

ASPECTS
OF

HISTORICAL
GEOGRAPHY
OF

PRĀGJYOTIṢA-
KĀMRŪPA

(Ancient Assam)

ICHHIMUDDIN SARKAR

About the Book

For a concrete and comprehensive understanding of the history of a country, the study of historical geography of various regions of the world is essential. In India, however, the number of such studies is scanty. The present treatise offers a valuable contribution in this field.

The book contains rich harvest of materials, both ancient and medieval, gleamed and garnered through painstaking research, and delineated in a cogent, coherent and attractive style. The people of the different regions have been familiarized in a lucid, vivid manner. Starting with a historical background up to the 13th century AD the book chapterwise represents the mountain system, the river system, administrative divisions, growth and development of cities and towns, the trade centres and the trade routes, village names and the places of worship.

This publication will be a significant addition in the study of historical geography of India and will serve as a basic source of information to the teachers, researchers, students of history and social sciences and particularly those who are interested in studying the socioeconomic history, culture and geography of the present North-East India.

ISBN 81-85421-01-3

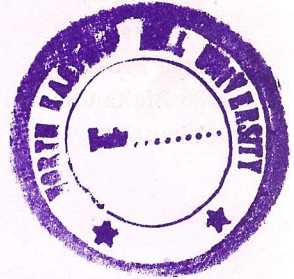
About the Author

Dr Sarkar, a product of North Bengal University, obtained his Ph D degree in history from this alma mater in 1983 and had a brief stint as a lecturer in history at the Kalimpong College before joining the department of history, University of North Bengal in 1984. Presently he is a senior lecturer and engaged in research in modern Indian history. His current interests, among other topics, include 'the peasants and the Communists of Bengal', 'Evolution of the Economy and the Classes in Colonial India' (base of Bengal). He has contributed numerous research articles on various aspects of Indian history to different reputed journals.

F238
1175

ASPECTS OF HISTORICAL
GEOGRAPHY OF
PRĀGJYOTIṢA-KĀMARŪPA
(Ancient Assam)

ICHHIMUDDIN SARKAR



NAYA PROKASH
206 Bidhan Sarani : Calcutta - 700 006

Final
5/1/93

ASPECTS OF HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY
OF PRĀGJYOTIṢA-KĀMARŪPA
(Ancient Assam)

© Ichhimuddin Sarkar

First Published : 1992

NE
911.54162
SAR;2

The publication of this book has been financially supported by the Indian Council of Historical Research. The responsibility for the facts stated, or opinion expressed is entirely of the author and not of the Council.

Published by
P S Basu
Naya Prokash
206 Bidhan Sarani
Calcutta-6

NEHU Library
Acc. No 171023
Acc. by 206/10/93
Date
Class by
Sub R. by
Entered
Indexed by

Printed by
Darbari Print-Pro Pvt Ltd
16/3E, Dixon Lane
Calcutta-700014

Price : Rs. 180.00

ISBN : 81-85421-01-3

Dedicated to
My father Late K. M. Sarkar
and
Mother Mrs. A. Sarkar

FOREWORD

Since the composition of the pioneer work (*Ancient Geography of India*) of Sir Alexandar Cunningham, a number of important works have been published on the reconstruction of the historical geography of regions of Indian subcontinent. But it is rather bewildering that in spite of abundance of materials, a very few works on historical geography of Assam have been attempted so far, and those, too, are primarily based on such late religious texts as *Kālikā Purāṇa*, *Yoginī Tantra* and *Hargaurī-Saṁvāda*.

The present work on Prāggyotiṣa Kāmarūpa, which substantially represents the area of modern State of Assam, adequately seeks to fill up the lacuna in our knowledge of historical geography of India. Although Kāmarūpa emerges into limelight of history as a distinct political entity since the days of the *Kālikā Purāṇa* (12th–13th century A.D.) which delineates its clear-cut boundaries, the outlines of history of the territory of earlier centuries, as derived from a medley of source-materials, are now based on firm foundation. The significant discoveries in recent years supplying welcome light on the history and geography of the region, have made the study little more complex, but more alluring to any painstaking researcher.

