

A Study on The Socio-Political-Economic Cum Cultural Aspects of Ancient North East India *Vis-À-Vis* Bengal

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Abstract: In the remote past, the present region of North East India and un-divided Bengal shared many common traits – cultural, economic, religious, social and political aspects. Looking from the present socio-religious-politico cum cultural ethos, it is difficult to imagine the close affinity shared in the ancient period. Taking the whole region as a single geographical entity such as the similar riverine systems and related topographical features, the study is being carried out. Other methodologies employed in this article are that of anthropological, archaeological interpretation of cross cultural interaction and assimilation. The discovery of the existence of ancient trade routes, promoting not only in economic terms but also in enriching the cultural and scientific pool of the region is another aspect being look into.

Keywords: North East India, un-divided Bengal, single geographical unit, riverine systems, cultural linkages

North East India and Bangladesh are geographically contiguous, with four states, viz., Assam (263 km); Tripura (856 km); Mizoram (318 km); Meghalaya (443 km), as well as, another 2,216.7 km with West Bengal, from the Indian side (Government of India, 2007-2008, Department of Internal Security). On the other hand, four Bangladesh divisions namely, Chittagong, Sylhet, Mymensingh, and Rangpur abut directly with the above mentioned states of North East India (*Political Map of Bangladesh*, Online source). Its total length (including that of West Bengal shared with another two divisions on Bangladesh side viz., Dhaka and Khulna) is 4,096.7 km (also known as Purbanchal line), making it the longest land boundary India has shared with any of her neighbours (Bhardwaj, 2015, p. 102). The present North East India comprised of eight states namely: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura (arranged in alphabetical order). The present paper makes an attempt to look into the ancient period, taking the entire region of present North East India and un-divided Bengal as a single geographical unit, on the socio-political-economic cum cultural aspects.

The ancient history of Tripura is shrouded in *Rajmala*, from which only mythological illusions could be discerned. In fact, it is said to have been originally composed in the 15th century A.D. in Sanskrit and Bengali in metric verses. It was the handiwork of three of the court poets of Maharaja Dharma Manikya (1431 A.D.-1462 A.D.), namely, Darlabendra, the

chantai (royal priest), Sukreswara and Baneswara, both from Srihatta (Syhlet). Remarkably, the original composition, written in the late 15th century A.D. records the reigns of Tripura rulers for 138 generations, including a divine origin of the founder of the lineage called Druhya and his association with the Lunar Dynasty. It is but natural that in such an attempt, the facts and fictions were bound to be freely mixed and mingled. It was followed by many other works on the history of Tripura in subsequent periods, more or less on the line of *Rajmala*. The latest work in the *Rajmala* tradition on the history of Tripura is Jagdish Ganchoudhury's *Tripurar Itihas*, published in 2000 A.D. It begins with Devayani-Sharmista-Yayati-Sukracharyya legend and discusses the history of Tripura during the reigns of 186 kings from Druhya to Kiritbikram Kishore Manikya. By all accounts, it seems the historical value of the chronicle before the 15th century is not much. Nevertheless, it is undoubtedly a very important source of the history of Tripura of later period (Bhattacharjee, 2002, pp. 41-45).

Attempts have been made to identify Tripura with Traipura of the *Mahabharata* or to trace it from the Allahabad Pillar inscription of Samudra-Gupta (c. 335 A.D.-375 A.D.) but without any success (Sarma, 1986, p. 59). Fortunately, the ancient history of Tripura is not lost entirely in the midst of legends. Some reliable archaeological sources like copper-plates, numismatics, terra cottas (Sen, 1986, p. 37), etc. enable to reconstruct the ancient past of the kingdom. Palaeographically (the study of ancient and historical handwriting which include the practice of deciphering, reading, and dating historical manuscripts, and the cultural context of writing) some of the copper-plate grants and coins suggest the existence of various dynasties in ancient Tripura. However, before proceeding further into the past history of the kingdom before the Manikya dynasty from the 15th century onwards, it is worth to have an idea of the territorial extent under the sway of the said dynasty. As a kingdom under the Manikya rulers, it included Hill Tippera (of the British period), portions of Sylhet, districts of Noakhali and Chittagong. From this it could be surmised that the ancient history of Tripura (pre-Manikya period) is intertwined with that of Samatata, a region roughly corresponding to the aforementioned areas (Sen, 1986, p. 37).

