HISTORY OF ASSAM
(5th Century to 1228 C.E.)
Gauhati University
Institute of Distance and Open Learning

MA in History
(First Semester)

Paper II
HISTORY OF ASSAM (5th century to 1228 C.E.)

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Paper Introduction

The modern state of Assam in the northeast region of India was known variously, as Pragjiotisa, Pragjiotisapura and also Kamarupa. The boundary of the kingdom of Pragjiotisa-Kamarupa was not constant in early times. Its western limit was the Karatoya River while the temple of Tamesvari in Sadiya, the Dikkarvasini marked the eastern boundary of the kingdom. Its northern boundary was the peaks of the eastern Himalayas and said to be Mount Kanchenjunga in present Nepal. The southern boundary was the confluence of the rivers Brahmaputra and Laksha. Thus it encompassed a vast territory and was much larger in extent than the modern state of Assam. The history of the land finds mention in the two Great Epics, namely the \textit{Ramayana} and the \textit{Mahabharata}. Prior to it, the history is shrouded in mystery, although one finds reference to it as a land of sunrise, situated in the eastern regions of Bharatvarsha or India. The later \textit{Vedas} refer to its people as Kirata or Mongoloid. The Epics establish relations between its early rulers with their contemporaries in northern India. The reliable history of the region begins only in the 4th-5th century C.E. when the kingdoms of Kamarupa and Devaka, parts of ancient Assam become tributary states of the Imperial Gupta Empire that held sway over the Ganga Valley. These states were said to be located on the eastern frontier of the Gupta Empire, i.e. east of Bengal. During that time rulers bearing the title of Varman ruled over different regions of the Brahmaputra Valley. They were followed by the Salastambhas and the Palas. From the 5th century onwards we find enough evidence to weave a connected history of the land centred round the River Brahmaputra and its tributaries. The River Brahmaputra that flows through the land has given birth to myriad cultures. The rulers of Assam from the time of the legendary Naraka of the Epics, right down to the thirteenth century, encouraged migration from the Ganga valley by granting rent-free lands to learned Brahmans. This in turn brought about many changes in the society, economy and polity of the region. We shall be learning about these changes in this course.

In this semester we shall be learning about the history of Assam from the 5th century C.E. to the year 1228 C.E., the objective of being a broad understanding of political, social, cultural and religious history of Assam during the period. However, during that time the region. Before learning
about different aspects of its history we shall also survey the different ways in which the history of ancient Assam has been dealt with by different historians during different periods. This course will also give an idea about the different sources like literature and archaeology that help us to reconstruct the history of ancient Assam. The evolution of the state under the different political dynasties that ruled over Assam during the time will also be discussed along with the administrative organisation and judicial system. The change and continuity of the political, socio-economic, cultural and religious aspects of Assam history with focus on the Brahmaputra Valley forms the concluding part of the course:

UNIT I
This unit deals with the historiography of early Assam up to the advent of the Ahoms into the Brahmaputra Valley. We shall study about the early trends, subsequent developments as well as current trends prevalent in the writing of history with reference to Assam in the period prior to 1228 C.E.

UNIT II
This unit will make an extensive survey of the existing sources. The different types of literary sources will be discussed in detail. Archaeological sources like inscriptions, coins and material remains will be examined and their importance in reconstructing the history of the region will be critically discussed.

UNIT III
This unit will discuss the various factors leading to state formation in early Assam. Emergence of the kingdom of Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa and its growth under the Varmans, Salastambhas and Palas will be dealt with. The growth of political centres in the Doyang-Dhansiri and Kapili-Jamuna valleys will also be dealt with.

UNIT IV
The last unit shall focus upon the Brahmaputra Valley. Changes in the political and socio-economic structure, the emergence of kingship, feudalism, sources of revenue of the state, its administrative set up and judicial system will all be discussed. The emergence of the varna-jati system social customs, the position of women and the role of the environment on the culture of the region shall also be discussed. Emergence and development of different religious sects like Vaisnavism, Saivism, Saktism and the worship of minor deities shall also be briefly dealt with.
Unit I
Historiography of Ancient Assam

Contents:
1.1 Introduction
1.2 Objectives
1.3 Early Trends
1.4 Later Developments
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1.1 Introduction

Historiography literally means the writing of history, which includes the study of the methodology and development of history as a discipline. It also refers to a body of historical work on a specialised topic. As the history of historical writings historiography also reflects how history was understood in a particular age. The research interests of historians change over time. Thus, when we look at the historical writings on ancient Assam we find that scholars have written different types of history. Many of these histories may not conform to methods of objective scientific history. Yet they are a mine of information on the period. History writing depends upon available sources and critical analysis of the same. Early writers primarily based their works upon literary sources. Very often they failed to submit these sources to scientific examination to test authenticity. Folklore and popular beliefs were incorporated in history writing with an attempt to portray a comprehensive picture of ancient Assam. These pioneering writers paved the way for the next generation of historians who were more scientific in their approach. Archaeological discoveries over the years also contributed to enriching the variety of sources available for reconstructing the history of ancient Assam. These historians focused on different aspects of history and used a much greater variety of sources in an objective manner. Scholars also began to explore different aspects of history such as culture, art,
archaeology, ethnology, economic changes, political developments, etc. and did not confine their writings to political history. Today historians writing on ancient Assam rarely write comprehensive works covering the whole history of the region. They generally focus upon only certain aspects of history. These works are much more specialized in their approach and content. Modern day historians also have access to a much more great variety of sources at their disposal. This enables them to cross reference their data to verify authenticity of the material. Thus history writing today is much more scientific, objectively and subject to rigorous scrutiny of sources.

1.2 Objectives

After going through this unit you will be able to

- Gain insights into the different types of historical writings on ancient Assam.
- Discuss about the writings of different historians who have contributed to this field
- Examine the strength and shortcomings of these historians

1.3 Early Trends

The state of Assam has a rich tradition of history writing in the form of the Buranjí literature. These historical chronicles belong to the medieval period of her history and were a legacy of the Ahoms who entered the Brahmaputra Valley in 1228 C.E. Prior to the advent of the Ahoms ancient Assam is believed to have produced only a single historical work in the form of the Kalika Purana believed to have been composed in the 10th-11th century C.E. But in this early historical work, myths, legends and history are closely entwined as found in other Pauranic literature of India. Hence this work can only be regarded as quasi-history (like history). However this text offers us a glimpse of Aryan penetration into the Brahmaputra valley and records the socio-religious changes that occurred as a result. The Buranjis, on the other hand faithfully record historical events but at best they are chronicles that are centred round the king and his court. Moreover, as stated earlier they do not deal with ancient Assam or our period of study. (But the word buranjí in course of time came to be used as a synonym for the word history in Assam.) Similar is the case with the hagiographies or biographies of saints, popular known in Assamese as charitputhis. These generally deal
with the life of the Neo-Vaisnavite saints and do not throw any light upon our period.

