

## **Trade relations of Ancient North East India: Through traveller's eyes with special reference to Surma Barak Valley region**

**Leena Chakrabarty**

### **Abstract**

In ancient period many foreign travellers visited the North Eastern region of India and left their valuable accounts which give us a vivid picture to reconstruct the socio economic history of this area. Among these foreign travellers Greek Geographer Ptolemy, Hiuen-Tsang and I-tsing are important. Ptolemy wrote about the trade relation of Sylhet with China in exchange of Silk the Chinese people used to by Malbathrum and cane mattress. Malbathrum was exported to Roman Empire also. Hiuen Tsang in his account described about the six countries to the east of Samatata. He also described about a sea route from interior India to Kamrupa through Bihar. Most of India territories were connected with China and South Asia by naval routes and business were done through this route. It Sing mentioned about one Raja of Samatata who was a vessel king. The agricultural products of this region secured an important place in foreign trade. This paper will discuss elaborately about the trade relation of North East India on the basis of foreign accounts.

**Keywords:** Malabathrum, Kirata, Samatata, Cane mattress, Nidhanpur plates

### **Trade relations of Ancient North East India: Through traveller's eyes with special reference to Surma Barak Valley region**

Materials of some important historical value in respect of the ancient period of India may be collected from the accounts of the foreign travellers. Their writings contain observations on the various aspects of the country during their time of visit. Some of the visitors came with the foreign invaders, some of them were attracted by the glorious chapter of this land and some other came as pilgrims. They visited India for their own purposes but the descriptions left by them provide us some trustworthy materials for the construction of our ancient history.

---

**Leena Chakrabarty**, Assistant Professor, Department of History, Ramkrishna Nagar College.



Fortunately some of the foreign travellers visited the North East corner of India also, and wrote their valuable accounts. Among them the most important were the Greek geographer Ptolemy, the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang and I-tsing. These foreign accounts corroborated our views in some extent expressed in connection with discussion of inscriptions and coins. So, these accounts are not to be seen in isolation but in correlation.

About the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD Greek writer and geographer Ptolemy travelled India. His account gives some important clues to the economic and political condition of ancient Barak Valley. In ancient times this valley included four districts of Bangladesh viz. Sylhet, Habiganj, Sunamganj and Maulavibazar, four districts of Assam viz. Karimganj, Cachar and Hailakandi and Dima Hasao, the Jiri frontier tract of Manipur and Kailasahar-Dharmanagar area of Tripura came under its fold. The whole region was known as Srihatta. The Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang travelled throughout India during the second quarter of the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. The testimony of Hieun Tsang is the most important source of the then North East India. Another Chinese pilgrim I-tsing travelled India about 671 AD. From his account we obtain some important clues of ancient Srihatta (major portion of Srihatta or Sylhet is now in Bangladesh).

The testimony of Ptolemy provides various titles of hills and hillocks, water course, urban area and ethnic group of this region of India. He mentioned about Kirrhadia which has been recognised as the place settled by Kiratas starting from the bottom of the Garo and Khasi Hills and extended upto Tipperah hill. According to his account in Kirrhadia the best quality of Malabathrum (*Tezpat scientifically known as cinnamomum tamala, Indian bay leaf*) was grown. Sylhet region is well known for malabathrum which is grown on the southern slopes of Khasi Hills as well as in the border areas of Sylhet. Ptolemy refers that the people of Sylhet had trade relation with other countries.<sup>1</sup> In boarding area of Kirrhadia there was a big trade fair and in this fair a large quantity of malabathrum was traded. In exchange of silk the Chinese traders used to buy malabathrum. The Chinese traders also used a high quality of cane mattress to exhibit their goods.<sup>2</sup> The Sylhet region is now-a-days also famous for the growth of malabathrum and cane mattress which suggests their production and holding of fair for sake of these goods along with other indigenous products of the Surma Barak Valleys.

