Land Grants and Land Management in Ancient Srihatta Kingdom

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Abstract

As per the available epigraphic sources, we find that Srihatta Kingdom developed its own independent political entity under the Deva Kings. The local states in the region during the 7th to 11th Century were powerful, wealthy and prosperous. The practice of land grants to the Brahmans officials and monasteries placed these landed intermediaries between the rulers and the actual tillers of the land. The sovereign state transferred all sources of revenue to the donees. The new settlements that came up in the forest regions by virtue of land grants had the full compliments of peasants, artisans and professionals and left scope for creating new tenants on the donated lands. In return of these land grants, the donees were obliged to render certain specific services to the state. Thus, a wealthy group had emerged on the basis of landownership and they were powerful in the state affairs by virtue of their command over land and wealth. The king had the authority to gift the land on behalf of himself and his successors. In land management, the land could be transferred by the rulers along with the dwellers. Lands were generally gifted to the Brahmans, temples, monasteries and the state officials. It was depended only on the spirit, emotion and benevolence of the rulers and the like.

Keywords: Nomenclature, Land Grants, Land Management, Subservient, Command, Castes

1 Introduction

Srihatta or Sylhet in Ancient times denoted the territory now covered in the Sylhet district of Bangladesh, Karimganj, Hailakandi and Cachar districts of Assam (India) and the adjoining Kailasahar-Dharmanagar areas of Tripura (India). It is a single valley formed by the river Barak and its branches, viz. Surma and Kushiara, with uniform physical features that make it a distinct
geographical division and the homeland of a homogeneous group of people who speak in a common
dialect of Bengali, called Srihatti or Sylheti. The region bordered almost on three sides by the hills
ranges, viz. the Khasi-Jaintia hills, North Cachar hills, Mizo hills and the Tipperah hills, leaving the
fourth exposed to Bengal.

Srihatta in ancient times must have been the common nomenclature for the entire
Barak/Surma Valley. Geographically it is a distinct territory and the indigenous people here share a
common ethnic, linguistic and cultural heritage. Until the formation of the Tripura State in the 11th
–13th century and the Turko-Afghan conquest of Sylhet-Karimganj section of the valley there was no
political segmentation of the territory.

The copper plates clearly suggest that Srihatta was ruled by the Varmanas of Kamrupa in the
7th century A.D. and that they were immediately replaced by the Samanta chiefs of Samatata who
ruled under the later Guptas. During the 7th to the 10th century A.D. Srihatta must have formed a part
of Harikela which in all probability included, besides Barak-Surma Valley, the plains of Tripura and
the Bangladesh districts of Comilla, Chittagong and Noakhali. We have found that the Deva
Kings of Bhatera plates also ruled over the same territory. According to the Paschimbhag copper
plates of Srichandrs (10th century A.D.) Srihattamandala was within the Paundravardhana
bhukti, while the Bhatera copper plate of Govinda-kesavadeva describes the ruler as Srihattesvara or
King of Srihatta.

It is difficult to reconstruct the early history of the region, due to the paucity of acceptable
data. It is, however, certain that in ancient times a large portion of Srihatta was included in a large sea,
in all probability the Bay of Bengal. In Cachar, Hailakandi, Karimganj and Sylhet districts there are
large lakes that are locally called haor which is believed to be a corruption of sagar (or sea). Hiuen
Tsang (7th century AD) described Sylhet as Shih-li-cha-talo which was to the north-east of Samatata
among the hills near sea. The Paschimbhag copper plate of Srichandra (10th century AD) mentions a
naubanda or naval base at Indresvara in Chandrapura visaya in Srihattamandala. The Bhatera
copper plate (no. 1) of Govinda-kesavadeva (11th century AD) mentions sagara as the boundary of this
great land and the Bhatera copper plate (no. 2) of Isanadeva (11th century A.D.) refers to nauvatakas
or war boats. As Hunter says, “The conformation of some of the sandy hillocks and the presence of
marine shells at the foot of the hills along the northern boundary, indicates that sea flowed at the base
of the hills at a comparatively recent period.” Nevertheless, there is no doubt that some divisions of
Srihatta became the homeland of the Indo-Aryans at a very early period of History. Of the 51
mahapitha or mystic centres associated with Saktism at least two, viz. griva-pitha in Kalagul and
Vamjangha-pitha in Baurbhag are in Sylhet. These centres are referred to in the texts like
Mantrachudamani Tantra and Tantra Chudamani. Srihatta found mention in the Mahalinga Tantra
and the Sadhanmala of the Buddhists. The references to Srihatta in these ancient texts suggest the
antiquity of its civilization, the Indo-Aryan settlements, the prevalence of Buddhists and Brahmanical
Hindu religions, the existence of the people of different castes and occupations, including the
Brahmanas, peasants and artisans.

