

Historical Interpretations of Kalidasa's Description of Raghu's Conquest of Pragjyotisha

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The description provided by Kalidasa (generally placed between the period ranging from the first century B. C. to the fifth century A. D.) of Raghu's conquest of Pragjyotisha or Kamarupa in his famous work "*Raghuvamsa*" offers little scope for its historical interpretations. The description is, of course, poetical, but the theme is, evidently historical. He is one of those ancient Indian writers (either as a classical poet or a dramatist) whose portrayal of contemporary historical events, as well as, geographical settings is, no doubt, worthy of our attention, to a considerable extent. He appears to have possessed considerable knowledge of some important countries adjoining India's border in the north, east and the west. We also find evidence in the text of his knowledge of the peoples inhabiting the different places conquered by Raghu.

Here it must be made clear, at the very outset, that Kalidasa intended to apply the name Kamarupa¹ to the old province of Assam and the name Pragjyotisha² to its capital town (Pura = Pragjyotishapur), situated on the bank of river Lauhitya or Brahmaputra which is also identified with the modern town of Gauhati.

Raghu was the mightiest and the most illustrious of Ikshvaku kings of the Solar dynasty, that ruled at the city of Ayodhya in the northern Ganges valley in the pre-Ramayanic age. After being installed on the throne as king by his father Dilipa, he set out on his digvijaya or conquest in all four directions, viz. the east, west, north and south with ulterior motive to conquer the populace and potentates of the regions concerned and to compel them to acknowledge him as the sovereign ruler of India.

After having subdued the Parasikas (the ancient persians or inhabitants of that part of Persia, which was lying adjacent to the Indus), the Yavanas, the Hunas and the Kambojas in the north-

west and the tribal people of northern Himalayan region, he descended to the plains, crossed the Lauhitya and finally reached the kingdom of Pragjyotisha or Kamarupa in the valley of Brahmaputra.³

We are further told that as soon as, he ' along with his army' crossed the river Lauhitya, the lord of Pragjyotisha began to tremble out of fear. Raghu's very name struck terror into the heart of the king of Kamarupa, but he later somehow became able to please the conqueror, who was advancing towards his kingdom, by paying him homage in the form of presenting some of his excellent war-elephants with which he generally used to encounter other conquerors. It is also stated that he worshipped the shadow of his (Raghu's) feet (the orb of the splendour or lustre) with the offerings of flowers in the form of precious gems in the same manner as the presiding deity of Hemapitha (corresponding to Svarnapitha, one of the four divisions of Kamarupa as stated in "Haragauri-Samvada", and extending up to Puspika river) was worshipped. This is clear indication of the fact that the king of this land surrendered at the feet of Raghu. The following verses from the text will bear an eloquent testimony to the facts as stated above :—

*Cakampe tirnalauhitya tasminpragjyotisesvarah I
tadgajalanatam prapteh saha kalagurudrumeh II
na prasehe sa ruddhakarmadharavar sadurdinam I
rathavatmarrjo apyasya krta eva patakinima II
tamisah Kamarupanamatya-khandalavikrcmam I
bhejo bhinnakatenargeranyanuparurodha yeh II
Kamarupe svarastasya Hemapithadhidevatam I
ratnapaspepaharena cchayamanarea padayoh II*

All the kings (including that of Kamarupa) conquered by Raghu became destitute of their white umbrellas (an emblem of royalty and independence) and banners and eventually became his vassals. Having thus conquered all the quarters the conqueror performed the Visvajit sacrifice at the end of which he assisted by his ministers of state allayed the wounded feelings of the defeated kings by honouring them with marks of great respect and restored them to their respective thrones in their capitals with their banners, swords and royal umbrellas.⁴ However, the reference to the undisputed universal sovereignty is an indirect poetic expression of an unqualified glorification of Raghu, who out of lust for power led his armies into battles.

The poet, unfortunately does not provide any indication either about that particular king of Pragjyotisha or Kamarupa, who was brought to subjection by Raghu or about the period during which the incident might have occurred, which undoubtedly, mark the desideratum of the narratives. The evidence furnished in the text is undeniably too vague to project a clear picture of the subject concerned. In this connection we should not forget that, after all, it is a poetic description. However, the modern researches on the works of Kalidasa, as well as, the interpretations of the data contained in the text by different annotators lend support to the subjugation of the king of Pragjyotisha or Kamarupa by Raghu. Moreover, there are some other evidences with the help of which we can prove the historicity and determine the antiquity of the episode.

