

Cultural Variations and Social Formation in Early Assam

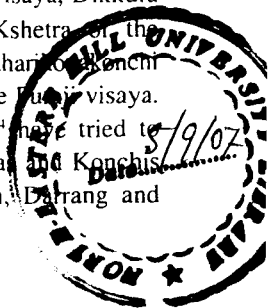
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The term 'Early Assam' denotes here the region that roughly presents the early state of Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa and which largely finds mention in the early epigraphic and literary records. This land being situated "in one of the great migration routes of mankind"¹ it has been a melting pot of different ethnic, linguistic and cultural elements since the unknown past. The various ethnic and racial groups who settled in this region were the makers of the socio-cultural fabric. Naturally, the cultural background of this region has been distinguished by diversity and variation. Most historical writings, however, have treated its cultural formations and developments as one and a whole without considering the character of its regional cultural variations. These variations had been working as the main contributing factors towards the process of formation of the composite culture of Assam. A minute observation on the cultural development in different areas of early Assam reveals that they tended to give themselves an own cultural trait and entity by showing some local variations. This paper is an attempt to study the social formation in early Assam on the basis of cultural variations that could be seen in different parts of the valley.

For our convenience we have planned to identify tentatively certain cultural zones, such as Guwahati, Goalpara, Tezpur, Nagaon-Davaka and Barpathar-Duboroni zone. although specific geographical boundary cannot be fixed to identify their territorial limits. However, on the basis of cultural variations found in the areas, the zones can tentatively be demarcated. In this line of understanding, the Guwahati zone can be formed by including major portion of the districts of Kamrup, Nalbari and some portions of Barpeta district. The Goalpara zone includes mainly Goalpara district and Vadagokugiri of the west Garo hills district of Meghalaya. It also touches some portions of the Bongaigoan district. The Tezpur zone comprises parts of Darrang and Sonitpur districts, part of North-Lakhimpur district; while the Nagaon-Davaka zone roughly consists of Morigaon, Nagaon and portions of Karbi-Anglong district of present Assam. The whole Doiyang-Dhansiri valley has been taken to form the Barpathar-Duboroni zone.

It is to be noted here that division into different cultural zones does not mean that a separate culture existed in each of these zones. The basic structure and overall trend of changes of the society and culture were more or less same in the cultural zones. The process of Sanskritation, supposed to have started from the time of Naraka, the legendary king of Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa, was going on through initiative of the royal court and Brahmanas, where the indigenous tribes absorbed into Sundravarna under the *Varnasrama* system in the period of our study. The *Varnasrama* system thus never became complete during the period under review. The earliest evidence of granting lands to the Brahmanas by the rulers of early Assam is noticed in the Nagajari Khanikargaon Stone Inscription of the 5th century A.D. The *agrahara* settlements brought about remarkable changes in the agrarian pattern of the land. Epigraphic records of the period witnessed the gradual proliferation of some social groups based on their professions and occupations. A network of rural and urban economy was also developed among different areas of early Assam. Brahmanical Hinduism, with a modified aspect by incorporating the non-Aryan cults, became a popular religious faith along with the growth of Saivism, Vaisnavism, Saktism, Tantric Buddhism, etc. in early Assam. In the field of art and architecture, the influence of different schools of art and architecture penetrated from northern and central India. In spite of all these common features, there were some cultural elements with distinct characters of their own in different zones. These variations can be observed as follows :

The social categorization and stratification were more prominent in the Guwahati, Tezpur and Nagaon-Davaka zones. For we see that the land to Brahmanas were made in different areas of these three zones. Our study shows that out of twenty-two land grants that have so far been discovered, fifteen were issued to the Brahmanas in these three zones. (the number excludes those inscriptions where neither the name of the donated lands are found mentioned nor the locations of the donated land can be identified). Lands donated in these zones were situated in places like Dijjina visaya, Haposagrama of the Svalpamongoka visaya, Dikkura in the visaya of Manjai, Habunga visaya, Lavakuti Kshetra of the Trayodasagrama visaya, Kasipataka in the Hapyoma visaya, Kharibong in the visaya of Barasojamboba and in some villages in the Puri visaya. Scholars like P.C. Choudhury², B.K.Barua³, M.M.Sarma⁴ have tried to identify and locate these visayas, gramas, Kshetras, Patakas and Konchis in different part of present Kamrup, Nagaon, Morigaon, Darrang and



Sonitpur districts of Assam. These *agraharas*, by creating some pockets of Brahmanical culture, had accelerated the process of Sanskritization which resulted in the promotion of social categorization and stratification distinctly in these three zones.