It is only after the coming of the British East India Company and the introduction of western education in the nineteenth century that we see the emergence of a class of historians that composed what can be regarded as history. A class of scholars who received the benefits of British rule were pioneers in this field. Notable among them was Haliram Dhekial Phukan who wrote a history of Assam in 1829, called the Āsām Buranji in the Bengali language so that scholars from Bengal would learn about Assam’s rich historical past. Maniram Dewan’s Asam Buranji Vivek Rutna is written on similar lines. But the social reformer Gunaviram Barua is generally regarded to be the fore-runner. His Āsām Buranji in the Assamese language was published from Kolkata in 1884. It was the first systematic study of the history of Assam from the remote past to 1875. Unfortunately, the author’s treatment of the pre-Ahom period is very subjective and sketchy. But his account of the geography of the land and the different tribes that live here are fairly accurate.

According to Padmeswar Gogoi, “the section of the book dealing with the early history of Assam is primarily based upon Pauranic traditions prevalent in Assam, folk lore, oral sources and popular beliefs.” Thus, the work dealing with ancient Assam is not very reliable as the sources have not been scientifically and objectively examined but accepted at face value. Even while describing the different tribes of Assam their origin is traced either from gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon or a Kshatriya hero found in the epics. Thus the scholar fails to distinguish between myths seeking to legitimise political authority and historical facts. But one cannot judge Gunaviram Barua too harshly. In the Nineteenth century, in India, historians and writers were not aware of the need to verify the reliability of historical data as modern historians do. Gunaviram faithfully wrote what he and his generation regarded as history. Yet, his treatment of the later sections that deal with the political and economic history of the Ahom period and the rule of the British is based on more reliable sources and contains valuable insights into the social and religious condition of Assam as well. But his was the first comprehensive history of Assam that used so many different sources and paved the way for future historians in the field.

It was nearly twenty years later that Edward Gait wrote A History of Assam. Published in 1905, it was to remain for decades to come the authoritative work on the history of the region. It can perhaps be regarded as the first scientifically written history of Assam. Gait subjected his sources to objective
scrutiny and did not accept myths and folklore as history. While Gunaviram had devoted equal space to the ancient, medieval and modern periods of Assam’s history, Gait’s work passes lightly over the early period and primarily deals with the history of the Ahoms in Assam ending with the advent of the East India Company into the province. In spite of his best intentions, Gait was greatly hampered by the fact that as a foreigner, he was unaware of the local customs and traditions. He sometimes misrepresented facts due to his ignorance of the local language. He was also greatly dependent upon scholars from Bengal, (who were unsympathetic to the local Assamese culture), to translate local texts and inscriptions. Moreover, Gait was a British officer, the product of an industrial nation that followed an imperial policy and had colonised India. His value judgements on Assam and its people are necessarily influenced by his imperial outlook and the notion of “the white man’s burden of civilising the non-West.” In 1926 a revised edition of Gait’s work was published. When Gait wrote, a great number of inscriptions issued by the early rulers of Assam had not yet been discovered. Archaeological explorations had been undertaken in Daparatiya and Sadiya by the Archaeological Survey of India in the first decade of the twentieth century itself, but Gait primarily based his work on literary accounts. Unfortunately, literary sources for the history of the period, i.e. ancient Assam, were very scanty. Due to the abundance of literary material for the medieval period, he concentrated on that era alone. But his work is focussed mainly upon the Ahom kingdom and other powers like the Koch are not adequately discussed except in relation to the Ahoms.

Meanwhile, in 1912 the Kumarupa Anusandhan Samiti (also known as the Assam Research Society) was established in Guwahati. Its primary objective was to undertake research relating to the antiquities, history and culture of Assam. In 1926, Padmanath Bhattacharyya published a work on twelve inscriptions belonging to ancient Assam. Written in Bengali, this work was the first to shift the focus of scholars from literature to epigraphic studies. Besides a translation of these Sanskrit inscriptions into Bengali, in the introduction to the work there is a discussion on the ruling dynasties of ancient Assam as revealed by a study of these inscriptions. However, political history continued to draw the attention of scholars. In 1933 Kanak Lal Barua’s Early History Of Kumarupa was published. This is the first work to give a comprehensive account of the history of Assam from the pre-historic times to the rise of the Koch kingdom in the sixteenth century C.E. Based on the great variety and quantity of historical materials at his disposal, it presents the political and cultural history of Assam in a chronological
sequence. Kanak Lal Barua was one of the founders of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti and he also contributed to its scholarly publication in English, known as the *Journal of the Assam Research Society (JARS)*. Many of his writings published in this journal as well as other publications were compiled in a book called *Studies In The Early History Of Assam*. Published in 1973, after his death, this work incorporates a very large number of research articles on different aspects of the history of Assam. He was the first scholar to bring to the attention of the academic world, the contribution of the ruler of Kamarupa in withstanding the invasion of Muhammad-bin-Bakhtiyar Khilji in 1205 C.E. at a time when the Turko-Afghan hordes had overrun nearly the whole of northern India.

Although K.I. Barua was the first historian to concentrate on the history of ancient and early medieval Assam, the practice of writing comprehensive accounts continued. In 1949 was published Pratap Chandra Choudhury’s *History of Civilization of the People of Assam to the 12th century A.D.* Like his predecessors, he too concentrated on political history. However, for the first time we find separate sections devoted to religion, society, economy, as well as an appendix containing details of archaeological remains like temples and sculptures. He had access to much more quantity and variety of sources than his predecessors. A revised edition was published in 1966, but like Edward Gait’s work, on the medieval period, this book still continues to be a standard work on the ancient period of Assam’s history. However, at times the scholar fails to use corroborative evidence and often presents speculations and theories as historical facts. There is a tendency to glorify the culture and civilization of ancient Assam. Despite the lack of critical and objective judgement, the book offers students of history an idea of the primary source material upon which the book is based. Herein lies its merit.

From the foregoing discussion one can make certain general observations. Early historians with the exception of Gait and K.I. Barua often lacked critical and objective judgement. They failed to distinguish between myths, legends, folklore and history. Secondly, the style of writing was narrative. According to Lawrence Stone the narrative has traditionally been the main rhetorical device used by historians. Stone defined the narrative as follows: “It is organised chronologically; focussed on a single coherent story: it is descriptive rather than analytical: it is concerned with people not abstract circumstances; and it deals with the particular and specific rather than the collective and statistical.” The works contained a mere narrative of events without analysis of data. The use of examples to represent the whole, rather than statistically verified empirical evidence represents the narrowness of
treatment of these early writings. Thirdly, except for P.N. Bhattacharyya, the focus of history was on political events. This was inevitable, as up to the first half of the twentieth century, the chronological sequence of the history of ancient Assam was yet to be established upon a solid foundation. There were many missing links in the political framework. Fourthly, the idea of writing a history integrating the socio-economic, cultural and religious changes and trends was absent, although Choudhury's work was an attempt in this direction.

