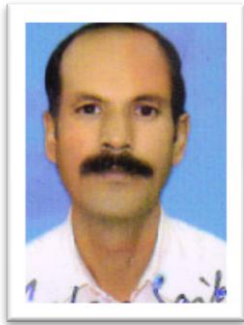


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Behind The Disappearing of Urban Centres Of Pragjyotisa – Kamarupa



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Abstract

Assam which has existed in the north east of India was known as Pragjyotisa and Kamarupa in ancient times and played the significant role in the history. From the later Vedic or the Epic period the land was known as Pragjyotisa and from the reigning period of the kings of Varman dynasty the kingdom was known as Kamarupa. The Kamarupa name for the first time is seen in the Allahabad pillar inscription of the Gupta emperor Samudragupta. In the process of the development of culture and civilization of the land cities and towns were originated and developed in the land from remote past. The finding of the references of the cities like Pragjyotisapura in the Vedic literature and the two epics viz. the Ramayana and the Mahabharata indicates the existence of the cities in ancient Assam during the Later Vedic and Epic period. Some of the important cities that developed in ancient Assam during the period were Pragjyotisapura, Karnasuvarna, Kamarupanagara, Durjayanagara, Haruppeswara, Sonitapura, etc. A distinct culture and civilization was developed in the cities of early Assam.

Although the of ancient Assam developed in different ways it could only survive for a limited period. Some inherent causes played the role for the decline and disappearance the urban centres of Pragjyotisa – Kamarupa kingdom, some of which were -- the changing of the ruling dynasty, changing of civilization, attacks of the neighboring powers, not having the suitable successors, natural calamities etc.

Keywords: Urban Centres, Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa, Disappearing
Introduction

The study of urbanism is a recent area of scholarly debate among the social scientists. The origin and growth of city in history was the result of on going social transformation. It is a unique form of settlement with administrative set up, specialized crafts, industries, markets, socio-cultural organizations like temples, educational institutions, developed transport and communication system and being a centre of more cultured people. Cities and the towns which refer in the sources as pura, nagara, puri etc were flourished in Ancient Assam (Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa). In the present work it is tried to analyze the factors leading to the disappearance of the urban centres of ancient Assam.

Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa was the ancient name of present Assam is existed in the north east of India. During the classical period the kingdom was known as Pragjyotisa but from the reigning period of the kings of Varman dynasty the kingdom was known as Kamarupa. The kingdom played the significant role in the entire periods of history.

Urban centres like cities and towns grew in Prāgijyotisa-Kāmarupā gradually in evolutionary process and before the emergence of urban centres in there were happened to be a cultural evolution utilizing the local environment. This cultural evolution was brought in pre-Aryan period by one Naraka who established a new regime by overthrowing Ghatakāsura, the last asura (non Aryan) ruler of Pragjyotisa¹. Naraka, who was born and brought up at Videha under the care of King Janak, started the Aryanization of the land by settling twice born learned people in the land². This Aryanization led to the socio-political and cultural changes in the land that created the atmosphere for emergence of urban centres like the cities and towns along with other socio-political settlements. Reference of the foundation of city *Pragjyotisapura* by Amurtarāja, son of Kusi³, in the Ramayana bears significant importance in this respect.

Bhagadatta, the son and successor of Naraka played a magnificent role in the Mahābhārata war fighting against the Pāndavas⁴. So the emergence of urban centres in Prāgijyotisa predated the war of Mahabharata. Frequent references of the capital cities in epigraphs like in the Nidhanpur and Doobi Inscriptions and others, issued by the kings

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beginning with the Varman dynasty (4th century A.D.) indicate that the urban centres were fully developed in ancient Assam since 4th century A.D.

The urban centres that flourished in ancient Assam were termed as capital cities (purās or nagaras), forts or strongholds (Skandhāvāra), headquarters of provinces and visayas (adhīstāna), places of pilgrimage, town and cities with the epithet puri or pattana and cities mentioned in the puranas and traditions.