Three major political centres as well as capital cities, i.e. Pragjyotisapura, Hatappesvara and Triveganagara⁷ were situated in the three zones respectively. Urban population growth and urban economic activities might have given birth to a cosmopolitan character to the capital cities (mainly to Pragjyotisapura). The proliferation of social groups based on professions and occupations was also more distinct in these three zones. Such groups included scribes (*kayastha*)⁸, writers (*Karanika, Lekhavita, Lakhaka*), engravers (*Sasavita, Sakyakara, Taksakara*)⁹ and artists (*Silpi*)⁹ all of whom were connected with recording of documents. Name of another social group called Vaidya is found mentioned in the Khanamukh CP Inscription of Dharmapala. The potters (*Kumbhakara, Hadi*)¹⁰ and the weavers (*Tantuvayas*)¹¹ formed important occupational groups. Evidently, they practised agriculture while catering to the needs of the rural folk. Perhaps they catered to the needs of the Brahmana donees also. The volume of the trade was small as can be inferred from the paucity of coins and from epigraphic references to only one type of merchants i.e. *Vamk*. They stood for a class of rich merchants and resided in the urban centres. Nothing is known about minor traders. The Daivajnas (astrologers)¹² and Tarkkukas (soothsayers)¹⁴ were two of the occupational based castes, most of them whom were aboriginal priests were admitted to the lore of the Brahmanas. The urban centres became nodal points in the network of redistributive economic integration. The rapid growth of urban life in the aforesaid cities (mainly in Pragjyotisapura and Hatappesvara) created more demands for surplus products as a result of which some centres of different professional groups emerged in its neighbouring areas. The patronization of Brahmanical Hinduism, appointments of Brahmana in the royal court, spiritual and religious activities of the kings and their family members within and outside the royal court and the *agrahara* settlements were some of the factors which led to the social stratification more distinct in these three zones. It is no doubt that the autochthonous and some of the occupational groups were incorporated in the Sudra class of Aryan fold in early Assam, the term 'Sudra' as a caste is found only in an inscription (Deopani Visnu Image Inscription), geographic provenance of which is determined in the Deopani area of the Doiyang-Dhansiri valley. Like that, only few inscriptions

(Tezpur Rock Inscription, Guwahati CP Inscription and Puspabhadra CP Inscription) geographic provenance of which are determined in the Tezpur, Sangsari and Barpeta region, mention about Kaivarta people, one of the bigger occupational based groups of early Assam.

The economy of the Barpathar-Duboroni zone had witnessed a great turn towards further growth along with the development of indigenous smelting technology of iron. Rahdhalapukhuri, found with slag heaps, near Dhekial in the Goalghat district, is one such evidence of an ancient iron extracting and smelting site¹⁵. The production of iron naturally worked as a favourable source for the progress of agriculture, defensive system (weapons etc) and material affluence in the lives of the people in the zone. Both the iron production and the riverine settlement of the people indicate that the valley also maintained commercial pursuits through river and overland trades. The discovery of gold coins at Paglatek leads us to believe that the Goalpara zone had played an important role from the side of Pragjyotisa kingdom in carrying on external trade link. Thirty-one numbers of gold coins have been discovered at Paglatek in 1972. Earlier, it was commented that these were minted by imitating the Gupta gold coins issued by the rulers of east Bengal region (now Bangladesh)¹⁶. But in a recent study¹⁷ N.G.Rhodes and S.K.Bose have identified one of the gold coins of Paglatek hoard, which bears the name of Sri Kumara with a coin of Bhaskaravarman. It will be worth mentioning here that some similar gold coins bearing the name of Sri Kumara have also been found at Mainamati area of South-east Bengal (now Bangladesh). S.Chattopadhyaya opines that in case of trade with foreign countries, traders used gold coins as medium of exchange.¹⁸ Referring to the gold coins Rhodes and Bose opine that "most probably merchants were actually responsible for striking the coins...these merchants were involved in trade between the kingdom of Harshavardhana, Kamrup and Arakan, and the seaport of Chittagong."¹⁹ The Nagaon-Davaka zone had also played significant role in maintenance of external trade link with Burma and China. P.C.Bagchi tells us about three trade routes to China and Assam.²⁰ The first one was through the valley of Brahmaputra upto the Patkai range, the second through Manipur upto Chindwin valley and the third through the Arakan upto the Irawadi valley – all these routes met on the frontier of Burma (Myanmar) near Bhamo owing to its geographic position, the Nagaon-Davaka seemed to be more convenient, shorter and common region for the itinerant persons who had taken the first two routes to China from Pragjyotisapura. The discovery of copper coins in