My colleague and former student Dr. Ichhimuddin Sarkar has made a significant contribution to the subject in his work on historical geography of the region. He has culled information from a very large range of sources and has made a survey which may serve as a beacon to the students working on historical geography. One of the main features of historical geography is to study and identify the nuclear historical centres, and unlike many of its genre, Dr. Sarkar's work contains analysis of the nuclear centres, as well as evolution

of the settlement patterns of the territory. His study on the emergence of towns and cities on the Brahmaputra Valley on the basis of literary and archaeological sources is likely to throw welcome light on the problems of urbanisation of the region.

I commend Dr. Sarkar's study to all students of Indian history and particularly to those who want to have an understanding of the socio-economic relevance to the study of history of this part of India.

Pranab Kumar Bhattacharyya

Jadunath Sarkar Professor of History
North Bengal University
Darjeeling (West Bengal)
January, 1991

PREFACE

The present book has grown out of a revised version of the thesis with the same title I submitted in 1982 as a UGC Research Fellow for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy under the University of North Bengal. My interest in the subject of historical geography, as far as I recollect, occurred in my mind during the school days when I had queries about the place names of West Dinajpur (home district) ending with *pura*, *nagara* or *grāma*. Although this work is not on the said area, it virtually having analytically dealt socio-political history and geography of the Brahmaputra valley and adjoining zones (i.e., Prāgjoṭiṣa-Kāmarūpa of the epic fame) has taken much concern about the study of place names of the whole region. This work embodies the results of an intensive study of the people, the ruling dynasties, cultural phenomena, growth of cities and towns, mountains and rivers, trade and trade routes and many other aspects on the basis of early Indian literature—like the Brāhmins, Epics, Purāṇas, Tantras, Buddhist and Jaina texts, Burañjis, Kāvya and numerous astronomical works. Apart from these, accounts of foreign pilgrims, inscriptions, coins and seals have been thoroughly consulted and used in the relevant parts of the book.

A work of historical research of such magnitude cannot be done and completed without the support and help of a large number of followmen and fellow-workers in the field of research.

At the outset, I must express my great regards to all my revered teachers of Malda College and the University of North Bengal. Among others, who encouraged me and gave valuable suggestions are Dr. S. K. Chaube, formerly Director of the centre for Himalayan Studies, North Bengal University, Professor Amalendu Dey, Jadavpur University, Dr. R. D. Choudhury, Director, Assam State Museum. My long discussions with the late Professor D. C. Sircar on the study of place names and some disputed historical aspects of early Assam had stimulated me deeply. His enormous works and interpretations of various inscriptions, too, furnished me

with a wealth of reliable background information to enrich my knowledge on the research paper. I have benefited immensely from the vast erudition of Dr. B. N. Mukherjee, Carmichael Professor, Calcutta University and intellectual discourses with Professor, Irfan Habib, Aligarh Muslim University and Dr. Jagadish Narayan Sarkar, retired professor of History, Jadavdur University. I am very much grateful to all of them I should humbly record my respectful gratitude to Dr. B. N. Mukherjee who kindly spared much of his valuable time to brush up a few chapter of the book in the light of modern trends of research in historical geography. It is also my pleasant duty to express deep gratitude to late Nirmal Chandra Choudhury, who helped me ungrudgingly by throwing all books and journals of his personal collections related to my research. Mere words are not sufficient to pay my debt to him.

Dr. Pranab Kumar Bhattacharyya, Jadunath Sarkar Professor of History, North Bengal University, encouraged me to undertake this difficult topic. His inspiration and able guidance sustained me in my work and I find no words sufficient to record his sympathy and loving kindness. I am also grateful to him for his valued foreword for this book.

I would also remember here my deceased father who used to constantly give a sympathetic ear to my progress of work. My eldest brother, too stimulated me during the period of research in the University. My wife Ayesha took down the task of dictation when it was in press. I am also thankful to her for helping me immensely in the laborious task of compiling the index. I must record my gratitude to Professor P. K. Ghosh, former Vice-chancellor and P. K. Das, Accountant, North Bengal University for their sympathy and encouragement I enjoyed during the days of my fellowship.