2 Land Grants

The epigraphic data on land in ancient Srihatta is extremely meager. The earliest known
copper plate discovered in the valley is that of Maharaja Bhaskar Varma of Kamrupa who ruled in the
7th century AD. This undated inscription is found in six copper plates recovered from Niudhanpur
village in Panchakhanda pargana of Sylhet district. It describes the renewal of a perpetual revenue

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free land grant by the Kshatriya king Maharaja Bhaskar Varmaa of the original grant made by his great grand-father Maharaja Mahabhutta Varman who ruled towards the close of the 5th and the beginning of 6th century AD. The donated land called mayurasalmala was in the Chandrapuri vashaya and bounded on the east by river Kosika, on the south-east by dried Kausika marked by hewn fig tree, on the south-west by the dried river Ganginika marked by a cut down fig tree, on the west by the dried bed of Ganginika, on the north-west by a potter’s pit, and on the north-east by the pond of a lawyer (vyavahari) named Khasoka. This grant to the Brahmana (agrahara) was in the manner of bhumi-chchidra so that no tax is levied on it as long as the sun, the moon and the earth will endure, and the text was addressed to the district officers (vishayapati) and the courts of justice (adhikharana). The officer who issued ‘hundred commands’ is named as Sri Gopala, the officer who marked the boundaries was the nayaka or headman of Chandrapuri named Sri Kshikunda, the nayakarnika or the judge was one Janardana Svami, the vyavahari or lawyer Hara Datta, the kayastha or clerks were Dandunatha and others, the sasyitia or composer and lekhayita or writer was one Vasuvarman, the Bhandaradhidikrita or superintendent of stores was Mahasamanta Divakaraprabha, the utkhetayita or collector of revenue was Dattakartra Puranna, and sekayaka or engraver was one Kaliya. The total area of the donated land is not known, but the names of Brahmana donees, including their gotra and veda-sakha, and the number of shares (amsah) are clearly mentioned in the text. As one of the seven plates could not be recovered, the total number of donees and shares cannot be ascertained. The available plates contain the list of 205 donees and they are given 159 11/16 shares. In addition to these, 7 shares were allotted for the Bali-Charu-Satra or the common purposes like worship (Bali), oblation (Charu) and hospitality (Satra). It is also stated that the produce of the land increased by Kosika will go to the concerned Brahmana donees but the land which is enlarged by the Gangini shall be equally divided by these Brahmanas.⁹

Another important copper plate is the Tipperah copper plate of Samanta Lokanatha. In this document we get a short history of a few generations of Samanta chiefs of Samanta or Eastern and South-Eastern Bengal. The name of the first chief could not be deciphered. The second was Srinatha, the third Bhavanatha, and the next Lokanatha bhattaraka who was the donor of the grant. The Samanta chiefs with the title Kumaramatydikarana must have been subject to a sovereign whose name is not mentioned in the text. Although the Smantas were Saiva, the plate bears the gaja-laksmi seal which could be of the paramount ruler. It tells us that Mahasamanta Pradosha Sarman, an orthodox Brahmana who held a high office in the state, approached Lokanatha through the latter’s son Laksminatha as Dutaka, for a plot of land in the forest region (atavibhukhande) called Suvvunga vishaya whereupon he wanted to erect a temple of the deity Anantanarayana and to settle more than a hundred Brahmanas versed in four Vedas in that locality. The prayer was granted and by this charter land was donated to those Brahmanas individually and, in some cases, jointly. The donees included bhogin or headman of the village, pachaka or cook, vachaka or reciter etc. The copper plate was issued in 44th year of the Harsha era, corresponding to 650 A.D. On this basis, R.G. Basak held that Lokanatha was probably a feudatory chief under the later Gupta Emperor Aditya Sena of Magadhā.¹⁰ R.M. Nath conjectured that Suvvunga was identifiable with modern Suvang area of Cachar.¹¹ Kamalakanta Gupta, on the other hand, opined that it was in the Chautali paragana of Sylhet where the Kalapur copper plate of Samanta Marundanathabhattachara of the same family has been discovered.¹²

