

PRAGJYOTISHPUR - THE ANCIENT CAPITAL OF ASSAM: REVISITED

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The present effort is to discuss the Pragjyotishpura, the ancient capital of Assam. The author traces its origin and brings it to the present extent of Guwahati City environs. The author takes geographical approach and attempts to suggest the need for extending the limits of the present city to the limits of Pragjyotishpura. This has been based on assumption and fact that this ancient city of Pragjyotishpura had extended on both banks of the river Brahmaputra. The reasons for this are obvious and are explained at length in the paper. The effort also includes the construction of historical maps based on literature and physical verification showing the extent of Guwahati during Ahom rule, British rule and after independence. Keeping in view the nature of the physiographic attribute of the area under question. It will become apparent why Guwahati city should occupy its ancient territorial limits.

Guwahati During Classical Age

Guwahati is an ancient and famous town of Assam. The historical antiquities of the city is gleaned from various sources. The sources are: (i) ancient scriptures, (ii) earlier inscriptions, (iii) earlier literature, and (iv) account of early foreign travellers and historians.

Ancient scripture like Kiskidhya Ramayana described that Pragjyotisa was a city built on an extensive sea-side mountain known as Varaha with golden peaks. The whole city was built with gold and was ruled over by a Danava

known by the name of Naraka.¹ Kalikapurana as the abode of "Brahma", god of creation, who created stars and planets here in Pragjyotishpura. This signifies that this was the city where study of astrology on a scientific basis was initiated. The word Pragjyotishpura derived as prag - pre, jyotis - astrology, and pura² - town, meaning the town or place of "old astrological centre". The present Navagraha temple stands as the evidence of the ancient seat of astronomical studies, in the city. The temple of nine planets with "tole"³ epitomises the ancient heritage of the city.

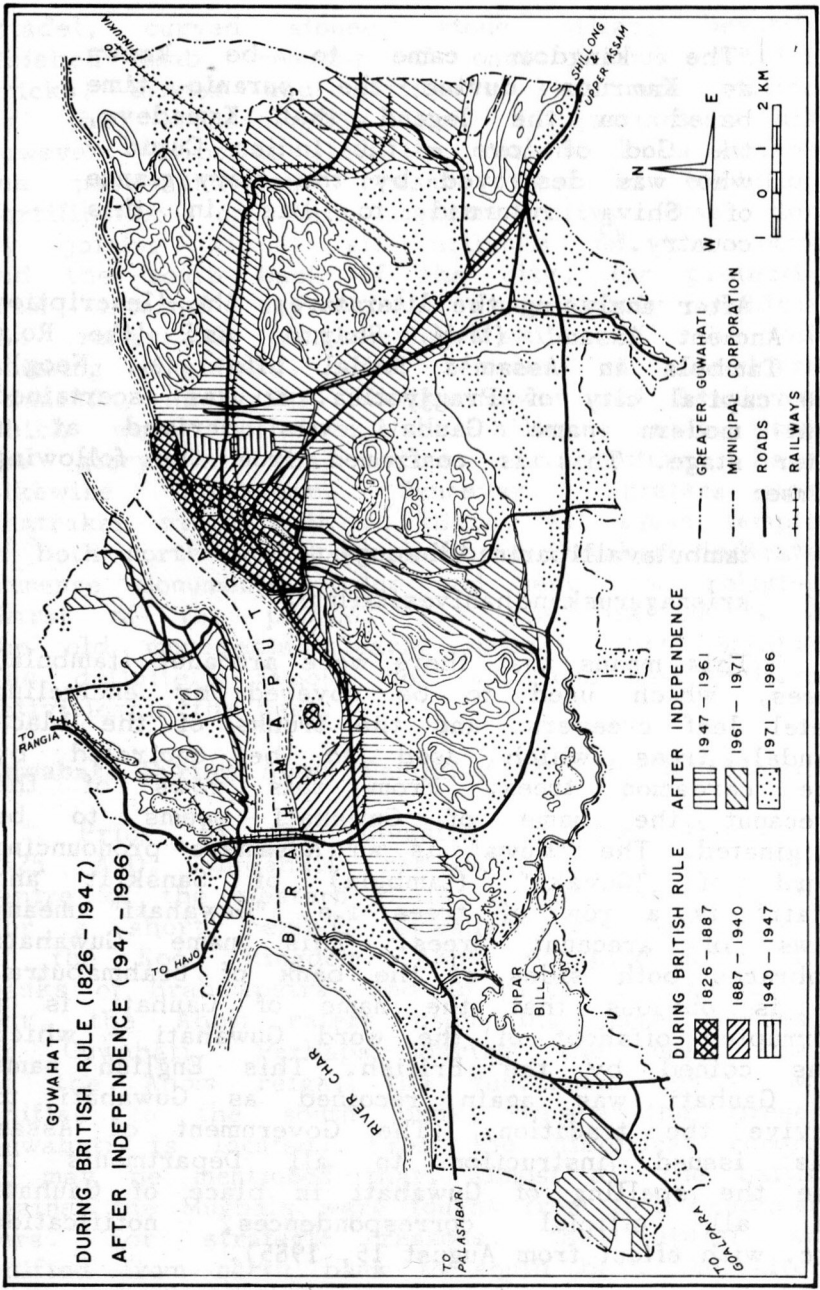
The inscription on the copper plate of Dharmapala Raja depicts certain sanskrit verses, where it has referred the name of Kamrup Nagar. Different sources ascertain it and refers to both Kamrupa and Pragjyotisa as a kingdom and as a capital city underwent changes at different periods. And it is specifically known that the name Pragjyotispura, is much older than the name "Kamrupa".