It is perhaps the right place to express my thanks to the Indian Council of Historical Research, New Delhi, for kindly granting me substantial financial assistance for the publication of the book. I also extend my heartfelt thanks to Naya Prokash for undertaking the publication and sincerely remember the staff of the press for the way they had taken up to

bring out the publication. I owe my gratefulness to the staff of the The Asiatic Society, Calcutta, National Library, Calcutta. My sincere thanks are also due to the staff of the Historical and Antiquarial Studies, Assam, and those of Gauhati University for their kind help in various ways in connection of this work.

Last but not the least, I must acknowledge the important role of my students Indira Basu, Prabir Saha, Md. Saud and Shyamal Chatterjee who ever encouraged me for this publication in due time. They also deserve my sincere thanks for the enormous labour they gladly undertook for the preparation of Index of the book.

It is likely that some mistakes might have crept in the book for which the responsibility goes to the author himself. May I, however, crave the kind attention of the readers and researchers in this respect who may be kind enough to bring them to my notice so that they may be rectified in future.

Ichhimuddin Sarkar

Department of History
North Bengal University
Darjeeling, West Bengal
January 4, 1991

Introduction

It has rightly been suggested that for a correct understanding of the history of a country a thorough knowledge of its geography is essential. Historical geography tries to find the historical roots of present form and conditions of settlement and to trace the stages of colonisation and desertion that have affected the cultural landscape. So, for a proper and comprehensive understanding of the history of a country the necessity of historical geography can hardly be over-emphasized.

Many a scholar have studied the historical geography of the various regions of Europe¹; but in Indian history the number of good geographical studies is limited. Among the pioneer works in this field we may refer to A. Cunningham's *Geography of Ancient India* (1871). Though this work is primarily concerned with the description of the route followed by Yuan Chwang, it contains a lot of information about ancient India. Cunningham was, however, followed by various scholars some of whom wrote stray articles in this line.²

Valuable contributions in this respect have, however, been made by other scholars, such as S. N. Majumdar Shastri, H. C. Raychaudhuri, D. C. Sircar, B. C. Sen, H. D. Sankalia, K. D. Bajpai, S. B. Chaudhuri, P. K. Bhattacharyya and others.³ But very little attempt has so far been made to write about the historical geography of Prāggyotiṣa-Kāmarūpa which possesses a chequered history of its own.

In the present work, however, we intend to attempt a similar study of the territory of Prāggyotiṣa-Kāmarūpa, the boundaries of which are indicated in the *Yoginī Tantra*⁴ :

Uttarasyām Kañjagirih Karatoyātu Paścime |
tirthaśreṣṭhā Dikṣunadi pūrvasyām girikanyake || V. 17
dakṣiṇe Brahmaputrasya Lākṣāyāḥ Saṅgamāvadhi |
Kāmarūpa iti khyātaḥ sarva śāstreṣu niścitaḥ || V. 18

i.e., the Kañjagirih (Kañchanagiri) probably the Kunchenjinga was in the north and the river Karatoyā was the western boundary of Kāmarūpa. The Dikṣu (associated with the Dikkaravāsini near Sadiya in the north-eastern Assam is the modern Dikhu river falling in the Brahmaputra near Sibsagar) was the eastern boundary. The confluence of the Lākṣā (Lakhyā) and the Brahmaputra was the southern limit of Kāmarūpa. It thus appears that the present State of Assam (lying between latitudes 28° 18' and 24° N : and longitudes 89° 46' and 97° 4' E) may be a considerable part of the ancient territory of Prāgjyotiṣa-Kāmarūpa.

The physiography moulds the geographic base for human activities and settlements. The geographic personality of a region is erected over this base. The express form of the geographical pattern is determined by the technics adopted and the stages of the material culture of the people.⁵ On the basis of the physical components Prāgjyotiṣa-Kāmarūpa may be divided into following regions : (a) north-eastern frontier mountain ranges or the Assam Himalaya or the eastern Himalaya, (b) southern hill ranges or Pūrvācala, (c) Assam plateau or Meghalaya plateau, (d) Surma valley, (e) Brahmaputra valley or Assam valley.

