

# State, Ideology and Legitimacy in Early Assam

*Chandan Kumar Sarma*

In the historiography of early Assam the question of legitimacy of the state is not properly analyzed. The recent publication by J. B. Bhattacharjee<sup>1</sup> is a welcome intervention in the understanding of the complex process of state formation and its legitimacy within a firm theoretical understanding and solid empirical work. This paper is an attempt in understanding the complex and multidimensional aspect of the instruments of legitimacy of the state system in early Assam. I have tried to understand the various ways and means of the legitimacy of the state in the context of the continuous and integrative process of state formation throughout the early period. The continuous process of state formation in early Assam should be emphasized as the state system was integrating various non-state and tribal areas through the process of autochthonous cult appropriation within the Brahmanical system, spread of *varnashrama dharma* resulting in formalization of social stratification, peasantisation of tribes and extension of agricultural settlements throughout the period. The understanding of the early state as a static entity certainly reduces the scope of investigation in regard to the complex process of legitimization of the state.

J.B. Bhattacharjee in his study has presented a very scholarly understanding of the role of the legend of Bhouma Naraka in the formation of the early Kamrupa state. The theoretical model put forward by Classen and Scalnik inspires his empirical investigation regarding the role of the legends in state formation in early Assam. Bhattacharjee correctly spells out that "The most important historical role of the Bhouma-Naraka legend is to be seen in a general pattern in the claims of the ruling dynasties in later times of a divine, high or extra ordinary descent of their ancestors. It seems that for state formation the royal lineage had in the mean time had become a necessity: the kings must be of a high realm, heaven born or of divine origin or at least of extra ordinary or supernatural birth".

Bhattacharjee also takes into account the importance of *varnashrama dharma* in providing the ideological support to the state system<sup>2</sup>. Though the spread of *Vanasrama dharma* was key in the emergence of social stratification in early Assam, the impact of differential access to economic

resources in creation of social stratification cannot be glossed over. Moreover the process of castification in early Assam had only limited success as substantial number of people remained outside the caste fold in that period. Bhattacharjee concludes from use of the terms such as *varna*, *varnasramadharna*, *aryadharna* in some of the inscriptions that all the four *varnas* were present in early Assam as the *varnasrama* system cannot be complete without the presence of all the *varnas*<sup>4</sup>. It seems he goes by the normative and textual understanding of the caste system and he is oblivious to the fact that the intermediary castes did not develop even in South India, Bengal and in other areas where the process of Hinduisation happened at a comparatively late period.

The expansion of ideology of the state and legitimizing it in the areas that were transforming from non-state areas to state areas was a complex affair. Moreover, as the state formation process was a continuous phenomenon, the state and its ideology needed continuous validation and legitimacy. The legitimacy of the state system was necessary not only in the phase of transformation from pre-state to state society but even in the established state societies. In the understanding of Bhattacharjee, the State in early Assam remains a static entity and the structure of the state, its territorial jurisdiction, the administrative system remained more or less the same throughout the early period from 4<sup>th</sup> century to 12<sup>th</sup> century. He states that, "the system of government was an absolute monarchy with the king at the apex of the political structure. The system was by and large similar to kingship in the Indo-Gangetic plains in the ancient period..... (All the limbs of the state) as envisaged in the Arthashastra and other ancient texts, were present in the structure of the state in Kamrupa under the Varmana, Salastambha and the Pala kings."<sup>5</sup> His idea of a static state system in early Assam is clearly visible in the following statement. "The period from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards witnessed the emergence of a number of early states from the indigenous ethnic social base in north east India viz Koch state, Dimacha state, Tripuri state, Meitei state and the Jayantia state. This happened due to the collapse of the Pragjyotisha Empire after the decline of the Pala dynasty in the 12<sup>th</sup> century."<sup>6</sup> These were new state formations in areas, which were developing due to extension of agriculture, emerging social stratification, etc and except the Koches other state formations, were not within the erstwhile Kamrupa state. In spite of firm theoretical and empirical understanding, Bhattacharjee's study regarding the legitimacy of early state of Kamrupa fails to take into account the continuous

process of state formation in early Assam and the continuous expansion of the realm and authority of the state both within its territorial limits and in its peripheral areas.

