

Did Hiuen Tsiang visit Guwahati

Bharati Barua

It is wellknown that Chinese scholar Hiuen Tsiang visited Kamarup during the reign of Kumar Bhaskara Varman between 629 A.D. and 645 A.D. He came to the capital city of Kamarupa at the invitation of the king. The name of the old capital was Pragjyotishpura. *Harshacharita* states that "Kumara Bhaskaravarma was the direct successor of his father on the throne of Pragjyotisha" Epics and other classical literatures locate Pragjyotisha in the east and association with the Lauhitya Kamarupa and Kamakhya. P.C. Chaudhury states that "the interpretation of the name as a place of 'eastern astrology' is however, justified by a number of references to its association with the solar cult and planetary worship"². The *Samhitas* and the *Puranas* refer to the name of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa. P.C. Chaudhury points out that archaeological remains of the solar cult, and the existing temple of Navagraha in Gauhati and Surya Pahar in Goalpara prove the fact of the origin of the name of the land⁴. Pragjyotisha was an important city for the growth of the first astronomical observation in Assam was made in Navagraha. It was also a famous astrological centre. It is stated that "The modern village of Jatia and Dispur lying on the western and eastern sides of Gauhati respectively stand jointly for the ancient city of (Prag) Jyotispura"⁵.

Location of Pragjyotisha is identical with the location of Gauhati⁶. The Epics, the *Brhatsamhita*, the *Raghuvansa* and the early *Puranas* and the *Tantras* which indicate that ancient kingdom of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa lay to the east of the Lauhitya. it is stated that beginning with the 1st-2nd century A.D., the *Periplus*, Ptolemy and also the *Mahabharata*

referred the south-western boundary of Pragjyotisha touched the sea, the western boundary extended beyond the Karatoya,⁸ the east boundary was extended to the Sadiya region. But, during the middle of the 6th century A.D. under Bhutivarman, the kingdom included Magadha and Gauda, the kingdom again expanded to include Pundravardhana in North Bengal, and portions of south-east Bengal, including Samatata, Tripura, Noakhali and Sylhet.⁹ It is quite clear from the above references that old capital city Pragjyotishapur is present Guwahati.

Now the question arises where did Hiuen Tsiang actually come to Guwahati or to some other place where Kumara Bhaskaravarman constructed a temporary capital at Karnasuvarna or to some other place, the location of which has to be identified.

In this regard I have discussed with four sources on the accounts of Hiuen Tsiang's visit to Kamarupa. These are (1) *Ta-Ta'ng-Hsi-Yu-Chi* briefly known as *Hsi-Yu-Chi*, or *Si-Yu-Ki* originally said to have been compiled in Chinese by Pien-Chi, a disciple of Hiuen Tsiang. It has been directly translated into English by Samuel Beal under the title *Records of Western lands of the great T'ang period*, (2) *On Yuang Chwang's Travels in India* which has been compiled by Thomas Watters on the basis of his study of *Si-Yu-Ki* in original Chinese (3) *The life of Hiuen Tsiang* as compiled in English by Samuel Beal, and (4) *She-Kia-fang-che*, a Chinese account by an unknown author which has been translated into English by P.C. Bagchi.

Hiuen Tsiang in his biography, which was compiled by S. Beal states that from Pundravardhana east 900 li after crossing a great river, came to the country of Kia-mo-lu-po (Kamarupa)¹⁰. *The Life of Hiuen-Tsiang* compiled by his disciple Hwui Li did not give the distance from Nalanda to Kamarupa only mentioned that the Master of

the Law, leaving his teacher, went with the envoy and arrived there¹¹. The word - there signifies Kamarupa.

She-Kia-fong-Che by P.C. Bagchi says that "going eastwards more than 900 li and crossing a large river you reach the Kingdom of Kia-mo-leu po" (Kamrupa) (This is Eastern India)¹². On *Yuan Chwang's Travels in India* by Watters states that "from Pua-na-fa-tan-na (Pundravardhana) the pilgrim travelled east above 900 li, crossed a large river and came to Ka-mo-lu-po. This country was more than a myriad li in circuit and its capital above 30 li¹³. In "Records" S. Beal says that the circuit of the capital was "about 30 li"¹⁴. None of the records on Hiuen Tsiang mention the name of the large river but indicate that the large river was the boundary of the kingdom of Kamarupa. Earlier it has been reported both by Beal¹⁵ and Watters¹⁶ that "after crossing the Ganges and proceeding towards east about 600 li then one will reach Pun-na-fa-tan-na. From this going eastward 900 li then crossing a large river then come to the country of Kia-mo-lupo (Kamrupa)¹⁷. Now the distance from the river Ganges to the large river is 1500 li¹⁸. Hiuen Tsiang never mentioned the name of the large river nor the name of the capital of Kamarupa. Watters identifies this large river as possible the Brahmaputra. But in the same book Watters mentions that "in the T'ang-Shu this country, called according to some texts ka-mo-no as lying 600 li to the south-east of Pundravardhana with the river Ka-lo-tu between that country and kamarupa²⁰ It seems that all the four accounts on Kamarupa are different from each other. Because the accounts of Hiuen Tsiang were written by his disciples and mostly translated from the Chinese into English. The sources are treated as biographical work on Hiuen Tsiang but not as an autobiography of the priest.

