

Pre-Ahom Assam

NAYANJOT LAHIRI

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The large scale donations of land in different parts of the Indian subcontinent is one of the major socio-cultural trends of the post-Gupta phase. *Pre-Ahom Assam* focuses on this phenomena in the Brahmaputra valley, the thirty-two inscriptions, twenty of which record royal grants of land to Brahmins, forming the basic historical sources of this period. The historiography and the different technical aspects of the grants such as their basic distribution, language and palaeography are lucidly analysed. Different aspects of pre-Ahom society, polity and economy are visualized through the microcosm of the epigraphs. The system of landholding and the general character of the peasantry are discussed in the light of the relevant ethnographic evidence in the context of pre-modern Assam.

The cultural character of Assam and its relationship with Southeast Asia is a controversial issue both in historical studies and in contemporary perceptions of the region. The collective testimony of the inscriptions under study goes against any close Southeast Asian link, clearly underlying that throughout the course of her early documented history, the Brahmaputra valley looked towards inner India. The historical analysis of the trade routes between Assam, north Burma and China contained in an important appendix to the book also underlines this basic argument.

Nayanjot Lahiri is Lecturer in History at Hindu College, University of Delhi.

ISBN 81-215-0463-X
Jacket by S. Banerjee

PRE-AHOM ASSAM

Studies in the Inscriptions of Assam
between the Fifth and the Thirteenth Centuries AD

Nayanjot Lahiri



**Munshiram Manoharlal
Publishers Pvt Ltd**

To
Kishore



003344

ISBN 81-215-0463-X

First published 1991

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Published by Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Post Box 5715,
54 Rani Jhansi Road, New Delhi 110 055, and phototypeset at Royal Photo Typesets,
T. Nagar, Madras 600 017 and printed at Gayatri Offset Press, Noida 201 301.

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Chapter One

Introduction

There were kings reigning in Assam when Rome was as yet only a small Latin state.¹

The claim of Assam to a high position among the classic lands of the east... would in all probability have been earlier investigated, had not an idea generally prevailed... that it was a country without such relics of the past ages as are found in other parts of India, and therefore, without a history that was worth enquiring into...²

HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE PRE-AHOM INSCRIPTIONS

The earliest mention of the pre-Ahom inscriptions of Assam appeared in 1840 in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*.³ Two inscriptions—the three copperplates and one seal forming what was subsequently known as the Tezpur copperplate inscription of Vanamālavarmadeva (middle of the ninth century), and a grant of Dharmapāla (twelfth century) were located and their text sent to the Asiatic Society, Calcutta by Captain Francis Jenkins, the Governor General's agent in the North-East Frontier. The historic importance of this area had been realized a few years earlier when Captain Westmacott in 1835 had reported ancient temples near Tezpur, at Charduar.⁴ The significance of the epigraphs was understood right from the outset. The Secretary of the Asiatic Society in Calcutta wrote:

The early history of these tracts on the banks of the Brahmapootra which lie to the North-East of Bengal and which are now for the most part either forest land, tenanted only by wild animals, or wastes partially reclaimed and inhabited by tribes nearly as wild as the beast of the forest, is unfortunately involved in singular obscurity... Amid the uncertainty I have described above, it is gratifying to find something in the shape of documentary evidence, speaking to a direct historical fact, as in the case of the copperplates which Captain Jenkins has enabled me to present to the readers of the Journals.⁵

The fact that cognizance was taken of these inscriptions in 1840 by a British officer is not entirely coincidental. British interest in Assam dates from the conquest of Bengal. In fact, Assam first came to the attention of the British *vis-à-vis* their preoccupation with the security of their Bengal administration. Assam came into the direct purview of British administration with the establishment of their supremacy there in 1826. The metamorphosis of the British from traders into colonizers envisaged as a corollary a better understanding of the object of such an endeavour. An essential preliminary to good government in any part of India was the knowledge of the customs and usages of a particular set of people. The interest that Assam evoked was entirely in keeping with this spirit. As William Robinson wrote in 1841 in the preface to his book: "The daily increasing importance of Assam and the conspicuous position it begins to hold as the scene of great commercial advantages to British India, render a *Descriptive Account* of the province a great desideratum."⁶

However, even before the establishment of British supremacy in Assam in 1826, the province had attracted the attention of the British East India Company. Lord Cornwallis, Governor General of India wrote to Captain Thomas Welsh, the commander of an expedition which visited Assam in 1792:

...No pains should be spared to avail ourselves and to acquire every information that may be possible both of the population and of the manners and customs of the inhabitants as well as the trade and manufactures and natural productions of countries with which it must ever be our interest to maintain the most friendly communication.⁷

As a result of this injunction, lengthy accounts of the government, customs and products of Assam were dispatched by Captain Welsh; while Ensign Wood, the surveyor of the expedition, prepared maps of the country, and J. P. Wade wrote historical and geographical accounts of Assam.⁸ Between 1809 and 1811, under the instructions of the East India Company a wide survey of east India and of the territories lying adjacent to it was conducted by Francis Hamilton.⁹ The purpose of these surveys and the recording of facts was evidently administrative with a view to collecting material and writing about the condition of the people. However,

once Assam was constituted as a division of Bengal in 1826, compilation of records on the diverse aspects of Assam was actively pursued under Government auspices. In 1832 Captain Jenkins who was deputed by Lord William Bentinck reached Assam to report on its resources and products. In 1836 Jenkins visited Upper Assam in order to obtain first-hand information about the administration of Purander Singha, a scion of the Ahom royal family. In all probability he made the discovery of the Tezpur plates in the course of this tour.

This promising beginning was, however, not followed up for the next four decades or so. Systematic and serious interest in the historical part of Assam was not earlier than the last decade of the nineteenth century. In 1892 a villager, while ploughing a field near the confluence of the Varuna and Ganga rivers at Varanasi, found twenty-five copperplate inscriptions together. Three of the twenty-five plates recorded a grant by a king of Kāmarūpa called Vaidyadeva (AD 1142).¹⁰ This Kamauli copperplate grant was deciphered by Arthur Venis, the principal of Benares Sanskrit College. In the subsequent decades considerable progress was made with the unearthing of a considerable amount of epigraphic source material. These new developments encompassed both the official as well as the non-official sphere.