Regarding the complex ways of legitimacy of the state and the need for the continuous process of legitimacy B.D.Chattopadhyay states: "The process of legitimacy cannot be viewed simply in terms of a newly emerged polity seeking validation through linkage with a respectable Kshatriya ancestry or by underlining its local roots, the constant validation of temporal authority really relates to the complex of ideological apparatus through which temporal power was reaching out to its temporal domain."<sup>7</sup> In the process of state formation and legitimation of the various dynasties in early Assam the role of the legend of Bhauma Naraka was the most important element. Along with it, the ideology of *varnashramadharma*, the royal inscriptions with biographical sketches of the kings, Brahmanical appropriation of the cults and their royal patronage, temple construction and the landgrants to the Brahmans were important instruments of legitimation of the state in early Assam.

The longer royal inscriptions issued by the kings of the different dynasties in early Assam functioned as charters of validation of the family and the region constituting the kingdom.<sup>8</sup> These inscriptions served as a sign of authority in and around the area. Moreover, these inscriptions containing a detailed description of the accomplishment of the issuing king and his ancestors regarding successful military campaigns and other philanthropical works such as land grants and other endowments to Brahmans who ensured a fabricated genealogy to the dynasty also served as royal biographies. Such long inscriptions along with the fabricated genealogy relating to the mythical Bhauma Naraka dynasty contained and propagated a particular sense of history, which legitimated the royalty of the issuing authority in early Assam.<sup>9</sup>

From the available records relating to early Assam, it is apparent that the autochthonous tutelary deities of the Brahmaputra valley underwent a process of Hinduisation and were gradually accommodated in the larger Hindu pantheon of gods and goddesses. This process of appropriation of the local deities into the Brahmanical fold happened through the Sakta and Saiva typology of Hinduisation as described by A Eschman in the context of Orissa.<sup>10</sup> The indigenous communities accepted the worship of Siva and his consort Parvati as they found in these deities a continuity of their pre-Hindu mode of worship in the

characters of Siva and Durga. The acceptance of Hinduism on the part of local tribes was possible because of this perceived continuity between their own ancestral beliefs and the one they were adopting.

The Brahmanical appropriation and transformation of the local cult of Kamakhya in early Assam is very well analyzed by B.K. Kakoti<sup>11</sup>. B.K. Kakoti in his study on the development of the cult of Kamakhya makes the following observation, "once her existence was recognized and her worship formulated all local and independent deities began to be identified with her as her local manifestations.....the process of assimilation went on until in the Devi Bhagawata it came to be declared that all village goddesses should be regarded as manifestations of the goddess."<sup>12</sup> According to K.R. Van Kooij, "The common ritual covers by far the greater part of the fragment on devi-worship in the text of Kalika Purana, and this fact is a clear indication of the author's concern to have the deities of his country propitiated by a cult form closely corresponding to the ones usual in other parts of India of his time and to draw in this way the borderland of Kamrupa in the fold of Hinduism."<sup>13</sup>

This transformation in the identification of Kamakhya and her elevation as the presiding deity of the early state of Kamrupa did not lead to a complete change in the mode of worship of the autochthonous deity. This complete transformation in the mode of worship of the goddess could not be introduced without a simultaneous full-fledged Hinduisation of the autochthonous communities on which active support of the state system was continuing. The continuation of some of the practices and rituals had to be accepted by the ruling class to enlist the support of these autochthons especially for military operations. The continuation of some of the primitive rituals in the worship of Kamakhya is apparent in the list of animals to be offered to the goddess that included even bulls and boars. The Rudhiradhaya of the *Kalika Purana* also mentions about human sacrifice offered to the goddess Kamakhya. The *Kalika Purana* maintained that a brahmana must not offer human sacrifice and in case of human sacrifice, the head must not be served in front of the goddess.<sup>14</sup>

In the medieval period the Koch King Naranarayan (1540-1587) had to concede to the demands of his tribesmen to allow them to worship the god Siva according to their tribal rites while on his campaign against the Ahom kingdom in the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century. <sup>15</sup> It can also be presumed that the titular deity of Kamakhya was allowed to be worshipped by the

local people according to their primitive practices to find greater legitimacy for the growing state structure among them as well as to enlist their active support in military campaigns against the rival forces of the incipient state.