North-Eastern Frontier Mountain Ranges

This region extends between the Tista river in Sikkim and the Namcha Barwa peak (25445 ft) in the Mishmi hills. Here the Brahmaputra makes a 'hair-pin' bend and has cut across the mountains before flowing into the plains of Assam. The total length of the region is about 450 miles. This Himalayan region is divisible into several sections. Bhutan Himalaya extends from Sikkim to Dhansiri river (Assam), Aka hills from Dhansiri to Dikorai river, the Daffa hills from Bharali river in the west to Ranganadi in the east, the Miri hills in north of the Lakhimpur district, the Abor hills between the Siom river and Dibong river and the Mishmi hills between Dibong and Dihang rivers.

The southern edge of the Assam Himalaya is abrupt and it rises from the Brahmaputra plain with abrupt slope whereas

the northern edge facing Tibet is comparatively gentle. The rivers in this part are turbulent. They cut vertically the mountains into steep gorges and flow southward to meet the Brahmaputra.

In addition to Namcha Barwa, there are two other peaks, several glaciers and an important lake named Yegrongtso in the region.

South-Eastern Hill Ranges or Pūrvācala

The Pūrvācala is the southern extension of the eastern Himalayan region and is characterized by relatively low relief. The Assam Himalaya or north-eastern frontier ranges run in the east-west direction. The ranges are extended to extreme south-eastern hills of Mizo district. All the hills, viz., Patkai, Naga, Barail, highlands of Manipur and Lushai hills are included in the group of south-eastern hill ranges. The general elevation of the ranges is 3000 ft or 915·5 metres above sea level. The region is very much unstable and falls into an important seismic zone of the world.

Assam Plateau or Shillong Plateau

The Assam or Shillong plateau is known as Meghalaya—‘abode of clouds’⁶, includes the Garo hills, Khasi and Jaintiya hills and Mikir hills. The length of the plateau from the river Dhansiri in the east and Singimari river on the west is approximately 250 miles and the width is 25 miles on the average. The general elevation of the plateau varies between 4000 to 6000 ft. The plateau has been taken to be a part of the massive block of peninsular India.⁷ The Assam plateau, with the exception of the south-eastern part, is surrounded by the plains of Brahmaputra, Surma and the Kapili rivers.

This bulk of plateau is widely dissected, covered with dense jungle and scoured by the highest rainfall in the world.⁸ The recent discovery of coal on the plateau is of some significance to the Assam tea industry.⁹

The tribes—Garo, Khasi, Jaintiya—have Mon-Khmer or Tibeto-Burman affinities and generally live by shifting subsistence agriculture; the villages often shift with the fields (*jhum*).

Surma Valley

It may be noted that half of the total areas of the State of present Assam is occupied by the two alluvial plains namely the Brahmaputra and the Surma valley. The Cachar plain of modern Assam is a part of the Surma valley, the major portion of which lies in Bangladesh.

The Surma valley as a whole is a flat plain about 125 miles long and 60 miles wide, shut in on three sides by ranges on hills. The river from which the valley takes its name rises on the southern slopes of the mountain ranges on the borders of the Naga hill districts, and flows south through the Manipur hills.

The Brahmaputra Valley or Assam Valley

The Brahmaputra valley which is hemmed in between the north-east frontier hills, Patkai and Naga hills and the Assam plateau, occupies a most significant part in the physiography of Assam. The valley is very extensive—450 miles in length and 60 miles in width on the average. The river Brahmaputra and its numerous tributaries flowing from either side are mainly responsible for supplying the alluvial debris from the elevated parts from the north and south.

The general slope of the valley decreases from east to west. Sadiya, situated at the extreme end of the valley has an elevation of 440 ft, above sea level, Dibrugarh 340 ft, Gauhati 166 ft. It is interesting to note that the Brahmaputra valley is considered to be the easternmost continuation of the Indo-Gangetic trough.¹⁰

The flatness of the Brahmaputra valley is broken by the presence of numerous low hills which are the outlying parts of Assam plateau.