The malabathrum or tamalapatra was exported to Roman Empire from India. During the period of Indo Roman commerce these malabathrum got popularity in the Roman Empire as an element of ointments and perfumes.<sup>3</sup> It can be deduced that the agricultural products of this region occupied a renowned place in the market of foreign country. In this way local products found their due place in international market.

Next, we have the account of the Chinese pilgrim, Hiuen Tsang. According to his account in 638 AD there were six countries to the east of Samatata. These were i) Shih-li-cha-to-lo, ii) Ka-mo-long-ka, iii) To-lo-po-ti, iv) I-shang-na-pu-lo, v) Mo-ha-changpo, vi) Yen-mo-na-chato.<sup>4</sup>

Location of Samatata and Sylhet is to be found also in his description of the



country. This leads us to the Surma Barak Valleys gradually. According to his account Si-yu-ki Samatata was 250 miles to the south of Kamrupa. Before further discussion we should ascertain the location of Samatata. In the account of the Chinese traveller it has been found that he started from Kamrupa south wards and after a tour of 1200 or 1300 li (6 li= 1 mile) arrived at the country of Samatata and this Samatata was situated on the sea side and was wetlands. So it can be assumed that Samatata must have been the south eastern part of the Bengal Presidency corresponding to Dacca, Faridpur, Bakerganj, Jessore and Khulna districts.<sup>5</sup>

Hiuen Tsang then described about Shih-li-cho-to-lo. The account stated that Shih-li-cho-to-lo was situated to the north east from Samatata among the hill near the sea. Pandit Padmanth Vidyavinod associated Shih-li-cho-to-lo with Srihatta and said that this state was situated to the north east of Samatata or East Bengal. On the North and the South it was restricted by the Assam range and the Lusai Hills respectively. The western side of Sylhet and a portion of Mymensingh are mostly comprises of wetland and this area are inundated fully with water in rainy season. At that time it looks like a sea and are called haor (sagor) or sea.<sup>6</sup> As Hiuen Tsang mentioned Srihatta as a separate country, Achyut Charan Choudhury in his *Srihatter Itivritta* opined that Srihatta in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD was an independent Kingdom.<sup>7</sup> But this book was published before the discovery of the Nidhanpur copperplate of Bhaskar Varman. After the discovery of this copperplate it has been found that by this grant Bhaskar Varman donated land to the Brahmins in Chandrapuri *Vishaya* of Panchakhanda *Pargana* of Srihatta. So it is evident that this donated land was in Srihatta under the rule of powerful Varmans of Kamrupa. But it also can be argued that the rulers of Srihatta were feudatory chiefs under the Varmans or a part of the country where these copperplates were found was a part of Bhaskara's Kingdom. The account while describing the boundary areas of the valleys as well as the main land supports the sum and substance of the findings in regard to inscriptions and coins.

By the time of Bhaskar Varman or about the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD Samatata became commercially very important. The first five territories to the east of Samatata mentioned by Hiuen Tsang were on the sea or accessible by rivers from the sea, Samatata must have contacts with them through sea routes. The relation could have been commercial or cultural or both. The account of Hiuen Tsang mentions a naval route running from the interior of India and through South Bihar and Bangladesh to Kamrupa which was used regularly. Through the Brahmaputra or the Barak river or the Kamrupa Samatata route a person could arrive the coast. Samatata might have been directly accessible from the area of Tripura. During the time Tamralipta (in the modern Tamaluk area of the Midnapur district in West Bengal) was a well known port which could be arrived from Samatata or Harikela either by coastal navigation or by a overland route on the coast. There was a regular communication between Kamrupa and Samatata Harikela and Tamraliputra.<sup>8</sup> So it is possible that a route from Arakan went through Samatata and Barak Valley to the Brahmaputra Valley.<sup>9</sup> All these information suggest that there was a developed naval communication system in ancient Surma Barak region



and this region had well connection with other parts of India as well as China and South East. The channel routes were used for trade and commerce in the ancient period. As the region was well connected with China and South East Asia, it is evident that this region had trade relation with these countries. Not only this region but ancient India had socio-economic and cultural contact with foreign countries through the coastal area of Harikhela and Samatata. So it is clear that the ancient Surma Barak region played a very important role in developing the social, economic and cultural condition of India.