The earliest archaeological record discovered from the region of ancient Samatata is a copper-plate inscription dated 507 A.D-508 A.D. It was found at Gunaighar, Comilla, which shows the rule of a certain Maharaja Vainya-Gupta. In all probability, Vainya-Gupta could be a member of the imperial Gupta family and acted in the Tripura region as the *de facto* ruler at first. Subsequently, he had perhaps taken advantage of the slackening of the central authority of Magadha and declared himself as the emperor. This dynasty was followed by that of the Khadgas in the 7th century, which could be seen from two copper-plates hailing from Ashrafpur, 30 miles north of Dacca. They disclose the names of three reigning king of Buddhist persuasion namely, Khagodyama, Jata-Khadga and Deva-Khadga, each being the son of the predecessor. The rule of these three kings are also corroborated by other sources, such as an inscribed image goddess Sarvani (a form of Durga) discovered from Deulbadi (about 14 miles to the south of Comilla) and also from the accounts of Seng-chi, a Chinese pilgrim priest. A copper-plate grant of Lokanatha, discovered from Comilla contains a short

history of four or five generations of *Samantas* (*Samanta* system was a political system, which was started during the Gupta period, that mainly depended on land-owners) of the Natha family. It can be inferred on the basis of the probable date of the inscription that Lokanatha was a feudatory of the Khadga dynasty. Another copper-plate discovered at Kailan, Comilla, appraises the names of two Rata kings of Samatata, namely Jivadharmana and his son Sridharana. It also furnishes that the Ratas had their headquarters at Devaparvata, encircled by river Kshiroda (perhaps a dried up river course of Gomati, west of Comilla town (Sen, 1986, pp. 59-61).

In the 8th century, the Khadgas was replaced by a new dynasty called Deva name-ending. A copper-plate charter issued by *Maharajadhiraja* Bhava Deva from Devaparvata, presumably the region of Lalmai-Mainamati area, throws light on the rule of this dynasty. Coins bearing the name Pattikera, chronologically assigned to 8th to 9th centuries A.D. also shows that they were all hailed from the Comilla region. The founder of this dynasty was Vira Deva, also known by the imperial title *Parameswara* and *Paramabhattacharaka*. On the other hand, *Parama-Saugata* and *Maharajadhiraja* were titles assigned to Ananda Deva, his son, and successor. His grandson Bhava Deva was also a *Parama-Saugata*. It appears that Bhava Deva was an independent ruler and extended his kingdom and enhanced his power (Sen, 1986, p. 61). What is interesting to note here is that during this period, in the western region of Bengal, the Palas were ruling. Archaeological findings in the Mainamati (Comilla) and Pilak (south Tripura) throws light on the existence of similar style of terra cotta. From Bengal and Tripura terra cottas were discovered which are generally confined to temple architecture. Some of the specimen, covering vast subject matters from Pilak are, fierce bear, or flying 'Kinnars' (divine bodies), an object very close to flying monkey of Mainamati, archers on chariots, musicians, the whole world of animals and representation of popular stories from the ancient texts, etc. An important Buddhist establishment, Mainamati has unearthed terra cotta sealings and plaques. At the same place and almost under the same roof, stone sculpture and terra cottas were found at Pilak. This shows that the availability of raw material i.e. suitable clay by the river side contributed to the flourishing of terra cotta making in both Tripura and Bengal (Sen, 1986, pp. 36-39).

The Devas were followed by a little known ruling family of Akara. Shortly after this another Buddhist kingdom, probably from the matrilineal line Bhava Deva came into being from 750 A.D.-850 A.D. Three successive members, namely, Bhadra Datta, Dhana Datta and Kanti Deva, each being the successor of the predecessor of the Buddhist family ruled this kingdom. It seems that Kanti Deva adopted the name-ending 'Deva' of his maternal grandfather (father of his mother Vindu-rati). He assumed the imperial titles *Parameswara* and *Maharajadhiraja* and swayed over the whole or part of Harikela, roughly corresponding to the present Sylhet. The Dattas was followed by another Buddhist dynasty called Chandra, ruling the Vanga-Samatata region from about 825 A.D-1085 A.D. As many as thirteen inscriptions found in Tripura, Sylhet, Dacca and elsewhere, have disclosed the existence of seven generations of Chandra rulers. They are Purna-Chandra, Suvarna-Chandra, Trailokya-Chandra, Sri-Chandra, Kalyana-Chandra, Ladaha-Chandra and Govinda-Chandra. The seat of