The Kalapur copper plate of Samanta Marundanathabhattacharakha of 7th century A.D. has been discovered in the village Kalapur in Chautali paragana within Srimangal Thana of Maulavibazar.
subdivision of Sylhet district. The text has so far been only partially deciphered. Written in the relief character of the early Gupta age, some letters of this copper plate bear strong resemblance to those of Afsad inscription of Gupta Emperor Adityasena of Magadha (7th century A.D.). This has also got some similarities with the Tipperah copper plate grant of Lokanatha. Both the copper plates have seals containing almost the same emblem (i.e. Gaja-Laksmi). The name of Samanta Srinatha is mentioned in both the plates. It is probable that Srinatha was the common ancestor of both Lokanatha and Marundanatha, although we do not get the actual relationship between Lokanatha and Marundanatha in the deciphered portion of the text. The words Srilekha (charter from the sovereign) and Samanta-Sainapathi (a feudatory chief and an army chief) and the title Kumaramatayadikaranar qualified by the word bhattaraka perhaps clearly suggest that Marundanatha was a feudatory chief (Samanta) like Lokanatha of the Tipperah copper plate under some paramount power. The important fact gathered from the deciphered portion of the document is that Samanta Marundanatha by a copper plate charter donated a plot of land in the forest region (atabibhukhande) comprising an area of one pataka and two dronas for the purpose of the balichurasatra of god Ananataranyaya gifted in the name of the deity of the temple and the Brahmanas (mathadevadviebjybah). Pataka possibly denotes part of the grama or village while drona indicated such measures of land as is sown with a drone of corn. A droma in Sylhet and Tripura contains 16 seras, and in Tripura a drone also means 15 bighas or about 5 acres of land. Two dronas will, therefore, mean 30 bighas or the land sown by 32 seras of corn-seeds, which was in addition to the part of the village so gifted. Again a pataka in Sylhet-Tipperah region generally meant half of a village, whereas a village covered 80 dronas. On this basis it may be calculated that the land donated by the Kalapur copper plate was 42 dronas measuring about 630 bighas or 210 acres. It is interesting to note that Lokanatha by his Tipperah copper plate grant gifted land in the forest region for the construction of the temple of Anantnarayana, the balichurasatra of the deity, for the settlement of the Brahmanas well versed in four Vedas, while Marundanatha by his Kalapur copper plate also gifted in the same forest region land for the construction of a matha i.e. balichurasatra of Ananathnarayana and for the settlement of the Brahmanas well versed in three Vedas. It can, perhaps, therefore, be conjectured that on the land donated by Lokanatha in the forest region, the temple of Anantnarayana was constructed and the Brahmanas versed in four Vedas were settled, while Marundanatha of the same family donated an additional plot of land in the same region for the purpose of the balichurasatra of the deity and the Brahmanas versed in three Vedas were settled. The names of the Brahmanas in both cases ended with svami. The position of these Brahmanas must have been like the sebait and mahant of the religious endowments then prevalent in many parts of the country.

The Kalapur copper plate was discovered in Chautali pargana. This being a hilly area was certainly a forest region in the past. A deposit of large quantities of broken pieces of earthen vessels in the very find spot of the copper plate and an old brick wall and a brick-built well at a short distance have been discovered. A statue of Visnu was also discovered in the same locality. Kamalakanta Gupta, therefore, holds that lands donated by both Lokanatha and Marundanatha were in the Chautali pargana of Srimangal in Sylhet. The land donated by Marundanatha was undoubtedly in Chautali as the copper plate was also discovered in that locality and the existence of the temple or monastery (satra) is supported by archaeological evidences, but Lokanatha’s donated land could be either in Chautali or in Suvang as the plate was discovered somewhere in Tipperah district. In any case, Suvang and Chautali are both in ancient Srihatta.
The next important document is the Paschimbhag copper plate of Maharaja Srichandradeva of the 10th century A.D. It was discovered in village Paschimbhag under the Rajnagar Thana in Maulavibazar subdivision of Sylhet district. The text gives the genealogy of the Chandra kings of Bikrampur from Purnnachandra to Srichandra who is described as a devout worshipper of Sugata (i.e. Buddha) and Paramesvara, Paramabhattarakaraka, Maharaja-dhiraja. By this copper plate Srichandra granted lands in the Vishaya of Chandrapur, Garala and Pogara within Srihattamanadala under Paundravardhanabhukti. The grants in three vishayas are described in three different parts of the document. Lines 36-42 record the allotments of 120 patakas to various classes of people like professors, students astrologers dancers, gardeners, potters, blacksmiths, clerks, drummers, conchblowers, shoe-makers, architects, carpenters, etc. in different numbers and according to different rules connected with the matha of Chandrapura. Lines 42-47 record the allotments of 280 patakas given to professors, clerks, blacksmiths, oilmen, physicians, etc. in different numbers and according to different rules connected with foreign mathas and four mathas situated in Vangala land. Lines 47-57 record the grant of lands of Gargga and other six hundred Brahmans of different gotras and pravaras and students of four charanas of different branches of the Vedas mentioning 37 of them by name and declaring the permanent revenue-free grant of the remaining lands to those six hundred Brahmans in equal shares exclusive of lands belonging to ratnairaaya (Buddha, Dharma and Sangha) and 52 Patakas of land reserved for the Indresvarsa-naubandha according to the principle of bhumichchidra.

