



NORTH EAST INDIA

on

Historical Perspective

Dr. N.N. Acharyya

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Evolution of Assam Through the Ages

Assam, Situated on the north-eastern frontier of India, was a large and powerful kingdom through the ages. Its geographical limit varied from time to time. In connection with the study of present day readjustment of the boundary of Assam, it may be worthwhile to enquire into its genesis.

Assam had different names in different periods of her history. From the beginning of the Rig Vedic age the kingdom was known as Pragjyotisha which means the seat of learning in Astronomy. This learning was connected with the Sakti worship of Kamakhya and Siva worship of Umanada of per-Aryan origin. The kingdom came to be known as Kamarupa during the later Vadic period. This was based on the legend that Kamadeva, the Indian Cupid, having been destroyed by Siva, regained life in this country. In the famous Prasasti of Samudragupta it is mentioned that Kamarupa was the frontier kingdom of India. Kalidasa mentioned Kamarupa and Pragjyotisha as names of the same kingdom. In the 13th century when the Shans conquered Assam, the word Assam or Assam first applied to the people and subsequently to the country they conquered.

The land of Assam has emerged as a result of long courses of geological evolution. As a whole it was formed not in single jolt but rather in parts and by stages. Some of

its original parts were the oldest of the earth. Geological researches show that there was Eur-Asiatic ocean (Tethys) stretching from central Europe to Burma through Asia-Minor, Northern India and Assam. Next in the age of mountain-building, the Alps, the Carpathians, the hills of Persia and the hills of Assam emerged. Assam as a geographical entity has a long and continuous history. The animal world took a long course to emerge in evolution. Evolution of man in Assam was followed by that of a variety of racial types.

In the Palaeolithic age the civilisation of Assam was based on hunting. The celts used by this people had been found in several places of Assam. The inhabitants who formed this civilisation were of the Austric stock. They were the pre-Dravidian aborigines and are at present represented by the Syntengs and Khasis the Monkhmer elements of Assam. Philological and Ethnographical studies show that during this age, Assam exercised considerable influence over northern, southern and further India. The erection of monoliths by the Khasis and Syntengs of Assam represents a specialised form of phallic ancestor cult which was widely prevalent among the earlier Mongolians of South-East Asia.

In the Chalcolithic age, Agricultural civilisation began in the Brahmaputra valley which was noted for its alluvial soil most suitable for rich agriculture. The people who formed this civilisation were of Dravidian origin. They were a cultured race and supplanted by the Austries. At this period the influence of the civilisation of Assam was felt in various eastern countries like Burma, China, Indo-China and Siam. Ghataka, a pre-Aryan king of Assam had exercised power over various Kirata countries of eastern Asia.

The Aryans entered Assam in the early part of the Rig-Vedic age. The location of Parasuramkunda in the easternmost corner of Assam and the hermitage of Basistha at a distance of seven miles from Guwahati prove that the aryanisation of the whole of Assam was completed when many other parts of India were not aryanised. Parasuram and Basistha were the pious sages of the early Vedic age.

They had made large contributions to the culture and institutions of ancient Assam. Kalidasa informs us that the ancient Kamarupa kings were very powerful. Naraka who was brought up in the court of Videha and influenced much with Aryan culture, extended the western boundary of Kamarupa, upto videha. It is mentioned in the Ramayana that the boundary of Pragjyotisha touched the sea and it was a hilly country. The great Epic gives descriptions of the monuments of ancient Assam which were really unique in form, ideal and craftsmanship. The kingdom of Assam under Naraka stretched to the Himalayas in the north, the Bay of Bengal in the south and kingdom of Mithila in the west. The capital was at Guwahati which stood at the centre.

Bhagadatta extended the boundary of Assam in the east and ruled over Tibet, Bhutan and Burma besides the territories ruled by Naraka. At the time of Bhagadatta Pragjyotisha reached to its pinnacle of glory. The soldiers from Burma and China fought in the Kurukshetra war under Bhagadatta's banner. This king had a pleasure seat in the city of modern Rangpur which was at the centre of his kingdom. Under Bhagadatta Assam became a country of heterogeneous population consisting of the Austriacs, Dravidians, Aryans and Mongolians.