Capital cities that flourished in ancient Assam were Prāgyotisapura⁵, Hārūppeswara⁶, Durjayanagara⁷, Kāmarupanagara⁸, Sonitpur⁹, Kundilnagar¹⁰, Dimāpur etc. The cities termed as the strongholds or victorious camps (Skandhāvāra) were Hārūppeswara, Karnasuvarna¹¹ and Hanchakonchi¹². Inscriptions indicate numbers of visayas such as - Chandrapuri visaya¹³, Dijiinā visaya¹⁴, Hāpyoma visaya¹⁵ etc. with head quarters adhīsthāna¹⁶. Cities were developed in the adhīsthāna of the visayas¹⁷. Few cities of ancient Assam like Apurnarbhava¹⁸ (modern Hajo) developed as the centre of pilgrimage. Cities like Chandrapuri¹⁹, Uparipattāna²⁰, were flourished in ancient Assam with the epithets puri and pattāna. Traditions and literature of Assam mention cities like Alakā²¹, Chandrāvati²², Bhogavati²³ and Varasāna²⁴ which have no existence in modern times.

It is known in the local traditions that Mairānka, the capital city of Mahiranga Dānava, who belong to the pre-historic period of Assam, was the first capital city of ancient Assam. The city is identified with Mairānka parvat (Mairānka hill) near Beltolā in Guwahati²⁵.

In the historical period Prāgyotisapura which identifies as present Guwahati, is regarded as the oldest capital city of Ancient Assam. The existence of two villages namely Jatiā and Dispur at present in Guwahati and another village with the name of Narakāsūr Gaon and a hill (pāhār) with the same name near the village indicates the location of the city of Prāgyotisapura in modern Guwahati²⁶. Mention of the city as Giri Durga (mountainous fortress) and Jala Durga (Water fortress) in the Kālikā Purāna²⁷ also supports the identification of the city as present Guwahati, which is surrounded by hills and the mighty river Brahmaputra. Discovery of ruins at Ambāri, Saraniā hill, Narakāsūr hill, Navagraha, Sukleswar, Umānanda, fortification at Rājgarh (all are in Guwahati) are also supporting factors to identify the city Prāgyotisapura with present Guwahati.

The city of Karnasuvarna, which was previously the capital city of Sasanka of Gaud, brought under Kamarupa kingdom by King Bhāskara Varman (594-650 A.D.) in the early part of 7th century A.D. This was proved by the proceeding of Bhāskaravarman and his army along with Hiuen Tsang to meet Harsa of Kanouj at Kājāngalā near Rājmahal²⁸. The ruins of the city had been discovered at Rājbaridāngā, six miles south west of Berhānpur, the head quarter of Murshidābād district²⁹.

Inscriptions indicate Hārūppeswara as the capital city of Prāgyotisā-Kāmarupa during the reign of the kings of Sālastambha dynasty. Associations of the city with the river Lauhitya (the Brahmaputra) and recent discovery of ruins at Tezpur indicate that the city Hārūppeswara was located at the site of modern Tezpur³⁰ in Assam.

The inscriptions mention Sri Durjayanagara as the capital city of Kāmarupa during the reign of the kings of Pala dynasty, which was embellished with beauty by the river Lauhitya (the river Brahmaputra)³¹. The existence of the city nearby the river Brahmaputra and other references of the inscriptions indicate to identify the city in the site of the old capital city Prāgyotisapura³². The inscriptions also indicate that Dharmapāla (1095-1120 A.D.), one of the important rulers of the dynasty ruled at Kāmarupanagara³³. K.L. Barua locates Kāmarupanagara in North Guwahati near the temple of Asvāklāntā³⁴.

The Kamauli Grant of Vaidyadeva refers to the skandāvāra (victorious camp) of Hansakochi³⁵. Existence of the various places like Suwālkuchi, Guwākuchi, Betkuchi, etc in the present district of Kamarupa which ended with the word 'kuchi' indicates the location of the city within that district.