Check Your Progress

1. Discuss the contribution of Kanaklal Barua to the historiography of ancient Assam.

2. Bring out the differences in the writings of Gunaviram Barua and Edward Gait

3. What were main trends in the historiography up to the first half of the 20th century?

1.4 Later Developments

By the second half of the twentieth century scholars writing on ancient Assam turned their attention upon hitherto unexplored aspects of history. Birinchi Kumar Barua's first volume on the *Cultural History of Assam* published posthumously in 1951 was a pioneering effort. It covers the period from the pre-historic times to the end of the 12th century C.E. Here the political narrative forms the background for the discussion on different aspects of history like society, economy, religion, food habits, dress and ornaments, position of women, etc. that is the focus of the work. His work is based not only upon literary evidence, but also archaeological remains like inscriptions, sculptures, etc. By this time many excavations had been undertaken throughout the length and breadth of Assam under the auspices of the Archaeological Survey of India and the Directorate of Archaeology, Government of Assam. This resulted in history writing that was primarily focussed upon the discussion of inscriptions, sculptures, temples and other material remains belonging to the period of ancient Assam. To this category belong Dimbeswar Sarma's *Kamarupasasunavali* and Mukunda Madhav
Sharma's *Inscriptions of Ancient Assam*. Both contain English translations of more than thirty inscriptions belonging to the pre-Ahom period of Assam. While the Mukund's Madhav primarily concentrated on the literary merit of the inscriptions, it is Dimbeswar Sarma who sought to reconstruct the history of ancient Assam based not only on the epigraphic evidence but also to correlate it to the material found in the two epics, namely the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* as well as the *Puranas*. His work is further enriched by incorporating an Assamese translation of the inscriptions.

With the development of archaeology we also find works like R.D. Choudhury's *Archaeology of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam* and N.P. Choudhury's *Historical Archaeology of Central Assam*. Both limit their study to the pre-Ahom period, i.e. the 12th century C.E. While the former incorporates a discussion on the sculptures and icons of ancient Assam, devoting only a few remarks to the epigraphic evidence, and ignoring the monuments, the latter concentrates on the remains of Tezpur and Nagaon area. His discussion encompasses different archaeological material like sculptures, buildings, ruins, etc. Both works are descriptive in nature and not interpretive. In a departure from this form, Pradip Sarma in *Architecture of Assam* traces the development of the temple architecture of Assam. Beginning from the evidence of the 5th century C.E. Umachal cave temple he discusses the features of the different temples of Assam as seen in the different periods of her history under different ruling dynasties till the end of Ahom rule in the 19th century. In *Sculpture of Assam* Monoranjan Sharma seeks to understand the emergence of different styles in the sculptural art of Assam, from the 5th century up to the end of Ahom rule. He puts forth new theories and seeks to identify five different sculptural schools in Assam based on different localities and time by a critical examination of the sculptural remains. It is he who first suggested the possibility of a new school of art, indigenous to the area, called the Deopian School of Art. Prior to him scholars like P.D. Choudhury (*Art Treasures of Assam*) and Arun Bhattacharyya (*Icons and Sculptures of Assam*) had written books that were descriptive catalogues that failed to discuss art styles and their development.

In the field of numismatic studies relating to ancient Assam there was a vacuum. Works relating to the coins of the region focussed upon the medieval period. This was primarily due to the paucity of finds. Existing coins were issued either by the Koch, Ahom or Kachari rulers, and coins belonging to pre-Ahom rulers had not yet seen the light of day although literature and inscriptions did refer to the existence of coins in the pre-Ahom period. With
the discovery of gold coins at Paglatek in Goalpara district and copper coins in the region of Tezpur numismatic studies on ancient Assam could be undertaken. But scholars writing on coins were few and far between.

Certain common features can be discerned in the historiography of ancient Assam in the second half of the twentieth century. Although political and administrative history continued to engage scholars, other aspects of history like society, religion, economy, etc., also received due attention. Moreover, archaeological sources like inscriptions, sculptures and icon, temple architecture were also not neglected. But historians continued to focus upon the narratives of the dominant group, i.e. the Sanskritised population. Assam is inhabited by many ethnic communities whose history remained undocumented. Lakhi Devi's *Ahom-Tribal Relations* being the only exception, it however discussed the interactions between the ethnic groups of Assam and the Ahoms from the point of view of the Ahom government. But even such a work was missing in the history of the ancient period of Assam. It was the colonial officials, anthropologists and Christian missionaries who documented the life of the tribes as early as the 19th century during British rule. But these were not histories, but ethnographical studies. History in general continued to be a narration of events as indicated by the sources. But historians, unlike their nineteenth century predecessors, were more discerning and objective, scrutinising sources to determine their veracity. Folklore, myths and legends were no longer mistaken for history. Meanwhile at Shillong in 1989 was established a new academic body, the North East India History Association. Its objective was to write the history of North East India. It provided a platform for historians to present their findings and hold discussions within academic circles to foster a modern scientific approach to writing history. In the coming years it would usher in many changes in the historiography of the region.

Check Your Progress

1. Discuss how archaeological discoveries inaugurated a new trend in the historiography of ancient Assam.

2. What are the common features in the historiography of ancient Assam in the second half of the twentieth century?
1.5 Current Trends

In the last decade of the twentieth century history writing underwent some changes. In 1990 was published the first volume of the Comprehensive History of Assam under the auspices of the Assam Prakashan Parishad. Edited by H.K. Barpujari it was a voluminous work that improved upon the path shown by P.C. Choudhury. It was based upon an abundance of new material and analysis of earlier sources, interpreted and incorporated into the work. Generalisations were abandoned in favour of verifiable statements. Although the economy, society, religion, sculpture, iconography, architecture, etc., political and administrative history are dealt with in great depth, the very nature of this comprehensive volume necessitated compartmentalisation of different aspects of history instead of presenting an integrated holistic picture of the past. This series is perhaps the first attempt, with the exception of S.L. Barua’s A Comprehensive History of Assam that has attempted to present a total picture of the history of the land, from the remote past to the end of colonial rule in 1947, since Gunaviram Barua wrote his Āsām Buranji.

