

BEHAVIORAL ECONOMY OF PRE – COLONIAL SRIHATTA  
KINGDOM

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**Abstract:**

The economy and economic activities of pre – colonial Srihatta Kingdom could not be anything but agriculture, which suggest the presence of the peasants. The occupations crossed the racial boundaries. Professional specialization emerged social groups. The economic factors operated as a motive force in the formulation of the cult practices at the lower level. In fact, from sowing time to activities, the peasantry here observes and performs a number of customs and practices, which retains their original magical significance that seeks to influence nature for direct and indirect economic gains.

**Keywords:** Economy, Occupations, Peasants, Agriculture, Social groups,

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In the 7th century A.D. the Chinese traveler, Hiuen Tsang described Barak Valley (Srihatta) as Shih-li-Che-to-lo and located it to the north-east of Samatata among the hills near the sea (Kamalakanta Gupta, 1967 “a”). In the 9th century A.D. the Arabian traveler, Solaiman Sariafi while crossing the Bay of Bengal came across ‘Selahet’, the famous port of Bengal (Sayed Murtaza Ali, 1988). In the 10th century it was mentioned as Srihatta Mondala in the copper plate of Maharaja Srichandra, and in the 11th century it was named as the Kingdom of Srihatta in the copper plate of Govinda Kesavadeva (Kamalakanta Gupta, 1967 “b”). At the same time, the great scholar Alberuni, in his famous book Kitabul Hind mentioned the name of this Kingdom as Shilahat (Fazur Rahman, 1991). However, in the absence of contemporary sources, the chronological history of ancient Barak Valley (Srihatta) has remained uncertain till now, and historians in this regard have to rely on indirect evidence such as copper plates and creative literatures for reconstructing the political and social history of this period. The same observation can be made for the economic history of the time.

The ancient period has been defined as the time beginning from the remote past to the arrival of the Sufi Saint Hazrat Shah Jalal in Sylhet in the early 14th century. In the remote past, excepting the hilly region and the north-eastern and southern elevated lands. The greater parts of the present day Barak Valley (Srihatta) were under water and included in the Bay of Bengal (Kamalakanta Gupta, 1347 BS “a”). William Hunter on the evidence of marine shells, found at the foot of the hills, along the northern boundary of Srihatta concluded that the sea flowed at the base of the hills in the past. Hamilton wrote “While to the north and east lofty mountains rise abruptly like a wall and appear as if at some remote period they had withstood the surge of the ocean” (Kamalakanta Gupta, 1347 BS “b”). In the 7th century A.D. When Srihatta was a part of the Kingdom of Kamarupa, the Kings of Kamarupa kept their navy on the sea around Srihatta. ‘The navy consisted of the Navadingas, nine ships, each propelled by one hundred and twenty oarsmen’ (Adams Caroline, 1987 “a”). In the Paschimbag copper plate (10th century A.D.) mention has been made about Srihatta Mandala or division consisting of deep lakes and off-shore islands. In the same source mention has also been made about Indresvara Naubandha, that is, Indresvara naval base. In the Bhatara copper plate of Govinda Kesavadeva (11th century) ‘Sagar’ or the sea and in the copper plate of Isanadeva ‘Naubatak’ or war-ships are mentioned (Muhammad Asaddar Ali, 1987). After that due to many natural causes, such as the silt carried

by innumerable rivers and the earthquake of the 12th century A.D. the plains and the low lands of Barak Valley (Srihatta) were elevated (Adams Caroline, 1987 “b”). According to Nihar Ranjan Roy, “The northern parts of the district of Cachar and Hailakandi region to the south as well as the eastern region of the district of Sylhet may be considered as old land. Other parts of East Bengal consists of watery plain land or newly formed land and covered with canals, channels as well as widespread marshy land”. He further adds, “This newly formed land is the creation of Padma-Brahmaputra and Surma-Kushiyara (Nihar Ranjan Roy, 1993 “a”).”