In classical literature, reference regarding the ancient city are abundantly found. The great classical poet, Kalidasa, in his epical literature, Raghuvmsa, had mentioned about the foundation of the Pragjyotishpura. He mentioned Kamrupa along with the river Lauhitya.⁴ The verse reads as follows:

Chakampe Tirualauhitya Tasmin Pragjyotisesvarah
Tamisah Kamarupanamtyakhandalabikramam.

Raghu IV. 81-83.

Huen Tsang, a Chinese explorer, visited Assam in 640 A.D. He recorded his observation in his travel diary about Kamarupa. At that time Kumar Bhaskar Varma was in the throne of Kamrupa. Baruah wrote in his "Early History of Kamrupa", that



MAP. 2.

"The kingdom came to be known as Kamrupa during the puranic time based on the legend that Kamadeva, the God of love - the Indian Cupid - who was destroyed by the fiery glance of Shiva, returned to life in this country."

After analysing the literatures, the 'Inscription of Ancient Assam' (M.M. Sharma) and 'the Role of Tambula in Assam's Social Life' (M. Neog), the capital city of Pragjyotisa, it was ascertained that modern name Gauhati was derived at a later stage. This is confirmed from the following verse:

tambulavalliparinaddhapuga
krisnagurus kandhanivesitailam.⁶

This means that there were arecanut (tambula) trees, which used to be covered by encircling betel leaf creepers, and the trunks of the black sandal trees which used to be encircled by the cardamon trees. From this rows of the arecanut the name of Guwahati seems to be originated. The "Guwa" is an Assamese pronouncing word of "Guvaka" (tambula) of Sanskrit and "Hati" is a row of trees i.e. "Guwahati" means rows of arecanut trees. This name Guwahati embraces both sides of the bank of Brahmaputra. It is obvious that the name of Gauhati is a corrupted offshoot of the word Guwahati - which was coined by the British. This English name of Gauhati was again recoined as Guwahati to revive the tradition. (The Government of Assam has issued instruction to all Departments to use the spelling of Guwahati in place of Gauhati in all official correspondences, notification etc. with effect from August 15, 1985).

The main evidences, of classical age to know a particular place, the abandoned ancient

citadel, curved stones, stone pillar, beautiful finished slab, remains of once famous temples, bricks, mortar and earthenware etc. are utilised by the archaeologists and antiquarians. This, however, helps to find the missing links between the past and the present city in evolution. Fortification of this capital city, was done by joining almost all hillocks on the north and the south bank of the city, for protection from external aggression. This amply exhibits the remarkable engineering skill of the old planning engineers. The temples of Kamakhya, Umananda, Navagraha, Manikarneswar and Asvakranta which were built on the hillocks also prove the glory of the ancient architectural hand. Likewise Sukresvar, Banasvar, Ugratara and Chatrakar were built on plans. All these temples of both north and south bank of Guwahati indicated immense monumental value and serve the religious thirst of the people. The scattered relics of the old monuments clearly indicate that Guwahati was definitely famous for religious and cultural activities in the past.

