



Society Reflected in the Paschimbhag Copper-plate Inscription of Srichandradeva

Dr. Dipanjona Purkayasha
Asst. Professor, Dept. of Sanskrit
S.S.College, Hailakandi, Assam
Email: drupan84@gmail.com

Abstract:

The five copper plates discovered in the Sylhet district of present Bangladesh represents the early history of Surma Valley region of North East India. Among the five plates the Paschimbhag Copper-plate Inscription of Maharaja Srichandradeva acquired a very important place because during colonial rule, the Sylhet district of present Bangladesh was considered as a part of Assam. At that period the present Karimganj district of Barak Valley was a part of the then Sylhet district, Bangladesh. From this point of view the history of Sylhet district occupies a very important place in the life of the people of this Valley. So, in this paper an attempt is made to throw some light on the society reflected in Paschimbhag Copper-plate Inscription of Surma Valley region.

Key Words: *Paschimbhag Copper-plate Inscription, Maharaja Srichandradeva, Sylhet district, Barak Valley, Assam, Society.*

Introduction:

Paschimbhag Copper-plate Inscription of Maharaja Srichandradeva is one of the most important copper-plate among other plates discovered in the Sylhet district. There are five copper-plates discovered from Sylhet district of present Bangladesh which are considered as the earliest historical records of the Surma Barak Valley of North-east India. These five copper-plates are:-
1. Nidhanpur copper-plate issued by King Bhaskaravarma of Kamrupa in the early 7th century A.D. 2. The Kalapur copper-plate of Samanta Marundananda of the late 7th century A.D. 3. Paschimbhag Copper-plate of Maharaja Srichandra of Vikrampur of the 10th century A.D. 4. Bhatara copper-plate issued by King Govindakeshavadeva of the 11th century A.D. and 5. The Bhatara copper-plate issued by King Ishanadeva of the 11th century A.D.

The Paschimbhag Copper-plate of Maharaja Srichandradeva of 10th century A.D. was discovered by Babu Binod Bihari Chakraborty in about the year 1958. This copper-plate was found in the village Paschimbhag under

Rajnagar Thana within Maulavibazar sub-division of Sylhet district. This copper-plate is deciphered by the eminent scholar Kamala Kanta Gupta and the translated version of this plate is known as “Copper Plates of Sylhet”.¹ During the British period Sylhet district of present Bangladesh was considered as a part of Assam. The two districts of present Barak valley i.e., Cachar, and Hailakandi was known as Cachar district and the Karimganj district was a part of the Sylhet district. In 1874 the district of Cachar along with the districts of Sylhet was added to Assam and in the British official records these two districts were jointly identified as the Surma Valley Division of the State.² After independence in 1947 the major part of Sylhet district was transferred to East Pakistan,³ only four Thanas of the present Karimganj district remained within Assam.⁴ Thus after independence only the Indian portion of the ‘Surma Valley Division’ constituted the districts of Cachar with three sub-divisions viz., Silchar, Karimganj and Hailakandi.⁵ After independence the Cachar district was also known as Barak Valley and politically it has become a part of Assam in North East India.

From the historical point of view, as the Sylhet district was a part of Assam in the North East India, the history of Sylhet occupies a very important place in the life of the people of this region. The history of the people of this valley is deeply connected with Sylhet district. Therefore, the five copper-plate inscriptions discovered in the district of Sylhet are very important heritage for the people of this valley.

The Paschimbhag copper plate inscription is engraved on both sides and on the top of the plate there is a seal attached with it. The copper-plate is written in both sides which consist of 65 lines. On the front side 28 lines are inscribed and on the back side there are 37 lines. The font used in writing is the Devanagari font which was prevalent in the 10th -11th century A.D in that part of the country. The language used in inscribed is Sanskrit. In the whole copper-plate so many verses are there in the beginning and the rest portion is written in prose style. The metres used in writing the verse are - शार्दूलविक्रीडित, अनुष्टुभ, उपजाति, शालिनि, पुष्पिताग्रा, आर्या and others.⁶

This inscription is issued by Maharaja Srichandradeva from his capital situated at Vikramapura which is inscribed in the plate as – ‘स खलु श्रीविक्रमपुरसमावासित’.⁷ The inscription starts with a benedictory verse in respect of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Then a genealogical description of the Chandra dynasty is found, starting from Purnachandra to Maharaja Srichandradeva. Srichandraveda was the son of King Trailokyachandra and Queen Kanchika Devi. Along with the names of the forefathers of Srichandradeva, their valour, strength and victory over the enemies are also described in the starting portion of the inscription.

Society reflected in the Land Grant:

This inscription of Srichandradeva is very important because of its allotment of lands to the different classes of people. In this inscription it is mentioned that lands are donated to six thousand Brāhmaṇas and to eight Monestaries or Mathas. This incident of donating land to a huge number of Brāhmaṇas is very rare which may not be found anywhere in the history of India.