The identify of the ancient people of Barak Valley (Srihatta) is still under speculation. However, it is generally believed that the Austric people used to live in this region in the remote past. After the Austric, came the Mongoloids (Ratan Lal Chakraborty, 1987). It is generally known that the principal source of livelihood of the Austric was agriculture. On the plains and on the steps by the side of the hills, they cultivated wild paddy and made it agricultural commodity of human settlement. In addition, banana, brinjal, pumpkin, lemon, betel-leaves, coconut, pamelos, kamranga (a kind of sour fruit), fig, betel nut, pomegranate etc. were also produced by them (Nihar Ranjan Roy, 1993 “b”). Though the Austric speaking people were basically cultivators, the taming of animals was unknown to them. Among them some people lived in the forest and their source of livelihood was hunting. They were adept in hunting animals and birds on land and fish in water. They knew the technique of producing dry fish. The popularity of dry fish in Barak Valley (Srihatta) is nothing but the old Austric tradition (Subash Mukherjee, 1983). They used small boats or canoe made of log as well as floats as means of transport in rivers or in the sea and they even built up sea trade. They knew the use of cotton cloth. Counting was done by the Austric on the basis of score (twenty) (Nihar Ranjan Roy, 1993 “c”). Even now fish and some other articles are bought and sold in hats or bazaars of Barak Valley (Srihatta) on that basis.

Again, the Chinese and the Greek sources also provide clues to the economic activities of the region. The Greek geographer Ptolemy mentions about Kirrhadia which is identified with Tripura. There the best malabathrum was produced (K. L. Barua, 1966).

Ptolemy’s account shows that in the frontier of Kirrhadia there used to be a big trade fair in which huge quantity of malabathrum was traded. The Chinese traders brought it in exchange

of silk. It is further stated that these Chinese traders used fine cane mattress for displaying their goods (A. C. Choudhury, 1317 BS “a”). That Sylhet was the seat of Ptolemy’s big trade fair is deduced on the ground that Sylhet region is still famous for the production of both malabathrum and cane mattresses and there are references to the production of these items in the medieval sources (A. C. Choudhury, 1317 BS “b”).

The later Mongoloid Khasi-singteng people adopted Austric language and culture. They are also called the Bodos. Austric and Bodos gradually became assimilated. People of both the tribes were basically cultivators although hunting was in practice among them. But this ancient agriculturist community did not know the use of plough. Hence their agricultural technology was very primitive. “Consequently the output was so limited that it could hardly be sufficient for their subsistence leaving on surplus” (Sujit Choudhury, 1992 “a”). In ancient times, Indian society was traditional, apathetic towards change, immovable and closed. In societies like this collective system of cultivation was prevalent. For instance, people belonging to a particular community participated jointly in the work of cultivation. Because of this, private ownership over land did not arise in that period. But in the 7th century A.D, the wind of change began to blow in this rigid and stagnant Indian society. At the root of all these was the expansion of agricultural activities. Between 600 A.D. and 1200 A.D. There was expansion of agriculture all throughout India. Vast areas of untilled lands were brought under cultivation and this not only led to the expansion of agriculture but also the growth of many new settlements.

This new era was ushered in by a system known agrahara. The main feature of this system was the grant of rent-free land to the places of worship, priests or Brahmins by royal or administrative decree. Generally the fact of land-grant used to be recorded on copper plates. These copper plates are the authentic sources of contemporary economic history. In ancient Bengal, lands transferred under agrahara system were arid, unproductive, fallow, or forest. But the recipients earned their livelihood from this land. It indicates that they somehow got this untilled land cultivated. In this process many untilled lands were brought under cultivation (Ranabir Chakraborty, 1398 BS “a”). Besides the remarkable impact of this system on the contemporary economic life, it also led to the great expansion of private ownership of land. The land thus obtained as grant used to be permanent in nature and for this reason the power of the

land owners also increased steadily (Ranabir Chakraborty, 1398 BS “b”). So far five copper plates have been discovered in Barak Valley (Srihatta). These are the following:

1. Nidhanpur Copper Plate of Bhaskaravarman, the King of Kamarupa;
2. Kalapur Copper Plate of Samanta Morundanatha;
3. Paschimbag Copper Plate of Maharaja Srichandra of Bengal and Harikela;
4. Bhatara Copper Plate No. 1 of Govinda Kesavadeva. the King of Srihatta;
5. Bhatara Copper Plate No. 2 of Isanadeva.