In the work done by the government to encourage historical studies in Assam Sir Edward Gait will always deserve special mention. It was at the instance of Gait, a member of the Indian Civil Service, that the tremendous progress in Assamese historical studies was made in the last decade of the nineteenth century. It was at his suggestion that the first attempt to conduct an investigation into the history of Assam through the creation of an official institution was made. The measure was initiated in July 1894 when the Department of Ethnography was established with Gait as the Honorary Director of Ethnography.¹¹ Prior to the institution of this department only two copperplates of ancient Kāmarūpa had been published—the Tezpur copperplates (1840) and the Kamauli plates of Vaidyadeva which were found in Benaras (1892). However, under the auspices of the ethnography department four more inscriptions were discovered—the rock inscription of Harjaravarman (AD 829–830) at Tezpur,¹² the three copperplates and one seal known as the Bargaon grant of Ratnapāla (first half of the eleventh century) in the Tezpur subdivision of

Darrang district,¹³ two plates (the first plate is lost) which formed a part of the Sualkuchi grant of Ratnapāla discovered in Kamrup district¹⁴ and the three plates and one seal known as the Gauhati grant of Indrapāla found in the Gauhati subdivision of Kamrup district (middle of the eleventh century).¹⁵ Through the office of Gait the facsimiles of these inscriptions reached the Asiatic Society of Bengal where they were subsequently deciphered and discussed by the well-known epigraphist, Hoernle. Also, in 1898–99 five plates which formed the Assam plates of Vallabhadeva (AD 1185) were edited and published by another distinguished European epigraphist, F. Kielhorn.¹⁶

In this regard, two facts need to be noted very carefully. First, by the end of the century interest in the historical background of Assam had assumed significant dimensions. In 1897 Gait published his *Report on the Progress of Historical Research in Assam*¹⁷ where a very comprehensive catalogue of all the published material on Assam was included; the books and articles relating to geography were 87, history 40, religion and mythology 46, ethnology 36, philology 64, numismatics 6, and miscellaneous 55. Subsequently and secondly, we need to note the fact that earlier, whereas certain knowledge of the past stopped at the Ahom period (i.e., the thirteenth century), now, these inscriptions enabled scholars to push back the boundary to the ninth century. Relying primarily on these epigraphs, scholars were able to reconstruct the genealogies of two pre-Ahom dynasties i.e., the Sālasambha and the Pāla dynasties. What had earlier been dismissed as a veritable *terra incognita* under the grab of the so called dark ages of Assam now came to occupy with the help of these inscriptions an important place within the mainstream of Assamese history. Nevertheless, in spite of this progress, the epigraphic source material of Assam still carried the status of 'discoveries.' To put it another way, even in 1884 Gunabhiram Barua, while writing on the pre-Ahom period, gave a brief account of the mythological kings relying almost solely on sketchy and unconnected accounts of some medieval chronicles. No attempt was made to collate and relate the information supplied by the inscriptions to write a systematic history of ancient Assam.

Sir Edward Gait in his pioneering work, *History of Assam* (1905), made extensive use of the inscriptions in reconstructing the pre-Ahom history of the region.¹⁸ However, partly because of his

own perspective, and also because Assamese epigraphic studies had not achieved a great degree of sophistication, only fourteen pages were devoted in his book to the period between the fourth century and the thirteenth century AD. Furthermore, his perspective was mainly political, as a result of which his treatment of the non-political data which could be gleaned from the inscriptions was inadequate. Nevertheless, Gait's work was important inasmuch as it was the first to utilize inscriptions in writing Assamese history of the pre-modern times, and signalled the extension by historians of Assam of their field of interest to include a serious study of the ancient period.

As regards the progress in the non-official sphere, it is well known that the second half of the nineteenth century witnessed the flowering of popular consciousness and the growth of an organised national movement in India. As a corollary, pride in India's ancient past came to be increasingly felt and expressed. The chief instrument through which this pride was expressed was by the printed word. Though inspired by a proselytising spirit the Christian missionaries made a significant contribution to the study of the history of ancient Assam. In order to propagatate Christianity amongst the 'backward' masses who were totally ignorant of the English language the missionaries had to learn the vernaculars and to translate the *Bible* into local languages. In addition to religious texts, they wrote grammars, dictionaries and other works which proved to be very useful in interpreting and translating material relevant to history. W. Robinson Bronson's monumental work, *Dictionary in Assamese and English* was published from the Serampur Press in 1867, the earliest of its kind till 1900.¹⁹ Perhaps the crowning achievement of the missionaries at Sibsagar was the publication of a monthly magazine called *Arunodaya* in 1840.²⁰ Started by American Baptist missionaries (who also established the first printing press in Assam in 1840), *Arunodaya* devoted to "religion, science and general intelligence" may have helped in creating a certain intellectual awakening. In fact, the last decades of the nineteenth century saw the birth of a large number of newspapers and magazines in Assam. *Āsambilāsini* (1871), *Āsammihir*, *Āsam Darpana*, *Āsam News* and *Āsam Tāra* to name only a few,²¹ were among the more important ones. These journals dealt with a number of historical, religious and literary subjects. *Bijuli*, a monthly Assamese journal, started by Assamese students in Calcutta in 1890 published a number of articles on Muhammadan

invasions of Assam.²² The copperplates of Balavarman III (last quarter of the ninth century) numbering three with a seal, found in Nowgong, were first published by Mahamahopadhyaya Dhireswar Bhattacharya Kaviratna in the journal *Āsam* from Gauhati.²³