According to the *Kalika Purana* Kamakhya was worshipped in both Daksinabhava and Vamabhava methods. Daksinabhava or the proper brahmanical mode of worship was introduced for the Brahmins and the local autochthons were permitted to worship according to left hand practice. Another goddess Tripura who was identified with Kamakhya was to be worshipped by both these methods. The other goddesses mentioned in the *Kalika Purana* such as Tripura-Bhairavi, Ugratara, Smasana-Bhairavi etc. were to be worshipped only in the left hand method.

The *Kalika Purana* also mentioned another autochthonous Mother Goddess cult Dikkaravasini, popular in the eastern border of the early Kamrupa state and identifies her as Lalitakanta after being appropriated within the brahmanical fold. The *Kalika Purana* also states, "In the temple of Dikkaravasini the wife of Siva rests in two forms. One form is Tiksnakanta who is also called Ugratara. The other is Lalitakanta also called Srimangala Candika." Perhaps Dikkaravasini was worshipped in left handed practices and the Brahmins after identifying her as Lalitakanta worshipped her according to brahmanical rituals. Worship of Shakti images in ancient Assam can also be studied from the large numbers of images discovered from various parts of Assam.

The Brahmanical absorption of the local goddess cults and the propagation of the ideology of 'varnasrama dharma' helped in the growth of patriarchal value system in the Brahmaputra valley. The dominance of the Kiratas and the Mother Goddess cults is sufficient to argue that patriarchy as found in the Ganges valley was not well entrenched in early Assam. The process of Hinduisation of the independent Mother Goddess cults led to their association with other pantheons of Hindu deities. In course of time these mother cults became identified as the male god Siva's wife or consort. This subservience of these independent mother Goddess cults after their appropriation into Puranic Hinduism as the wife of Siva also led to increased penetration and legitimation of patriarchal values in the emerging stratified social structure. This in the long run helped in strengthening the monarchical form of governance and the system of male primogeniture among the indigenous communities who had a matrilineal background in early Assam. B.K.

Kakati in his study traced the origin of the cult of Kamakhya in early Assam from antiquity and established its connections with the Khasi and Garo traditions. According to him, "on the basis of similarities in mere sound and sense in the formation of Sanskrit Kama, Austric Kamoi and Shinto Kami and also on the basis of correspondence of certain rites and customs, it may be tentatively assumed that Yoni-goddess sprang up amongst the peoples with leaning towards ancestral worship and believing in the protective powers of an Ancestral Mother and that she migrated into Assam with the migration of the Austric peoples." This view of Banikanta Kakati is also reinforced in the studies of scholars who worked on Khasi legends and traditions. According to H. Barih, "Ka Meika was revered mother exalted to the position of a deity. It appears that both the Garos and the Khasis were associated with the legendary history of Ka-meikha."<sup>18</sup> Ka-Meika, an independent mother goddess cult associated with these matrilineal societies became transformed as an important Sakti cult as well as the consort of Siva after being inducted within Puranic Hinduism. D.D. Kosmabi in his *Myth and Reality* has demonstrated this transformation of Mother Goddess cults and their subsequent association with male gods in relation to the change of production system as well as other value systems in western India.<sup>19</sup> The transformation of another local mother goddess cult in the eastern areas of early Kamrupa state as the consort of Siva is well demonstrated in the following verses of *Kalika Purana* : "In the temple of Dikkaravasini the wife of Siva rests in two forms. One form is Tiksnakanta who is also called Ugrataru. The other is Lalitakanta also called Srimangalacandika" (K.P.80/36-37).