The copper plate of Bhaskaravarman was discovered in 1912 in the village Nidhanpur of Paschimbag pargana under Beanibazar police station. First, Pandit Padmanath Bidyavinode and then among others Kamalakanta Gupta deciphered it. Inscribed in the 7th century, this copper plate was the renewal of an original copper plate inscribed in the 6th century by Bhuti Varman, the great grand father of Bhaskaravarman. Bhuti Varman made a perpetual revenue free land grant, known as Moyursalmala Kshetra under Chandrapuri Vishaya (Chandrapuri district) to Brahmins. The plate was destroyed by fire while it was in the possession of the recipients. Subsequently, in the absence to impose land revenue on those revenue free land of Agrahara Kshetra. Confronted with this situation, the inheritors of the original recipients approached Maharaja Bhaskaravarman, and got this renewed in favour of those enjoying the occupancy rights. In the contemporary Tipperah copper plate of Samanta Lokanatha mention has been made about the grant of a large Agrahara Kshetra to 200 Brahmins in the deep forest of Srihatta (Ranabir Chakraborty, 1398 BS “c”).

The copper plate of Samanta Morundanatha inscribed in the 8th century A.D. was discovered in 1963 in the village Kalapur under Srimangal police station of Moulavibazar. Kamalakanta Gupta deciphered a part of this copper plate and found the evidence of a grant of land comprising an area of one pataka and two dronas. About the measure of land by pataka, Subodh Mukherjee wrote. “Pataka as a measure of land was in use in the 6th and 8th centuries A.D. At that time pataka meant a village or a part of village” (Subash Mukherjee, 1983 “b”). Kamalakanta Gupta mentioned that one pataka was equal to forty dronas and accordingly areas of land donated stood at  $40+2=42$  dronas. This was equivalent to 630 bighas or 210 acres approximately taking one drona equaling 15 bighas or 5 acres (Kamalakanta Gupta 1347 BS

“c”). The copper plate of the famous King of Chandra dynasty, Srichandra (10th century A.D.) was found in the village Paschimbag under Rajnagar police station of Moulavibazar in 1958. This one was also deciphered by Kamalakanta Gupta. In the Paschimbag Copper Plate of Srichandra, we come across the land Srihattamandala (Srihatta Division) under Paundravarddhanabhukti (Paundravarddhana Province). It is gathered that Maharaja Srichandra donated major portion of about 6000 sq. miles of land in equal shares to Gargga and other six thousand Brahmins. This entire land was rent-free, and was located in Srihattamandala under Chandrapura Vishaya i.e. on the southern side of the river Kushiya in the southern part of Srihatta (Kamalakanta Gupta 1347 BS “d”).

In a place known as Bhatara between Maijgao and Baramchal railway stations two copper plates were discovered together in 1872 where the existence of a separate Kingdom of Srihatta have been mentioned. Moreover, it is gathered that during this period land used to be measured in terms of Bhu Hal or Bhu Kedar. Hal means plough. According to Kamalakanta Gupta, the area of land that could be cultivated with a pair of bullock and a plough (as prevalent in this region) constituted one Hal or Bhu hal of land (Kamalakanta Gupta 1347 BS “e”). The copper plate mentioned above indicate that during the period under consideration agrahara system was wide spread in Sylhet. The accounts of the period that are found in two genealogical books of Brahmins of the Vedas of Sylhet and in the Panchali of Hattanatha are complementary to the information obtained from the copper plates. According to the accounts of Brahmins of the Vsdas, five Brahmins of Mithila origin were invited by Adi Dharmapa, the King of Tippera, in the 7th century to perform a sacrifice under the Vedas. They belonged to five clans. They accepted grants of land (agrahara) at Panchahanada region and began to live there. They brought there some more people of their clan. From the Panchali of Hattanatha, it is also gathered that Brahmins belonging to five clans accepted grants of land from Govinda Ranakeshara, the King of Goura. At that time the vast plains of Sylhet was called Srichattala, and its major portion was covered by forest (Kamalakanta Gupta 1347 BS “f”).

Historian Ram Sharan Sharma remarked that “the underlying idea of making grants of untilled land to the Brahmins was to make it arable” (Sujit Choudhury, 1992 “b”). It is gathered from the Nidhanpur Copper Plate, the first written document of the ancient history of this region, the recipient Brahmins received land on the basis of Bumichchhidranaya. It was a principle by

which uncultivated or unsettled lands were exchanged. Land obtained under this principle, if brought under cultivation, could be enjoyed rent free (Ranabir Chakraborty, 1398 BS “d”). The grant of land made by Bhutivarman in this region helped the introduction of cultivation with plough. Historians suppose that the great majority of the Brahmanas mentioned in the Nidhanpur Copper Plate were the worshippers of Vishnu. Balarama as deity, became popular when cultivation with plough was introduced in south-west India under the Satavahana. So the relationship between the worship of Balarama with plough in hand, and the introduction of agricultural technology based on plough can be imagined. From the stone inscription of the grandfather of Bhutivarman on the hills of Kamakhya, it is gathered that he constructed a temple of the deity Balabhadra. Balabhadra and Balarama with plough in hand were essentially the same deity. Bhutivarman, probably following the tradition of his ancestors, took the initiative in establishing Brahmin settlement in order to propagate the worship of Balarama with plough in hand. Thus from his initiative, the road to agricultural revolution based on plough was widened in this region (Sujit Choudhury, 1992 “c”).