In the literature like Yogini Tantra refers to the city of Apurnarbhava, which is identified with modern Hājo³⁶, the Kālikā Purāna refers to Barasana city and discovery of ruins of the city in and around present Davaka of Nagaon leads to locate it near Dobakā³⁷ on the bank of the river Jamunā in Nagaon district of Assam.

Sonitapura was the capital city of the traditional king Bāna or Bānāsura ruling in the kingdom with the same name. The textual reference that the city was on the bank of the river Louhitya i.e. the Brahmaputra³⁸, and the discovery of ruins at Agnigarh, Agniparbat and other structures associated with king Bāna in and around present Sonitpur of Assam indicates that Sonitapura can be identified with present Tezpur.

Kundilnagara (modern Sadiyā), the capital city of king Bhismak was located on the bank of the river of the same name, in the extreme north east of Assam. The ruins that discovered by Hannay, consisted of ruins of temple, buildings, copper plates and tanks indicate that the city flourished in Sadiyā and its adjoining areas³⁹.

Dimāpur, the capital city of the Dimāsās was located in the Dhansiri valley of Assam which was established during the pre- Ahom period.

The urban centres of ancient Assam that flourished in different places of early Assam could not survive for long due to certain inherent causes. From 13th century with the establishment new regime by the Ahoms in the easternmost of Brahmaputra valley who belong to the great Sun race, a series of new cities and towns appeared in different places in Assam to meet up the political and economic necessities. The declining of the old cities followed their Destruction, gradually leading to their extinction and at present it is now difficult to find out the least remains of the old

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significant cities that refer in the literature and the epigraphic records⁴⁰. Certain factors responsible for the declining and destruction of the cities of ancient Assam are as the following –

Most of the urban centres of ancient Assam were the capital cities and being the administrative centre the rise and fall of a ruling dynasty affected to the capital cities. Thus in the pre-historic times during the reign of Mahiranga Danava and his successors the capital city of Pragjyotisa kingdom was Mairānka⁴¹ and with Naraka's accession to the throne⁴² till the reign of the last king of the Varman dynasty Pragjyotisapura was made the capital city of Pragjyotisa-Kāmarupa kingdom and, with the establishment of the Sālastambha dynasty the capital of Pragjyotisa-Kāmarupa kingdom was shifted to Hārūppeswara⁴³ and again with the coming of the kings of the Pāla dynasty to the throne of Kāmarupa the capital of the kingdom was shifted to Durjayanagara⁴⁴ and Kāmarupanagara⁴⁵ and finally due to troubles created by the kings of the Pala and Sena dynasties of Bengal during the reign of Kāmarupa king Sandhyā (1250-1270 A.D.)⁴⁶ the capital of the kingdom was shifted to Kamatāpur, existed in the north west part of Ancient Assam. This changing of the capital affected to the prosperity and sustainability and even existence of the earlier capital cities early Assam.

Collapse of the ruling dynasty due to absence of suitable successors in certain kingdoms of ancient Assam was also responsible for the declining of few kingdoms as well as its capital cities. Thus the death of king Bana of Sonitpur⁴⁷ and Bhismak of Vidarbha⁴⁸ led to the decline of the capital cities of Sonitpur and Kundilnagar respectively because there were no any suitable successors to succeed the deceased rulers.

The repeated invasions that made on Kāmarupa by the Pālas, the Senas and the Mahmmedan rulers of Bengal during 12th and 13th century A.D. and the failure of the Kāmarupa kings to resist the invasion was also a factor for the declining and destruction of the urban centres of Ancient Assam.