If such journals and newspapers were important in helping to create what can be called a 'historical' awareness among certain sections of the Assamese people, certain societies which were established during this period played a significant role in articulating and systematizing this awareness. The more important ones included the Gyān Pradayini Sabhā (1857) at Nowgong, the Āsamiya Sāhitya Sabhā (1872) in Calcutta and the Upper Assam Association (1880) at Sibsagar.²⁴ Mention may also be made of Āsamiya Bhāṣa Unnati Sadhini Sabhā which originated in Calcutta with the object of promoting the Assamese language and literature.²⁵ The one individual whose contribution was immense in these unofficial circles was Mahamahopadhyaya Padmanath Bhattacharya Vidyavinoda. Padmanath Bhattacharya had begun with the limited object of making the neighbouring Bengal more aware of the real history of Assam.²⁶ With this in mind, in 1908, the Bangasāhitya-anuśilani Sabhā was established in Gauhati. The Sabhā caught the attention of European officers interested in historical pursuits and could also enlist the co-operation of local scholars such as Pandit Hemchandra Goswami, Mm. Dhireswar Bhattacharya Kaviratna, and consequently became transformed into the Gauhati Branch of Bengali Literary Association. In 1911 the Kamakhya session of the North Bengal Literary Society on the suggestion of P. N. Bhattacharya decided to establish the Kāmarūpa Anusandhān Samiti to investigate the antiquities of Assam.

The Samiti was formed on 7 April 1912 with twelve members. Later it was patronized by scholars and officials like Gait, P. R. T. Gordon, etc. It had its own building where there was a fairly large collection of sculptured stone images, relics of ancient architecture, terracotta plaques, inscriptions on stone tablets and copperplates, collection of old pottery and so on and so forth. The anniversary meeting of the society was held regularly where usually papers on historical, ethnological and allied subjects were read. The working of this society was indispensable in creating a wider interest in these subjects throughout the province. Six copperplate inscriptions and rock inscriptions of ancient Kāmarūpa

kings were brought to light through the endeavours of the members of the society—the Nidhanpur copperplates (six plates and one seal) of Bhāskaravarman (AD 620–43) found at Sylhet,²⁷ the Hayunthal copperplates of Harjaravarman found in the Mikir Hills district (middle of the ninth century),²⁸ and the Kanaibarasi rock inscription (AD 1206) in north Gauhati²⁹ were deciphered and published by Padmanath Bhattacharya himself. The Guwakuchi grant (made up of three plates) of Indrapāla (AD 1071) found in the Kamrup district,³⁰ the Śubhaṅkarapāṭaka copperplates (three in number) of Dharmapāla (first half of the twelfth century),³¹ and the Pushpabhadra copperplate grant (three plates and one seal) of Dharmapāla found in north Gauhati³² were discovered largely because of the endeavour of Sri Hemachandra Goswami.

The new epigraphic material and the insights gained into the historical past of Assam through them were utilized by Padmanath Bhattacharya's *Kāmarūpasāsānāvalī* (1931). In this work he compiled and edited twelve grants issued by Kāmarūpa kings from Bhāskaravarman to Dharmapāla. This was the first and the most significant compilation of historical inscriptions pertaining to the pre-Ahom kings in Assam. However, it was not a complete catalogue of all the relevant inscriptions which had been discovered upto 1931. The copperplates of Vaidyadeva and Vallabhadeva were among those which were not included in his work. Only those epigraphs which Padmanath Bhattacharya had either discovered or discussed or deciphered were included. Furthermore, the translations of the inscriptions and the preface were in Bengali which limited the readership of the book. In fact, the object of the author is apparent when he declares that his work was meant primarily for the descendants of the brahmins mentioned in the inscriptions i.e., the donees residing in the present-day Assam and parts of greater Assam. This as well as the fact that the work was not translated into English limited its scope and its content. Nevertheless, his work and his example were invaluable in the field of epigraphic studies in Assam—he single-handedly discovered and deciphered the Nidhanpur land grant of Bhāskaravarman, which, incidentally, was the earliest and the only grant discovered at that time of the first Kāmarūpa dynasty—the Bhauma-Naraka dynasty.

The contemporary discoveries and the progress consequently made in epigraphic studies may now be summarized. Around the

early 1930s the need of the Kāmarūpa Anusandhān Samiti for a journal came to be increasingly felt and the *Journal of the Assam Research Society* was founded in 1933. Most of the inscriptions which were subsequently discovered were published in this journal. The number of inscriptions which were discovered and deciphered after the publication of *Kāmarūpasāsanāvalī* are quite significant. Approximately, fifteen inscriptions have been discovered, deciphered and published. The most significant progress has been made in the sphere ranging chronologically from the fifth century to the seventh century AD. With these discoveries the political chronology from the fifth century to the twelfth century AD has been satisfactorily reconstructed. In the decipherment and understanding of a large number of these inscriptions, the scholastic pursuits of Sri P.D. Choudhury who has been the Curator of the Assam State Museum and the Director of Archaeology are worth mentioning. Six of these fifteen recently discovered inscriptions are associated with his name—the Umacal rock inscription of Surendravarman (AD 518–42) at Gauhati,³³ Dubi copperplates (five plates and one seal) of Bhāskaravarman in the Kamrup district,³⁴ Parbatiyā plates (two plates) of Vanamālavarmadeva near Tezpur,³⁵ the inscribed image of Sūrya from Kaki in Nowgong (ninth century),³⁶ and the Khonamukh plates (three plates) of Dharmapāla found in the Nowgong district.³⁷ Dr P.C. Choudhury, one time Director of Historical and Antiquarian Studies in Assam has also deciphered and published the text of some epigraphs—the copper bell inscription of Śrī Kumāra (first quarter of the eighth century),³⁸ Harihara image inscription from Deopani (eighth century) in Sibsagar,³⁹ Howra-ghat plates (three plates) of Balavarman III (end of the ninth century),⁴⁰ Gachtal copperplate inscription (two in number) of Gopālavarmadeva (tenth century) found in the Nowgong district,⁴¹ and the stone inscription of Samudrapāla found in Gauhati.⁴² We may also note the endeavour of R. M. Nath, the then Principal of the Assam Civil Engineering Institute at Gauhati, who discovered certain significant inscriptions such as the Umacal rock inscription of Surendravarman⁴³ and the Barganga rock inscription of Bhūti-varman (first quarter of the sixth century AD) found in the Mikir Hills district.⁴⁴