The next is addressed to all the important personages and officials of the state including the queen (rajni), chief (ranaka) and the prince (rajputra), and it also calls upon the future kings for the dull approval and protection of these land grants.16

The lands donated by the Paschimbhag copper plate were situated in Chandrapura, Garala and Pogara vishayas of Srihattamanandala. In fact, the text gives the impression that all the lands in these three vishayas with the exception of those belonging to tri-ratna and the naubandha were donated by this copper plate. As calculated by Kamalakanata Gupta, the lands so donated measured about 22600 acres. The 47 patakas of land for Chandrapuramatha under first allotment were specically for navakarmma (nine works). These navakarmmas, according to the Bhagalpur Copper plate of Narayanapaladeva are (i) Puja (worship), (ii) Bali (offerings), (iii) Charu (oblation), (iv) Satra (distribution), (v) Sayanasana (relax), (vi) Glama (exhaustion), (vii) Pratyaya (meditation), (viii) Bhaishajya (remedy) and (ix) Pariskara (purification).

The third and the main grant related to gifts of lands in the Chandrapura and two other minor vishayas exclusive of the lands gifted to the mathas and those belonging to tri-ratna and naubandha. The gifted lands were perpetually revenue-free and given equally to Gargga and others six thousand Brahmans of different gotras and pravaras and students of four charanas of different sections of the Vedas in the name of Lord Buddhaabhattarakaraka for enhancing the merit and fame of the king and his parents. Thirty-seven Brahmans including one Gargga Sarmma and another Gargga Gupta are mentioned by name and finally they are all mentioned as Gargadi six thousand Brahmans. With the exception of Sarma, all other surnames like Datta, Dama, Pala, Kara, Dhara, Nandi, Soma, Naga, etc are these days non-Brahmin surnames among the Bengalis including those in the geographical area of ancient Srihatta. As recorded in the copper plate these surname holders were Brahmans and they were students of different charanas of the Vedas.18
Although the Chandra kings were Buddhists, they donated lands to those Brahmanas. Even for the *mathas* the donees included the Professors of Vedas. The copper plate which is a royal charter asked the people, the cultivators and the Brahmanas of the concerned *vishayas* to pay all dues to the donees (i.e. the Gargga group of six thousand Brahmanas). This shows that apart from the Gargga group there were other Brahmanas and other classes of people in the donated *vishayas*. These Brahmanas must have included the descendants of the donees of the Nidhanpur grant in the Chandrapuri *Vishaya* who were then favoured with rent-free grants but are now subjected to the donees to whom they have to pay taxes. Further, the grantees of the Nidhanpur plate were gifted with uncultivated lands which must have been developed in about three hundred years. The donated land was about one thousand square miles which included the lands granted to the nine *mathas* and those reserved for *triratna* and *naubandha*. The six thousand Brahmanas of the Gagrra group who received in equal shares the minor portion of the lands of the three *vishayas* as revenue-free grants, were given the status of rent receivers. If this donate land is divided amongst 6000 Brahmanas equally then each of them gets roughly an area of about 100 acres. Then royal charter of Srichandra thus created 6000 rent-receiving interests in a small portion of the *Srihattamanadala.*

The small portion of Srihatta mentioned in the Paschimbhag Copper plate included three *vishayas*, viz. Chandrapura, Garala and Pogara. The boundaries of the donated territory are clearly mentioned. The rivers Manu and Kushiyara mentioned in the plate still flow through the region. The *vrihat kottali* or the huge ridge with a fort is interpreted to suggest the Pathariya or the Duhalia hills of Karimganj as one of the boundaries. The mention of Brahmapura creates the impression that the donated lands extended upto Khaspur (which was known as Brahmapur in ancient time) in Cachar. That it included the adjoining areas of modern Tripura like Kailasahar and Dharmanagar subdivisions is also beyond doubt. The donated lands in three *vishayas* thus covered portions of modern Sylhet, Karimganj and Cachar districts and also of Tripura state.