The present Assam valley or Brahmaputra valley became the centre of political activities and civilization of Assam right from the early period. The region possesses a rich ancient heritage dating back to the epic period when it was referred to as Prāgjyotiṣa with its capital at Prāgjyotiṣapura, the present city of Guwahati.

Leaving behind the dim and hazy past of the mythological period, we next come to the historical period which commences roughly with the early centuries of the Christian era. From the 4th century A.D. to the beginning of the 13th century A.D., several dynasties ruled over this region. The earliest of these dynasties was the Varman dynasty which ruled for nearly four hundred years. The great king of this dynasty Bhāskaravarman was an ally and a friend of king Harṣavardhana of Kanauj and a contemporary of the celebrated Chinese pilgrim Yuan Chwang.

The Varman dynasty was succeeded subsequently by the families of Śālastambha and Brahmapāla. The rulers of Śālastambha family made Haḍapeśvara (or Haḍappeśvara) their capital which was situated in this region. After the decline of this line, the rulers of Brahmapāla family shifted their capital city to Durjjayā, situated on the bank of the Brahmaputra, and next to Kāmarūpanagara, probably to the western side of the kingdom. Vaidyadeva, Vallabhadeva were some of the later rulers who also emerged prominent till the period when Kāmarūpa became a prey to various invasions of the Muslims and the Āhoms towards the 13th century A.D.

The State of Assam and its adjoining regions have a typical climatic characteristics. The State is again very rich in raw materials which may be divided into following categories :

- (a) Mineral-based materials are petroleum, natural gas, coal, limestones, iron ore may be included in this group ;
- (b) Forest-based materials are timber, plywood, cane, etc. ;
- (c) Agriculture and livestock-based materials include cotton, sugarcane, rice, etc.

These are the geographical bases of Prāgjyotiṣa-Kāmarūpa to which we have confined our discussion. The present work embodies the results of an intensive study of the mountain and river systems, territories and capitals, districts, cities, villages, routes of Prāgjyotiṣa-Kāmarūpa on the basis of the early Indian literature like the *Brāhmaṇas* (e.g., *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, etc.), the epics (e.g., the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the

Mahābhārata), the *purānas* (e.g., *Mārkaṇḍeya*, *Kālikā*, *Varāha*, *Skanda* and others), *Tantras* (e.g., *Yoginī Tantra*, *Kāmaratna Tantra*, *Śaktisaṅgama Tantra*, etc.), astronomical works (e.g., *Bṛhatsamhitā*) and the Buddhist and the Jaina texts.

Apart from these sources, the ancient *Kāvya*s, prose works and scriptures like *Raghuvamśa*, *Haragaurīsamvāda*, *Haragaurīvilāsa*, etc., supply us many interesting additional information for our study. Old Assamese literature like the *Burañjis* (e.g., *Purani Asama Burañji*, *Kāmarūpar Burañji*, *Pādsāh Burañji*, etc.), though religious in tenor and imaginative in outlook contain a mass of information about sociopolitical history and geography like medieval romances of Europe. Again some other medieval works by Muslim historians like *Tabaqāt-i-Nāsiri*, *Riyāz-us-Salātin*, *Bahāristān-i-Ghaybī*, *Fāthiya-i-Ibriyā*, *Ālamgīrnāmā*, etc., are no less important from our point of view. These indigenous literary sources are sometimes supplemented and corroborated by the accounts of foreign pilgrims (e.g., the accounts of Yuan Chwang, Jesuit travellers and so on) who visited the country in the early and medieval periods.

Besides the sources referred to above, other materials which are generally considered to be more genuine, are the epigraphs, coins and seals. The inscriptions sometimes refer to the boundary of a piece of land granted or the administrative unit in which a particular village, *bhukti* or *viṣaya* were situated. A large number of inscriptions of the various ruling dynasties have been discovered from and outside of the territory of Prāgjyotiṣa-Kāmarūpa, and it is needless to emphasize their importance in this respect. In this connection, a few books may be worth-mentioning. These are (a) P. N. Bhattacharyya, *Kāmarūpa Śāsanāvalī*, Rangpur, 1338 B.S., (b) M. M. Sharma, *Inscriptions of Ancient Assam*, Gauhati, 1978, (c) D. C. Sircar, *Some Epigraphical Records of the Medieval period from Eastern India*, New Delhi, 1979, (d) M. Neog, *Prācyā Śāsanāvalī*, Assam, 1974.