It has been supposed by V. R. Vandarkar from the titles of the grant recipient Brahmins that a group of Nagara Brahmins from Gujrat settled at Panchakanda with the grant of Bhutivarman (Sujit Choudhury, 1992 “d”). These immigrants brought with them the culture of cultivation and land grant which developed in Gujrat in the distant past. Kamalakanta Gupta is also of the opinion that the ancestors of the Brahmins settling in this region belonged to Nagara Brahmins of Gujrat or Lat country. The measure of land in terms of Hal and the measure of crop in terms of Pali are found in the copper plate of Chalukya King of Gujrat. The relationship between Gujrat and Barak Valley (Srihatta) can be gathered from the fact that these measures also prevailed in Barak Valley (Srihatta) (Kamalakanta Gupta 1347 BS “g”). The Brahmins settling in the regions described in the copper plate with the help of new techniques of cultivation brought about socio-economic changes there and those were evident from the subsequent events. After the grant of land by Bhutivarman, with the passing of hundred years, the concerned region attracted the attention of the government officials as a prosperous area. The officials considered this area to be fit for imposition of taxes. Hence, without some written evidence of ownership as grants, taxation could not be avoided. That is why the successors of the recipients of grant had to approach Bhaskaravarman for the renewal of the deed of the grant. From this fact it is also

gathered that land by that time had become valuable asset. In the next three centuries, pressure on and demand for land increased in Barak Valley (Srihatta) following the continuous agricultural expansion. Its evidence is noticeable in the copper plates of Srichandra. The measure of land donated in Brahmapur, Srichandrapur was also pataka but the amount of land making one pataka shrank by that time. Formerly 40 dronas equaled one pataka and in the 10th century A.D. only 10 dronas made one pataka (Ranabir Chakraborty, 1398 BS “e”).

With the creation of Agrahara Kshetra in Barak Valley (Srihatta), it was not that only the religious people came here. Usually the priestly class of people refrained from manual labour, and for cultivating the untilled land they required the services of people belonging to other occupations. So it is observed that, along with six thousand Brahmins, people of many other occupations were also settled with land at Brahmapur, Srichandrapur. Kamalakantha Gupta observes that “among the recipients of grants there were people belonging to about 25 occupations and the definite method by which land was granted to people of different occupations, reflected there relative importance in the society of that period” (Kamalakanta Gupta, 1983). Moreover, the Brahmins who came here had to seek assistance from the local people. As a result of this, in cooperation with the Austriacs and the later Mongoloids, a class of working people grew up known as Sudras. These people were taught the new method of cultivation as well as other trades, and thus the problem of finding agricultural labourer by the landowners was solved. The Brahmins who settled in the regions mentioned in copper plates soon imposed their dominance over the indigenous population. The Brahmins achieved the status of landlords because “the villages they received from the King would be considered as their permanent property” (Ram Sharan Sharma, 1989) and the concepts of private ownership of land gradually became widespread. The landlords got the authority to rule over the locality and as such they were empowered to impose taxes on the people. The mention of Utkhetayita or collector of revenue in the Nidhanpur copper plate indicates that the system of revenue collection was prevalent at that time. The granting of land and its acceptance under the agrahara system left a permanent influence on the system of land settlement in the region. After analyzing the copper plate of Paschimbag, Kamalakanta Gupta came to the following conclusions, “In the 10th century A.D. the Maharaja Srichandra of Bikrampur with a single royal decree created 6000 small middlemen rent collectors of equal share in the southern part of the region. Moreover,