The changes in the religious beliefs and practices introduced other changes in the value systems and the social structure. The Brahmanical mode of appropriation of these local units helped in subsequent penetration of patriarchal values, concept of property rights, etc. The royal patronage of these cults and its association with the state system resulted in changes in kinship and in gender relations and it also legitimized the emerging state structure and its monarchical system. The process of Hinduisation and subsequent castification of the local communities led to the change from matrilineal social structure to patrilineal structure in certain cases. The far-reaching impact of the subsequent association of the independent mother goddess cults with male hierophanies is clearly demonstrated by Gerda Lerner. According to her, "Just as the development of plow agriculture, coinciding with increased militarism, brought major changes in kinship and in gender relations, so did the development of

strong kingship and the archaic states bring changes in religious beliefs and symbols. The observable pattern is: First, the demotion of the Mother goddess figure and the ascendance and later dominance of her male consort/son's then his merging with a storm-god into a male creator-god, who heads the pantheon of gods and goddess." (145) The role of the early Kamrup state in the changes of the religious rituals and the practices and its impact in the state formation process as well as development of a patriarchal system needs serious investigation from the scholars.<sup>20</sup>

The elevation of the cult of Kamakhya as the presiding deity of early Kamrupa state and the construction of the temple of Hetukasulin is related to the process of state formation and it helped in providing legitimacy of the state structure among the autochthons. The Tezpur grant of Vanamaladeva records that the king out of devotion got the temple of Hetakasulin rebuilt and provided it with villages and elephants.<sup>21</sup> Though there are various opinions regarding the origin of the word Hatapesvara, the capital city of Salastambha dynasty, the name must have been non-Aryan in origin and the cult of Hetukasulin was a Brahmanised non-Aryan cult emerging as a rallying point in and around that area. A major reason behind the patronage of these tribal deities by the ruling dynasties in early Assam as their tutelary deities was the fact that the "nuclear areas" of the early state of Kamrupa were surrounded by tribes on whose loyalty and military support they depended a lot. In this context it may be mentioned that in 1442, the Chutiya king Dharma Narayan constructed a brick wall around the temple of Dikkaravasini.<sup>22</sup> The ruins of the temple of Dikkaravasini were discovered at Paya in the Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh in 1958. Dikkaravasini was the local mother goddess cult in and around the area where the Chutiya state evolved and the Chutiya kings patronized the cult by building temples to gain legitimacy among the common people.

The inscriptions of ancient Assam provide information relating to royal patronage to the various temples. It is apparent that the royal patronage of these places of pilgrimage through generous land donations and construction of new and impressive temple buildings in these *tirthas* had great a significance for the legitimating of local cults and their elevation as royal deity helped in internal legitimation of the state structure and ideology of the state in and around the nuclear areas inhabited by the tribal autochthons. The royal patronage to temple and large temple structures along with landgrants helped in increasing the social base of the state structure, which may be called horizontal expansion of legitimacy. The emergence of various temple sites in different

parts of the early Kamrupa state such as Tezpur, Deopahar, etc from 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. helped the early state to reach out to the peripheral areas ruled by the *samantas*.

One of the important features of early state system in Assam was the systematic settlements of Brahmans within the kingdom. The *Kalikapurana* mentions that Naraka brought in Brahmanas from outside and settled them in his kingdom. These brahmans helped in the process of Hinduisation of the local autochthons and also set in motion the process of appropriated of the local cults within the Brahmanical tradition. These Brahmins worked as instruments of legitimacy for the emerging monarchical form of government and the state structure. In early Assam various kings belonging to Varmana, Salastambha and Pala dynasties made large-scale land grants to the Brahmins and these were recorded by issuing copper plate epigraphs. The earliest landgrants discovered so far are the copper plates of Bhaskarvarman who ruled in the first quarter of the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and these landgrants were stated to be renewals of early charters issued by Bhutivarman, the great grandfather of Bhaskarvarman.<sup>23</sup>

One of the distinctive features of the landgrants in early Assam was that these were provided in settled areas and not in peripheral points. According to N. Lahiri, "In contrast to certain other areas of India, such as Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra where the donated plots of land were supposedly in waste areas, giving the donee Brahmans absolute land tenure rights, the rights of the already existing peasantry in the donated plots of land in the Brahmaputra valley were unlikely to have been impaired because these plots of land were already in settled regions and not in areas to be reclaimed."<sup>24</sup>