To sum up our discussion on the historiography of the early inscriptions of Assam, a few general points need to be noted. First,

relatively speaking, the number of early epigraphs discovered in Assam in relation to the other regions in India is not large. However, these inscriptions, although few, attain a unique historical significance in the light of the fact that a very meagre amount of archaeological evidence pertaining to this period has been discovered. With this knowledge at the forefront, the limited nature of the analytical work using these inscriptions stands out. Only three works which have been published on this period are noteworthy. Chronologically, they are widely spaced over this century, but the similarity in their methodology and approach to the problem of inscriptional data is striking. In 1933, when Kanaklal Barua published his *Early History of Kāmarūpa*, this approach with political history as the main focus of historical analysis was the framework within which most historical writing on India by Indians was being done.⁴⁵ Whatever may be its limitations, this was the first to fill the vacuum on the ancient past of Assam, and as the first serious step in this direction, this book together with the various articles which he published over the years was certainly significant. In fact, Barua's work provided the basic structure on which the two subsequent works of B. K. Barua and P.C. Choudhury were constructed. There was some shift towards redressing the balance in B. K. Barua's work where the cultural aspects of pre-Ahom Assam were dealt with more adequately, but by and large this did not constitute a departure from the approach that K. L. Barua had adopted.⁴⁶ The work of P.C. Choudhury, first published in 1958, and made up to date in the second edition of 1966, is a very comprehensive survey and summary of the history of Assam from prehistoric times to the thirteenth century, with the primary focus on dynastic history.⁴⁷ Some scholars such as Dimbeswar Sharma have worked on certain aspects of the inscriptions such as language and palaeography.⁴⁸ B. Kakati in two appendices to B. K. Barua's work, dealt with certain place and personal names in the inscriptions.⁴⁹ Much of this kind of linguistic and palaeographic evidence can be carefully and usefully integrated into writing a more complete history of the region. Furthermore, the social and economic data which can be gleaned from the epigraphs have not always been sufficiently highlighted. This is one field in which a considerable amount of useful work can be done. Also, since the epigraphs are spread over several centuries, they throw considerable light on the changes that took place in various spheres of life. The present work hints at the possibilities that can open up when the epigraphic data are processed differently.

THE SOURCES PRIOR TO THE FIFTH CENTURY AD

The purpose of the present section is to assess the extant sources in the following order: (1) Indian literary sources, (2) Chinese literary sources, (3) classical sources, (4) references in early non-Assamese sources, and (5) archaeological discoveries. It would also be worthwhile to assess the value of the aforesaid sources in reconstructing the background to our period.

The earliest reference to Kāmarūpa is available in the *Arthasāstra* of Kautilya. In chapter XI, Book 2, "Examination of Gems that are to be Entered into the Treasury"⁵⁰ a large number of products are mentioned which, according to the commentator Bhaṭṭasvāmin were the products of Kāmarūpa. These are Joṅgaka, Grāmeruka, Sauvarṇakuḍyaka, Pūrṇadvīpaka, Antaratavya and Pāralauhityaka.⁵¹ According to the commentary, Antaratavya is produced on the bank of the river Antharavati in Kāmarūpa and Pāralauhityaka is called after its native land, Lauhitya in Kāmarūpa.⁵² Lauhitya is the ancient name for the Brahmaputra river and in the pre-Ahom inscriptions numerous references to this river are available. Hence, it is possible to surmise that the product belonged to an area through which the Brahmaputra flowed i.e., Kāmarūpa.

Some references to Kāmarūpa, mostly indirect, are found in the two epics—the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. In the opinion of Macdonell the kernel of the *Rāmāyaṇa* was composed before 500 BC, but the latter portions were probably not composed till 200 BC or even later, whereas the *Mahābhārata* may have been compiled between 500 BC and 400 AD. In the *Rāmāyaṇa* Prāgjyotiṣa is described as a city built on an extensive seaside mountain known as Varāha with golden peaks.⁵³ It is also said that the whole city was built with gold and was ruled over by a *dānava* with the name of Naraka. As is well known, from the pre-Ahom inscriptions, Naraka is taken as the founder of the Bhauma-Naraka/Varman dynasty. This reference to Prāgjyotiṣa with Naraka is not entirely coincidental. There are also a number of references to Assam, again called Prāgjyotiṣa in certain sections of the *Mahābhārata*. In the Udyoga Parvan, it is related that in a great citadel named Prāgjyotiṣa, there used to live the valorous Naraka, with the epithet Bhauma.⁵⁴ It is further mentioned that this Naraka stole away the ear-rings of Aditi. Subsequently, the ear-rings were

recovered by Kṛṣṇa who also gained great fame in this encounter in which he killed Naraka. Again, in the same Parvan, it is related that Naraka lived for several *yugas*, residing in Prāgjyotiṣa, and even with the *dānavas* he could not withstand Kṛṣṇa who killed him in a battle and took away thousands of his damsels.⁵⁵

Apart from the Naraka episode, there are a number of references in the *Mahābhārata* to Bhagadatta, his ostensible son and successor. In the Sabhā Parvan, in connection with the northern expedition of Arjuna, it is related that Bhagadatta, the king of Prāgjyotiṣa resisted the Pāṇḍava hero; Bhagadatta was accompanied by Kirāta and Cīna soldiers and many others drawn from the sea-shore.⁵⁶ The battle lasted for eight days and finally Bhagadatta disclosed that he was a friend of Indra and thus could not stand any more in a battle with Arjuna who was as good as his own son. He finally agreed to recognize the supremacy of Yudhis-thira as requested by Arjuna. In the same Parvan, it is recounted that Bhīma, in course of his expedition to the east, reached the Lauhitya region and compelled the Mleccha kings and dwellers of the sea-shore to pay taxes.⁵⁷ Bhagadatta's supremacy over the Cīnas and Kirātas is confirmed by the Udyoga Parvan when it is reported that he joined the Kaurava side with one Akṣauhiṇī of soldiers, mostly Cīnas and Kirātas endowed with a golden complexion.⁵⁸ In the Bhīṣma Parvan a full chapter is devoted to the description of Bhagadatta's heroic feats and the great qualities of his elephant Supratīka.⁵⁹

