

**HISTORICAL
ARCHAEOLOGY OF
CENTRAL ASSAM
(from earliest time
to 12th century
A.D.)**

N.D. CHOUDHURY

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in 1939 at Patacharkuchi in Kamrup District (Modern Barpeta District) of Assam, Shri Nishipada Deva Choudhury obtained his Master's Degree in Ancient History and Archaeology from Sagar University, Sagar, Madhya Pradesh.

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He has not only edited several literary journals but also has to his credit two books on History. He has also contributed a good number of Research papers.

At present he is serving as the Registering Officer in the Directorate of Archaeology Govt. of Assam, Guwahati.

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Introduction

Ancient Assam, known as Prāgjyotiṣa or Kāmarūpa occupied an area larger than that of the modern Assam State, and extended westwards to the river, Karatoyā. According to the *Yoginītantra*,¹ the kingdom comprised the whole of Brahmaputra (Lauhitya) valley, together with Rangpur and Cooch Behar.² The kingdom included Manipur, Jaintia, Cachar, West Assam and parts of Mymensingh and Sylhet. As recorded by Yuan Chwang, the country was about 10,000 li in circumference and the capital town was 30 li.³

According to the *Yoginītantra*, the country was divided into four parts or pīṭhas; Kāmapīṭha, from the Karatoyā river to the Saṅkosh river; Ratnapīṭha, from the Saṅkosh to the Rupahi rivers; Suvarnapīṭha, from the Rupahi to the Bharali rivers; and Saumārapīṭha, from the Bharali to the Dikrong rivers.

Prāgjyotiṣa, Kāmarūpa and Kāmākhyā are the three geographical names given to the kingdom. B. K. Kakati,⁴ suggested that the word Prāgjyotiṣa is a Sanskritization of Austric group of words like *Pau* (=hill) + *ger* (=hill) + *jo* (=high) + *tic* (=long) = “(land of) high and long mountains”, and Kāmarūpa and Kāmākhyā he sought to connect with an Austric basic word meaning ‘a grave, a corpse’, the place names being connected with the legend found in the Purāṇa of Satī’s dead body being cut up and a part of it falling in Kāmākhyā hill in Kāmarūpa. Lauhitya is of course the Tibeto-Burman Luhit, the meaning of which is lost; and Bishnu Rābhā finds in the name Brahmaputra, a phrase *Boḍo bhullambathur* meaning “making a gurgling noise”.⁵

Prāgjyotiṣapura means the city of eastern astrology. Prāgjyotiṣapura, was the name

1. *Yoginītantra*, 1.11.60-61; 1.12.68; 2.2.119.

2. *Imperial Gazetteers of India*, XIV, P. 331.

3. Watters, T., *On Yuan Chwang's travels in India*, Vol. II, PP. 185-7 f.; Beal, S., *Travels of Yuan Chwang* Vol. IV, PP. 404-06.

4. *The Mother Goddess Kāmākhyā*, P. 6; *Purani Kāmarūpar Dharmar Dhārā*, P. 9; *Assamese—Its Formation and Development*, PP. 53-54.

5. Chatterji, S.K., *The Place of Assam in the History and Civilisation of India*, P. 17.

of the city, where Brahmā is said to have stood when creating the stars.⁶ *Prāg* means former or eastern, and *Jyotiṣa*, a star, astrology, shining. *Prāgjyotiṣa* may, therefore, be taken to mean the city of eastern astrology.⁷ The name *Prāgjyotiṣa* is commonly associated with Lauhitya, Kāmarūpa and Kāmākhyā. Again, *Prāgjyotiṣa* stood for both the country and the city.

The name *Prāgjyotiṣa* seems to be more ancient than Kāmarūpa, as it is mentioned in the two great epics, the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata* and even in the *Brahmānda-purāna*. In the *Kālikā Purāna* both the names *Prāgjyotiṣa* and Kāmarūpa are mentioned.⁸ In the *Raghuvamśa* of Kālidāsa also both the names are mentioned.⁹

The interpretation of the name as a place of 'eastern astrology' does not seem to be justified though there are a number of references to its association with the solar cult and planetary worship. According to P. C. Choudhury, the archaeological remains point to the prevalence of the solar cult, and the existing temple of Navagraha in Gauhati and Sūrya Pāhār in Goalpara, justify this origin of the name of the land.¹⁰ Spooner also pointed out the astronomical significance of the name in connection with the Magian culture in *Prāgjyotiṣa*.¹¹ The archaeological evidence does not support the meaning of *Prāgjyotiṣa* as eastern astrology. The solar cult, which was already prevalent in other parts of India, moved to Assam at a later period, and the temples of Navagraha and Sūrya Pāhār were built in the late mediaeval period. The *Kālikā Purāna's* evidence that Brahmā made the first calculation of the stars in *Prāgjyotiṣa*, points to the early importance of the place in astrology and astronomy of the early mediaeval period as this work was composed in the 10th century A. D. or little after, whereas the name of *Prāgjyotiṣa* had already been known in the epics. We may agree with B. K. Kakati that the name was derived from the Austric phrase meaning 'long and high mountain' and the name appears to be a Sanskritization of some non-Aryan formations.