It should be noted that land granted to the Brahmans included villages, paddy fields, marshy land, ponds, grazing grounds etc. This suggests that the areas granted were pre-existing rural settlements. Landgrants were also issued to persons in recognition of the donee's extra-ordinary scholarship or service rendered to the state or expertise in the act of warfare. Though apparently these landgrants were made to the Brahmans for earning religious merit, the settlement of large groups of Brahmans within the state cannot be explained in purely religious terms. The socio-economic implications of land grants to the Brahman donees were studied in a systematic way for the first time by R.S. Sharma. R.S. Sharma studied the importance of landgrants to Brahmans in the context

of bringing the wastelands under cultivation, extension of improved agricultural technology in peripheral areas and most importantly in the emergence of feudal economy in early medieval India. He explained the phenomenon of giving landgrants to the Brahmins in the larger contexts of the Kali age crises, decline in trade and commerce, paucity of coins, de-urbanization, etc.

In recent historiography of state formation especially those who follow the integrative state model, landgrants are studied in the perspective of providing legitimacy to the growing state structure amidst non-state and tribal social formations<sup>25</sup>. In early Assam also, the ideology of the state, the extraction of the surplus produced, introduction of a set of uniform legal and civil procedure, etc could not be established without the active help of the ideologues of *varna-srama Dharma*. The Brahmins with their mission to propagate *varnasramadharm* were the best agents to introduce the idea of state regulations in areas, which were witnessing the transition to state society from pre-state society. Moreover, these Brahmanical settlements were instrumental in the creation of the concepts of private property in areas where the concept of communal property predominated. It need not be emphasized that in most of the tribal areas even within the state, the concept of communal property predominated. In the context of the larger role played by the landgrants to the Brahmins Romila Thapar states, "The granting of land, apart from its other functions, served also to incorporate areas under lineage systems into the society dominated by the state. Lineage-based agrarian activity was assimilated into the new economy and erstwhile clansmen or else their chiefs were converted into tax paying peasants. Lineage traditions continued up to a point and could be adjusted to the *varna* framework which acted as a bridge between the earlier society and its later form."<sup>26</sup>

The idea of the early Kamrupa state as a replica of the state systems in the Ganges valley with centralized and bureaucratized administration is difficult to be accepted. The presence of tribal population in the Brahmaputra Valley who were practising primitive modes of cultivation even in 19<sup>th</sup> century suggests that even within the early Kamrupa state, there were groups of people over whom the state structure and its regulations had only nominal authority. The language of the inscriptions in early Assam is interspersed with lots of Khasi, Bodo and other non-Aryan words.<sup>27</sup> The large-scale settlement of Brahmins with landgrants facilitated the penetration of the ideology and the system of regular surplus extraction by the state in the areas inhabited by such

tribal groups where the authority of the state could be at the minimum level or totally absent. According to B.D Chattopadhyay -- "It becomes understandable that assignments such as brahmadeyas and devadanas were not an administrative but a socio-religious necessity for the temporal power, the earthly agents of sacred domain."<sup>28</sup> He further states that if temporal power needed legitimacy from spiritual authority, so did the human agents of spiritual authority require sustenance from temporal power.

The creation and the perpetuation of the royal rights in the pre-state tribal areas cannot be comprehended without the active role of these Brahmins and the Brahmanical settlements. According to Herman Kulke "Most significant in this connection is that every donation of land to Brahmins and the public proclamation of its legal conditions and implications for the villagers can be equated with the setting up of legal forms for the whole environments of Brahmin villages..... Thus, it developed upon the Brahmins the difficult tasks not only to create validity for the royal rights, but also to develop a village level administration necessary for the implementation of these demands."<sup>29</sup>

Though the landgrants were endowed with large numbers of immunities and privileges, these may not have reduced the royal privileges at the time of endowment. It may have helped the state system to create these royal rights in areas where the control of the state was just emerging. These landgrants can be seen as instruments of creating a royal norm throughout the state. The process of giving landgrants to the Brahmins continued in the areas, which were witnessing a transition to state areas even after 12<sup>th</sup> century. The Chutiya kings, a new state formation that evolved in and around the Lakhimpur district, also issued landgrants to Brahmins. This process certainly helped them in having a dignified genealogy as well as penetration of the royal ideology in areas, transforming into a state society. According to H.Kulke, "The main function of these generous land donations to large groups of Brahmins was to provide the central power of the great regional kingdoms with a group of administrative and ideological specialists."<sup>30</sup>