the Morigaon district leads us to believe that these might have played important role in the internal trade and commerce in the region. R.M.Nath, on the basis of Bengali lyrics *Goraksha Vijoy*²² shows routes from Bijni (Bongaigaon district of Assam) to Nagaon by which Gorakh Nath, the disciple of Matsyendranath or Minanath, the great *siddha* reached the Kadali kingdom (identified with Kandal Mauja, about 15km. to the south-east of Nagaon town) in search of his master.²² In the functional part of the Nagaon CP Inscription by which land was donated in the zone, a highway (*vrihadalih*), as the southern boundary of the donated land is found mentioned. The trade link of this region with China can also be substantiated by the fact of sending two embassies to China in AD 428 and in 466 by the rulers of the Kapili kingdom. The Shung-Shu History of the first Shung dynasty (420 to 479) of China mentions the Kia-pili (Kapili) state by referring two embassies who had been sent to China in 428 and 466 respectively from the kingdom.²³ The Kia-pi-li state can easily be identified with the Davaka kingdom of the Allahabad Stone Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta, which was located in the Kapil valley or Nagaon-Davaka region of Assam.)

The Guwahati and Tezpur zones witnessed a remarkable progress in the field of literature, education and philosophy. Sources are available to prove that the studies of the Vedic literature and its auxiliary branches, philosophy, Tantric literature and other literature including both the secular and vocational have been made in these two zones. Pragjyotisapura, the capital city and its neighbouring areas had been a great centre of astrological and astronomical studies since time immemorial. However, Tezpur and Nagaon-Davaka zones marked a considered progress in this respect. The archaeological remains of *graha* worship including Sun god have been found in the two zones. The *Ravikshetra* of the *Kalika Purnana*²⁴, which is identified with the present Suryapahar of Goalpara was also a centre of worship of Sungod in the Goalpara zone. The discovery of a series of manuscripts for calculating the almanac in Kamrupa called *Kamarupiya Nibandhaniya Khandasadhya* shows the development of a distinct school of astronomy in the Guwahati zone. In the subsequent centuries (14th century onwards) a considerable number of treatises had been written on *Jyotisa* by the different scholars taking inspiration from this school. The very name of Pragjyotisapura, meaning of which is interpreted as the city of eastern astrology, indicates the prevalence of study of *Jyotisa* in the zone. With the help of these literary sources and some of the archaeological remains of *graha* worship, those

are found in Navagraha temple and other parts of the Guwahati zone lead us to believe that this zone had made a better progress in the field of astrological and astronomical studies in comparison to other zones.

In the sphere of religion, the Goalpara zone acquired a special reputation because of the fact that it was a meeting place of three religions, viz. Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism. The stupas, caves of Buddhist faith at Jogighopa, Pancharatna, Surya Pahar, Vadagokugiri clearly show that Buddhism, both in earlier and later form, was a popular religion in the zone. The votive stupas of Surya Pahar, particularly those chiselled above the row of the images of Siva, Visnu etc. on stylistic consideration, are placed by the scholars in the early Christian centuries.²⁵ S.K.Saraswati has placed them in c. 100 A.D. or 100 B.C.²⁶ B.N.Mukherji after visiting the place opines that they bear the message of the Hinayana doctrine of Buddhism.²⁷ The existence of Mahayana Buddhism at the place is proved by the terracotta plaques bearing two rows of stamped images of Bodhisattva. The rock cut caverns at Surya Pahar, Pancharatna and Jogighopa were also placed by S.K.Saraswati in early period.²⁸ In the later part of the Pala period, the Tantric form of Buddhism has also been developed in the zone. "They had other outposts (besides Hojai of the Nagaon district) in the Goalpara district where at Jogighopa, Pancharatna and Surya Pahar they established regular centres."²⁹ The Sahajia Naths had established a stronghold in Rangjuli, Bijoypur area of the zone. Some of the songs and ballads of the Sahajia Naths viz. songs of Goraksha Nath and Maynamatir gaan are believed to have been composed during this period by the followers of the Vajrayana faith of the region.

The ruins of temples and sculptures belonging to the 7th-8th century A.D. onwards, show that Saivism, Vaisnavism and Saktism were popular religious faiths in the zone. According to a local legend one short of one lakh old Sivalingas were in Surya Pahar. A.K. Sarma, on the basis of his exploration at Vadagokugiri, comes to the conclusion that Saivism was the predominant religious faith in the region.³⁰ The discovery of the images of Visnu and his incarnations, terracotta plaques of Ganesa, Kali Ugratara, Uma-Mahesvara, Manasa etc. at Marnoi and Vadagokugiri testify to the prevalence of Vaisnavism and Saktism in the zone. The one-linked inscription of Brahmi script at Surya Pahar shows the existence of the Brahmanical faith in the locality in 8th-9th century A.D. and it continued in the subsequent period.

Another popular cult of the zone was the worship of the Sun god. The temple ruins of the Sun god of Choudhurypara, sculptures of Surya

and twelve Adityas datable to the 9th-10th century A.D. found at Marnoi and Surya Pahar are ample evidences of the prevalence of the cult.