Raghu's conquest of Pragjyotisha or Kamarupa is supported by Mallinatha's (ascribed to the latter half of the 14th century, approximately it falls sometime between C. 1325-1425 A.D.) commentary (Sanjivani) on the text, as well as by the statements of M. R. Kale, ⁷ Bhagavat Sharan Upadhyaya, ⁸ H. C. Chakladar⁹ and S. C. Banerji.¹⁰ R. G. Basak has categorically stated that 'Kalidasa's poetical description (of Raghu's victory over the king of Pragjyotisha) was, undoubtedly influenced by the actual historical occurrences of his time.'¹¹ Walter Ruben has also admitted that Raghu as a valliant warrior achieved remarkable success in his expeditions launched out against India in all four directions. He won laurels of victories over his opponents and thereby brought whole India under his political sway. ¹² Mark Colltins also refers to the ancient kingdom of Pragjyoisha along with other principal kingdoms of India which were subjugated by Raghu.³¹ Regarding the historical validity of Kalidasa's statements Mr. S. P. Pandit has observed that ".....he (Kalidasa).....can not be supposed to have brought down the history of the most celebrated ancient Indian kings to such a sorry end"¹⁴.

The similarity found between the relation of the famous Raghu with the lord of Pragjyotisha (against whom the former launched military expeditions) and that of the Gupta monarch Samudragupta (C. A. D. 335-380) with the king of Kamarupa¹⁵ can no doubt, be held justified, to some extent. Because, Kamarupa during both the periods maintained its autonomy and was not included in either's empire. But its ruler acknowledged the allegiance to both. However, the former event was just a passing phase in the political his-

tory of ancient Assam, and the latter reduced the status of the kingdom to a subordinate state.

Whatever the facts may be, it is very hard to confirm the views held by some scholars that as Kalidasa belonged to the fifth century A. D., his description of Raghu's digvijaya is nothing but a reflection of the victories of the Gupta kings (either Samudragupta or Chandragupta - II Vikramaditya, C.A.D. -380-412 or both) or the defeat of Kamarupa ruler at the hands of Raghu stands for the defeat at the hands of Samudragupta.¹⁶

Actually, we do not find any clue in the text, which associates the event concerned with the Gupta Kings or which shows that the poet ever attempted to delineate the war exploits of Raghu in honour of any Gupta king. As a matter of fact, no Gupta king figures in the text by name. Moreover, latest researches have demolished the hitherto prevalent view that the poet belonged to the fifth century A. D. Thus it will not be reasonable to connect the event concerned to the Gupta period. Nor do we find it possible to endorse fully the view of Walter Ruben that it was "sequel to the artistic inscriptions in honour of similar victories of earlier rulers and a sequel to the tradition of world conquerors, for this ideal of conquest had been held up to every Indian prince for a thousand years". This statement, in fact., questions the authenticity of Kalidasa's statements about Raghu's conquest. Judging by the data available in the text we do not find it relevant. The actual period during which Raghu undertook his campaign against the king of Pragjyotisha has been discussed in the para following the next.

The present writer does not agree with B. C. Law¹⁰ and Ajay Mitra Sastri,¹⁹ who have suggested that Raghu met the Kiratas in the eastern valley of Brahmaputra. It is also said that they either fled away after Raghu approached towards them or were defeated in a battle with him. They no doubt had their settlements in the Brahmaputra valley as evidenced by a number of literary sources, but the Kiratas whom Kalidasa refer to were one of those seven tribes, who were vanquished by the mighty conqueror in the mountain regions of the Northern Himalaya (comprising Kashmir, and Ladakh) and in Tibet region. Moreover after defeating them he came down to the plains and then proceeded towards the Brahmaputra valley. Therefore, we do not find any basis to support the view that Raghu also conquered the kiratas of Pragjyotisha. The above statements can be amply substantiated by the evidences

furnished by the author for the text²⁰ himself, as well as by D.C. Sircar 21 and B. S. Upadhyaya. 22

On the basis of genealogical charts of Ikshvaku kings of Ayodhya, in general and the lineage of Raghu,²³ in particular, the antiquity of episode concerned may fairly be pushed back to the pre-Ramayanic age, when Pragjyotsha was known as a mleccha and an asura kingdom. The king conquered by Raghu possibly, might have been a tribal belonging to this dynasty and having his settlement along with his followers in the hill region in the vicinity of Kamakhya or Gauhati with which sometimes Pragjyotisha as a capital town is also identified. Kalidasa no doubt sometimes touches upon the epic and Puranic details but Raghu's conquest, was definitely undertaken during the period preceding the epic and Puranic ages because he flourished before the dawn of the age of Ramayana.

