

Rise of Cities in Early Assam: The Causative Factors

Abstract

Urbanization is the process of origin and development of the urban centres. It started in the settled agrarian society in evolutionary process. In spite of the urban centres prevailed in early Assam from the epic period and it played the significant role in history, no proper study to this field has been made till the date. In the present work attempts have been made to analyze the different factors for urban growth in early Assam.

Urbanization in early Assam started in the later Vedic period which started a revolutionary change in the whole pattern of social and economic life of the people in history. It was a complex system and it is observed that there were not certain factors responsible for origin of an urban centre. The notable factors that responsible for the growth of the cities in early Assam were- increased food products, administrative necessities, religion, defence, warfare, geographical factors, individual initiative, trade and commerce, astrology, crafts and industrialization and the like.

Keywords: Early Assam - Cities – Causative Factors.

Introduction

The study of urbanism is an important area of scholarly debate among the social scientists. The origin and growth of city in history was the result of ongoing social transformation. It is a unique form of settlement with administrative set up, specialized crafts, industries, markets, socio-cultural organizations like civic society, temples, educational institutions, developed transport and communication system and a centre of more cultured people. Cities and the towns which refer in the sources as *pura*, *nagara*, *puri* etc were flourished in early Assam (Prāgijyotisa-Kāmarūpa) from the later Vedic times. In the present work it is tried to analyze the factors leading to the origin of the urban centres i.e. the cities of early Assam.

Aims of the Study

Rise of cities in early Assam was an important historical development. It effected in the socio-political-economic and cultural life of early Assam. No one has done work in this important area. The aim of preparing the work is-

1. To find out genesis of the cities of early Assam.
2. To analyse the different causative factors, leading to the growth of the cities of early Assam.
3. To analyse the atmosphere in which the cities of early Assam appeared.
4. To examine the role of the cities in the growth and development of the history and civilization of the land.
5. To have an idea of the planning and design of the cities of early Assam.
6. To fill the gap of the historical study of the land by completing the work.

Modern Assam and north east India at present time was known as Pragijyotisa-Kamarupa in the ancient times. During the classical period the kingdom was known as Pragijyotisa but from the reigning period of the kings of Varman dynasty the kingdom was known as Kamarupa. The name Kamarupa is seen for the first time in the Allahabad Pillar Inscription of great Gupta king Samudraputra. 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 there were happened to be a cultural evolution utilizing the local environment. This cultural evolution was started during the Later Vedic period by one Naraka who established a new regime by overthrowing Ghatakāsura, the last *asura* (non Aryan) ruler of Pragijyotisa¹. 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



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in the land². This Aryanization led to the socio-political and cultural changes in the land, which also created the atmosphere for emergence of urban centres. 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 Prāgjyotisapura predated the war of Mahabharata. Frequent references of the capital cities in epigraphs like the Nidhanpur and Doobi Copper Plates Inscriptions of king Bhaskara Varman and others, issued by the kings of the land beginning with the Varman dynasty (4th century A.D.) indicate that the urban centres were fully developed in ancient Assam since 4th or 5th 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* (*adhīsthāna*), places of pilgrimage, town and cities with the epithet *puri* or *pattana* and the other cities mention in the puranas and traditions.

Capital cities that flourished in ancient Assam were Prāgjyotisapura⁵, Hārupperwara⁶, Durjayanagara⁷, Kāmarupanagara⁸, Sonitpur⁹, Kundilnagar¹⁰, Dimāpur etc. The cities termed as the strongholds or victorious camps (*Skandhāvāra*) were Hārupperwara, Karnasuvāna¹¹ and Hanchakonchi¹². Inscriptions indicate numbers of *visayas* such as - Chandrapuri *visaya*¹³, Dijiinā *visaya*¹⁴, Hāpyoma *visaya*¹⁵ etc. with head quarters *adhīsthāna*¹⁶ and most probably Cities were developed in the *adhīsthāna* of the *visayas*¹⁷. 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 at present.

Urbanization is the epitome of a society advancing towards more civilized way of life; it can be studied and viewed more properly only in a total societal framework²⁵. Urbanization is a great revolutionary change in the whole pattern of social and economic life of the people in history²⁶.

The scholars point out certain causative factors for the rise of urbanization in ancient India as like-increased food supply, increased population, rural unemployment, craft specialization, marketing and trade, social stratification, religion, secular tourism, education, landlords, retainers, administration, defense, warfare, irrigation, geographical location and individual initiative²⁷. Again the economic factors, the iron technology, cultural elements like multifunctional syllabic script and coinage, expansion of trade network, gross surplus which covered wide range of commercial and industrial items and geographical location of surplus flow are also the factors for origin of urbanization in historical period of India²⁸. It was a complex system and it is observed that there were not a certain section of causative factors were responsible for origin of urban centre.

On the other hand the causative factors as like increased food product consisting of rice, vegetables, pulses, mustard seeds etc. that was mainly done with the iron technology, suitable climate, geographical location and fertility of soil of the land played the significant role for the rise of the cities in early Assam. People of early Assam considered the rice as important items that produced in the land and is used as the article for measuring land²⁹. To manage the surplus food products and others the ruling elite appeared, which played the leading factor for formation of the kingdoms and the capital cities in early Assam.