The lands are donated in the three districts namely – Chandrapura, Garalā and Pogāra within the division of Srihatta under the province of Paundravardhana as mentioned in the inscription – ‘श्रीपौण्ड्रवर्द्धनभुक्त्यन्तः पाति श्रीहृदमण्डलसातलवर्गजसम्बद्ध अवेडिकासमेत- गरलाविषय- पोगारविषय- चन्द्रपुरविषयेषु’.⁸ In the starting line of the inscription we find eulogy of Lord Jina which means Buddha and it is also found that Maharaja Srichandradeva and Trailokyachandradeva are the worshiper of Buddha which indicates that they were the follower of Buddha and Buddha Dharma was prevailing in those days in the Srihatta area. In the inscription it is mentioned that lands donated to six thousand Brāhmaṇas but only thirty seven names of Brāhmaṇas are found in the inscription and others are mentioned together in the word ‘gargadi’ in plural number as – ‘गर्गादिषड्ब्राह्मणसहस्रेभ्यश्च’.⁹

From the land grant it is found that the Brāhmaṇa society was fully established there. In the land grant among the Brahmanas two types of Brāhmaṇas are mentioned separately, they are the Mahattara Brāhmaṇas and the Apūrva Brāhmaṇas. From this it can be said that in the Brāhmaṇa society there are some divisions according to their works or their seniority. According to Kamala Kanta Gupta, Mahattara Brāhmaṇas are may be the Principal of the Mathas and another type of Brāhmaṇa who is called Apurva Brāhmaṇa is may be a Brāhmaṇa boy who has become qualified to learn the Veda just after the initiation i.e., the upanayana ceremony.¹⁰ Apurva Brahmana also may mean a new comer or a new Brāhmaṇa. Here we find a division among the Brāhmaṇas because in the land grant, lands are not donated equally among them. To the Apūrva Brāhmaṇas five pātakas, to the brāhamaṇa supervisors’ one pataka and to the Mahattara Brāhmaṇas lands are donated in equal shares. In the land grant lands are donated not only to the Brāhmaṇas but also to the other class of people. Here lands are donated to different classes of people mentioning their occupations. The different classes mentioned here are – the Gaṇakas, Kāyasthas, Mālākāras, Tailakas, Kumbhakāras, Kahalikas, Sankhavāadakas, Dhakkāvādakas, Drāgādikas, Karmakāras, Charmakāras, Naṭas, Sutradharas, Sthapatis, Vettikas. These classes of people were connected with the Chandrapuramatha. They were

appointed for the daily works and maintenance of that Maṭha. Beside these people, for the four Foreign and four Vangāla Maṭhas some other classes of people were appointed. They are – the Nāpitas, Rajakas, Varikas and the Vaidyas. From this, it is clearly observed that a huge number of people from different classes were appointed for the maintenance of the above mentioned Mathas which reflects a picture of the then society.

From the above allotment of lands it can be noted that, in the allotment A maximum land donated to the Upadhyāyas i.e., Professor who is an explainer of Chandragomi grammar. Next to Professor, land given to the Apūrva brāhmaṇa or the new Brāhmaṇ. Though the astrologers are Brāhmaṇas but the Kāyasthas or clerks got more land than the astrologers. It may be because of the service of the Kāyasthas for their land and for their masters. The Vaidyas or physicians have also got more land than the astrologers because of their occupation which was very much valued in the society in comparison to the astrologers. From this point of view, after Brāhmaṇas, the physicians and clerks were very much respected in that society. In later period and in modern period also respect is given to these classes of people. Beside these three classes of people, the other lower class people like the Mālākāra, Tailaka, Kumbhakāra, Kahalika, Sankhavāadakas, Dhakkāvādakas, Drāgādikas, Karmakāras, Charmakāras, Nāpitas, Rajakas have got half pāṭakas of land each. There is difference in their occupation, caste and creed which was maintained in the society but from the equal allotment of land it can be said that financially all these classes were in same position in that society.

In the allotment we find that two pāṭakas of land is granted for the Naṭa or dancer. Naṭa is an ancient class which has very low social value from the early age, but here it is found that this class got much land than other class. It means that during 10th century A.D. the position of the Naṭa was not so bad in this region. The Sutradharas or carpenters and Sthapatis or architects were may be in a good position during that period in the society because two pāṭakas of land was donated to each of them (one pāṭaka each). So, it can be said that their position was a little higher than the other labour class people of the society. The Karmakāras were in a good position because each of them got two pāṭakas of land which indicates their social condition which is better than the other classes. The Vettikas have got three fourth (3/4) pāṭakas of land. According to Kamala Kanta Gupta the Vettikas are may be those people who sweeps and cleanses the temple.¹¹ So, this class of workers have got more land than the others.