the ancestral dominions of the Chandras was in the Mainamati region. Interestingly, the existence of a Chandra dynasty in this region from about the 6th to 8th century A.D. is recorded by the Tibetan historian and monk Taranatha. Trilokya-Chandra, the first politically significant member of this dynasty, added Chandradvipa (Barisal and its neighbourhood) and Samatata including Devaparvata to his kingdom and assumed the title *Maharajadhiraja*. Trilokya-Chandra was succeeded by Sri-Chandra and assumed the full imperial titles like *Parameswara*, *Paramabhattacharaka*, and *Maharajadhiraja*. He established his sway over a vast area covering present Bangladesh, Sylhet, and Pragjyotispura (Kamarupa). His son Kalyana-Chandra, not only maintained the kingdom but also made his power felt in Gauda and Kamarupa. He also defeated the Mlechchhas who lived on the Lauhitya River. This dynasty was, however, finally destroyed by the invasions of Kalachuri ruler Karna (1041 A.D.-c. 1070 A.D.) (Sarma, 1986, pp. 61-64).

After the storm of the Kalachuri was over and the Palas quitted the political stage of Bengal, the Comilla sector of the erstwhile kingdom of Chandras became a free field for political enterprise. A new kingdom called Pattikera under the ruling dynasty of Deva came into being, with its headquarter in and around the Comilla. Among the ruling members of this family, Harikala-Deva became prominent. He came to power in the 13th century and ruled as an independent king. The genealogical list of this Deva family is known from five copper-plate grants, namely, Purushotama, Madhumathana-Deva, Vasu-Deva, Damodara-Deva, and Dasaratha-Deva. They were Hindus and followers of the cult of Vishnu. In fact, Purusottama, the founder of the family is only mentioned as *gramani* (village chief), while his son Madhumathana-Deva is referred to as a king. It is, therefore, reasonable to hold that the latter was the real founder of the kingdom. Vasu-Deva's son Damodara-Deva ruled from 1230 A.D.-c. 1243 A.D. The rise of this Deva dynasty to power at the beginning of the 13th century seems to have been taken place somewhere in present Tripura. The extent of Damodara-Deva's kingdom roughly comprised of modern Tripura, Noakhali, and Chittagong. Dasaratha-Deva, the son and successor of Damodara-Deva dispossessed the Senas of their hold over East Bengal. In his Adavadi grant issued from Vikramapura, the capital of the kingdom of the later Senas, Dasaratha-Deva has been described as *Paramesvara*, *Parama Bhattacharaka*, *Maharajadhiraja*, and *Ariraja-Danuja-Madhava*. He was the last known Hindu king of the Samatata region. With his death by the close of the 13th century, Samatata or the Noakhali-Tripura-Sylhet region came under the occupation of the Muslims. The Hindus yet attempted to survive and moved towards the north east. They found a relatively safe place for their life and culture in the Hill Tippera region (of the British days), where they came across peoples of the Mongol race, the Kiratas (of the Epico-Puranic fame), who were being ruled by a royal line, ethnically of the same stock (Sarma, 1986, p. 64-66).

The *Rajmala*, the State Chronicle of Tripura, ascribes a Kshatriya origin of the ruling dynasty of the state (of the Kiratas). However, anything noteworthy historically is from that of Chhengthum-Fa (c. 1350 A.D.-1375 A.D.), the ninety third king of the genealogical list of the *Rajmala*. He is said to have defeated the king of Gauda. He was succeeded by his son Achanga-Fa who was subsequently succeeded by Khichanga-Fa. His son was Dangara-Fa,