Surya Pahar is the only place in Assam where the relics of Jainism have been found. The two images of Rshabhanatha (one is recently discovered) and one of Neminatha, the first and twenty second of the Tirthankars respectively, seem to have belonged to the 9th century A.D. indicating the existence of a few followers of Jainism. From the extant sources however, nothing is known about its antiquity, popularity and development in the zone. Probably, it was a small branch of ramified Jainism of Bengal and could not flourish much in Assam.

The cult of *nama-samkirtana* and syncretism appear to be a socio-religious character of the Barpathar-Duboroni zone. The Sankarnarayan Stone Image Inscription from Deopani clearly shows the prevalence of the cult of *nama-samkritana* (chanting of *nama* in honour of Sankar and Narayan) in the zone. The discovery of composite figures of Hari-Hara (Visnu and Siva) in the different parts of Doiyang-Dhansiri valley reveal that syncretism of religious cults in the zone perhaps prevailed. This syncretism was an outcome of the social assimilation and synthesis occurred in the zone. The geographic seclusion might also be one of the factors for the growth of regionalism in the zone. Sculptures and architectural remains of early Assam substantiate the fact that Saivism was a predominant religious cult in all the cultural zones; however, on the basis of the inscriptional evidence, the practice of gifting Devadasis to the Saiva temple had been observed only in the Guwahati and Tezpur zone.

In the field of temple architecture, the zones, **keeping themselves** within the framework of the north-Indian *nagara style*, show some regional variations. The Guwahati zone shows the application of certain geometry of planning of the ground plan of a temple of north Guwahati. The ground plan of temples was generally modeled out on a square, and the plan did not include triangle as a major component, but the plinth of the Manikarneswar temple of North-Guwahati is standing on two concentric equilateral triangles. This is a rare phenomenon in the temple architecture of early Assam. The use of *angasikharas* in the Madan Kamdeva temple and use of friezes depicting bracket figures with ornamentation in the temple of Pingaleswar of the Guwahati zone were some of the regional variations which were not seen anywhere in early Assam. Another regional variation of the zone is reflected in the use of

cavern in order to place the main deity in the *garbhagriha* of the temple. This uncommon feature has been observed in the case of Kamakhya, Dirgheswari, Bhubaneswari and some of the temples of the Guwahati zone. One of the regional features of the Guwahati and Goalpara zone is its creation of partial architectural structures on the natural rocks. In both the zones, the natural rocks along the Brahmaputra river were mainly used for this purpose. A regional feature reflected in the temple architecture of the Tezpur zone is the construction of systematic structural architecture from the low-lying areas to the top of the hill or higher places in chronological order. In the process of construction of the temples, starting in the low lying plains of Da-Parvatiya, it gradually expanded towards higher land via Baralimara, Majgaon, D.C.Court area, and had been completed on the top of the hill of Bamunipahar throughout the centuries from the 5th to the 10th century A.D.³¹ in the zone. The use of *Kalpavrksha* motif on the door lintels and doorsills, and *darasirapati* studded with profuse ornamentation were most popular style in the zone. The Nagaon-Davaka zone acquired its reputation for the construction of a group of nine temples at one place in its different parts. The reason behind this peculiar feature is conjectured with the idea of worshipping of nine planets or *narvagrahas*.³²

The sculptures of the zones generally exhibit various Indian classical characteristics; however, incorporation of local ideas and features into it is remarkable. This incorporation led the Barpathar-Duboroni zone to such an extent that was able to develop a regional art form of its own. Scholars describe it as Deopani or Duboroni School of Art. In addition to the classical characteristics, some special features were reflected in the sculptures of the zone, which appear to be purely native creation and born of local spirit.

The sculptures of three religious faiths, noticed in a compact manner, helped the Goalpara zone to form its own cultural entity. The Buddhist stupas and the sculptures of two Jain Tirthankaras found in the Goalpara zone were uncommon in other parts of Assam. Amorous figures found in Changchowki of the Nagaon-Davaka zone and in the ruins of Madan Kamdev and Pingaleswar temple of Guwahati zone reflect the influence of Tantricism on sculpture. These sculptures showing the sensuousness as a new aesthetic idea reflect the trend of the changing society of the two zones.

Minute observation shows that the assimilation and synthesis of different cultural elements had played a vital role in the process of social

formation in early Assam. The zones had shown some varied reactions and results whenever it received new cultural elements from outside. The process of assimilation and synthesis of the cultural elements depended upon the basic nature and the character of the zone. In this study, a broad outline of the main trend of cultural variations in the zones has been drawn. The regional cultural variations (including those outside the purview of our study) contributed cultural elements to the process of social formation and the growth of greater heterogeneous culture of Assam.

Notes and References

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6. Nidhanpur CP Inscription, 27.
7. Nidhanpur and Kamauli CP Inscription.
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10. Nidhanpur, Kamauli and Pushpabhadra CP Inscription.
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