The next important epigraphic records are the two Bhatera copper plates of Raja Govinda-Kesavadeva and Raja Isanadeva respectively; both belonging to 11th century A.D. The two plates were discovered in a village called Bhatera in Maulavibazar subdivision of Sylhet district. Plate No. 1 was issued by Raja Govinda-Ke-savadeva of Srihattarajya donating 375 bhuhalas and 296 vatis to Vatesavara Siva and also mention the different kinds of attendants belonging to various subject races given to the deity. The names of the villages in which definite quantities of land in *bhuhala*, *hala*, *bhedara* measurements and number of *vatis* and houses in those villages are given in the text. There are 64 such villages and they are identifiable with the names of villages in modern Sylhet, Karimganj and Cachar districts and the adjoining areas of Tripura. As estimated by Kamalakanata Gupta, the total gift (including land, compounds and houses of attendants) amounted to 348.5 *Bhuhala*, 51 *hala*, 20 *bhedara*, 365 *vatis* and 72 houses. The houses included the dwelling houses, out-houses, kitchens, cow-sheds etc. of *Gopa* (milkman), *Kasya* (bellmetal worker) *gattaka* (maker), *napita* (barber), *rajaka* (washerman), *vanika* (goldsmith), *navika* (boatman), *danataka-ra* (ivora worker), *mala* (retainer), etc.

The Bhatera Copper Plate No.2 was issued by Raja Isanadeva, son and successor of Kesavadeva gifting two halas of land with residential quartrs and adorned with a waterfalls to one Banamali Kara, who was the *Ashapatalika* or the keeper of records, for his maintenance. Banamali Kara belonged to *vaidya* caste; the gift was pronounced by Vira Datta, who was the army chief, and the composer of the eulogy was Madhava of the Dasa family. The copper plate inter-alia mentions that Kesavadeva had built the lofty temple of *Kamsaniudana* (Krishna) with big stone, performed...
3 Land Management

The data available to us from the copper plates are indeed too scanty for an understanding of the land system. All that we can gather is that the king had the authority to gift the land on behalf of himself and his successors, that a gift made by a former government was not binding on the successor government which had the right to donate a plot of land which was already allotted earlier, that bhumiichhidradana was one of the prevalent forms, that cultivated or uncultivated land or land in the forest region could all be donated by the ruler, that land could be transferred by the rulers along with the dwellers and the dwelling houses, that land could be transferred to the individuals or group of individuals and to educational or religious institutions, that land were generally gifted to the Brahmanas, temples and monasteries, but it was donated to the non-Brahmana officials of the state as well, that the land could be owned privately and hereditarily, that the state had the right to collect taxes on land and to exempt any individual or institution from payment of taxes and given to authorized individual holders or donees to collect taxes from the dwellers with the holdings, and that in matter of transfer the successors were also sometimes involved. We also came across certain officials who were involved in land management, viz. nayaka (headman), nyayakaranika (judge), vyavahari (lawyer), kayashta (clerk), Bhandagaradhikrita (superintendent of treasury), utkhetayita (collector of revenue), vishayapati (head of vishaya or district), mandaladhipati (head of mandala or division), etc. As regards the measurement of land, there were terms like ansah, pataka, drone, hal, bhuhala, bhakedara, etc.

4 Conclusion

Our study of the six inscriptions brings out clearly that South East Bengal, including Srihatta, was ruled by autonomous Samanta rulers during the later Gupta period and that the control of the distant sovereign over them was merely theoretical, while Srihatta developed its own independent political entity under the Deva Kings in 11th century A.D. The local states in the region during 7th to 11th century were powerful, wealthy and prosperous, which could be possible only by enough income generated through extraction of surplus by the rulers. On the other hand, the rulers had under their control smaller chiefs, who could have been reduced to subordination by the process of conquest and who paid regular tributes and did homage, contributing in large measure to the growth of contractual relations. The practice of land grants to the Brahmanas, 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 professionals to ensure its self-sufficiency and left scope for creating new tenants on the donated lands. Although we do not have any evidence of the state’s surrender of administrative functions, the land grants resulted in the rise of powerful intermediaries and in the fragmentation of the soil. In return of these grants, the donees were obliged to render certain specific services to the state. The society was hierarchically organized on the basis of caste and the unequal groups in the society survived through mutually obligatory services.
Some of the Brahmanas gave up their hereditary priestly professions, engaged themselves in the management of their lands, and they became powerful in state politics. The numismatic evidences suggest the possibility of a flourishing trade in the region in which the wealthy landowners could participate by reinvesting their income from land. The nature of development in the region in that point of time, therefore, presented a picture of uneven social growth. A wealthy group had emerged primarily 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. Caste was no doubt the dominant factor in social life, but it was no barrier to an individual’s assuming a social status by virtue of his skill and wealth.

5 References

[2] Ibid.
[22] Ibid, pp.182.