The sources on account of Hiuen Tsiang of Kamarupa have some conflicting interpretation.

If Hiuen Tsiang came to Pragjyotishpura or Guwahati he would have definitely mentioned the proper name of the place because Pragjyotishpura was very prominent for its culture and heritage from the remote past. Beal²¹ interprets the capital of Kamarupa as Pragjyotish. Watters²² has give different interpretation regarding the description of Kamarupa by Hiuen Tsiang. He says²³ the Ka-mo-lu-po restored as Kamarupa of this passage is represented it is agreed, by the modern Kamarupa or Western Assam with its capital Guwahati²⁴. Watters confidently remarks that "There is nothing, however, in the text of our passage to indicate that the pilgrim did not actually visit the country here described"²⁵.

K.L. Barua states²⁶ that "evidently the pilgrim came into the present district of Kamarupa and the capital of the time was probably the old Pragjyotishpur or Gauhati". Ramaprasad Chanda²⁷ states "it is not possible because Yuan Chwang came to the Kamarupa capital travelling east 900 li from Pundravardhana and Karnasuvana cannot be to the east of Pundravardhana".

P.C. Choudhury does not comment on the capital city as Gauhati. He mentions the statement of Watters regarding the priest's visit to the capital. Conningham identifies it with the Teesta, the large river, and further adds that the capital, visited by the pilgrim, lay in Koch Bihar²⁸. P.C. Choudhury never agreed with it. S. N. Mazunder rightly identifies the capital with Gauhati and the river with Karatoya. Dr. Choudhury accepts that the capital visited was Guwahati.

In the *Life of Hiuen Tsiang*, Hwui Li³⁰ mentions that when Kumara Raja came to know that Hiuen Tsiang stayed with Silabhadra at Nalanda, then the king sent a messenger to give an invitation to the priest to come to Kamarupa, but it was first rejected by Silabhadra then again the king

after two days sent the messenger, Silabhadra did not accept it. The king with great anger sent yet another messenger with a personal despatch for Silabhadra³¹. This time Silabhadra sent the great priest Hiuen Tsiang to Kamarupa. Hiuen Tsiang was there with the king and passed a month and more³² when Siladitya Raja returning from his attack on Kongyadha heard that the Master of the Law was residing with Kumara, Siladitya immediately asked Kumara to send the priest of China to him. After a great controversy the Kumara Raja agreed to send the priest and the king himself along with 20,000 elephants, 30,000 ships, passed up the Ganges together in order to reach the place where Siladitya Raja was residing³³. This reference shows that Kumara Raja was residing near a large river where he took out a large number of elephants about 20,000 and a huge amount of ships about 30,000 in number and proceeded upwards to meet Siladitya Raja.

Regarding sending a messenger by Kumara Raja to invite the priest consecutively for three times from Nalanda within a few days was not an easy task in those days. Because the communication at that time was not very fast or speedy to reach one place from the other. So the point is that the distance from Nalanda to the Kumara Raja's capital where Hiuen Tsiang was residing was shorter than the distance to the old capital Pragjyotisha. If we calculate the distance, mentioned in the Records By S. Beal³⁴ that from going that country (Kajughira) eastward, and crossing the Ganges after about 600 li came to the kingdom of Pun-na-ba-tan-na (Pundravardhana)³⁵. From this going east 900 li or so, crossing the great river, came to the country of Kia-mo-lu-po (Kamarupa)³⁶. Now the distance from Kujughira and river Ganga to the boundary of Kamarupa was only 1500 li. It is mentioned that Kumara Raja was the Lord of eastern India³⁷ and it comprised modern Assam and Bengal proper including the whole of the delta of the Ganges together with Sambalpur, Orissa

and Ganjam³⁸. It is stated by Cunningham³⁹ that Kusa-Vihara was the western division of Kamarupa proper and as it was the richest part of the country, it became for some time the residence of the rajas, whose capital called Kamatipura, the capital of Kusa Vihara is exactly 150 miles or 900 li from Pubna, while Gohati is about twice that distance or say 1900 li, or 317 miles from Pubna, in the north east direction. He is confirmed with the distance recorded by the pilgrim, it is almost certain that Kamatipura was the capital of Kamarupa in the 7th Cen. A.D. and not Gohati⁴⁰.