Most of the cities of early Assam were the capital cities which were related to government and administration. For administrative purposes the king or the ruling authority was required officials, staffs, retainers, traders and businessmen who were settled in the apex centre of administration of the kingdom which ultimately led to transform the centre to the capital cities. So the administrative compulsion was one of the prime factors for the origin of the cities in Ancient Assam.

The increasing importance of certain religious centre was also the causative factor for origin of the cities in early Assam. It transformed the religious centre to the dwelling place of different classes of people as like the priest, attendants of the temples, officials, traders etc. which ultimately transform the centre to the capital cities. As instance the city of Hārupperwara, the capital city of the Salastamba kings emerged centering the temple of Hatakasulin (lord Siva)³⁰. The city Apurnarbhava (modern Hajo) was also originated centering a religious centre³¹.

The factors like defense, warfare and military activities were also responsible for emergence of cities in Early Assam. The mentionable capital cities of early Assam in this respect were – Karnasuvāna³², Hārupperwara³³, and Hansakochi³⁴ which were mentioned in the inscriptions as *Jayaskandhāvāra* or *Skandhāvāra* meaning the victorious camp. Another such type of city was Sonitpur, the capital city of king Banāsura which got its name with the great bloodshed that committed during the battle occurred between Banāsura, the king of Sonitpur and Sri Krishna of Dwāraka on the issue of the secret marriage of Usha, the daughter of king Banasura and Anirudha, the grandson of Sri Krishna which later converted to the battle of *Hari- Hara* (Hari-Sri Krishna and Hara, the god Siva)³⁵.

Geographical location also played as the factor for the growth of cities in particular places in Early Assam. For security and strategic purposes the creators of the cities of Early Assam considered the geographical location as one of the important consideration for building their cities. Considering the ideas of natural protection, hygiene, good communication system and water facility the city builders of Early Assam established their capital cities like Prāgjyotisapura, Hārupperwara, Durjayanagara, Kāmarupanagara, Sunitapura etc. in the suitable and healthy geographical atmosphere.

Changing of civilization and the dynasties were also a factor for emergence the cities of Early Assam. Traditions indicate that during the reign of the pre-historic *Asura* or *Dānava* rulers Mairānka

(adjacent to the Mairānka parvat, near Guwahati) was the capital city Pre-historic Assam³⁶. With the establishment of Naraka's rule in Prāgjyotisa kingdom Prāgjyotisapura was emerged as the capital city. During the reign of the kings of the Naraka-Bhagadatta (From Pre-Bharata War time) and the Varman dynasty (A.D.335-650) Prāgjyotisapura remained as the capital City of the land, but with the establishment of the Salastambha dynasty (A.D. 650-990) in the throne of Early Assam the capital was shifted to Hārappeswara, and during the reign of the kings of the Pāla dynasty (A.D.990-1130), Kāmarupanagara and Durjayanagara emerged as the capital cities of ancient Assam.

The feudal chiefs and the landlords of ancient Assam also contributed to the growth and sustenance of the cities in ancient Assam. Inscriptions of Assam indicate the feudal chiefs who came to pay their homage to the kings of Kamarupa mounting on the back of the elephants, horses and *Sivikas* (palkins)³⁷. Their tributes and contributions paid to the kings of Early Assam played the important role for building and strengthening the cities of the land.

Individual initiative was also a noticeable factor for the urbanization in Early Assam. In the Adikanda Ramayana it is mentioned that the city Prāgjyotisapura was founded by Amurtaraja, the son of Kusi. There is a reference in the Doobi grant that Susthitavarman founded a new city on the bank of river Brahmaputra along with his citizens, friends and relatives³⁸. King Bhismak, the ruler of Vidarbha was the originator of the city of Bhismaknagar (most probably the city got its name after the name of king Bhismak).

For emergence and sustenance of the cities in Early Assam trade and commerce also played the significant role. The river Brahmaputra had been using as the route of communication since the time immemorial and locating most of the ancient cities of Assam on the bank of rivers indicate that with the prospect of using the river for the trade route the cities were built on the banks of the river. The crowded decorative boats that waiting in the river of Brahmaputra nearby the city³⁹, and the reference of the Kaivarta class⁴⁰, and *vīpanis* (shops) of the cities filled with shining ornaments (*..vīpanivadhrītapadmarāga shovīsta..*)⁴¹ indicate that the trade and commerce played the significant role for rise, development and sustenance of the cities of Early Assam. From reference in the inscription it is known that the king of ancient Assam specially honoured the merchant class and placed them in the court along with high ranked officials and princes of the noble birth⁴².