To the south east of Samatata in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD a port in Harikkela (including the Chittagong district) became very important centre of maritime route. In the latter half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD I-Tsing came to Harikela from Simhla by sea route.<sup>10</sup> In the ancient literacy works which were discovered it was found that Srihatta and Harikela were synonymous. Dinesh Chandra Sarkar in his book *Pal O Senyuger Bamsanucharit* said that Srihatta and Harikela were one.<sup>11</sup> On the basis of this it can be said that Srihatta and Harikela were identical. However, thus by the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD Samatata and Harikela became so important in the field of trade and commerce through the Bay of Bengal that the port of Harikela came to be known to the Arab geographers as the sea of Harkhand.<sup>12</sup> There was also a famous port of Samander in the Harikela which was identifiable with Chittagong. There were also business routes from Samander to Urashior (Orissa) and to South India and also to Sarandiv (Srilanka).<sup>13</sup> So it can be argued that Harikela port occupied a prominent place in internal as well as external trade.

Samatata began to participate in overseas commerce and established relation with different countries of South East Asia by the first half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. The territory of Samatata came under the control of Kamrupa King for sometime during the time of Bhaskar Varman.<sup>14</sup> Different political powers including the rulers of Kamrupa tried to control this area seeing its local regional and internal; importance both in political and economic matters. Although political interference did not put any check on smooth ongoing economic exchange process. The trade through the port of Harikela and Samatata was conducted regularly.

Besides this account of economic importance other information is available relevant to the Surma Barak Valleys and their adjoining areas. According to Si-yu-Ki, the circumference of Kamrupa was 1700 miles. Gait pointed out that the entire Assam Valley, Surma Barak region, a portion of Northern Bengal and some portion of Mymensingh must have belonged to Kamrupa. As the circumference of Kamrupa Kingdom included the area of Surma Valley and Hiuen-Tsang left a vivid description about the people of Kamrupa Kingdom and their life style so the account throws some light upon the social life of the people of Barak Valley also. According to the pilgrim that the land of the area was wet and marshy and thus water-intensive crops such as paddy and jute were produced sufficiently. It also mentioned about availability of two types of fruit namely Coconut and Jackfruit. Jackfruit locally known as *Khathal* grew abundantly and the people liked it very much. Till today names of various villages of this region starts with khathal such as khathla tali, khathal bagan, khathal basti etc. The climate was healthful.<sup>15</sup>



The account has left behind an interesting description of the people of the valleys. The people of this area were small stature and dark yellow complexion. The behaviour of the people was simple and honest but their nature was wild and impetuous. Their memories were sharp and they were eager in study also. They used to worship the Devas and did not believe in Buddhism. Hundreds of Deva temples were in the country. There were some Buddhists also but they performed their religious acts secretly.<sup>16</sup> It appears that Buddhism had lost its significance as a religion in the area when Hiuen Tsang travelled the tract. As the people of this land were eager in learning, had sharp brain and number of temples were in the country, it is evident that the area was culturally developed. Since the crops were regular and chief profession was agriculture, it is clear that agriculturally the region was self sufficient..

Another Chinese Traveller I-Tsing visited India about 671 AD. He referred Harikela as the eastern limit of India.<sup>17</sup> Hiuen Tsang did not mention about any reigning king in Samatata but I-tsing wrote that one Rajabhata was the King of Samatata. He was either a vassal under the Kamrupa king or Samatata was outside the dominion of Bhaskar Varman.<sup>18</sup> It seems that many petty rulers ruled over this area including the Surma Barak Valleys.

From the accounts of foreign travellers we gain something about the socio-political and economic condition of this area. From the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD to the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD external trade flourished over the coastal area of Samatata and Harikela. There was a developed naval communication system in this area. This region had well connection through sea routes with other parts of India as well as China and South East Asia. The channel routes were used for trade and commerce in the ancient period. Since this Valley was well connected with some others parts of the world most of the business activities of ancient India had been done through this region. Through transactions the traders of our country earned a considerable amount of profit. So this reign played an important role in developing the economic condition of the people.

