

Aspects of Pre-Ahom Economy

Manash Mazumdar

In this paper an attempt is made to highlight some data for revealing features of economy in Kamarupa during the pre-Ahom period.

I

It has been indicated earlier¹ that the emergence of the state and its concomitant administrative and social hierarchy in the region was accompanied by the practice of landgrants in favour of religious donees. The Brahmins who arrived in this region from distant lands emerged as pioneers of new cultural patterns. Regarding the wave of Sanskritization we can say that the wave was only marginal in its early phase (between the fourth and fifth centuries). But members of the ruling family started to patronize the Brahmanical ethos and culture. They donated lands to Brahmanas on the principle of '*bhumichidranaya*'² and even fullfledged and settled villages were transferred by means of land donation³. We can say that the main purpose of such land donation was to bring the virgin soil under proper mode of cultivation, as D.D.Kosambi⁴ also indicated in his study of northern India. While discussing about the economy of the frontier region, Dr. Sujit Choudhury⁵ states that in the frontier area tracts of hitherto huge unploughed land appeared as best for the newly arrived community of Brahmanas.

In northeast India different ethnic clans settled down in the Lauhitya region and the surrounding areas since early times. The socio-economic history of these tribes had passed through a period of transition. In the formation of the economic structure of the region these tribes, who generally belonged to the Austric, Tibeto – Burman and Indo-Mongoloid stock, played a much significant role⁶. The tribal people of northeast India were experts in weaving, making pottery and manufacturing bamboo and cane baskets. We can recall here that our extant inscriptions during the period speak of the settlement of weavers⁷. Thus we find that weaving as an industry was very prominent during the period. We also know that iron technology pushed forward a new socio-economic revolution in early India. In this region among the expert iron smiths were the Khasis and

Jaintiyas of Meghalaya). In the Duboroni area in Golaghat district archaeologists had discovered a pit of iron smelting. Perhaps the wave of Sanskritization in the region corresponded to the spread of the new technology in production.

II

We may now examine the economic sequence in the early history of the Brahmaputra valley. Due to the geographical location the Valley played a crucial role in the economic history of the region. It kept close contact with Bhutan, Tibet, North Bengal and its eastern part, parts of Bangladesh and distant China also. After examining the situation in the Valley it appears that it was not impossible for the ruling groups and the traders of the Valley to keep contact with Pundravardhana after crossing the Karatoya. As Chitrarekha Gupta observed - A land route via Tirhut or North Bihar seems to have connected this region with the "Grand route".⁹

The Arthasastra of Kautilya¹¹ mentioned "Paralauhityakam" which was then famous for commercial goods. If we identify "Paralauhityakam" with Lauhitya or Brahmaputra then the Valley remained very busy in exporting commercial goods during the time of Kautilya. It is stated in the *Arthasastra* that from Suvarnakudya traders supplied *Ksuma dukula* and *pattrarna* fabrics to Magadha. The interpreter of the *Arthasastra* located this Suvarnavakudya in Kamarupa which was then famous for supplying these exportable goods.

Not only 'Suvarnakudya', Kautilya also inform us that the sandalwood of Jap¹² region was famous and was much in demand. Besides Jap, Jonga¹³ and Turupa¹⁴ also attracted Kautilya's attention. Another important item was a kind of blackish leaf. Kautilya also informs us that all these items were supplied from Jonga, Donga and Turupa regions. Again we find reference of Tailaparnik¹⁵. Kautilya says that from Tailaparnik scented perfumes were prepared which attained international repute.

But to which period Kautilya belonged? Whether he belonged to the Mauryan period or not? As we cannot say conclusively that Kamarupa developed trade relations with Magadha prior to the 4th / 5th centuries A.D. we can only say that the *Arthasastra* had been composed over a long period of time, going up to 1st and 2nd centuries A.D. Perhaps the traders were mostly of tribal groups. Because we find frequent mention

of non-Aryan names like Jonga, Donga, Turup, and only Suvarnakudya was a Sanskritized name in this particular text.