The first such invasion on Kāmarupa was made by Rāmapāla (1085-1130) of Bengal during the period from 1125 to A.D. 1130 A.D. by insisting his general Tingadeva⁴⁹. In this attack Rajyapāla, the last Pāla ruler of Kāmarupa was defeated and the western portion of Kāmarupa was occupied and Tingadeva was placed as the vassal of Rāmapāla in the occupied territory. But within a short period Tingadeva revolted against his master and thus he was replaced with Vaidyadeva by Kumārapāla (1130-1135 A.D.). Afterwards Vaidyadeva also declared independence from his master and established himself in the throne of Kāmarupa and donated land in the Bādā visaya within Prāgjyotisa bhukti by A.D. 1138⁵⁰. The invasions on Kāmarupa from Bengal were still continued and it is mentioned in the Deopārā inscription of Vijayasena that the Vijayasena conquered Kāmarupa⁵¹ and again the Mādhāinagar Grant of Lakshmanasena also indicates the conquest of Kāmarupa by

Lakshmanasena⁵² which resulted severely to the entire kingdom of Kāmarupa.

Tabqāt-i-Nāsiri⁵³ and Kānāi Varasi Bowā Inscription of North Guwahati indicates the Mahmmedans invasions on Kāmarupa under Bakhtiyār Khilji in 1205-06 A.D.⁵⁴. This invasion was repulsed by Kāmarupa king Prithu. A severe invasion of the Mahmmedans on Kāmarupa was took place in 1256-57 under Ikhtiyār-Uddin Yuzbek during the reign of Sandhyā where the Kāmarupa king was suffered⁵⁵.

These repeated invasions of Kāmarupa from Bengal's sides turned the existing capital city of Kāmarupa into a battle-field and finally compelled the Kāmarupa king Sandhyā to shift the capital of his kingdom from Kāmarupanagara to Kamatāpur near present Koch Bihār in or about 1257 A.D. This shifting of the capital naturally decreased the importance of the old city and thus gradually led to the decline and destruction of the city.

The change of civilization in Assam from the beginning of 13th century A.D. was also responsible for the declining and destruction of the ancient cities of Assam. It was in the beginning of 13th century A.D. that the Ahoms, the descendants of the great Shan or the Tai race entered to the easternmost part of Assam through the Pātkāi pass and established their rule⁵⁶. With the establishment of the Ahoms rule the earlier urban centres Assam lost importance and declined. Some new cities emerged in Assam like Charāideo, Gargaon, Guwahati Rongpur, etc. to fulfill the required necessities of the time.

As in the present day the natural calamities like floods, earthquakes etc. occurred frequently in the land and created great havoc to the people and monuments. The multiplication of the rivers and the heavy rainfall in greater part of the year are the two main factors for the occurrence of frequent flood in the land which has been created damage and destruction in a larger scale to the land since long past. On the other hand the existence of the land in the earthquake prone zone led to the occurrence of the frequent earthquakes of different ranges in different times. It is known that in the great earthquake of 1897, great numbers of monuments were fell down⁵⁷. Thus these natural calamities have been playing the great destructive role for existence of the urban centres of Ancient Assam.

The natural vegetation and humidity of the soil are two natural factors for the damage and destruction of the monuments of the ancient cities of Assam. The growing of the papal tree in the ruins of the buildings or the monuments certainly leads its destruction. The humidity, the acidic nature of the soil of the land also played the role for the destruction of the ancient buildings, the terracotta and historical monuments and other remains of ancient urban centres of the land.

Not availability of the buildings of the cities of ancient Assam as mention in the literatures⁵⁸ and the epigraph⁵⁹ indicates that these buildings were most probably constructed with perishable materials like wood, bamboo, mud, reads etc. Strabo⁶⁰ and Arrian⁶¹ inform that the buildings and forts of the

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Mauryan times built with these perishable materials. It indicates that the city buildings and the palaces of Ancient Assam were also done with the perishable materials which destroyed in course of time.

Thus due to above factors led to decline and destruction of the cities of ancient Assam. This destruction was so severe that it is difficult to find out the traces of the old cities of ancient Assam, which the literature and epigraphs mention.

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