The data of the *Mahābhārata* in broad terms are fairly consistent. Bhagadatta and Naraka who find mention in the *Mahābhārata* are referred to in the inscriptions as well—in fact, as in the above epic, Bhagadatta, according to the early inscriptions is also supposed to be the son of Naraka.⁶⁰ The reference to a Mleccha kingdom is also fairly common in the inscriptions, especially those of the Śālastambha dynasty.⁶¹

As regards the Chinese sources, Kāmarūpa is chiefly mentioned in connection with the visit of Yuan Chwang during the seventh century in the reign of Bhāskaravarman of the Bhaumarvarman dynasty. However, commercial and cultural relations are testified according to some historians by some earlier Chinese sources. Joseph Needham and P. C. Bagchi among others have mentioned a certain Chang K'ien in 138 BC who was instructed by the Han emperor to proceed as far as the Oxus valley to seek

alliance with the Yue-chis, the Sogdians, the Tokharans amongst others.⁶² One of the most interesting points in Chang K'ien's travels was the following. In making his report to the Emperor, he said:

When I was in Ja-Hsia (Bactria), I saw there a stick of bamboo from Chiung (Chiung chow in Szechuan), and some cloth from Shu (Szechuan); when I asked the inhabitants of Ta-Hsia how they had obtained these, they replied, "The people of our country buy them in Shen-Tu (India)." Shen-Tu may be several thousand *li* to the south-east of Ta-Hsia. The people there have fixed abodes and their customs are very much like those of the Ta-Hsia, but the country is low, damp, and hot. The people ride on elephants to fight in battle. The country is close to a great river. According to my calculations Ta-Hsia must be 12,000 *li* south-west of China. Now the country of Shen-Tu being several thousand *li* to the south-east of Ta-Hsia, and the produce of Shu being found here, that country cannot be far from Shu.⁶³

Chang K'ien had in fact clearly realized the existence of a trade route between Szechuan and India via Yunnan and Burma or Assam. Furthermore, according to Bagchi, this Assam-Burma route to China started from Pataliputra (Patna) which was the ancient capital of Madhyadesha, passed by Champā (Bhagalpur), Kajangala (Rajmahal) and Puṇḍravardhana (North Bengal) and proceeded to Kāmarūpa (Gauhati) in Assam.⁶⁴ It is however important to note that there is no archaeological evidence in favour of this hypothesis.*

Classical writers from about the fifth century BC in the opinion of some historians like P. C. Choudhury, are also said to have referred to the people and place names of ancient Assam.⁶⁵ It has been pointed out that the first person to mention the regions of Assam is Hekataeus of Miletus (500 BC) who mentions such people as the Indoi, Kakatai, Opiai, etc. of India. However, according to J. W. McCrindle, the *Geography* of Hekataeus of Miletus has been lost and is only known from fragments of its contents cited in works of later dates.⁶⁶ Herodotus mentions the Kalatai along with Gandarioi and Padaioi. Kakatai or Kalatai mentioned by

* Appendix III.

Hekataeus and Herodotus have been tentatively identified with the Kalitas of Assam by P. C. Choudhury.⁶⁷ However, it is extremely difficult to satisfactorily identify the persons and peoples mentioned by classical writers. Furthermore, most of the names mentioned by them have been identified with regions around the Indus river e.g., Indoi is Indus, the Opiai is a race on the banks of the Indus, Kaspapyros a Gandharic city. Therefore, it is likely that Kalatiai was either a people or a region contiguous to the north-west, and that this term does not have any relevance to north-east India.

A much more solid reference to Assam is found in one of the contemporary inscriptions of the period. In the Allahabad pillar inscription of Samudragupta, Kāmarūpa is mentioned.⁶⁸ In this inscription, Kāmarūpa is mentioned as a frontier kingdom along with Samatata, Ḍavāka, Nepa, and Kartrpura, the kings of which submitted to the imperial commands of Samudragupta "by giving all kinds of taxes and obeying his orders."⁶⁹ There is no reason to doubt the historical authenticity of this record. The inference in the Allahabad inscription is obliquely supported by the seal attached to the Dubi copperplates of Bhāskaravarman.⁷⁰ In the genealogy given in this seal, there is a reference to the passing of the throne to Samudravarman whose queen is mentioned as Dattavatī.⁷¹ According to D. C. Sircar, it was fairly common in ancient and early medieval times to give sons and family people the names of the overlord. According to *Kāmarūpaśāsanāvalī*, the names of Samudravarman and Dattavatī were imitated from those of the Imperial Gupta monarch, Samudragupta and the latter's queen.

As regards the archaeological remains, we may divide our evidence into two categories: prehistoric remains and historical evidence.*

Not much can be said about the prehistoric remains in Assam in chronological terms. In the Garo hills area of modern Meghalaya the evidence of a prehistoric succession, related mainly to the palaeolithic period, is gradually emerging. The rich neolithic

* Since the writing of this work, two new works on the archaeology of Assam have been published; R. D. Choudhury, *Archaeology of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam*, Delhi, 1985, and N. D. Choudhury, *Historical Archaeology of Central Assam (from the earliest time to 12th century AD)*, Delhi, 1985. Many of the discoveries and interpretations are referred to in Appendix III.

tradition of Assam exemplified not merely by surface occurrences but also by work at such sites as Daojali Hading and Saru Taru still remains undated. Indeed, there is some circumstantial evidence to suggest that this neolithic tradition continued in some areas of Assam till the nineteenth century.⁷²

The remains of the historic period of Assam prior to the period under study are only a few. The most important among them are the typical Gupta type of sculpture and architecture found at Dah Parbatīya near Tezpur where Gupta type stone pillars have been found. In 1969–71, excavations at Ambari in Gauhati have also revealed a rich archaeological site. The site, however, preserved cultural material only from the seventh century onwards.⁷³

To sum up, the basic historical point which emerges out of the foregoing discussion is that there is a singular paucity of sources on the history of Assam prior to the fifth century AD. That Assam was within the mainstream of events in the Gangetic valley is amply clear from the epic references where there is focus on the legendary dynasty of Assam. However, the transition from pre-history to history in Assam is not clear at all on the basis of archaeological remains (personal discussion with Dr. Dilip K. Chakrabarti). In fact, according to Dr. Chakrabarti (personal discussion), it is the earliest epigraphs of our period which provide the definitive archaeological evidence of the beginning of history in this region. The literary evidence, however, clearly hints at an earlier beginning.

GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

The term 'Assam' is, relatively speaking, of recent origin and traces back to the tradition of the Ahoms who entered the Brahmaputra valley in the thirteenth century. Prior to the thirteenth century the present region was called Kāmarūpa or, alternatively, Prāgyjotiṣa. The variation of the name of the region is only symptomatic of the transformations that have come about over the centuries in the size and geographical boundaries of Assam. Between the fifth and the thirteenth centuries AD. The river Karatoya was accepted as the western boundary. Under the Ahom dynasty the kingdom did not extend beyond Goalpara. After Assam came under British control, the boundary line between Assam and Bengal was the Manas river on the northern

shore of the Brahmaputra, and on its southern bank an imaginary line a little west of the hill of Nagharbera. Today, the river Sonkosa makes a natural boundary between Assam and Bengal. However, over the centuries the Brahmaputra valley has remained the primary focus of historical events. One may mention here that since almost all our inscriptions have been discovered in or around the Brahmaputra valley, our concentration will be on the geography and ecology of the valley itself.

The Assam valley includes the administrative districts of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Nowgong, Darrang, Kamrup and Goalpara. This valley, although it is the eastern continuation of the great plains of India, is a well demarcated physical unit within the girdle formed by the Eastern Himalayas, Patkai and Naga hills and the Garo-Khasi-Jaintia and the Mikir hills. Extending from the easternmost tip of Upper Assam near the bend of the Eastern Himalayas to the west of Dhubri on the border of Bangladesh, the valley covers 56,274 km.

In viewing the physical aspect of this country, William Robinson, a nineteenth-century ethnographer, summed up its most striking characteristic very colourfully:

... the beholder is at once struck with the peculiarity of a perfect plain, studded with numerous clumps of hills rising abruptly from the general level, and surrounded by lofty mountains.⁷⁴

The Brahmaputra valley is made up on the one hand of a flat plain, with very little slope (12cm/km). It is physically demarcated from the surrounding ranges by a 150 km contour and is fairly wide, especially in Upper Assam (80–100 km). It narrows to 55km in the middle where the river encounters the granitic-gneissic projection of the Mikir hills. Beyond this it widens westward, but narrows down again to 65 km on an average when it runs in the gap between the Shillong plateau and the Bhutan Himalayas. The valley widens again to the west until it merges with the North Bengal region.

“... The pleasing panorama [of] a series of hills innumerable ... presented to view, retiring far away in fine perspective ...”⁷⁵ is one of the most pleasurable aspects of the physiography of this region. The largest group of hills within the valley is that of the

Mikir hills—they extend from east to west to about 63 miles, and are in breadth about 27 miles occupying an area of 1700 square miles. The hills which project into the valley at Gauhati, and extend from Nowgong to Kāmākhyā, likewise form another considerable interruption of the flat plain—the latter are prolongations of spurs from the Khasi chain. There are various other hills also such as the hills of Singori, Hajia, Sialkuchi, Garo, etc.

The valley is mainly depositional in origin—it is built mainly by the gradational work of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries, and this brings us to what is possibly the single most significant physical feature of the region—the Brahmaputra river. The Brahmaputra which intersects the whole length of the valley and from which the latter derives its name is the lifeline of the region, both cultural and economic. A delineation of the historical geography of Assam is inconceivable without the Brahmaputra. Known in the ancient period as the Lauhitya and worshipped as supernatural force, this river is indispensably associated with the history and composite character of Assam. Benedictions in the name of Lauhitya i.e., the Brahmaputra are numerous in pre-Ahom inscriptions. In the Tezpur copperplates of Vanamāla it is stated:

Let you be protected by the river Lauhitya, which has sprinkled the body of the celestial being with showers, looking like the rays of the moon polluted with the mud of gold, gushing up on account of the waters dashing against the accumulation of huge gold rocks of the Mount Kailāsa⁷⁶

References to the Brahmaputra can be found also in the Nowgong grant of Balavarman III, the Bargaon grant of Ratnapāla, the Gauhati grant of Ratnapāla and the Guwakuchi grant of Indrapāla, amongst others. Furthermore, Lauhitya is also mentioned in Kālidāsa's *Raghuvamśa*, the Mandasor stone pillar inscription of Yaśodharman and the Aphsad stone inscription of Ādityasena. The consistency of references to the Brahmaputra is suggestive of the manner in which the life of the people of the region has been interlinked with the river.

Incidentally, up to the British period, the regions of the Assam valley were described in terms of their relationship with the Brahmaputra. Wade, one of the earliest British visitors, described the regions of Assam as follows:

The kingdom is separated by the great stream of the Brahmaputra into three grand divisions called Outerkole or Outerparh Dukankole or Dukanparh and the Majulee or great island... the first denotes the provinces lying on the north side of the Berhampooter, the second, those on the south. The Majulee is a large island in the middle.⁷⁷

William Robinson similarly described the natural zones of Assam: "The lands in Assam may in general be divided into three great classes, with reference to the level of the waters of the Brahmaputra."⁷⁸

General Features of the River Basin

The Brahmaputra with its chief tributaries, the Subhansiri, Bhalali, Barnadi and Manas on the north bank and the Dihang, Disang, Dikhou, Jhanji and Dhansiri on the south, traverses an alluvial plain about 450 miles in length with an average width of 50 miles. It receives the drainage of the Himalayas in the north and the Assam range in the south, and continuing its course round the westward spurs of the Garo hills for 180 miles, joins the Ganges at Goalunda from where the river flows under the name of Padma, and reaches the Bay of Bengal by the broad estuary of the Meghna.