the father of Ratna-Fa alias Ratna Manikya. Dangara-Fa is considered to be identical with Dharma Manikya who ruled from 1431 A.D.-1462 A.D. Dharma Manikya's father was Maha Manikya whose rule was roughly placed between c. 1400 A.D.-1431 A.D. (Sarma, 1986, p. 66). Before concluding the ancient Tripura narratives with the advent of Muslim rule in the Samatata region, it is worth to note that the existence of another Deva family is known from two copper-plates discovered at Bhatara about 20 miles from Sylhet. Palaeographically both the plates belong to the 13th century A.D., which mention five members, namely, Kharava, Gokula-Deva, Narayana, Kesava-Deva and Isana-Deva, each being the son of his predecessor. In them, nothing significant is mentioned, except some vague praise about Kesava-Deva that he was a great warrior and Isana-Deva ruled for more than 17 years and his territory was occupied by Sikandar Khan Ghazi in 1303 A.D. during the rule of Sultan Firuz Shah. It also appears that excepting Kharavana, whose name and existence are doubtful, the remaining members belonged to the same line which was perhaps an offshoot of the family of Dasaratha Deva (Sarma, 1986, p. 65).

On the other hand, Manipur is said to have established as a kingdom since 33 A.D. with Pakhangba as the first king. However, the historicity of Pakhangba is still debated, as he is projected as half divine and half man, reigning for 121 years. Nevertheless, from the reign of king Loiyumpa (1074 A.D.-1122 A.D.), apparently a shred of history could be discerned as the first Constitution of Ancient Manipur known as *Loiyumpa Silyel* is said to have written and promulgated in 1110 A.D. (Singh, 2012, p. 1). R.K. Jhalajit Singh opines that culturally Manipur has been in close contact with the rest of the country (India) from 300 B.C. onwards up to the present time. He further puts that these cultural ties were somewhat slackened in the 12th, 13th, and 14th centuries A.D., which was resumed in the 15th century. He argues that Manipur was known to the rest of India from ancient times citing Panini, who lived in the 5th and 4th centuries B.C. Panini mentions about Surmasa, which is identified with Surma. The valley of Surma is the western gate of Manipur. The Surma or the Barak River rises in the hills of northern Manipur. The Barak valley comes right up to the western fringe of Manipur. Jhalajit emphasises the geographical proximity of Manipur with Barak Valley for establishing his theory of cultural linkages as under.

Between Sylhet and the western fringe of Manipur, there is no impediment such as hills, forests, big rivers or wide deserts. Once the Indo-Aryans reached Sylhet, they reached the western border of Manipur in a matter of decades. Once they reached there, it was easy for them to reach the Manipur Valley, for this valley was on an international route connecting the Gangetic Valley with Burma and beyond (Singh, 1965, p. 5).

The above postulation seems to have corroborated with the accounts of R.C. Majumdar that, in the second century B.C. there was a regular trade-route by land between Bengal and China and Upper Burma and Yunan. In addition to trade, there were many Indian colonies in South East Asia. Indian colonists, apart from regular sea routes also proceeded to the East and South-East by land-route, through Eastern Bengal, Manipur, and Assam (Majumdar, 1944, p. 12). What is worth to note here is that the location of Manipur on the route connecting the Gangetic valley with the Burma-China border and Upper Burma had a great

effect on the Manipuri-speaking people: the formation of their language; their economy and outlook; and ultimately its history.

Manipur situated on one of the important land-route from the plain of North India to Upper Burma was a meeting-ground of Indo-Aryans and Mongoloid peoples, cultures and languages. It is believed that Indo-Aryan traders, invaders, and missionaries came mostly without womenfolk. Some of them married local Mongoloid women thus were the beginning of fusions. Such immigration kept on happening wave after wave at intervals. The process of miscegenation continued for many centuries and as a result of the fusion of these different races, by the first century of the Christian era, the nucleus of the Manipuri-speaking people was formed. Yet, even after the formation of this nucleus, the migration from the east and west continued. The earliest recorded contact with the Bengalis was at the beginning of the 12th century A.D., with the formation of a Bengali village in the western part of Imphal Valley. It was followed by fresh settlement of Brahmins in the valley in the early half of the 15th century, who came mostly via Bengal. Other Indo-Aryan groups who eventually got Manipuri surnames like Lairikyengbams and the Kshetrimayums also settled there in the 16th century. Interestingly, Manipuris maintain a class of books which record the immigrations both from the east and west. The coming of people from the east is recorded in a book called *Nongpok Haram*, while from the west is entitled *Mayang Tekhaolon. Bamon Khunthok* (*Bamon*: Brahmin; *Khunthok*: Immigration) records the immigration of Brahmins to Manipur. For the Lairikyengbams and the Kshetrimayums, they are recorded in *Lairikyengbam Lon* and *Khetri Lon* respectively (Singh, 1965, pp. 21-22).