Guwahati During Ahom Period (1625 AD to 1826 AD)

Prior to the invasion of the Ahoms in 1625 A.D. Guwahati remained as a prominent centre of the western plain of the Assam Valley. For a short period, Guwahati was the capital of the Koch kingdom. Ahom occupied both the banks of Brahmaputra, and in place of Pragjyotishpur, the Ahom rulers used the name Guwahata or Guwahati. Perhaps during the early part of the Ahom reign, the functional centre was shifted to the south bank, where the present Guwahati is located. From the historical records it may be mentioned that, almost all the battles against the Mughals were fought from this headquarters. For strategic reasons, the capital was shifted from north bank to south bank thereafter. Guwahati - during Ahom period comprised the

area between the foot of the Kamakhya hill and Navagraha hill including Kharghuli. In the north-south direction, Guwahati extended from the river Brahmaputra to Chalabil (Map No.1).⁷

There were as many as ten chowky (Garrison Gateway) constructed around Guwahati, including North Guwahati for its security and protection. Karoipani chowky, Patduar, Sendurighopa, Chilar chowky and Kanaibarashiboa chowky, are on the north bank, while Pandu, Duargaria, Dharamduar, Jaiduar and⁸ Latacil pani chowky are in the south bank. Both the Kanaibarashiboa chowky of north bank and Jaiduar chowky of south bank were the eastern most gateway to Guwahati. The Chilar chowky on Momaikata garh of the north bank and Pandu chowky on the south bank of the Brahmaputra were the western gateway to Guwahati.

The "garh"⁹ of Pre-Ahom period renovated and made strong as wall against Muhammedans. Mamaikata garh is known for its great historic events along with the Rangmahal and Narakasur garh on the north bank; Jalukbari, Tetelia, Fatasil, Rajgarh on the south bank are still found in dilapidated form (Map No.1).

There were regular boat service between the ghats at Rajduar, Asvakranta and Pandu. Boats were the only means of communication between north and south bank. As Guwahati was the regional headquarters of the Ahom rulers, the office of the Barphukan (Chief Commander) was located on the west of the confluence of the Bharalu and the Brahmaputra river. Near Uzanbazar, there was a place of royal armory, known as Kharghuli. This was a strategically important garrison of the chief commander of Guwahati.

Guwahati during British Period (1826 A.D. to 1947 A.D.)

After the treaty of Yandabo, Assam came under the control of East India Company in 1826. However, till 1836, the invaders could not establish any effective administrative control over Guwahati. In the absence of civic amenities and poor hygienic condition, the British soldiers suffered from various diseases. The British Officers, however, constituted a town improvement committee to look after the affairs of the town,¹⁰ and perhaps for this reason the capital was shifted from Guwahati to Shillong. Though the capital was shifted to Shillong, Guwahati remained as the administrative headquarters of Assam. In the year 1878, Gauhati Municipality board was formed and the first task of the Municipality was to construct a water supply plant. At that time the municipal area was constituted of eight wards, covering 6.5 sq.km. and Shillong was linked with Guwahati by a narrow cart road.

By the year 1897, railways were extended from north Bengal to Guwahati and Upper Assam, Cachar was also linked by rail line in stages. Several other roads were also constructed by the public works department to and¹¹ from Guwahati joining various important places. The major road links noteworthy of their importance were constructed. These were: (1) Guwahati to Shillong (G.S. Road), (2) Guwahati to Agia (A.T. Road), (3) Guwahati to Kalong River (A.T. Road), (4) Guwahati to Digaru River (Old Nowgong or Sonapur Road), and (5) Guwahati to Mawphlang via Nongkhlaw.

Educational and cultural functions of the town was geared up during the British period. Cotton College in 1901, the Curzon Hall (Nabin Bardoloi Hall) in 1903, the Assam State Museum

in 1940 were established in stages at Guwahati. Gradual growth of urban population was responsible for improvement of the amenities in the town. Subsequently, the municipality was expanded in 1940¹², and the area was extended to 7.5 sq.km.

Guwahati witnessed the horrors of the Second World War. During this period, Guwahati was used as a stronghold of the British army. Civil Lines and cantonments were constructed in the heart of the town, besides there was a face life of the town with addition of new lines of transport and communication (Map 2).