It is said that the contact that held between the Aryans and the non-Aryans contributed to the emergence of the cities of ancient India. Many of the people of non-Aryans like the *ponis*, *dāsas* and *dasyus* were more skilled in trade and warfare than the Aryans⁴³. Thus most of the rulers of early times maintained cordial relation with the conquered non-Aryans. Their ideas and labours contributed a lot to urbanize in the society. Although it is said that Naraka was the symbol of Aryanization in ancient Assam he was also was known as the friend of the *Asuras*.⁴⁴ The soldiers of his son Bhagadatta belonged to the

Kiratas, *Cinas* etc⁴⁵ who were identified as the non-Aryans. So it is evident that the non-Aryans played a great role in emergence and development of urbanization in Early Assam.

The antiquities of Prāgjyotisapura, the capital cities of Early Assam indicate that factor like astrology was played the role for the origin of the cities in ancient Assam. As for instance the origin of the name *Prāgjyotisa* is related to astronomical observations, which means the 'land of eastern astrology'⁴⁶. The existence of the temple of *Nava Graha* (Nine Planets) within Guwahati confirms the statement.

Craft and industrialization was also a factor for urbanization in ancient Assam. Inclusion of various rare handicrafts and industrial products to offer as present by Bhāskaravarman to Harsavardhan of Kanouj and to Hiuen Tsang⁴⁷ and indicating some craftsmen in the inscriptions of ancient Assam like *Sekyākara*⁴⁸, weavers (*tantuvāyas*)⁴⁹, potter's village named *Dijjaratihādī*⁵⁰, potters (*Kumbhakāras*) in the inscriptions of ancient Assam⁵¹, discovery of a large numbers of terracotta plaques and other potteries in different places of Assam including Ambāri and Cotton College campus in Guwahati, discovery of an earthen seal at Nalanda region (present in Bihar) witnessed the prosperity of crafts and industries in ancient Assam. The crafts and industry also played a role for development of trade in ancient Assam which ultimately contributed to its urbanization.

Thus it can be said that there was not a single causative factor responsible for the origin of the cities of ancient Assam. The cities were originated with various political, social, cultural and economic factors. This process is still continuing in the land.

The causative factors behind the urbanization varied from time to time and this lead to the urbanization in several processes. These are the urbanization of changing of civilization, urbanization of political processed, urbanization of economic processed⁵². In case of Assam all the processes of urbanization more or less had been followed. Thus during the reign of the kings of the Naraka-Bhagadatta and the Varman dynasty the capital of the kingdom was at Prāgjyotisapura, during the reign of the kings of the Sālastambha dynasty the capital was shifted to Hārappeswara and during the reign of the kings of the Pala dynasty the capital of the kingdom was shifted to Durjayanagara and Kāmarupanagara.

In going to establish urban centers like the capital cities the city builders of early Assam had followed certain planning and principles. They selected geographically and strategically suitable place for building the city. They planned their cities in such places, where it would be well protected, hygiene, and accessible of all essential facilities. They selected the rivers bank as the places for their cities mainly because it would provide abundant water for using in different purposes and also to use the river as the route for communication. They established their cities in the places where there would have maximum natural protection. Thus city Prāgjyotisapura was covered east west and north by hills and forest the southern side by the river Brahmaputra. The other capital cities of ancient Assam also had the similar natural protection.

Arrangement of suitable roads system in the cities was another planning that followed by the city builders of Early Assam. The inscriptions and literary sources indicate the existence of different types of roads within and outside the cities of ancient Assam. Thus within the cities there were the *mahārājāmārga*⁵³ *viṭhi*, *satuspatha*, *rathya*⁵⁴ roads and outside the city there was the *Drihad Āli*⁵⁵ (High Way) which was linked by the *Khetra Āli* (lane roads)⁵⁶. Adequate facilities for maintaining hygiene, sanitation and high civic sense were also occupied the important place in the planning of the cities in ancient Assam. The discovered sites of the cities of ancient Assam indicates that the city builders of the land selected the places of high land on the bank of the river for establishing their cities so that the city dwellers could easily dispose off their garbage and could live the life of pollution free. Reference in the inscriptions that the city of Pragiyotisapura was as free from any kind of epidemic (*Maraka*)⁵⁷ indicates that the kings of Kamarupa were guided by the principle of health and hygiene in selecting the places for their cities. Similarly the plantation of the trees, arrangement of markets and the *vīpanis*⁵⁸, construction of temples, providing water for drinking and other purposes were considered as an important criterion in the planning of the cities of ancient Assam.

To keep the cities especially the capital cities protective the defensive measures were thought to be the primary important in planning and building a city in Ancient Assam. In this regard Kālikā Purāna indicates valuable information. It refers the planning of four types of cities viz. *trikonākṛiti* (triangular), *dhanurākṛiti* (semicircular), *vartula* (circular), and *chatushkōna* (quadrangular) so as to regard a city as protective⁵⁹.

Conclusion

The cities of early Assam grew in the developed stage of the civilization of the land. For the origin and growth of the cities of early Assam one or two factors were not responsible. A series of causative factors led to the rise of the cities in the land. The most mentionable factors in this respect were increased food products, administrative compulsion and political necessities, defense, warfare and military activities, changing of dynasty, religion, economic factors like trade and commerce, geographical factors, individual initiative etc. The rise of the cities in early Assam ushered a new trend to the history and civilization of the land which effected to all socio-political, economic and cultural life of its people.

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Remarking

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