The name of the kingdom, *Prāgjyotiṣa*, was converted to Kāmarūpa probably during the early centuries of the Christian era, but *Prāgjyotiṣa* remains as the name of the capital city of the kingdom of Kāmarūpa. References to Kāmarūpa as kingdom are made almost in all of the epigraphs. The earliest epigraphical document mentioning Kāmarūpa is the Allahabad Pillar Inscription¹² of Samudragupta, wherein the name of Kāmarūpa has been mentioned as one of the frontier states, outside the limits of the Gupta empire. Yuan

6. *Kālikā Purāna*, Ch. 38, Verse 119.

7. Gait, E.A., *A History of Assam*, P. 15.

8. Chap. 38, 119; 51, 67.

9. Chakampe tirṇa Lauhitye tasmin Prāgjyotiṣeśvarah—4/81 tamiśah Kāmṛpānāmatyā khaṇḍala vikramam. 43/83.

10. Choudhury, P.C. *The History of Civilisation of the People of Assam to the Twelfth century A.D.*, PP. 26-27.

11. *J.R.A.S.*, 1915, II, PP. 433-36.

12. *C.I.I.*, Vol. III, P. 8.

Chwang also mentioned Kāmarūpa as ka-mo-Lu-p'o.¹³ The traditional origin of the Kāmarūpa as given in the *Kālikā Purāna*, which relates the story of Kāmadeva's revival after being burnt by Śiva, may be explained in the light of the prevalence of the Aryan culture or Aryanization of Assam. This may suggest that the Aryans who by this time colonised Assam might have overthrown the non-Aryan culture and tradition and started the new era of civilization and cultures. Along with the Aryanization of Assam, the name of the region is given as Kāmarūpa, keeping the name of the capital city as Prāgjyotiṣapura, the name of the old kingdom. The Purānic legendary accounts, which have slight value, might have been explained in this way. As Kāmadeva was born again in this area, the name of Prāgjyotiṣa was retained only in the name of the capital, and the kingdom was renamed as Kāmarūpa. Prāgjyotiṣa remained the capital throughout the long period of the early history of Assam.

Kakati suggests that the word 'Kāmarūpa' is the combination of two Austric-words (*Kāmarū+pa*): 'Kāmarū' is the name of god and 'pa' means mountain.¹⁴ It means mountain of the god named *Kāmarū*. Kakati's view does not seem to be acceptable.

The name of Assam is of recent origin. The word is an Anglicised form of the Assamese word *Assam*. The word is derived from *asama*, in the sense of 'uneven' as distinguished from *Samatata*. But the term could not be traced out prior to the Ahom occupation. E. A. Gait suggests that the word is derived from the present designation of the Ahoms.¹⁵

The tradition of the Ahoms themselves is that the present name is derived from *Assam* in the sense of 'unequaled' or 'peerless'. Kakati¹⁶ suggests that *Asama*,¹⁷ peerless, may be a Sanskritization of some earlier formation like *Āchām*. In Tai (Āhom) √ *chām* means 'to be defeated', and with the prefix 'Ā' the formation 'Āsām' would mean 'undefeated'. The word 'Asama' first given to the Shāns (Āhoms), was later on applied to the country. S. K. Chatterji also opines that the (Āhoms, a Shān tribe, who came into Assam in 1228 A. D., gave the name 'Āham' or 'Āsam' to this province.¹⁸

A detailed critical study of archaeology of Assam, particularly in Central Assam has not been adequately undertaken. The area is potentially rich in structural monuments and sculptures. Not a single edifice exists in its complete form. The only memorials of ancient times consist of jungle-clad mountains scattered on the ground. The sculptures are still lying in the ancient sites; some are in private possession; a few are installed in temples and

13. Watters, T., *op. cit.*, II, P. 185.

14. *The Mother Goddess Kāmākhya*, PP. 6-7; *Purāṇi Kāmarūpar Dharmar Dhārā*, P. 10.

15. *Op. cit.*, P. 431 (Appendix G.).

16. *Assamese—Its Formation and Development*, PP. 2-3; *N I.A.*, I, PP. 1-23; *Aspects of the Early Assamese Literature*, FP. 1-2.

17. Choudhury, Dr. P.C. 'Historical Material in the Gachal Grant of Gopaladiva'—*Visheshvaranand Indological Journal*, Vol. XIX, Pt II Sept. 1976 PP. 261-278.

18. *Op. cit.*, P. 10.

the rest are preserved in the Cole park (Tezpur), Nagaon Park, other places and parks and the Assam State Museum, Guwahati.

It has been little more than a century since the attention of scholars has been drawn to the study of the decayed past of her history and archaeology. The pioneer work on the Stone Age culture of Assam, was done by Sir John Lubbock.¹⁹ He was followed by some British scholars and administrators like J. H. Hutton, J. P. Mills and others. They explored and studied the materials of the prehistoric culture.