It may be suggested that if the country had trade relation with China and South East Asia there may be cultural contacts also. Most probably there was cultural exchange between India and other countries of South East Asia and China. And in this regard the Surma Barak region had an important role to play. The agricultural products obtained an important place in dealing with foreign countries. From this it can be said that the soil of the region was very fertile and method of agriculture through primitive was developed. The high quality of cane mattress of Sylhet indicates, the small scale industry flourished to a great extent. The beneficial maritime trade was conducted through this territory up to 13<sup>th</sup> century AD. The trade and commerce of this region strengthened the economic base not only North East region but also ancient India. This fact is also supported by other sources interpreted by other scholars and writers.

#### Note and References

1. Barua, K.L., (1988) *Early History of Kamrupa*, Guwhati, , B. R. Publishing corporation,



- p.6
2. Crindell, M.C. "Periplus of Erythraean Sea", pp148-49 cited in Achyut Charan Choudhury, "Srihatter Itivritta" (Bengali), Sylhet 1317 BS, pp.40-41.
3. Pliny, Nalratis "Historia XIIIX", p.129, cited in B.N.Mukherjee "External Trade of Early North East India," 1992, New Delhi Har Anand Publication p.34
4. Vidyavinod Padmaanath (1920) "To The East of Samatata", Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, January, 1920, Cambridge University Press, U.K
5. *Ibid*
6. *Ibid*
7. Choudury Achut Charan (), "Srihatter Itivritta", Publisher Kotha p.43
8. B.N.Mukherjee (1992) "External Trade of Early North East India," ,New Delhi Har Anand Publication p.84
9. *Ibid* ,p.67
10. *Ibid.* , p.84
11. Choudhury Sujit, "Srihatta Cacherer Prachin Itihas" (Bengali) Sahitya, Quaterly Journal Hailakandi, 1<sup>st</sup> Kartik 1401 BS. Publisher: Bijit Choudhury
12. Monthly Bulletin, the Asiatic Society , January, 1990.
13. B.N.Mukherjee (1992) "External Trade of Early North East India" p.86
14. *Ibid* .p.57
15. Gait. E.A,(1926), "A History of Assam" EBH Publisher ,Guahati p.23
16. *Ibid*
17. Mazumder.R.C.,(1971), "History of Ancient Bengal" , Calcutta, Publisher :G Bharadwaj. p278
18. Barua, K.L,(1988), "Early History of Kamrupa" p.47

#### Profile of Leena Chakrabarty, R.K. Nagar College

Leena Chakrabarty completed her Master and M Phil degree in History from Assam University, Silchar. She is working as an Assistant Professor in History in Ramkrishna Nagar College, Ramkrishna Nagar. She has successfully completed UGC sponsored Minor Research Project titled '**History of Tea Industry in Barak Valley from 1855-1900 with special reference to Chatla Region**' duration from March 2009 to March 2011. She has been awarded PhD from Assam University, Silchar Regd No: Ph.D. 3098/17 on topic '**Refugee Settlement And Its Impact: A Study Of Barak Valley (1947- 1971)**' under guidance Dr. Habibullah Mazumder, Department of History, Assam University, Silchar.