In the formation of Manipuris, Mongoloid blood is more prominent than the Aryans. In the course of their settlement for a long time, they forgot their mother-tongues whether Gujarati, Oriya, Bengali, or Shan languages and adopted *Meitei Lon* (Manipuri language) as their own. The immigrants from the west brought with them books on philosophy, astrology, astronomy and other subjects along with Brahmanical ideas and culture. The ideas of Puranic gods also came to Manipur and by the end of the 8th century, Manipuris were already familiar with these gods and goddesses like Shiva, Devi and Ganesh. The immigrations contributed in a positive way towards the enrichment of life and literature of Manipur. On the other hand, people from Burma also migrated to Manipur and vice versa. There were instances of migrations of Manipuri Brahmins to Burma from the 13th century onwards practising astrology and other Vedic rites (Singh, pp. 20-23).

In the case of ancient Pragjyotish-Kamrupa, though many scholars allude to its existence from the time of *Epics*, its historicity is yet to be sufficiently established. From this, we can surmise that though there were three kingdoms in the present North East India, their existence as well established kingdoms of antiquity, is subject to scrutiny. Yet, it could be undoubtedly put forward that these three kingdoms might be there since ancient times in an early developmental stage. Another aspect to note is that out of the three kingdoms, Pragjyotish-Kamarupa seems to have the most developed socio-economic cum cultural stage, considering its proximity to the heartland of Indian civilisation, i.e., the Magadhan culture. In other adjoining areas, the rule of the tribal chieftains could be the order of the day. In the words of

Amalendu Guha, the term 'Janas' is the Sanskrit equivalent of the Greek 'ethos' and the earliest state formation, known as 'Sorasha-Janapada' of the pre-Christian era were based on the *Janas*. *Janapadas* such as Anga, Magadha, etc. had ethnonyms (the name applied to a given ethnic group) and were culturally Indo-Aryan speaking cognate Aryan languages/dialects. They lived in societies possibly based on the 'Varnashrama' institutions. However, in the process of their organising territory-based polities and selectively absorbing non-Aryan tribal elements, a distinct identity emerged which could be distinguished from one another (Guha, 1990, p. 87).

Comparatively, Kamarupa was a late political formation on the Janapada mould comprising of Kirata chiefs by the Indo-Aryan colonists from Maghadha. This can be alluded from the legends of Naraka, Bashistha, and Parashurama coming to Kamarupa as Aryanisers. Naraka was said to have founded the Bhauma dynasty and his son Bhagadatta joined the *Bharata War* along with 'golden complexioned Kirata' and Chinese soldiers. The myths and legends of ancient Kamarupa's connection with the heartland of the Indo-Aryan are suggestive of the Aryanised people of Assam forming the first state organisation. Such a state came into existence not long before Pusya Varman (350 A.D-374 A.D.), who established the Bhauma dynasty, the first historically known kingdom of Assam. However, even though culturally Indo-Aryan, the Kamarupa people were predominantly Mongoloid in their physical feature, largely composed of Mlechcha-Kirata population outside the *Varnashama* mould. Perhaps, this reason could be attributed on why the land was neither given any ethnonym, nor the people are known by the name of the land until the medieval times. The Kamarupa kingdom in the historical period underwent the transformation into an imperial state (*Mahajanapada*), with the merging of different *Janapadas* (Guha, 1990, p. 87).