On the foundation laid by previous scholars a new generation of historians were enabled to now carry forth the torch and write more analytical works or focus upon smaller subjects to facilitate in depth study. To this class belongs Nayanjot Lahiri’s Pre-Ahom Assam. She uses the inscriptions of the period, together with corroborative evidence from other sources to delineate a new history of the period. Her study views the different aspects of the history of ancient Assam through the microcosm of the inscriptions. Hemendranath Dutta’s History, Art and Archaeology of Doiyang Dhansiri Valley, Assam based on extensive archaeological excavations, uncovers new evidence of a line of kings in the region of Numaligarh and Deopération, contiguous to the hills of Nagaland, who ruled parallel to the Varmans of Kamarupa from the 5th century C.E. onwards. Earlier Nirode Barua’s Early Assam had thrown light on the existence of cultural zones throughout the valleys of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries, when state formation had already occurred in western Assam. R.G. Basak’s History of North-Eastern India focuses upon the political history of the states of eastern India including ancient Kamarupa. A.K. Sharma’s Emergence of Early Culture in North East India focuses on the archaeological site of Bhaithari (Vadagokugiri) located in the foothills of the present Garo district of Meghalaya, contiguous to the plains of the Brahmaputra. He seeks to interpret the remains in conjunction with the account of the Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang who visited Assam in the 7th century C.E. In History and Archaeology of North East India (with special reference to Guwahati) Paromita Das
reconstructs different aspects of the city of Guwahati in the pre-colonial period based on archaeological sources in conjunction with literary evidence. A long felt need was met by S.K. Bose and Nicholas Rhodes whose work on numismatic studies on ancient Assam is reflected in the first volume of their *Coinage Of Assam*. This work is not a mere catalogue of coins like the *Coinage of North East India*, but a reconstruction of the economic history of ancient Assam using coins and cowrie shells as sources.

The *Proceedings of the North East India History Association*, as stated earlier reveal the current trends in writing the history of ancient Assam. Scholars have written different articles on the period analysing religion, society, economy, land grants, coins, art, material remains, etc. Moreover, studies on ethnic groups of Assam were also receiving the attention of historians. In the backdrop of ethnic unrest and emergence of sub-nationalism among many groups like the Bodos, Dimasa, Karbi, Mising, Rabha, etc., the historical roots of dissension had to be studied. Along with that developed the need to understand their societies, their aspiration, especially their history. Although many works on the ethnic societies of Assam are focussed upon the present time or the early 19th century, documenting their early history and culture has now led to a broader understanding of many current political and socio-cultural issues. Scholars like M. Momin and S.K. Bose are some of the historians who have contributed to the field of studying the land grant system, state formation, economy and numismatics of early Assam. Current trends in the historiography of ancient Assam is also found in the *Journal of the Assam Research Society* and other scholarly publications.

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**Check Your Progress**

1. Describe the changes in the writing of history of ancient Assam in the last decade of the 20th century.

2. How does current historiography differ from that of the early writers of the 20th century?

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**1.6 Summing Up**

After reading this unit you are now in a position to trace the different stages of development in the historiography of ancient Assam. We have learnt about the different trends in the writings of different scholars. The traditional view of history was closely related to myths, legends and folklore. Early
historians accepted popular beliefs about the past as history. In the twentieth century this notion was challenged and historians like Edward Gait and Kanaklal Barua scientifically and objectively scrutinized the sources to write scientifically valid history. But to a large extent history writing revolved around politics, the king and his court and the discourse was on the narrative of the dominant groups. The history of society, economy, religion, etc., remained peripheral to the main political narrative. Moreover, history was often a mere narration of events. But in course of time history became more analytical and also began to focus upon local societies, cities and groups. There was also a focus on archaeology. History was now reconstructed on the basis of hitherto unexplored sources. With the discovery of many new inscriptions belonging to the early period of Assam, these were closely studied. Discovery of coins facilitated numismatic studies. Once the political chronology of ancient Assam was established other aspects of history like art, sculpture, belief systems, etc., also received scholarly attention. Thus historiography has travelled a long way in the last two centuries in Assam. This unit has helped you to understand not only the different trends in the historiography of ancient Assam, but also the different paths travelled in this journey.

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2.5 References and Suggested Readings

2.1 Introduction

Sources are the bedrock upon which history rests. A historian uses different types of sources to reconstruct the past. These sources may be in the form of literature or archaeological remains. Literature itself can be of different types. For instance we have religious texts, biographies, accounts of travellers, dramas, poetry, etc. Again, these may have been locally produced in Assam itself or in India, or may also be the work of foreign travellers, diplomatic records of foreign nations chronicling their contacts with ancient Assam. Religious texts throw a great deal of light upon the religious beliefs and practices of the people. They also contain a wealth of information on the society, economy and culture of the land. Then there exists archaeological remains in the form of old temple ruins, ramparts, coins, inscriptions issued by local rulers as well as by rulers from other parts of India. Besides these,
there are also remains of pottery, mud wells, toys and other artefacts belonging to the early period of Assam's history. In this unit we are going to discuss these different sources on the basis of which historians can reconstruct the history of the region.

2.2 Objectives

After going through this unit you will be able to

- Discuss about the different types of sources with the help of which historians can reconstruct the history of ancient Assam
- Describe the different types of materials provided by these sources and
- Analyse the importance of literary sources, inscriptions, coins, sculptures, buildings, pottery, etc., in reconstructing the history of the region.

2.3 Literary Sources

Literary sources relating to the history of ancient Assam are not very extensive. Literary sources are of two types, indigenous and foreign. The former can again be of different types, like religious literature and secular literature. The latter consists of historical biographies, accounts of travellers, epics, etc. In early times Assam was known as Pragjyotisa and also as Pragjyotisapura. The latter referred both to the land and its capital city. In literature from the fourth century C.E. onwards we also find reference to this land as Kamarupa. References to ancient Assam are found in the two epics, the Ramayana and Mahabharata and also in Kalidas's epic Raghuvamsa. Vedic literature rarely refers to Assam. However we find some references to Assam and her rulers in historical biographies like the Harshacharita of Banabhatta. Besides these texts, we also find information about Assam in religious texts like the Tantrik Buddhist literature and the semi-historical Puranas. Among foreign sources we find references to the land and her people in the records of Chinese travellers, as well as in the court records of the Chinese Empire. In the following sections we shall be discussing about the different types of information found in the literary sources.
2.3.1  Indigenous Literature

Indigenous literature as discussed in the foregoing section is of different types. It can be both secular and religious in nature. While secular literature consists of the treatises on polity and society, drama, biographies and historical accounts, religious literature relates primarily to Brahmanical Hindu Sanskrit texts like the *Epics* and *Puranas* and Buddhist works written in Pali. They also include Buddhist devotional songs composed in a local script. These provide information on different aspects of the history of our period. They throw light upon the political, social, economic and cultural life of Assam.