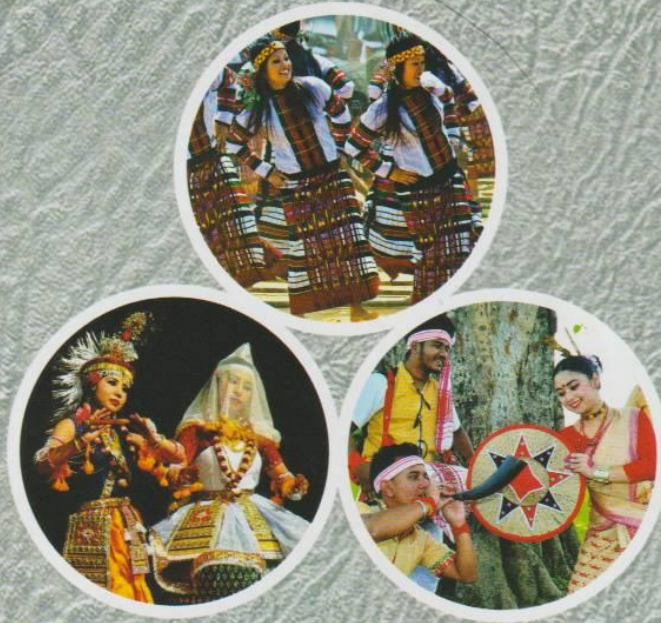
Vol. 12 Year 2023

ISSN : 2394-9023

# anandam

Journal of Anundoram Borooah Institute  
of Language, Art and Culture, Assam

A UGC CARE INDEXED JOURNAL OF  
SOCIAL SCIENCE AND HUMANITIES



Editor : Dilip Kumar Kalita



विद्ये वेद्ये परापरं

Anundoram Borooah Institute of Language,  
Art & Culture, Assam



## Contents

- ❖ The Woman in the Folklife Represented in Lakshmināth Bezbaroā's *Burhi Āir Sādhū*: A Study of Select Folktales || Ankur Goswami || 1
- ❖ Personality Changes Experienced by Jhumpa Lahiri's Female Characters || Arthi Mayavan || 10
- ❖ Folkloric Orientation and Postcolonial Complexity: A Study of *Midnight's Children* || Daisy Barman || 19
- ❖ Musical Aspects in Bargeet || Jinti Das || 27
- ❖ Role of 'Festival - Culture' in the Process of Community Making: A study on *Mech-Kachāris of Assam* || Prayasi Dutta, Kanima Pathak || 34
- ❖ Foucauldian Perspective of Power: A Paradigm shift from subjugation to Rejuvenation in Girish Karnad's *Taghlaq* || N S Yogananda Rao, E Koperundeve || 43
- ❖ Global Research output of Folklore Literature during 2008- 2022 available in WOS database: A bibliometric study || Abhijit Thakuria, Chinmay Sarma || 52
- ❖ Animal Culling as an Act of Cultural Pluralism: An Eco-critical Study of Indira Goswami's *The Man from Chinnamasta* || Rajashree Boruah, Rimjim Boruah || 68
- ❖ The Bwisagu Festival: An Overview || Faguna Barmahalia || 75
- ❖ Agricultural-based Folk Festivals of the Mising and the Rabha Tribes: A Comparative Study || Tarulata Boruah || 83
- ❖ A Comparative Study on Assamese and Nepali Gender System || Jahnoibi Kalita || 94
- ❖ Role of Civil Society in policy formulation in India || Sarabjit Roy Chowdhury || 99
- ❖ Research Productivity in Library and Information Science (LIS) of the Universities of North East India || Jaba Moni Das, Dipen Deka || 108
- ❖ ASO-AMEN-KIBI The name giving ceremony among the Karbis: A Study in and around Guwahati || Dipangkar Kayastha, Dilip Kumar Kalita || 122