It should be noted that the conversion of non-agrahara settlements into agrahara settlements certainly was not always a smooth affair. It could have generated lots of tensions in such areas and perhaps this conversion also met with resistance from the population. The tension may have been generated by the transition to provide ownership of property

from communal property as the donees appropriated some rights which were hitherto enjoyed communally. The emergence of such tensions in early Assam can be inferred from the negative injunctions in the Parvatia copper plate of Vanasmalavarmadeva. This copper plate inscription state, "Whoever takes away the land given by himself or by others, rots with names assuming the form of worms in vishtha."<sup>11</sup>

The study of legitimacy of the early state system in early Assam should take into account the growth, development and transformations of the state from 4<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries in terms of territorial and administrative and other societal changes. Interdisciplinary approaches and comparative studies with other early state formations will help us to further delineate the processes of state formation in early Assam.

#### *Notes and References*

1. J. B. Bhattacharjee, *Bhauma-Naraka-Legend and the State Formation in Pragjyotisha Kamarupa*, Shillong, 2004.
2. *Ibid.* p. 62.
3. For understanding the process of caste system in early Assam, see M Momin, "Rethinking Varnasrama Dharma in Kamarupa." *Proceedings of NEIHA*, Imphal 2001, pp. 9-29.
4. J.B. Bhattacharjee, *op. cit.*
5. *Ibid.* p.50.
6. *Ibid.* p.62.
7. B. D. Chattopadhyay, "Political Processes and the Structure of Polity in Early Medieval India", in H.Kulke (ed) *The State in India*, 1995 P.210.
8. Barganga Rock Inscription. Tezpur Rock Inscription. Parbatia Copper Plates of Vanamaladeva, etc. in M.M.Sharma. *Inscriptions of Ancient Assam*. 1978.
9. Romila Thapar, Historical Consciousness of Early India. in Cultural Pasts, 2000
10. H.Kulke, *Kings and Cult-State Formation and Legitimation in South India*. 1993, p. 8.
11. B.K.Kakati. *Mother Goddess Kamakhya*. 2003 reprint. Guwahati.
12. *ibid.* p.26.

13. K.R.Van Kooij, cited in B.D.Chottopadhyay *Making of Early Medieval India*, p.33, 1998.
14. B.N.Shastri, "Some Aspects of Saktism in Assam", *Journal of Assam Research Society*, 1992, pp. 1-7.
15. *Darrang Raj Vamshavali*, ed N.C.Sharma, Pathsala, v.325-338! 973.
16. *Kalika Purana*, v.80/36-37.
17. B. K. Kalita, *op.cit.*, 1993.
18. H.Bareh, *The History and Culture of the Khasi People*, p.37,1967.
19. D.D.Kasambi, *Myth and Reality*, p.82-109, 1994 reprint, Bombay.
20. Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, p.146, 1986.
21. Tezpur Copper Plate Inscriptions of Vanamaladeva, IAA,p.100-104.
22. D.C.Sircar, *Some Epigraphic Records of the Medieval Period Eastern India*, 1979 p.3.
23. Nidhanpur Copper Plates of Bhaskaravaman. in M.M.Sharma, *op.cit.*, p. 92.
24. N. Lahiri, *Pre-Ahom Assam*, Delhi 1991, p.98.
25. H.Kulke, *op.cit.*
26. Romila Thapar, "Society and Historical Consciousness", in *ibid.* p. 136.
27. B.K.Kakati, "Certain Austric-Sanskrit Word Correspondences", in B.K.Barua *A Cultural History of Assam*, pp.239-241.
28. B.D.Chattopadhyay, *op. cit.*, p.208.
29. H.Kulke (ed), *op. cit.* p.243.
30. *ibid.* p. 13,
31. Parbatia Copper Plate of Vanamaladeva, I.A.A., p. 124.