only a narrow corridor between the Himalayas on the one side and Bangladesh on the other. The mighty war machine of the English screeched to a halt on the boarders of Cachar on the eve of the First Anglo-Burmese war, because of utterly lack of communications and it took a long year to clear of the oppressive Burmese from an area of 40 square miles only. 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 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. The cost of transport goods was very high. The commerce in Surma-Barak Valley during the rule of the Rajas had never been encouraging but the Company officials encouraged it, in 1839-40, Cachar exported goods worth Rs. 36,800/-²³⁸ Much of the foreign trades of the valley in the past were carried on through waterways and still today the river Barak and Surma provides yeoman's service as the means of communication in the valley.

The transport in Surma-Barak Valley till 1853 was quite backward in respect of road transport. In the said year, there was only one road in the district which had not been repaired for years together. In 1886, the Cachar district had six roads under the Ferry Fund Board. The total length of these roads was in between 80 and 96 kilometers. But soon after the construction of the above roads in the district made rapid progress and it stood in advantageous position in respect of roads in Assam. This advantage owed to the tea planters

²³⁷ D. Dutta, *Op. Cit.* P. 143.

²³⁸ U. C. Guha, *Op. Cit.* P. 120.

who wanted good road communications between their gardens and the Barak River by which their tea was dispatched and all other supply were received. Foreign trade entirely carried by water but internal traffic passed along the roads which were kept in good condition by the tea planters. Many of these roads were available for wheel traffic also.²³⁹

During the colonial period, the railway system of Surma-Barak Valley was a metre gauge system. After the formation of Assam-Bengal Railway in 1892, steps were taken to connect Assam with the rest of India. As a result this valley had the first railway line from Chandura in Bengal to Badarpur. In 1897, railway communication from Chittagong to Cachar district was established. It entered the district at a point a little to the east of Badarpur junction then under Sylhet district and had a length of 403.20 Kms. Here the line divided and a branch line ran south of the Barak passing through Katakhal, Salchapra and ultimately reached Silchar.²⁴⁰ Through the railway, the important items of imports and exports were tea, rice, raw jute, timber, pineapple, Ginger, medicinal and miscellaneous goods.

Actually, during the colonial period, in Surma-Barak Valley, Boat as the main important means of transporting the commodities. Goods were imported and exported by steamer and boat. There were, however, some transit ghats for loading and unloading the goods on the river bank. During the monsoon one village was cut off from the other village. The river ports in the Barak through which the steamers plied were Badarpur, Sialtek, Jatingamukh, Masimpur etc. In the rains, the feeder steamers went up the Barak from Silchar to Lakhipur, up the Madhura to Chandighat, up the Ghagra to Hattia rocks, and up the Kathakal to Kukichara.²⁴¹

Finally, it can be said that during the ancient period, the Trade History in Surma-Barak Valley was very much limited. But with the occupation of British in Surma-Barak Valley and gradual development of communication, both external and internal trade of the district grew up and the volume of trade began to expand. Prior to the construction of the Assam-Bengal

²³⁹ Kamarunnasa Islam, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 135-136.

²⁴⁰ B. B. Hazarika and S. B. Roy Choudhury, *Op. Cit.* P. 113.

²⁴¹ W. W. Hunter, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 157-158.

Railway, trade with the outside world were kept up by the steamer. But with the construction of Assam-Bengal Railway trade with outside world were kept up by the railway.

The import trade was chiefly in the hands of foreign shopkeepers, the most important articles bought into the district being rice, flour, betel nuts, salt, sugar, ghee, cotton, piece goods, keroshine, oil, coal, iron, steel, etc. And the important articles of export were tea, timber, Agar, oranges, and other forest wood, vegetables, coconut, rice etc. More than half of the total weight of the trade still 1903-1904 enters or leaves the district by water. Manipur exports to Cachar timber and other forest produce, cattle and Indian piece-goods and receives in return European piece-goods and twist, dried, fish and betel nuts. Forest produce was floated down the rivers. Other articles were carried on men's backs or sometimes on pack bullocks. The internal trade of the district was carried on at markets which are held on certain specified days in the week, at the more important of which there were generally several permanent shops. And the balance of trade was not favourable to the natives due to the colonial policy, lack of communication and limited number of local traders; especially it was almost entirely in the hands of Marwaris and Shas of Bengal.

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