2.3.2  Secular Literature

References to Pragjyotisa and Kamarupa are rare in early Indian secular literature. The *Arthasastra* of Kautilya (Chanakya) is a treatise on statecraft, polity and society, composed in around the fourth century B.C.E. It refers to imports to the Mauryan Empire of certain items like ‘paralauhitya’, ‘suvarnakudy’ which historians believe were products of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. The famed Sanskrit dramatist Kalidasa who flourished in the Gupta period, around the fourth century C.E. refers to Assam in his epic *Raghuveema*, believed to be loosely based on the conquests of the Gupta monarch Samudragupta. While describing the *digvijaya* (world conquest) of Raghu, an ancestor of the legendary Rama of Ayodhya, Kalidasa states that “Raghu on his campaign towards the north is said to have defeated the Himalayan tribes like the Utsavasankas and Kinnara and crossing the Lauhitya (Brahmaputra) from the north truck terror in the hearts of the Pragjyotisas and the Kamarupas”. The epic suggests that the people of Kamarupa were separate from the people of Pragjyotisa. The Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta also indicates that there were other kingdoms like Devaka, besides the Kamarupa kingdom in the Brahmaputra Valley. The *Dasakumararastra* of Dandin who flourished in the sixth century C.E. refers to a matrimonial alliance between the rulers of Kamarupa and Videha (modern Bihar). In the seventh century we find more details about the political affairs of Kamarupa in a historical biography entitled *Harsacharita*. Composed by Banabhata, the court poet of the Pusyabhubhi ruler Harsavardhana of Thaneswar, this work contains details of diplomatic relations between his patron Harsavardhana and the Kamarupa king Bhaskarvarman. Visakhadatta’s *Mudrakshasa*, a drama set in the Mauryan period makes reference to the Kamarupa king Avantivarman, believed to
be a successor of Bhaskarvarman. The Kavyamimansa of Rajasekhara, a
tenth century text on the history of literature locates Pragjyotisa in the purva-
desa or eastern region of India, and refers to Kamarupa as the name of a
range of mountains therein. Kalhana’s Rajatarangini also contains an account
of the marriage between the Kamarupa princess Amritprabha and
Meghavahana, the king of Kashmir. It also refers to Latitadiya’s campaigns
as far as the Lauhitya and the construction of a stupa in Kashmir by a
Kamarupa Buddhist scholar who accompanied Amritaprabha.

2.3.3 Religious Literature

Religious literature relevant to the study of ancient Assam can be broadly
divided into two categories, namely Brahmanical texts like the Vedic
literature, the two great Epics and the Puranas, and Buddhist texts like the
Tantras and Charyapadas.

Brahmanical Texts

References to Assam or Pragjyotisa in the four Vedas are few and far between.
In the prose section of the Vedas, known as the Brahmanas however, we
find some references to the region. The Satapatha Brahmana records the
extension of Aryan culture up to the river Sudanira (Karatoya). This river
formed the western boundary of Assam according to many traditional
accounts. The Aitareya Brahmana gives further indication of the spread of
that culture to Kamarupa. Gopatha Brahmana records a tradition of the
origin of the name Kamarupa. Pragjyotisha also finds mention in the
Sankhyayana Grhyasamgraha as the land of sunrise. Early Indian literature
referred to the people of Assam as Kiratas. In the Atharvaveda we find
reference to a Kirata maiden digging upon the hillside with a stick for
medicinal roots. She is described as golden coloured. This reference indicates
that the Kiratas were none but the yellow skinned Mongoloid people who
had knowledge of medicinal plants and were probably hunters and gatherers
in the Vedic period. Although the Brahmanas form part of the Vedic texts,
these were incorporated into the Vedas at a much later period.

The earliest reference to Pragjyotishpura, as Assam was known at that time,
is found in the two epics, i.e. the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. These
texts contain details of the contacts and conflicts between the Aryan and
non-Aryan speakers in the post Vedic period. They indicate expansion of
Aryan culture from the Gangetic Valley, further east to the Brahmaputra
Valley and also south of the Vindhya Mountains up to far off Sri Lanka. The Adikanda of the Ramayana records the foundation of the city of Pragjyotishpura "upon the gold crested Varaha Mountain abutting on the fatherless Varunalaya" by Amrutaraja, the son of Kusa and the grandfather of the famous Rishi Viswamitra. The Kishindhyakanda of the epic locates Pragjyotisha in western India and states that it was the abode of Naraka. He is also said to be a friend of Ravana, and Sugreeva sends a group of monkeys to Pragjyotisa to search for Sita. The Varaha Mountain where Pragjyotisha is placed is identified with the Visnu Varaha hill lying contiguous to the Kamakhya hills extending to Pandu and the Varunalaya is probably a reference to the Brahmaputra River. The Mahabharata also contains references to the city of Pragjyotishpura, and to its rulers Naraka, Bhagadatta and Vajradatta. In the Mahabharata Naraka is referred to as a "danava", the son of Danu, a non-Aryan. The Sabha Parva of the Mahabharata mentions Bhagadatta as the king of the mlechhas, a term generally applied to people who were not an integral part of the varnasramadharma or caste system. It also states that the army of Bhagadatta was composed of Kirata and Cina soldiers and the Sagaranupavasin (dwellers of the sea-coast) who fought against the Pandavas in the Mahabharata war. They are described as shining bright, as if clad in gold, a reference to their golden coloured skin. The Kirata was the generic name of the Mongoloid people, but the name Cina was probably applied particularly to the Tibetans and the Bhutanese as China proper was known as Mahacina. The dwellers of the sea-coast were evidently the people living in the marshy region of Sylhet, Mymensing and Tripura.

On the basis of this statement, some historians believe that the kingdom known as Pragjyotasha at the time of the Mahabharata included the greater part of modern Assam combining Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Tripura as well as a part of eastern Nepal. That it covered an extensive territory is evident in the descriptions found in the Asvamedha Parva. While describing the digvijaya (literally, world conquest) it states that Arjun the third Pandava went to north from Indraprastha (modern Delhi) to the Himalayan lands whose rulers he conquered and then came to Pragjyotisa, then under the rule of Bhagadatta. After a fierce battle, the latter accepted Yudhisthira as his overlord. Elsewhere it is described how Bhima the second Pandava prince travelled east and defeated the sagaranupavasin.

We also find references to Assam in the Puranas. These are the earliest Indian texts akin to a historical narrative. They preserve an earlier oral tradition of record keeping. Most of them were revised and received their final form in the Gupta period (4th-5th century C.E.). Although they contain
a lot of myths relating to the origin of creation and the divine, the historical section comprising of genealogical lists provide a lot of historical information. However, it is only in the geographical section of the Puranas that we find reference to Assam. The Markendeya Purana mentions Pragjyotisha along with Udayacala, Lauhitya and Kamarupa as countries in the east. The Vayu Purana also includes Pragjyotisha and the Lauhitya along with other countries in the east. Other Puranas like the Naradiya, Markendeya, Vishnu and the Skanda Purana also provide information on ancient Assam. The origin myths of Naraka, a legendary ruler of Assam is to be found in the Bhagavat Purana as well as in the Harivamsa. Tantrik texts like the Hevaraja Tantra composed in the eight century also refer to the religious beliefs of ancient Assam.