Thus we find that the goods which were supplied were mostly forest products and that the tribes of the region took the leading part in the supply of these forest products. The evidence of the *Mahabharata*¹⁶ can clarify this fact. The *Mahabharata* mentions that during the time of the *Rajasuya* ceremony of Yudhishthira, the Kiratraj Bhagadatta presented to Yudhishthira different herbals, sandal woods, perfumed plants as gifts. Again we notice in the *Arthasastra* that Kau ilya mentions 'Koushiv' and 'China Patta' which were from China. During that period all commercial transactions from China and India were carried through the region as transit trade.

III

In the history of trade and commerce of early India the most significant period was the 1st century A.D. The period saw the beginning of Indo-Roman trade. Indian regional ports had remained busy for cargo-loading. Different commercial goods arrived at these ports from the Roman world. Prior to the collapse of the Gupta rule we have no specific source of information on the trading activity of Kamarupa – Pragjyotisha, especially numismatic evidence. Our view is that without formation of full fledged state in the Valley the question of the minting of coins did not arise. Prof. B.N. Mukherjee suggested that 'Caltis' mentioned in the *Periplus* as specific to Kirrahdia (land of Kiratas?) might have been gold in the form of ingots, rather than coins¹⁸.

Some scholars have suggested that the Ambari area of modern Guwahati may have been already settled before the Christian era¹⁹, and that the finds of pottery indicate trade connection with the outside world²⁰.

The main trade route that involved Kamrupa – Pragjyotisha during the period of the Varmanas, Salastambhas and the Palas lay between China, Tibet and Central Asia to the north and east; the rest of India to the west; and to the sea port of Chittagaon to the South and thence via the sea to the rest of the world²¹. Perhaps some trade may have been generated by local products, and major trading activity was mainly by export and transit trade. The numismatic evidence indicates that in the third quarter of the sixth century A.D. some gold coins were struck in

the Samatta kingdom²², centered around Comilla in east Bengal, but extending westward to the river Meghna into southern Tripura. This state was at that time very important in terms of trade because it controlled the trade route of Kamarupa to the sea. This is also confirmed by the inscriptional reference of Mahendra Varman and other later rulers of the Varman dynasty that the territorial empire of Mahendra Varman touched the sea-shore (*Sagara Mekhalante*)²³. Two major trade routes controlled by Samatata were the ones connecting the sea-port of Chittagaon with Pataliputra to the north-west of Bengal, and Kamarupa to the north-east. Rhodes²⁴ suggested that the goods traded along this route may have been travelling to and from Tibet, Sogdiana and beyond to the north and beyond to the north and west and to and from China and South-east Asia to the east. Even after the death of Sasankadeva in 635, Bhaskar Varmana appeared as the paramount ruler of east Bengal and even the king of Samatata acknowledged his overlordship. One coin²⁵ struck in the name of Sri Kumara was found in the Samatata region. Kumara was the popular name of Bhaskara Varman. It was said that Bhaskara had strong control over the seas. In the *Si-Yu-Ki*²⁶, there is reference that when Hiuen-tsang wanted to go back to China, Kumara (Bhaskar Varman) offered to escort him up to the seaport which clearly indicates that the trade between Kamarupa and China continued by sea-route also.

Though no coins of Kamarupa and its neighbouring areas shed light on their use as currency in trade, but it needs to be considered that items of trade were horses, salt, musk, muslin, lapis lazuli from Burma, gold from Tibet, chowrie shells, cotton, precious stones and other items from South, and also silk and spices from South-East Asia.

With the death of Bhaskara Varman, the flourishing trade mainly through sea-route via Samatata and Chittagaon might have come to an end. Until the period of the Salastambha kings we find that the bulk of trade in precious objects continued with the neighboring areas. There are references in their inscriptions to markets of jewels.