With these sources proper, we attempt to embark upon our study of historical geography of Prāgjyotiṣa-Kāmarūpa. The present work consists of several chapters. The Introduction has been followed by a chapter on the Historical Background from

the earliest time down the advent of the Āhōms in Kāmarūpa towards the beginning of the 13th century A.D. Here we have tried to trace in short an up-to-date historical information of the present territory on the basis of the latest discoveries and researches.

Next, there is a chapter on the Mountain System which is followed by another on the River System of the said region. A large number of mountains and rivers of this land played a significant part towards the growth of human settlements and civilization and find mention in the literature and inscriptions.

The fourth chapter is divided into two sections. In the first section, the Territories and Administrative Divisions have been discussed with the help of archaeological and literary sources. Capitals, Cities and Towns are dealt with in the second section, along with a historical study of the place-names. Place-names do not originate by mere accident, but are the outcome of social and historical conditions with which a people are intimately connected.

The fifth chapter also consists of two sections of which the first is connected with the Villages, both identified and unidentified and the second with the Route System of this ancient territory. The study of major routes in this part of India is no less important. In tracing the ancient routes we have mainly to depend upon the epics, itineraries of the travellers and other indigenous literary sources.

The Miscellaneous items form another interesting chapter. Which comprises a few other geographical matters that cannot be placed in the topics suggested above. These include *Pīthas*, *Tīrthas*, *Bhīṭhis*, *Bhīṭvis*, *Bhumis*, *Kṣetras*, *Kuṇḍas*, *Puṣkarīṇīs*, *Jolas* or *Jolis* and Forests.

The Appendices form another interesting feature of the present work. These are related to the mountains, rivers, administrative units and village names. These names are generally available from the medieval sources—both literary and epigraphic.

Lastly, a few maps of Prāgjyotiṣa-Kāmarūpa have been incorporated. These maps contain the location of the ancient

kingdoms, their capitals and cities, mountains, rivers and routes, etc., which will be of some help for the proper understanding of the problems connected with the historical geography of ancient Prāgjyotiṣa-Kāmarūpa.

REFERENCES

1. Cf. E. G. R. Taylor, *Historical Geography of England Before 1800* ; W. Gordon East, *An Historical Geography of Europe* (Roman Empire to the late 19th century) ; E. H. Bunbury, *An History of Ancient Geography Among the Greeks and Romans*, from the earliest age till the fall of the Roman Empire, 2nd edition, New York, 1950.
2. Works and various articles of B. C. Law may be quoted here, although in many places his observations and conclusions are not reliable and subject to criticism.
3. Works like *Historical Geography and Topography of Bihar* (1963) by M. S. Pandey, Delhi, 1963 and *Historical Geography and Dynastic History of Orissa* up to the rise of the Imperial Ganges, Calcutta, 1975, by D. K. Ganguli, Calcutta, 1975 may be cited here.
4. *Yoginī Tantra* (ed.) Swami Sarvesvarananda Saraswati, Calcutta, 1385 B.S., Part II, Patala XI, Vs. 17-18. Incidentally, in the *Kālikā Purāna* also (Ch. 38, Vs. 122-23) the river Lalita Kāntā and Karatoyā have been described as the eastern and western boundaries of Kāmarūpa.
5. S. P. Chatterjee in *Geographical Review*, March 1944.
6. O. H. K. Spate, *India and Pakistan*, 1967, p. 605.
7. *Assam : An outline*, Souvenir, 21st International Geographical Congress, Gauhati University, 1968, p. 15.
8. O. H. K. Spate, *op. cit.*, p. 606.
9. *Loc. cit.*
10. *Assam : An outline*, *op. cit.*, p. 19.