The Brahmaputra brings down a mass of silt from the Himalayas and this is sufficient to form sand banks, and even islands in the lower banks wherever it is blocked by any impediment in the current of the river, which thus alters its channel amidst an intricate network of waterways. Broad streams diverge from the main river and rejoin it after a long separate existence of uncontrollable meandering. The tributaries of the Brahmaputra, since most of them drain the slopes of the Himalayas to the south where rainfall is heavy, also bring down a great amount of material which includes not only heavy runoff, but also a very large volume of detritus, the result of excessive soil erosion. A great amount of this material contributes, without doubt, to raising the land surface in the plains by bank spill, but the major consequence of this heavy runoff is the aggravation of the flood congestion of the Brahmaputra.

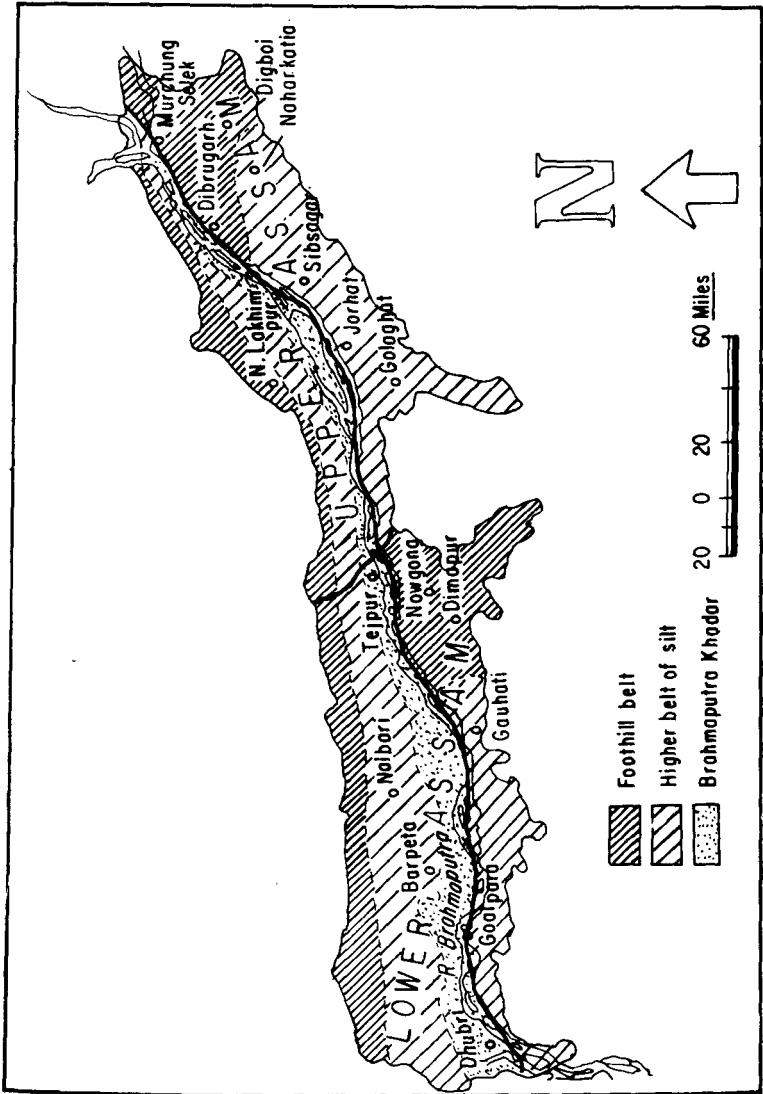
All these diverse features of the physiography of Assam undoubtedly contribute to the character of the soil in the river valley. Of course, over the length of the valley the soil is very varied. However, in general, the soil of Assam is exceedingly rich and well suited to agriculture, for the most part composed of a rich black loam,

reposing on a grey sandy clay, though occasionally consisting of a light yellow clayey texture. Also, in the plain areas of the valley the soil is very friable, since it has been built up and is being raised by comparatively coarse material, without much cohesion between the particles, carried down the hill slopes.

It may also be mentioned that there is a marked difference between the physiography of the north and south banks of the Brahmaputra. In the north, the innumerable tributaries running down the NEFA and Bhutan Himalayas debouch abruptly into the main valley and form a series of alluvial fans which join and obstruct the course of the tributaries near the foothills. Consequently, the tributaries have conspicuous meandering courses leading to the formation of ox-bow lakes, *bils* and marshy tracts. Thus, on the north bank we encounter *terai* or semi-marshy or semi-*terai* conditions with a dense forest cover. In the south, the valley is less wide and uneven. In the south, the headstreams of the tributaries, the Dhansiri and the Kapili have by their headward erosion almost isolated the Mikir and Rengma hills from the main mass of the Meghalaya plateau. The meandering tributaries are also found here but they are more meandering in the eastern part of the southern section of the valley. It is interesting to keep in mind the fact that even in the pre-Ahom period Kāmarūpa was divided effectively along the two banks of the river. In the epigraphs of this period we find innumerable references to *Uttarakula*⁷⁹ (north bank) and *Dakshinakula*⁸⁰ (south bank). The actual position of a place was described in terms of the bank of the river on which it lay. For instance, in the Parbatiya plates of Vanamāla the village called Haposagrāma is described as being situated in the Svalpamaṅgoka district of *Uttarakula*.⁸¹ Apparently, one major subdivision even in the ancient and early medieval period was between *Uttarakula*, covering the whole area lying to the north of the Brahmaputra river, and the *Dakshinakula*, covering the whole area lying south of the Brahmaputra.

Regions of the Assam Valley

The regions of the Assam valley present significant variations. Assam has been divided roughly into two first order regions: the Upper Assam valley and the Lower Assam valley with the boundary coinciding with the demarcation between Nowgong and Sibsagar districts in the south of the Brahmaputra and along the western catchment limit of the Bharali river in Darrang district, north of the Brahmaputra.⁸²



Map 1. Regions of the Assam Valley.