In the Hayunthal Grant²⁷ of Harjaravarmadeva we find the participation of *Vaniks* in the royal coronation ceremony along with other high castes in sprinkling holy water on the king from a silver pitcher. That trading activity was given importance is also revealed from land grants of the Pala period²⁸ – that land transactions were carried on through "*samupratistheta – brahmanadi – Vishayakarana – Vyavaharika – Pramukajanapade*". The *Vyavahariks* were probably traders who held

a prominent place in the social hierarchy of Kamarupa in those days, according to some scholars.

Thus the entire discussion reveals that Kamarupa and the adjoining areas were actively engaged in trade and commerce during the period. The nature of trade and its volume indicates that Kamarupa – Pragjyotisha exported its surplus and was actively engaged in transit trade between Tibet and China and the rest of India. The impact of commercial activity can be noticed in the reference to Vaniks and Vyavahariks attaining positions of honour along with other dignitaries.

Notes and References

1. See Manesh Mazumdar, "Land, Land Transformation – Talking – about social formation in Pre – Ahom Brahmaputra Valley", Proceedings of North-east India History (hereafter PNEIHA), Kohima session, Shillong, 1999, for discussion on the matter.
2. Mukunda Madhav Sharma: *Inscriptions of Ancient Assam*, Guwahati University, 1978. (See especially the Nidhanpur Grant, Kamauli Grant.)
3. See the Kamuli Grant in *ibid*.
4. D.D. Kosambi : *Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, Bombay, 1956, p. 88.
5. Sujeet Choudhury discussed the issue in detail while analyzing the economic sequence of the frontier region of Srihatta, Cachar. See his "Srihatta Cacharer Prachin Itihas – Adiparva", in *Sahitya – Navaparjya*, Hailakandi, Vol. 27, 1st Sravan, 1401 B.S.
6. See Amalendu Guha: *Medieval and early Colonial Assam-Society Polity and Economy*, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, 1991 pp 1-5.
7. Subhankarpataka grant.
8. W.W.Hunter: *Statistical Account of Assam*, Reprint 1975, Delhi, p. 21, 231, pp. 29, 300. See also P.R.T. Gurdon, *The Khasis*, London, 1914, pp. 39-40.
9. Chitrarekha Gupta: "Trade and Market in North-East India", in *Archaeology of North East India*, Jaiprakash Singh and Gautam Sen Gupta (ed.), Delhi, 1991, p. 281.
11. R.P. Kangle: *Kautilya's Arthashastra*, University of Bombay, 1972, pp. 156-59.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 156.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 158.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 158.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 158-159.
16. As cited in Nayanjyoti Lahiri, *Pre-Ahom Assam*, New Delhi, 1991, pp. 9-11.
17. Periplus, *op. cit.*
18. B.N.Mukherjee: *Coins and Currency System of Bengal* (upto c. AD. 300). Calcutta 2000, p. 37.
19. Ramsaran Sharma: *Urban Decay in India*, New Delhi, 1972, p. 78.
20. Z.D.Ansari and M.K.Dhavalikar: "Excavation at Ambari Guwahati 1970", in *Journal of University of Poona*, 1978, p. 79. See also H.D. Sankalia, "From Pre-history to Proto-history in Assam" in *Cultural Contours of India (Dr. Satya Prakash Felicitation volume) Pt. II*, ed Vijay Sankar Srivastava, 1981, pp.1-5.
21. Nicholas Rhodes: "The Trade Routes of Early Assam- the Light shed by Coinages, PNEIHA, XXIV Session, Gauhati. Also see B.N.Mukherjee. *External Trade of Early North-East India*, New Delhi, 1992, *Passim*.
22. *Idem. op. cit.*
23. Mukundu Madhav Sharma, *op. cit.*
24. Nicholas Rhodes, *op. cit.*
25. N. Rhodes and S.K.Bose : *The Coinage of Assam*, Vol.1 as cited in "The Trade Routes of Early Assam-The Light Shed By Coinages", PNEIHA, XXIV Session, Gauhati University.
26. Thomas Watters: *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India* np., 1904, pp. 184 f.
27. Hayunthal Grant.
28. Inscriptions of Ratnapala.