- ❖ *MORA XOKAM*: Understanding the death rituals as rites of passage of Koch Community in Assam || Kaushik Das || 129
- ❖ Empowerment of Mising women: A historical perspective || Tapesh Doley || 141
- ❖ Environmental Folk Beliefs Prevalent among the Tea Communities || Sabina Begum, Karuna Kanta Kakati || 148
- ❖ Preferring Jigsaw method to Demonstration Method in Effect Teaching of confused Prepositions || P. Dhivya, E. Koperundevi || 156
- ❖ Navigating Between Memory and Diasporic Imagination: Exploring A. K. Ramanujan's Poetic World || Ayan Kanti Ghosh || 164
- ❖ A Descriptive Analysis on Satyendra Nath Sarma, A Scholar of Epic Study with Special Reference to 'Vishwa Mahakavya Parichay' || Babita Brauah || 171
- ❖ The Influence of the Rāmāyaṇa in the Assamese songs with special reference to the Bargitas and the folk songs || Bagmita Sandilya, Gaurishmita Baruah || 181
- ❖ Impact of Folk Performing Art in Creating Cultural Assimilation between the Hindu Assamese Community and the Bodo Community || Daijee Kalita || 186
- ❖ Lakshminath Bezbaroa and Reinterpretation of Vaishnavism in Colonial Assam || Ditee Moni Baruah || 194
- ❖ Quality of life among Single Mothers in Karnataka State (India) || Harish K || 208
- ❖ Ecocritical Approach with Special Reference to Selected Indian Novels || Kumari Baveja Devi, Geeta Sharma, Kulbhushan Kumar, Radha || 218
- ❖ The Political Role of Borraja Phuleswari during Ahom Era || Dulen Hazarila || 229
- ❖ A bibliometric analysis of the scientific literature on Acetaminophen from 2002-2021 || Gajendra Ballav Devchoudhury || 234
- ❖ Women in Newar society || Gayotree Newar || 243
- ❖ Magic-Lore of Mayong – A Bibliographic Study || Juri Devi, Kangkanjyoti Kalita, Mridul Das || 247
- ❖ "Representation of Women in Folk Narratives: A Reading of Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps and Son of the Thundercloud*" || Kakoli Choudhury || 262
- ❖ Trade relations of Ancient North East India: Through traveller's eyes with special reference to Surma Barak Valley region || Leena Chakrabarty || 269
- ❖ African and Assamese Folklore: A Study of the Selected Works of Chinua Achebe and Jogesh Das || Md. Manirul Islam || 275
- ❖ Material Culture and Digital Trading : A Study in Assam || Meghna Choudhury || 285
- ❖ Traditional Iron Implements and Metal-Related Artifacts of Tangkhul Naga of Manipur || Naorem Arun Singh, Dwipen Bezbaruah || 297



- ❖ Archaeological Heritage of Early Assam: Its Challenges and Restorative Measures ||  
Oinam Ranjit Singh, Nilkamal Singha || 317
- ❖ 'Umpha Puja', The Religious Festival of Tai Ahoms: A Study ||  
Prarthana Phukan, Dipankar Boruah || 335
- ❖ Ritual, Altar and Taboo as an Instrument of Social Control:  
A study on Apatani Tribe || Punyo Yarang || 342
- ❖ Hunting Lore of the Bodos: An Endangered Tradition || Purnasmriti Kalita || 351
- ❖ Traces of Sankardeva's Creative Humanism in Material Culture of Neo-Vaisnavite  
Tradition of Assam || Ramala Sarma || 364
- ❖ Religious Preoccupations in R. K. Narayan (A Study of Some Selected Novels) ||  
Ramyabrata Chakraborty || 374
- ❖ Culture of Handloom and Textile Industry: A Study of Problem and  
Prospect of the Industry with Special Reference to Diphu, karbi Anglong ||  
Sakshi Munoth, Abhishek Sah || 380
- ❖ Religious Performances of the Bodos (With Special Reference to  
Kherai Puja and Garja Puja) || Trishna Mani Kalita, Sumi Thakuria || 392
- ❖ Theories and Best Practices in Translator's Training ||  
Parul Mishra, Umesh Kumar Gupta || 401
- ❖ Documentation of the Tai Khamyang Language: Role of Digital Humanities ||  
Palash Kumar Nath || 417
- ❖ Syllable Structure and Phonotactics in Loanword Adaptation in Nalbaria Assamese:  
A Constraint-Based Analysis || Bipasha Patgiri || 435
- ❖ Syllable Structure in Bodo || Pinki Wary || 454
- ❖ Word Order in Kokborok || Samir Debbarma, L. Pratima Devi || 468
- ❖ Expressives in Assamese || Seuji Sharma || 482
- ❖ Syllable Structure of T.M. Kasom Tangkhul Language || Thaodem Romen Meitei || 497
- ❖ The Light Verbs in Nepali || Sourabh Chetry, Madhumita Barbora || 514