To conclude, Raghu entered the kingdom of Pragjyotisha or Kamarupa from the Himalayan region in the north in the pre-epic age and conquered it, but did not annex to his kingdom. The king was subsequently allowed to maintain his independent status within his own kingdom.

Notes & References

1. Raghuvamsa (ed by M. R. Kale with the commentary "Sanjivani of Mallinatha, and with a literal Eng. trans, and copious notes, Delhi, 1972), Canto - IV, VV. 83-84.
2. Ibid., Canto - IV, V. 81 B. C. Law (Geographical Aspect of Kalidasa's works, hereafter abbrev, as GAKW., Varanasi, 1976, p. 15) also holds that

"according to Kalidasa the people of of Kamarupa and Pragjyotisha are.....two different nations". In another source (Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental research Institute, Vol.-XVII, pt. III, 1936, p. 241) he has pointed out that according to Raghuvamsa the Pragjyotisha country lay evidently to the north of the Brahmaputra river. Pargiter's statement (of his Eng trans. of the Markandeya Purana, Bibliotheca Indica Series ASB., Calcutta 1904, Vol. II, Pt. II, p. 328, note) that the "Raghuvamsa places it beyond the Brahmaputra" which runs contrary to the truth. There is no such information in the text. Therefore, his view seems to be entirely based on assumption. It is not possible to think that the poet was ignorant of the location of this country. Whether it is Pragjyotisha

or Kamarupa (interchangeable in ancient Indian literature and inscriptions), the fact remains that its king, during whose time the said ancient kingdom extended upto the Himalaya on the north and the borders of China on the east, surrounded at the feet of Raghu.

3. Raghuvamsa (ed. by M. R. Kalo), Canto-IV, VV, 60-81, also trans. pp. 31-33, Notes, pp. 111-118 ; Raghuvamsa (ed. with trans. by Brahma Shankar Mishra, Varanasi, 1956), Canto-IV, pp. 115-18. See also Bhagavat Sharan Upadhyaya, India in Kalidasa, herefter abbrev. as IK (Delhi, 1968), ch, 111, pp. 62-63. H. C. Chakladar, The Geography of Kalidasa (Indian Studies, Past & Present, Calcutta, 1963), pp. 24-25 and D. Sarma (ed) : Kamrupa Sasanavali (originally by P. Bhattacharyya Vidyavinoda, 1868-1938), Gauhati, 1981, pp. 136-38 & 153.
4. Raghuvamsa, IV, 81-84. 5. Ibid., IV, 85-88.
6. See Ibid (ed. by M. R. -Kale), pp. 87-88.
7. Ibid. Intr. XVII & xxxix, also trans. text, p. 33 and Notes, pp. 1.7-19.
8. IK., pp. 63-64. 9. Op., Cit., pp. 23-25.
10. Kalidasa-Kosa (Varanasi, 1968), p. 29.
11. The History of North-Eastern India (extending from the foundation of the Gupta Empire to the rise of the Pala dynasty of Bengal, C. A. D. 320-760), Calcutta, 1967, p. 266.
12. Kalidasa - The Human meaning of his works (Berlin, 1957), p. 42.
13. The Geographical Data of the Raghuvamsa and Dasakumara-carita (Leipzig, 1907), pp. 10-17.
14. Quoted by M. R. Kale, op. cit., Intr. xxx.
15. R. G. Basak, "Historical basis and model for Kalidasa's description of Raghu's conquest", of. Proceedings and Transactions of the Second Oriental Conference, 1922, pp. 333-34.
16. See M. Collins, op. cit., p. 48 and fn., Walter Ruben, op. cit., p. 42 ; S. K. Bhuyan, Indian Historical Quarterly, Vol. V, p. 42.
17. Op. cit., p. 42. 18. GAKW., p. 23.
19. Cf. India as seen in the Brhat Samhita of Varahamihira (Varanasi, 1969), pp. 82-83. 20. Raghuvamsa, IV 76-80.)
21. Studies in the Geography of Ancient and Medieval India (Delhi, 1971), p. 200. 22. IK., pp. 62-63.
23. For details see the genealogical chart inserted in Valmiki-Ramayana Kosha (by R. K. Rai, Varanasi, 1965, p. 136) in which Raghu figures as 21st in descent in direct line from Ikshvaku, the first king of Ayodhya.