The Kalika Purana, an Upa-Purana believed to have been composed in Assam itself, around the tenth century C.E. contains further details of the story of Naraka. It traces the birth of Naraka to the union of Prithvi or Bhudevi (Mother Earth) and the boar incarnation of the Vedic god Visnu. It relates the story of his birth, his childhood in the court of king Janaka of Mithila (Videha) and how his father Krishna (another incarnation of Visnu) brought him to Pragjyotisapura where he killed Ghataka the ruler of the Kiratas and assumed the lordship of Pragjyotisapura. Krishna asked him to worship the Goddess Kamakhya who dwelt on the Nilachala on the outskirts of modern Guwahati. By the grace of the goddess he became very powerful and arrogant. He harassed the gods and men. Due to his misdeeds Krishna later killed him and established Naraka's son Bhagadatta on the throne of Pragjyotisa. The Kalika Purana is an important source to study the socio-religious history of Assam. It also describes the land and her people and refers to Kamarupa as "trikana" or being triangular in shape. It states that Kamarupa extended from the Karatoya to the Dikkaravasini and was a hundred yojanas from west to east (one yojana = nearly eight kilometres) and the land measured thirty yojanas from north to south.

Another religious text is the Yogini Tantra. Composed in Assam in around the sixteenth century C.E, it is in the form of a dialogue between the great god Siva and his consort Parvati. Their conversations throw light not only on the geographical boundary of ancient Assam, but also on her political conditions. society and religious beliefs and practices. According to this text the traditional boundary of Kamarupa, as indicated by earlier texts extended from Mount Kanchana in Nepal (the Kanchanjunga Mountain) in the north to the confluence of the Brahmaputra and the Laksha in the south. Its western boundary was the Karatoya River while its eastern
boundary was the holy River Dikshu (Dikhow River in Sibsagar District of Assam). It further explains that the Dikkaravasisini was on the western boundary of Kamarupa. This temple has been identified with the copper temple dedicated to the goddess Tamresvari in the Sadiya area of Upper Assam. The traditional accounts as recorded in the Yogini Tantra divide ancient Assam into four regions, called pithas, each separated by rivers, indicating the riverine nature of the settlements. The region between the Karatoya and Sankosh was known as Kamapitha, that between the Sankosh and Rupahi as Ratnapitha, Suvarnapitha lay between the Rupahi and Bharali while Saumarpitha was the region between the Bharali and Dihang rivers. The Yogini Tantra also refers to the city of Apunarbhava wherein was located the shrine of Hayagriva-Madhava. Historians identify this city with the town of Hajo in Kamrup District.

The Haragaurisamvada and Haragaurivilasha are also valuable sources for the socio-religious history of Assam. The former text was composed in Assam in the nineteenth century and incorporates a mythological history of Assam from the time of the Mahabharata. It contains the names of an unbroken line of ancient rulers from Yudhisthira the Pandava up to the time of its composition. It contains the history of territories like Kamarupa and also the Ahom line of kings whose descent is traced from the Vedic god Indra. With reference to the history of ancient Assam, no genuine rulers find mention while we find long genealogies of mythical kings whose regnal period is given in both the Kaliyuga and Saka Era. Like the Rajnala of Tripura, the Rajavali of Bengal, the Madula Pani of Orissa and Chauharol Kumbala of Manipur the Haragaurisamvada provides valuable insights into the gradual process of Sanskritisation of the Brahmaputra Valley and is an important source for scholars of socio-religious history.

Buddhist Texts

Pali literature at the time of the Buddha however, does not refer to either Assam or her people. Thus, in the sixth century B.C.E., the name of Pragiyotisa or Kamarupa is not found in the list of the sasamahajanaapadas. Tantrik Buddhist texts like the Aryamanjusrimulakalpa though not directly related to the history of ancient Assam helps us fix the chronology of historical events in the seventh century in the political scenario of eastern India that also involved Kamarupa rulers. Other important sources for the religious history of ancient Assam are the Tantrik Buddhist poems or songs known as the charyapadas or charyageetis. Composed between the eight
and twelfth century in the region of Assam, Bengal, Orissa and Bihar, these mystical poems were composed and sung by the practitioners of the Tantrik Buddhist esoteric rites known as Mahasiddhas. Some of them like Laipa or Matsyendranath, and Sarahapa was from Kamarupa, and these poems present the rudimentary development of the present Assamese script.

**Check Your Progress**

1. What are the different types of indigenous literature that throw light upon the history of ancient Assam?

2. Assess the importance of Bana’s *Harsacharita* as a source for the history of Assam.

3. What light do the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* throw upon the early history of Assam?

4. Write short notes on the following:
   
   (i) *Kalika Purana*
   
   (ii) Buddhist literature on early Assam

**2.3.4 Foreign Literature**

Many travellers who visited India in ancient times have left behind valuable accounts of the land and people. Classical sources refer to the accounts of ancient Greece and Rome. Soldiers and statesmen who accompanied Alexander’s invasion of India have left us important details of the life of the people. They were followed by ambassadors and traders many of whom have recorded their observations. Pilgrims from China have also provided valuable insights into the life of the people of Assam in ancient times.

In *Periplus of the Erythraea Sea*, an anonymous Greek account of the first century C.E., we find descriptions of a sailor’s travels in Asia where there is reference to a people called Kirrhadia. Ptolemy, one of Alexander’s generals who later ruled over the conqueror’s domains in Africa also wrote an account of his travels to the east. In his *Geography*, composed in the second century C.E., we again find reference to the people of eastern India as Kirrhadia. Historians believe this is a reference to the Kiratas of ancient Sanskrit texts who are described as inhabitants of the mountains and foothills of the
Himalayan ranges. As discussed earlier, the Kiratas are associated with Assam and in the Mahabharata Bhagadatta, ruler of Pragiyotisa had an army of Kiratas.

Besides the Greeks, the Chinese travellers too have documented their travels in India. The Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang (also known as Yuan Chwang) visited India in the first half of the seventh century C.E. too further his knowledge of Buddhism. He documented his experiences in the Si Yu Kì or Records of the Western World. In this book we find details of his stay in Nalanda and how Bhaskarvarma (whom he refers to as Kumar Raja) persistently requested Silabhadra the rector of Nalanda University to send the pilgrim to Kamarupa so that Bhaskara and his subjects could learn about the Buddhist faith. The monk describes his journey to Kamarupa and records that it lay east of the Karatoya river. He gives a vivid description of the countryside, the crops grown there, the capital city of Kamarupa, its king and people. Besides the Harsacharita of Bana it is the only other literary text to refer to the friendship between the Kamarupa king and Harsavardhana of Thaneswar.