In this copper plate inscription we find different types of people from various castes having different occupations but it is very difficult to say

about their actual status in the society. From the allotment of lands found in the inscription we can get some idea about the society but it is difficult to say that actually these people have the same position in the society or it is only because they were connected with the works of the Maṭhas made by their King. In the inscription lands donated to those people who were related with the Chandrapura Maṭha, foreign Maṭhas and with the Vangāla Maṭhas. The lands donated to them as their remuneration because various responsibilities were given to those people to look after the Maṭhas. On performance of different types of duties they have got lands in return. This allotment gives a picture of the social and economic condition of that period. Lands donated to the people according to their ability. This also shows that the status of different classes of people was recognized by the State.

All lands of the three viṣayas or districts are donated in three allotments viz., A, B and C. In the allotment A total 120 pāṭakas of land was donated to the Chandrapura Maṭha and it was dedicated to the deity Brahmā which is mentioned in the Charter as –‘एतस्मिन् श्रीचन्द्रपुरे ब्रह्मणे’.¹² According to Nihar Ranjan Roy it is very strange to establish a Maṭha in name of Brahmā.¹³ It is strange because having a temple of Brahmā is a very rare thing. In allotment B total 280 pāṭakas of lands donated to four foreign Maṭhas and four Vangāla Maṭhas. These four foreign and four vangāla maṭhas were dedicated to the deities – Vaiśvānara, Jaimani or Jaimini, Yogeśvara and to Mahākāla. Here, it is noticed that in the maṭhas Vaiśvānara (Agni) and Jaimini were established as the single deity. It is something strange because establishing Agni as an independent deity in the maṭha is very uncommon. Another surprising thing is that Jaimini who is the founder of Pūrva Mīmāṃsā school of Indian Philosophy was also established as a deity in both the maṭhas. So worshiping Jaimini as a God was also a very strange thing. Nihar Ranjan Roy also said that worshiping Jaimini as a God in the maṭhas or temples is an extraordinary incident. Jaiminis temple could not be found anywhere in India.¹⁴ It is also mentioned here that every deity has two maṭhas one for the foreigners and one for the vangālas. In this regard, Nihar Ranjan Roy said that there must be something behind this for which two maṭhas have been made for the same deities, one for the foreigners and another for the vangālas. There must be some difference between these two types of worship. So, it is observed that it was like a university where huge number of persons were engaged in different types of works, students were also studying different subjects staying there. Upādhyāyas or Professors of the four Vedas viz,- Ṛk, Yajus, Sāma and Atharva was employed for teaching the students in each group consisting of four maṭhas.¹⁵ In this connection Nihar Ranjan Roy said “ the plate offers significant information on the religious life, academic atmosphere, administration of academic

institutions and the overall operation of the process of Brahmanisation in this eastern-most frontier of the country. It may also be mentioned that D.C. Sircar shows elaborately that in no other inscription of Eastern or Northern India we find reference to such big institution for Brahmanical studies.¹⁶

Another important point is that, though Srichandradeva was a follower of Buddha but there was no feeling or hatred in his heart against other religion. In many places we find that the religion of the King becomes the religion of his subjects but here it is found that Maharaja Srichandradeva has neither created any pressure on his subjects nor implemented any rule over them. He has not imposed anything over his subjects but he has established a very big institution of Hindu religion for Brahmanical studies. In the royal charter it is mentioned that in allotment A 47 pāṭakas of land and in allotment B 10 pāṭakas of land for each of the eight maṭhas are donated for the Navakarmas(nine works) of the temple deities connected with the maṭhas. There may be any political cause behind such a big donation of land but it is not clear from the inscription.

Concluding Observations:

Therefore, it is observed that the Paschimbhag Copper-plate Inscription is the one and only land grant issued by Srichandradeva through which a big settlement has happened in the Surma Valley region which was a part of North East India during 11th century A.D. Through this land grant six thousand Brāhmaṇas were settled in the Sylhet district. The socio- cultural condition of a place must be well and good where six thousand Brāhmaṇas are settled. In the inscription we find two religions – Hindu and Buddha, also we find teachers of four Vedas which indicates that the holy scripture of Hindu were studied there. The maṭhas were like big educational institutions and their academic atmosphere was very good. Many people were engaged in maintenance of the maṭhas. Sanskrit study was also in practice as the Vedas were taught in the maṭhas. It can also be said that, Sanskrit would be the royal language of that period as the inscription is written in Sanskrit language. From the above discussion we came to know about the different classes of people and their social status. Most the classes of people are present now a days in our society but their status have changed with time. As it is told earlier that the Sylhet district was in Assam till independence of India, the culture of that area is totally similar with the culture of the Barak Valley. The people of Barak Valley are connected with Sylhet from their heart. At present sylhet district is a part of Bangladesh but the people of southern Assam i.e., of Barak valley still introduce themselves as Sylheti, they talk in Sylheti language. Nations are divided but the hearts of the people of this region are still united, Sylheti culture is still in practice in this valley.

Therefore , it can be said that this inscription is the most important document for the socio-cultural study of the Surma Valley region.

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