From the early part of the later Vedic age down to the age of the Mahajanapadas, the kingdom of Kamarupa was one of the powerful countries of Northern India. The history of Magadhan ascendancy at the cost of the neighbouring countries began from the 6th century B.C. Kamarupa experienced encroachments upon her borders. Magadha gradually extended towards the east and ultimately at the time of the Nandas and Mauryas absorbed western Kamarupa. The first epigraphic record which refers Kamarupa is the famous 'Allahabad Prasasti' of Samundragupta. In this inscription Kamarupa is referred to as a frontier kingdom along with Samatata, Davak, Nepal and Katripura. So it appears that at the time of Samundragupta, Kamarupa, regained her lost position. Pushyavarman, the contemporary Kamarupa king fought

with Samundragupta and acknowledged the supremacy of the great Gupta Emperor. As a result the tract of territory between the rivers Kausika and Tista to the south of the district of Jalpaiguri was made Pundravardhanabhukti.

Yuan Chwang informs that a series of hills that reached the confines of China formed the eastern boundary of contemporary Assam. The Chinese Pilgrim visited Kamarupa at the reign of Bhaskaravarman who was a very powerful king. Under Bhaskara the western limit of Kamarupa included the eastern part of Magadha, Pundravardhana and Karnasuvarna, which touched the sea. The southern sea route from Tamralipti was controlled by Bhaskaravarman. According to the Kalika Puran the shrine of Kamakhya stands at the centre of the kingdom which stretched on all sides for one hundred yojanas. According to the Yogini Tantra, the eastern boundary of Kamarupa was the Dikhoo river, the river Karatoya flowed on the west, mount Kunjagiri stood on the east and the southern boundary went upto the rivers Lakshaya and the Brahamaputra. So we see that even at a later period Assam included northern and eastern Bengal, part of Bhutan, the Khasi and Garo hills and the northern half of the district of Sylhet besides the Brahamaputra valley. Thus it appears that Pragjyotisha or ancient Kamarupa was a powerful and much larger kingdom than most of the other kingdoms mentioned in the Mahabharata and most of the Sixteen Mahajanapadas existing at the time of the rise of Buddhism.

Minhaj-us-siraj in his 'Tabakat-i-Nasiril' gives the boundary of mediaeval Assam. It is mentioned that by the beginning of the 13th century, the river Bagmati (Karatoya) formed the western frontier of a state of considerable power and extent, under a monarch styled Kamesvar. The eastern boundary of the kingdom was the modern districts of Nowgong and Darrang. On the east of it there was the valley of the Brahamaputra. At that time it was divided into several petty principalities. A line of Chutia kings were holding the region north of the Brahamaputra and the east of Subansiri and Disang. The tract south and south-east of it was

possessed by several petty Bodo tribes. Further west there was the kingdom of the Kacharis, stretching south of the Brahmaputra across the Nowgong district. West of the Kacharis and the Chutias, there were the domains of a number of Bhuyans covering both the banks of the Brahmaputra. They were the heads of different tribes by which the valley was then peopled. Some of them were ambitious and they conquered and absorbed the adjoining territories and the kingdoms thus formed continued to exist until they crumbled down owing to the weakness of their successors. The borders of the kingdoms of the Chutias and Kacharis were occupied by some of the hill tribes, the Singphos and the Nagas.

In the 13th century, the Ahoms, an off-shoot of the great Shan race enters Assam through the North-Eastern boundary. They followed the course of the Lohit and the Eastern tributaries of the Brahmaputra and reached to its valley after crossing the Patkai. They first fought with the indigenous people of the region who were divided into small principalities, and were not in a position to resist the advance of the powerful invaders. By the 15th century the Ahoms consolidated their power in Upper Assam. Sections of the Nagas and the Kacharis were brought under their domination. But real Ahom expansion and conquest began from the 16th century, when the Ahom king Suhungmung, the Dihingia Raja, annexed the kingdom of the Chutias centring round their capital at Sadiya. The same king drove the Kacharis from their stronghold at Dimapur. The Bhuyan chieftains who had been ruling in the north bank of the Brahmaputra were brought under Ahom control. The Ahom history of the 17th century was mainly the history of Ahom-Mughal conflicts because of the ambitions of the Mughals to extend their territories further to the east, the intervention of the Ahoms in the affairs of the rival princes of Cooch-behar who possessed a considerable portion of Bengal besides western part of Assam and the violation by the Ahom of the terms of the treaties entered into by them with Mughals. By the beginning of the 18th. Century the

Ahom king Rudra Singha, a man of great ability and ambition, organised a confederacy of the Rajas of Eastern India with a view to oust the Mughals. After this king, the history of the Ahom is one of internal strifes and dissensions, downfall and disintegration. In 1817 the Burmese invaded the country and, in 1822, achieved complete domination of Assam. But in 1824, the British entered Assam and expelled the Burmese from their commanding position. By the treaty of Yandabu, signed in 1826, Assam passed under the control of East India Company.