It is worth to note here that in the initial state formation a *Jana* apparently emerged as an ethno-territorial concept which included both twice born *Dwija* and the once-born *Sudra*. In such a scheme, at least initially, other aboriginal tribes such as Kirata, Nisada, Shabara, Chandala, and others, by profession cultivators, hunters, and food gatherers were left out of the *Varnashama*. They constituted the despised and suppressed populace. In due course of time, early *Janapadas* also gave way to new ethnoses due to political turmoil and migrations. Generally, peculiar to ancient India, due to fusion and fission of the four *Varnas* and extra-*Varna* tribes brought into existence numerous endogamous *Jati* (caste) communities, arranged in a *Varna-Jati* hierarchy. In Kamarupa the four ethnic differentiations were, however, less elaborate and were confined to only two *Varnas*, namely *Dwija* and *Sudra*, where the former were entitled to hold high administrative offices, both civil and military functions, thus was dominant. On the other hand, religious sects like Vaihnava, Shaiva, Tantrik and so on also divided the people. However, until the 7th century, the linguistic situation in Kamarupa was not very different from, in its spoken form, that of the Madhya Desha. This situation continued throughout the pre-Ahom centuries when the Aryanised people of Orda, Gauda, Bengal, and Kamarupa apparently spoke a common language, the Eastern Magadhi. In the 14th century, this common language began to split into distinct

variants like Oriya, Maithili, Bangla, Kamarupi, etc. Due to lack of linguany (name of language) these languages were simply designated as *Bhasa* (Guha, 1990, pp. 87-88).

Another aspect which remained overlooked is the possibility of the existence of Buddhism in Assam and adjoining areas, though in a disguised form. This postulation comes from the premise that Bengal and its contiguous states viz. Assam, Bihar, and Orissa were the land of *Mahayana Buddhism*. It practically stood as a protest against the Brahmanical caste-distinction system and directly or indirectly, it gradually stretched in the cultural life of the peoples. It is presumed that Buddhism, a pliable religion activated and converted people, especially from the other excluded sections of the society. In this way, Buddhism flourished in Eastern India for some centuries. Nevertheless, Brahminism gradually eclipsed it in the ancient period and still later by the Muslims.

The copper plate of Indrapala (960 A.D.-990 A.D.) shows the evidence of Buddhism in Kamarupa. Indrapala who was initially a Siva worshipper became a devout Buddhist. In the later period, Buddhism took different shapes. The cult of *Dharma Thakur* is prevalent in both Assam and Bengal. According to *Dharma-sambad*, a poetical work written during the reign of Raja Siva Singha (1714 A.D.-1744 A.D.), the king of Ahom, Chandala is Dhrama and Dharma is Buddha. Dharma Thakur is the other form of Buddha. In Bengal, the poetical works of Manik Ganguli and Ramai Randit on *Dharma Tahkur* proves the existence of this cult in Bengal. Taranath, the Tibetan monk and historian observed that Buddhism was established in Kamarupa. Instances of Brahmins turning to Buddhists and building *viharas* (monastery) and leading a life of *Sanghas* (monastic communities of *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis*) are mentioned. He also cited symbolically in his work about the conflict between the Buddhist and the Brahmanical society in Kamarupa. Another instance, showing the prevalence of common worshipping of a variant of Buddhism in both Assam and Bengal is that of the *Niranjana* cult. In fact, *Niranjana* is one of the gods of *Dharma* cult. The Buddhist philosophy of *Sunyavada* (nothingness) was also not unknown in Kamarupa. Buddhist tantricism was also another manifestation of a variant of the sect which led a new type of worship, but Hinduism received its own position (Sengupta, 1990, pp. 159-163).

With the present state of knowledge available to the academic community, it is still not feasible to determine with certainty to obtain any glimpse of the original settlers of the pre-historic people of Bengal. However, it can be possibly said that from indeterminable times, Bengal has been a meeting ground of diverse peoples. Material evidence discovered from different parts of Bengal, such as cultural relics: stone tools – palaeoliths, microliths, and neoliths, show unmistakable records of the physical existence of pre-historic man in Bengal (Chhattopadhyay, 2005, pp. 33-34). On the other hand, the aborigines of Bengal have been grouped into four categories: (i) the Tibeto-Mongoloid tribal peoples from Northern Himalayas settled on the northern Bengal tracts, such as the Bhotias, the Gurungs, the Lepchas, the Newars, the Damais, the Kamis and the Khas; (ii) the Mongoloid peoples from Burma, Arakan and the Chin Hills settled in the hilly regions of Chittagong and Tripura. They include the Tipras, the Lushais, the Mrus, the Khyangs, the Khamis, the Chakmas, the Kukis and so on; (iii) the tribal peoples of the Mongoloid ethnic group from North-eastern

India through Assam, dispersing into different parts of Bengal. They were the Garos, the Kachadis, the Hadis, the Dalus, the Doyais, the Hajangs, the Mech, the Rabhas, etc.; (iv) Lastly, a host of tribes mostly belonging to Austro-asiatic and Australoid group from Chotanagpur, Orissa and north-eastern India. They were the Santals, the Oraons, the Mundas, the Khands, the Hos, the Malpahadis, etc. There after waves after waves of migrants settled in Bengal and its good neigh a possible task to determine with certainty the pure identity of a particular ethnic community (Chhattopadhyay, 2005, pp. 33-56). What is worth to consider for the present study is, the diverse trends swept down into the plains of Bengal from the North-East side.