Another Chinese Buddhist monk was Hwui Li who accompanied Hiuen Tsang to India. In his account Life of Hiuen Tsang he too gives details about the monk’s visit to Kamarupa. His book supplements the account of the Si Yu Kì and contains details of Bhaskarvarman’s journey by the river Brahmaputra and up the Ganga to meet Harsavardhana at Kajangala.

Chinese chronicles recorded during the rule of the Tang dynasty also throw light on the history of Assam. In the New History of the Tang Dynasty: we find references to Bhaskarvarman’s relation with the Chinese mission that came to Kanauj after the death of Harsavardhana in 648 C.E. The History of the Song Dynasty also refers to China’s diplomatic relations with the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. We also find reference to Assam in the seventh century C.E. account of another Chinese traveller known as I Tsing in the work Memoir composed during the Epoch of the Great Tang Dynasty on Eminent Monks who went to search for the Law in Western Countries.

Some Arabic and Persian works provide us details about the geography of ancient Assam. Chief among them are the accounts of the Arab merchant Sulaiiman that refers to Kamarupa and its location. Composed in 851 C.E. it was however completed only in 916 C.E. by Abu Zayd. Another geographical account is the Hudud-ul-‘Alam, whose author is unknown. Other important works are Alberuni’s Tarikh-ul-Hind and Masudi’s account of India. Minhajuddin-Siraj’s Tabaqat-i-Nasiri contains details of the invasion of the Turkish
Sultans of Bengal in the thirteenth century C.E. They refer to the expeditions into Kamrud (Kamarupa) by Muhammad-bin-Bakhhtiyar Khalji and Ikhtiyaruddin-Yuzbek Tughril Khan. These accounts corroborate the evidence of the local sources and are valuable for the reconstruction of the history of ancient Assam.

Check Your Progress

1. Discuss the nature of the foreign accounts that throw light on ancient Assam

2. Write short notes on the following:
   (i) Classical Greek sources
   (ii) Si Yu Ki
   (iii) Persian and Arabic literature on ancient Assam

2.4 Archaeological Sources

Archaeological sources are very valuable for the reconstruction of history. They are of different categories. Most important among them are the inscriptions. These are the contemporary records of early rulers that give details of the polity, society, religion and economic activities of the period. The study of inscriptions is known as epigraphy. Hence inscriptions are also referred to as epigraphic sources. Numismatic sources refer to coins. Issued by local chieftains, kings and emperors they often contain the names of the issuing authority and provide information on the state of the economy. Material remains refer to the remnants of past civilisation or culture. They are of different types. They may be in the form of temples, sculptures, wells, ramparts and other fortifications, pottery, toys, etc. In this section we are going to discuss about the importance of the different types of archaeological remains in the reconstruction of the history of a region.

2.4.1 Inscriptions

Inscriptions relating to different aspects of the history of ancient Assam are a very important source for historians. These epigraphs are found engraved on rocks, stone slabs, pillars, temple walls, copper plates and clay and metal
seals. Early inscriptions are written in the Brahmi script while others in the Devanagari script. We also find the use of rudimentary Assamese script in an inscription belonging to the thirteenth century C.E. The language of the inscriptions is Sanskrit. More than forty inscriptions belonging to our period of study have been discovered within the territorial limits of present day Assam. Besides these, some inscriptions from other parts of India too provide information about ancient Assam. All these inscriptions give us insights into the political condition of Assam, its society, trade relations, invasions and wars, economy, religious beliefs and practices, the names of rulers, their qualities, administrative structure of the state, etc.

The Umachal Rock Inscription located on the western outskirts of Guwahati city is the earliest inscription so far discovered in Assam. Datable to the fifth century C.E. on palaeographical grounds, it records the excavation of a cave temple dedicated to the Vaisnavite deity Balabhadravami, by the orders of Maharajadhiraja Surendrarvarman, identified with king Mahendrarvarman of the Varman dynasty of Pusyavarman. To the same period belongs the fragmented stone inscription found at Nagajari Khanikargaon in Golaghat District of Upper Assam. To a slightly later period belongs the Barganga Rock Inscription of Bhutivarman, a descendant of Mahendrarvarman. Located in the Doboka area of Nagaon District, it records the establishment of an *asrama* by the king's *vishayamatya* Avaguna. The Nalanda clay seals of Bhaskarvarman, a ruler of the same dynasty, were attached to the letters sent by the Kamarupa king to Silabhadra the rector of Nalanda University. The Doobi and Nidhanpur copper plate inscriptions of this ruler provide us a wealth of information about the genealogy of the Varman dynasty, their conflict with Bengal, their religious leanings, administrative system and names of officers.

The inscriptions of the Salastambhas and Pala kings similarly are very valuable for reconstructing the history of their period. The inscriptions of Balavarman provide us the genealogy of the Salastambha dynasty that ruled in Assam after the death of Bhaskarvarman. The Tezpur Rock Inscription of the Salastamba ruler Harjaravarman provides details about the use of cowrie shells for payment of fines. A land grant of Vanamalavarman records the repair of the Hetukasun temple dedicated to Siva in his capital city Haddapesvara. Salastambha genealogy also indicates a matrimonial alliance with the Rashtrakutas of the Deccan. Their land grants give us a list of the different categories of taxes which formed the sources of revenue of the state.
We find the genealogy of the Pala rulers in the inscriptions of Dhammapala. The latter's Puspabhadrā land grant refers to a city called Kamrupnagarā. The Gachтал copper plate of Gopala refers to constant conflict with the Palas of Bengal. The inscriptions of the Salastambhas and Palas contain a lot of references to the power of feudatory chiefs and their rights over the land, indicating a feudal structure of government. The majority of the land grants of the Varman, Salastambhas and Palas begin with a salutation to different forms of Siva, indicating the religious leanings of the ruling dynasties. However, all of them trace their origin from Naraka, born of the Boar Incarnation of the Vedic deity Viṣṇu.

The Kanai Barāsi Bowa Rock Inscription in North Guwahāti records the total destruction of the Turks that invaded Kamarupa on the thirteenth day of Chaitra, in the Saka year 1127. This incident is also recorded in the Tabaqat-i-Nasiri discussed earlier.

Stop to Consider:

Palaeographers study ancient writings on stone. These experts can help a historian to determine the date of an inscription by studying the formation of the letters of the alphabet which assumed different forms over time. Even when an inscription bears no date, a historian, by studying the internal evidence of the text and with the help of palaeography can fix the period in which it was issued.

Muharajadhiraja literally means a 'king of kings'. This title was used by kings of ancient India to denote their power and authority over other rulers.

A vishayamatiya is a revenue officer in charge of a district.

An asrama refers to a religious institution.

A tulipterushadana is a form of donation equal to the body weight of the donor. During this ceremony, the donor stands on one pan of a beam balance and grain, gold coins or other valuables are placed on the other pan, to balance his weight. In ancient India, kings often donated wealth to earn religious merit.