The Upper Assam valley: The Upper Assam valley is made up of Golaghat, Sibsagar and north Lakhimpur. It is physically almost monotonous with, the exception of the low hill ranges along the southern and south-eastern border. It is characterized by high rainfall (almost 200 cm at places) and relatively lower temperatures. The forests of this region can be roughly classified into two divisions—the tropical evergreen forests and the miscellaneous forest. The first category includes vegetation such as *Hollong*, *Nahor*, *Sam*, *Amri*, *GuneseROI*, *Makai*, *Sopa* etc. In the second category such species are included whose top canopies are deciduous and the middle and lower canopies are of evergreen character. In the Upper Assam valley we also see what may be called moist deciduous riverine canes. These include such luxuriantly growing canes as *Jati* and *Lita* and also contain various savannah types as *Ekara*, *Nal*, *Khagari*, etc.

The arable soils in the Upper Assam valley may be broadly grouped into: (1) the old alluvial soils; (2) new alluvial soils of riparian tracts; and (3) hilly soils. The major portions of the arable soils are, however, alluvial soils. Rice occupies the new alluvial tracts immediately adjacent to the Brahmaputra and its tributaries, while tea (which is the main cash crop) occupies the old alluvium with greater acidity. In the areas lying above the usual flood level away from the Brahmaputra, rice is the most important crop. In the Sibsagar district, for instance, 63 per cent of the total crop area of the district is utilized for the cultivation of paddy.⁸³ The other important crops of the district are tea, which occupies 15 per cent of the total crop area, and mustard which occupies 14 per cent.

In the Upper Assam valley the right and the left bank regions of the Brahmaputra differ in their genesis as well as in their economy. Therefore, the Upper Assam valley can be further subdivided into two second-order units i.e., the Upper Assam valley North and the Upper Assam valley South.

The North Upper Assam valley is a region of fertile soils which, with adequate rainfall renders a high agricultural productivity in terms of potentiality to it. But proper agricultural use receives a recurring setback through the devastating floods and frequently shifting courses of the innumerable streams descending from the NEFA Himalayas. The Upper Assam valley North can be further subdivided into three longitudinal belts which make a perceptible

three third-order regions: (1) in the north is the foothill belt which is covered with dense tree forest and is very sparsely populated; (2) coming towards the river is situated the second natural division which is a higher bed of silt which makes up a healthy and homogeneous plain lying between the foothills and the low lying area along the Brahmaputra; and (3) the Brahmaputra *Khadar* which is a belt of flood land varying from three or four to as much as seven or eight miles in width. There is little cultivation except of summer rice followed by pulse or mustard.

The Upper Assam valley south is fairly different from the northern Upper Assam valley. In this region the traditional agricultural economy has been supplemented with the industrial and plantation agricultural economy to a greater extent than in any other part of the Assam valley. As a result, the area is more developed and urbanized. Because of some differences in the economic set-up, the Upper Assam valley South can be further subdivided into two sub-units i.e., (1) the Dibrugarh-Digboi region is an area where growth has been extremely rapid due to oil and coal reserves and (2) the Jorhat-Sibsagar region is more sharply distinguished for its cultivation of tea and the tea industry, as also the great concentration on the cultivation of paddy.

The Lower Assam valley: The Lower Assam valley comprises Goalpara, Kamrup, Nowgong districts, Mangaldoi tehsil and the western fringe of Tezpur tehsil of Darrang district. Unlike the Upper Assam valley this region does not possess monotonous physiographic characteristics since its landscape is interspersed with the Meghalaya plateau spurs. The climate is also different with relatively less rainfall and high temperatures. This climate has helped in the growth of mixed deciduous forests characterized by *Sal* trees. At the turn of the century about two-fifths of the area was under *Sal* and the remainder consisted of equal portions of green forests, bamboos, and grass jungle.⁸⁴ This area has better accessibility with the rest of the country.

Like the Upper Assam valley the Lower valley is physiographically and economically distinctive in the plains along the two banks. The number of transverse streams on the left bank, almost parallel to each other on the regional scale, presents the well developed structurally controlled trellis pattern while the left bank tributaries of the Brahmaputra present lower density and a dendritic pattern. There are a large number of swamps or *bils*

(shallow sheets of water which collect in the centre of a saucer-like basin) in this region. These *bils* are much more numerous on the right bank of Brahmaputra—in the 1905 census it was calculated that in the Nowgong district, which is on the left bank, there were some 57 *bils* which were sold as public fisheries.⁸⁵ In the Kamrup district, on the other hand there were over a hundred *bils* which were large enough to be sold as fisheries.⁸⁶

The Lower Assam valley can be further divided into two second-order regions mainly on account of varying many features: (1) Lower Assam valley North and (2) Lower Assam valley South.

The Lower Assam valley North can be further delineated into three parallel belts similar to its contiguous parts in the Upper Assam valley i.e., (1) the foothill belt where subartesian conditions prevail and the luxuriant growth of evergreen vegetation dominates; (2) the higher belt of silt, which is the region of maximum development. It is a rich expanse of rice land dotted over with groves of bamboos and palm trees; and (3) the Brahmaputra *Khadar*, a zone of frequent siltation and purely agricultural economy. Here crops of summer rice, pulse and mustard are raised.

The Lower Assam valley South has a higher belt of silt extending more widely so as to restrict the *Khadar* belt which is extensive enough in the north to mark a distinct sub-unit. Economic and climatic variations in the Lower Assam valley South are more pronounced east-west than north-south and hence this region can be conveniently divided into: (1) the relatively drier eastern region which may be called the Nowgong region. This is dominated by rice, tea and jute culture; and (2) the western part which is humid and which can be called the Gauhati region. This region is dominated by the rice-jute culture.

To sum up, on the one hand, the Assam valley within its spatial limits has certain constant or uniform geographical features such as the flat plain along the Brahmaputra river and the river itself and further on, the hills surrounding the flat tracts. The entire belt is also uniformly green. On the other hand, in various parts of Assam people have acted upon the region and vice versa, economically and culturally. Therefore, human geography has dictated the delineation of Assam into several geographical belts. It was in the ambit of this background that the history of pre-Ahom Assam unfolded itself.

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