Different scholars give different interpretations to the derivations of the English expression of the word “Bengal” from *vanga* and *vangala*. Some ascribe *vanga* as originated from Tibetan words *bans* or *ban* meaning marshy or moist land, i.e., watery land. Another meaning of the word *vanga* is cotton. Again, it also denotes tin. Several other derivatives came into existence with the addition of suffixes, such as *Vangala*, *Vangal*, *Bengal*, *Bhangala*, *Bengala* and so on, which were transformed by subsequent Muslim and Portuguese writers into *Bangal* and *Bengala*. Finally, the English transliterated it from the Portuguese word *Bengala* into *Bengal*. At present, as a corollary, the word *Vangali* or *Bangali* denotes the whole Bengali language speaking area and its people, which have both linguistic and cultural bases, but no ethnic homogeneity (Chhattopadhyay, 2005, p. 33). However, it is difficult to understand the concept of Bengal of the ancient period. As we came across many instances of the ancient as a conglomerate of certain sub-regions of like Gauda, Vanga, Samatata, Radha and so on, ruled by different dynasties. On the other hand, from the epigraphic documents of the Kamrupa rulers, we came across references of kings of Gaudas and Vangas. Samatata, denoting the area to the east of the Meghna river was under the suzerainty of the Kamarupa, which could be seen from Allahabad Prasasti of Samudragupta, as a *pratyanta* (feudatory) state (4th century A.D.). By the 6th century, A.D. Samatata experienced monarchical rule of its own, which could be seen from the Gunaigarh copper plate, dated 507 A.D. with *maharaja* Vaiyagupta of a local house ruling the region. Perhaps, when the central rule of the Kamarupa power was slackened in the 7th century A.D. Samatata emerged as an independent kingdom with its king designated as *Samatatesvara* or Lord of Samatata (Ghosh, 2011, pp. 110-111).

Concluding Remarks

From the above discussion of various aspects of the ancient history of the present North East India and un-divided Bengal, it can be surmised that multitudes of variation existed, yet a common thread of homogeneity also ran through the length and breadth of this vast region. The riverine systems of the region played an important role in bringing about a common heritage of language, culture, socio-religious, migration, trade and commerce, etc. with slight variations. North East region of India being on the transit route of the ancient trade route between mainland India and China, including many south and south-east Asian kingdoms (Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, etc.) perhaps received many cultural impacts. The valley of Manipur served as the melting pot of myriad cultures, ethnicity, philosophy, religion, etc. The

Tripura Kingdom, co-terminus with ancient Samatata (East Bangladesh) flourished until the advent of Muslim rule in Bengal in the 12th century. Prior to the Mohammad Bkatiyar's invasion and occupation of political powers in 1198 A.D., many dynastic families rule Bengal in different kingdoms, without achieving any viable unity. Therefore, it implies that there was no 'Bengal' before this period. On the other hand, the existence of some kingdoms mostly in the valley areas shows fairly well developed socio-political structures. Kamrupa (Ancient Assam), which was geographically contiguous with Bengal, seems to have more developed socio-religious-cum-linguistic formation.

Taking the entire region as a single geographical unit, the eco-system played a vital role in bringing about a modicum of homogeneity amongst the peoples residing in different parts of this vast region. Major rivers like Brahmaputra and Barak along with their affluents shaped the ethos of the people residing in their respective valleys. They also served as the most convenient means of transport during the ancient period, when land transport was virtually non-existent. This region situated between two major river systems, namely, Ganga-Brahmaputra and Chindwin-Irrawaddy (on the Burmese side) was a major transit route for foreign trade. Culturally, the region received the best from the East and the West, enriching the then existing indigenous cultures.

Reference

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