Some archaeological remains of Surya Pahar at Goalpara district show some light about the religion which was mentioned by Hiuen Tsiang⁴¹. The priest said that the people of the kingdom adore and sacrifice to the Devas and have no faith in Buddha..... there never as yet has been built one Sangharama as a place for the priests to assemble. But some disciples have pure faith and they pray secretly. There are as many as 100 Deva temples and also different sectarian people are there. So the Surya pahar at Goalpara gives us some information regarding the Hindu cult which was definitely prominent at that time. Some remnants of temple architecture are still visible at that site. It gives us some hope that place was equally important during the reign of Kumara Bhaskaravarma and the construction of the temples show that the people were devoted to God. It might have been a significant place where a large number of people resided, whose religion was mainly Hinduism, worshipped Gods and Devas. Hiuen Tsiang referred 100 of Deva temples where the king also resided in his capital.

Karnasuvarna was the temporary capital from where the king Kumara Bhaskaravarma issued the land grants to the Brahmanas. It is stated in the Nidhanpur Copper Plates of Bhaskaravarma⁴². Hiuen Tsiang came to Karnasvarna⁴³ and he gave

a vivid description of this kingdom separately. So it is proved that when Hiuen Tsiang came to Kamarupa he did not give the description of the temporary capital of Bhaskarvarman.

Conclusion

After having a thorough study of the four sources of the accounts of Hiuen Tsiang on Kamarupa and the different views of the scholars regarding the capital of Kamarupa, it is difficult to accept the claim that Hiuen Tsiang paid a visit to Guwahati. The distance from Punavardhana to Kamarupa, which was given by Hiuen Tsiang, can not be taken as the distance to its capital. According to Cunningham the measurement of the distance indicated that the place was probably Koch Vihar instead of Guwahati. Cunningham referred the "large river" as Tists instead of Brahmaputra. But Watters mentioned the "large river" as Brahmaputra. Hiuen Tsiang mentioned about the "large river", but did not mention its name.

It creates a great confusion to the readers to find out the name of the proper capital of Kumara Bhaskaravarma where Hiuen Tsiang paid a visit. There are lots of scope for further research work to investigate the matter whether Hiuen Tsiang came to Guwahati or to some other place. Otherwise the problem will remain uncertain.

Notes & References

1. K.L. Barua, **Early Ristory of Kamarupa**, Lawyer's Book Stall, Gauhati, p.38.
2. P.C. Choudhury, **The History of Civilization of the People of Assam**, p.27.
3. **Ibid.**, p.27.
4. **Ibid.**, p. 27.
5. **Ibid.**, p.27, F.N. 19a
6. **Ibid.**, p. 36
7. **Ibid.**, p. 38

8. *Ibid.*, p. 42
9. *Ibid.*, p. 42
10. S., Beal **Chinese accounts of India**, p.404.
11. H. Li, **The Life of Hiuen Tsiang**, p.171
13. Thomas Watters, **On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India**, Munshiram Moncharlall, Nai Sarak, Delhi -- 6.
14. S. Beal, p. 404
15. *Ibid.*, p. 403.
16. Thomas Watters, **on** Vol. II, p. 184.
17. S. Beal, p. 404
18. **Chambers Dictionary** gives the meaning of li as a Chinese mile equal to rather more than one third of an English mile.
19. Thomas Watters, **on** p.187.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 186.
21. S. Beal, **Chinese** p. 404.
22. Thomas Watters, **on yuan** vol. II, 187.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 186.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 186, Foot note 1.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 187.
26. K.L. Barua, p. 57.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 57, Foot note 2.
28. Alexander Cunningham, **The ancient Geography of India**, p. 572-73.
29. P.C. Choudhury, p. 181.
30. H. Li, p. 169-170.
31. *Ibid.*, 170.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 172.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 172.
34. S. Beal, p. 404,406.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 403.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 404.
37. K.L. Barua, p. 46.
38. Alexander Cunningham, p. 422.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 422.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 422.
41. S. Beal, p. 404.
42. M.M. Sharma, **Inscriptions of Ancient Assam**, p. 50.
43. S. Beal, p. 408.