these small middlemen did not pay any revenue to the government” (Kamalakanta Gupta, 1966 “a”). Therefore, in his opinion, the main reason behind the existence of so many small rent receiving land owners and vast areas of the district remaining rent-free in the Barak Valley (Srihatta) in later years, was that royal rent-free grant. R. S. Sharma’s observation is relevant in this connection. He says, “it is undeniable that the main consequence of the system of land grant was the creation of a land owning class dependent on the produce of the cultivators. Through this the advent of feudal or medieval social system became evident” (R.S. Sharma, 1989). It is beyond doubt that the feudal system was introduced in Barak Valley (Srihatta) in this way in ancient time. Under this system agriculture was the main source of production. Together with agriculture small cottage industries also existed. The villages were self-sufficient. Production for market was not in practice and as such agriculturists used to exchange their crops against necessary services or works of others. “The boatman of ferry ghat, blacksmith, barber etc., used to work all through the year and the villagers undertook the responsibility of providing them with their livelihood” (Abdulla Faruk, 1974).

It is gathered from the copper plates that after the introduction of agrahara system in Barak Valley (Srihatta), along with agriculture other industries also developed. As for instance, in the copper plate of Nidhanpur, we come across the engravers, potters, merchants etc. The mention of ivory cutter’s name in the Bhatara Copper Plate of Govinda Kesavadeva indicates that ‘ivory’ industry was in existence at that time in Srihatta. Similarly the mention of Govinda – the brazier indicates that the bellmetal industry also existed. Moreover, mention of Dwojey, the sailor reminds us of the existence of boat-building industry and at the same time another historian pointed out, “Among the rivers of ancient Srihatta, many were probably navigable and helped internal communication by waterways” (Ranabir Chakraborty, 1398 BS “f”). The agricultural economy that developed with the introduction of agrahara system in ancient Barak Valley (Srihatta) was essentially dependent on villages. Villages again were established on the bank of the rivers for the need of cultivation, since water was indispensable for cultivation. The products of small cottage industries were not sufficient for exchange. These could hardly meet the needs of the villages. Under these circumstances, widespread use of money as medium of exchange was not necessary. But in other districts of contemporary Bengal a three stage medium of exchange was in use. “Under the three stage system, Kari or Kapardak coin of the smallest

denomination, constituted the lowest stage; on the upper stage there were metallic coins (Drahmma/Karshapan /old silver coins that were found in south-eastern part of Bangladesh), and in the middle there were metallic pieces or Churni. Each medium of exchange was convertible into others (Ranabir Chakraborty, 1398 BS “g”). In this connection the opinion expressed by Kamalakanta Gupta deserves consideration. He said, “Puran or Drahmma is the other name of Karshapon (Kahon). 80 Kapardaks (cowries) make one pana and 16 panas make one Karshapon or Kahon. Kapardaks or cowries constitute the lowest stage of this monetary standard, and that is why this may be termed as Puran-Kapardak, Drahmma-Kapardak, Karshapon-Kapardak or Kahon-cowri standard” (Kamalakanta Gupta, 1966 “b”) . Large scale use of cowry during the early period of the British rule in Barak Valley (Srihatta) is indicative of the existence of kahon-cowri standard in this region. Moreover, from the use of cowry in Barak Valley (Srihatta), it may be assumed that in ancient time the people of Barak Valley (Srihatta) participated in foreign trade. Because cowry was a substance of the sea and nowhere in the northern part of the Bay of Bengal, it was available. This led to the belief that it was imported.

Our study brings out clearly that the practice of land grants to the Brahmaanas, officials and monasteries placed these landed intermediaries between the rulers and actual tillers of land as the state transferred all sources of revenue to the donees and the peasants and artisans living in the donated lands had to pay rent and labour to these intermediaries. The new settlements that came up in the forest regions by virtue of land grants had the full compliments of peasants, artisans and professional to ensure its self-sufficiency and left scope for creating new tenants on the donated lands. From the numismatic evidences, we find that the possibility of a flourishing trade in the region in which the wealthy landowners could participate by reinvesting their income from land. Thus a wealthy group had emerged primary on the basis of landownership and by multiplying the income from land through its reinvestment in trade and manufactures. The peasants and workers were subservient to these wealthy persons who were powerful in the state affairs by virtue of their command over wealth.

Similarly, the economy and the economic activities of the region could not be anything but agricultural, which would suggest the presence of the peasants. The occupations must have cut across the racial boundaries, although the professional specializations of the emerging social groups might not have fully matured to assume the character of economic classes. We are not

sure of the extant of surplus, the extraction, or the type methods of appropriation or redistribution. However, a state of the type mentioned in the plates could be based only on surplus. That it was wealthy enough is beyond doubt. art are found in the Brahmaputra Valley.

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