The second phase of work was done by Sir Edward Gait, who published a report on the progress of Historical Research in Assam in 1897. Further, he published a book entitled '*A History of Assam*' in incorporating the known account of the history and culture of this area. Although this was a monumental work, it does not give sufficient idea about the history prior to the 12th century A. D. i.e. of the pre-Ahom period. The next step was taken by N. N. Vasu, who wrote '*A Social History of Assam*' in three volumes in 1922.

In 1912, the Assam Research Society was established to carry out the unveiling of its early history. A research journal is published by this Society. Its editor, K. L. Barua, wrote a book, '*The Early History of Assam*', which was published in 1933. Further, a more important step was taken by B. K. Barua, who contributed '*A Cultural History of Assam*', of which only the first part, dealing with the early period was published in 1951. P. C. Choudhury went a step further and wrote a dissertation entitled, '*The History of Civilization of the People of Assam to the Twelfth Century A. D.*' (published in 1959). It is a comprehensive work, dealing with both the political and cultural aspects of the region.

Although several scholars worked on the prehistoric culture of Assam, nobody except A. H. Dani published the results of the researches in the form of a book. Dani, in his book entitled '*Prehistory and Protohistory of Eastern India*', has given a good account of Assam. Lastly, T. C. Sarma conducted an extensive study on the neolithic culture of Assam. The results of his researches were submitted to the University of London in 1966 in the form of a thesis.

On the historical archaeology of Assam, very little work has been done, and no scholar has carried out any research work applying modern scientific methods. P. N. Bhattacharya, who edited the *Kāmarūpa Śāsanāvalī* in Bengali, has included only the inscriptions which were known in his time. R. M. Nath published his '*Background of Assamese Culture*' in 1948. He described only a few sculptures of early mediaeval period in his book. B. K. Barua, in his '*Cultural History of Assam*', deals with the fine arts in a small chapter, and P. C. Choudhury has very briefly described the archaeological remains of the region in his book. Both these scholars have dealt with the archaeological remains, relied more upon the published data without doing much critical work or any field work. However, their areas of study pertained to the cultural and political history respectively, and not to the

19. Athenaeum, No. 2069, June 22, 1867, P. 822.

archaeological remains. R. D. Choudhury, conducted an extensive study on the '*Archaeology of Brahmaputra Valley (Pre-Ahom Period)*' and the results of his researches on this topic were submitted to the University of Poona in the form of a doctorate thesis in 1970. His work is undoubtedly of a pioneer nature, but he has dealt mainly with icons and not with other branches of archaeology, and he has confined his study to the Brahmaputra Valley.

The works of the scholars, referred to above, are mostly of a preliminary nature in regard to the area of Central Assam.

As little work had been done, particularly in regard to the archaeology of Assam, on the advice of my teacher Prof. K.D. Bajpai, Head of the Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology, University of Sagar, I took up a detailed study of the archaeology of Central Assam under his supervision.

The area of Central Assam covers the plains and the hills, and the people of these two areas are mingled together to give an integrated picture of the culture. This area occupies a significant position in the entire history of Assam. The tribal people lived in the plains before the advent of the Aryans or the Sanskrit-speaking people, in the early centuries of the Christian era. After the occupation of the plains by the Aryans, some of the tribals shifted to the hilly areas. Later, the tribals had some impact of the Aryan culture on them. The archaeological remains of Central Assam testify the existence of two distinct cultures in this area. Most of the temples and icons, particularly of the Hindu pantheon are generally found in the plains. In Karbi Anglong the number of archaeological remains of the Vedic Purāṇic pantheon are quite considerable. The district is inhabited by Mikir tribe chiefly. The reason is that this district was bifurcated from the Nagaon and Sibsagar districts and secondly this newly constituted district was formerly occupied by the Hindus and also the tribal people who were converted to Hinduism.

The upper limit of the period of our enquiry, starts from the earliest time i.e. the Neolithic period. The lower limit is circa 1200 A.D., prior to the advent of the Ahoms.

The present work incorporates the results of a thorough exploration of the region of Central Assam. My field work has brought to light some important new materials in the form of pottery, structural remains and sculptures. These results were critically assessed with the previous known materials bearing on the Archaeology of the area.

My aim has been to study the archaeology of Central Assam in a critical and exhaustive manner. A comparative study of archaeological remains of Central Assam with those of some other parts of the country has also been briefly attempted.

The work has been divided into the following Chapters : Chapter I, deals with the original sources for the study of various facets of archaeology of this area. In Chapter II, the geographical background is discussed. Chapter III deals with the Neolithic and Megalithic remains of the area, giving details of the tools and megaliths discovered in its various

parts. Chapter IV discusses the historical background giving a detailed account of the various dynasties which rules over this part of the country. In Chapter V, a critical discussion of the religious and philosophical aspects has been attempted. The next Chapter gives an account of the social and economic condition of the region under review. Architecture, sculpture and minor arts are discussed in Chapter VII. This is followed by the Chapter on Iconography. The new sculptural material has been critically examined, and the iconographic details are based on the Sastric texts. The last is the concluding chapter.

There are 37 plates illustrating the prehistoric and protohistoric remains as well as specimens of fine arts of the historical period.