Guwahati during Post Independent Period (1947 A.D. to 1986 A.D.)

There is difference between pre-independent and post independent India. In the pre-independent period the British administrators were busy in consolidation of their power and little interests were shown for improvement of the towns. The multifaced growth and development were envisaged only in the post independent period. During the post independent period, especially in planning periods, the following additions were made: (i) High Court of Assam, (ii) All India Radio, and (iii) Gauhati University, and (iv) Railway Headquarters. Besides these, the State Central Library, the Assam Engineering College, the Gauhati Medical College etc. have been established in stages. All these new additions in the urban functions, have naturally enhanced the administrative as well as commercial functions in the city.

Consequently, the population of the town increased from 48,615 in 1951 to 100,707 in 1961.¹³ The Municipal jurisdiction was also increased from 7.68 sq. kms in 1951 to 14.24 sq.k.m. in 1961 by including three more wards. In the

mean time multiple nuclei was growing up from the core of the town and expanded it toward periphery. The Railway Station at New Guwahati, the Industrial Estate at Bamunimaidan, the Oil Refinery along with subsidiary industry at Noonmati, Military Cantonment at Satgaon, Military Hospital at Bashistha, the State Police Battalion at Kalapahar, the Airport with Airforce headquarters at Azara, all these had cumulatively and abruptly expanded the spatial dimension of the Guwahati City (Map 2). The landmarks in the history of Guwahati was the construction of the Saraighat Bridge across the Brahmaputra in the year 1962. The significance and functional importance of Guwahati radically changed and magnified, when the North-Eastern States were politically reorganised into seven States. The North-Eastern States and territories were linked with the mainland by a narrow corridor of about 14 km. through northern portion of Bangladesh (Formerly East Pakistan), Guwahati is the major centre of this link, therefore Guwahati served as the main gateway to these areas. Growth of Guwahati was further expedited with the shifting of its capital from Shillong to Dispur in the year 1973 (in the eastern outskirts of the city).¹¹

After independence, a large number of migrants (particularly refugees) from neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, and Burma and job seekers from other States of India came to Guwahati, besides having spread themselves in the whole N.E. Region and the city which added to the growing complexity of the problem.¹² Ultimately, Gauhati Municipal Corporation, perhaps, had to extend its area of jurisdiction by 216.19 sq.kms as it was established in the year 1974.

At present Greater Guwahati is composed of one Municipal Corporation, two town committees, fifteen other areas like Railway, Refinery,

Gauhati University and Defence areas with 82 villages covering a total area of 243.2 sq.kms (95 sq. miles).¹³ Radical changes in its functional behaviour has not only made the city life uncomfortable, but also it has created innumerable problems. The abrupt growth of population, encroachment upon the open land and disturbances caused to ecosystem have led to serious consequences that are familiar to unplanned city development.

The trend and tendencies of its past history profusely indicate further expansion of Gauhati Municipal Corporation into a metropolis in the near future.

Notes & References

1. D. Sarma. **Kamrupasasanavali**, edited, Publication Board, Assam Gauhati, 1981, pp. 8-9 (from Kiskindhya VIII in original Devanagari's script).
2. "Pura" is a sanskritise dravidian word meaning town or city.
3. "Tole" is a place of learning in old age, i.e. school or institution.
4. **Ibid.**, p.10.
5. K.L. Baruah. **Early History of Kamrupa**, K.L. Baruah, Shillong, 1933, p.11.
6. M.M. Sharma. **Inscriptions of Ancient Assam**, Gauhati University, 1978, p. 129 (from "The Uttarbarbil Copper Plates of Balavarman III).
7. N.N. Bhattacharyya. "Gauhati: A Study in Urban Morphology", Ph.D. Thesis, 1977, Gauhati University, p. 52.
8. M.C. Das. "Yuge Yuge Guwahatir Ruprekha", **Paura Bichitra**, (G.M.C. Journal), Gauhati, 1st Issue, 1978, (Assamese Section), p.15.
9. "Garh" is a local term meaning fortification of wall like embankment encircles capital town.

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15. R. Gopalakrishnan. "Some Theoretical Considerations in the Analyses of Immigration into the Brahmaputra Valley", **The North-Eastern Hill University Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities**, Vol. II, No.4, Oct-Dec.,1984, p.39.
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