Chaitra refers to the last month of the lunar calendar traditionally followed in India and corresponds roughly to the period from the middle of March to the middle of April.

The Saka Era is believed to have been initiated by the Kushana king Kanishka and marks the beginning of his reign in India. It begins in 78 C.E. so to convert a date in the Saka year to the Common Era we have to add the figure 78 to it. Many inscriptions of Assam are dated in the Saka year.
Some inscriptions from other parts of India also provide information about Assam in the fourth century C.E. The Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta records that Kamarupa under Pusyavarman, along with the kingdom of Devaka in the Kapili Valley had accepted Gupta suzerainty. The Apsad inscription of the Later Gupta king Adityasena states that his grandfather Mahasenagupta had defeated the Kamarupa king Sushtitavarman on the banks of the Lauhitya. The Pasupatinatha temple inscription of Jayadeva, the king of Nepal, states that his daughter Rajymati married the Kamarupa ruler Harsadeva of the Salastambha dynasty. The Mandasor Inscription of Yasodharman claims to have humbled a ruler of Kamarupa and that the songs of his victory were sung on the banks of the Lauhitya where there were rows of areca nut trees. The Silimpur Stone Slab inscription refers to a *tulapurusadana* of nine hundred gold coins. This inscription was issued by a Brahman named Prahasa who states that king Jayapala of Kamarupa offered him a tax-free land grant along with the coins which he refused to accept. Thus, from the foregoing discussion we have seen that inscriptions are an importance source for the historian as they throw light on different aspects of history and culture.

### Check Your Progress

1. Discuss the importance of inscriptions as a historical source

2. Indicate the different types of information provided by inscriptions issued by other Indian rulers on the history of ancient Assam.

3. Write short notes on the following
   (i) The Allahabad Pillar Inscription and Assam
   (ii) The Silimpur Stone Slab Inscription

### 2.4.2 Coins

Numismatic evidence on ancient Assam is very scanty. Most rulers of Assam probably did not issue coins. We have not found till date, coins bearing the names of early rulers of Assam. In the Paglatek area of Goalpara in western Assam, some gold coins have been discovered, datable to the seventh century C.E. onwards. These are similar to the ones discovered in Bangladesh and Tripura and resemble some coins of the Gupta monarch Samudragupta, known as Archer Type. The coins depict the crude figure of an archer with
bow and arrow, within a circle of dots on the obverse. To the right of the figure is a standard. The reverse bears a crude female figure. The coins vary in weight from 78 to 90 grains (5-6 grams). These coins were probably issued in the Imperial Gupta territories and were used in Assam for trade purposes. The Silimpur Stone Slab Inscription indicates that rulers of Kamarupa probably issued gold coins for special occasions only. The Tezpur Rock Inscription indicates the use of cowrie shells for regular transactions. The evidence of the Harsacharita also supports this. Bana records that Bhaskara presented Harsa with heaps of black and white cowrie shells. As these are found only in the oceans and seas, ancient Assam must have had trade relations with other countries and received the cowrie shells as payments for the sale of locally produced goods.

The discovery of numerous copper coins from the Dhulapadung and Tulip tea estates in the region of Tezpur indicate that at least the Salastambha rulers issued coins. These bear a single alphabet on the obverse, like 'Ha', 'Va' and 'Ba'. The reverse is bare. Assigned to the ninth century C.E. on palaeographic grounds they were probably issued by the Salastambha rulers Harjjaravarman, Vanamalavarman and Balavarman to commemorate special occasions like accession to the throne. Some texts like the Aryumanjusrimulakalpa and the Haragaurisamvada refer to the names of kings by their first alphabet.

Check Your Progress

1. Discuss the evidence regarding the use of coins by the rulers of ancient Assam.
2. Write a brief note on the coins of the Salastambha dynasty.

2.4.3 Material Remains

Material remains as explained earlier refer to artefacts used in early times as well as to remains of buildings, standing monuments if any, sculpture, pottery, etc. The monuments of the historical period are found scattered throughout the region in the form of architecture, sculptures and images. They are useful not only for their artistic value but also for the light they throw on the religious and economic conditions of the people. The temples and images of various deities indicate the popularity of Saivism, Vaisvanism and Saktism and other minor cults like that of Manasa.
The rock-cut caves with Sivalingas at Sri Sri Surya Pahar in Goalpara district are perhaps the earliest shrines of this region. At this site we also find huge monolithic stupas of the 1st century B.C.E. and rock-cut sculptures of Jain Tirthankaras. At Jogighopa and Pancharatna we also find numerous rock-cut caves. We also find the remains of a rock-cut shrine near Kamakhya in Guwahati. The earliest structural temple is found at Dah-Parvatiya in Sunitpur district. These temple ruins provide one of the earliest specimens of architecture and stone carving in Assam. We also find archaeological remains at Bamuni hill in the town area of Tezpur. This area contains ruins of temples and specimens of sculptures dating to 8th to 9th century C.E. The numerous ruins of Chitralekha Udyan (erstwhile Cole Park) in the heart of Tezpur town stand mute testimony to the prolific art activities of the region.

From the scattered archaeological objects of various types, it is evident that Guwahati was an important city in ancient times. Remains of houses, broken images and other remains were found at Ambari. The discovery of extensive remains in the form of more than three hundred icons of various gods and goddesses of the Brahmanical pantheon at Ambari has led historians to believe that it was an atelier or factory where sculptures were produced for local use, as well as for export. Excavations in 2009-10 revealed the remains of a step well and terracotta sealing datable to the 2nd century B.C.E.

At Madan Kamdev Parvat near Bafia Chariali in Kamrup district we find extensive temple ruins and the remains of a big Siva temple. The sculptures found in the remains of Madan-Kamdev bear similarities to those of Khajuraho and Sun temple of Konark.

We also find numerous archaeological remains at Hajo in Kamrup district, Singri in Sonitpur district, Deopani and Numaligarh in Golaghat districts and different places of Nagaon and Sibsagar districts. The remnants of ancient tanks, ramparts and roads indicate the existence of old settlements, while the presence of pottery indicates human habitation. The discovery of stone sculptures made of black basalt, a material whose nearest source is the Rajmahal Hills of Bihar indicate the existence of trade links between Bihar and Assam. Wares were probably ferried by the river route and catered to an elite clientele who patronised foreign goods.

From the archaeological remains of different parts of Assam it is clear that the kings of ancient Assam patronised artistic activities. The remains give a picture of developed architecture and sculpture in ancient Assam. They provide information about the crafts, trade, amusements of the people. Many of the sculptures depict scenes of music, dance, hunting, elephant capturing. 
scenes from domestic life, etc. These can also tell us about the economic condition of the people. They indicate expertise in different types of pottery, stone masonry, stone and metal sculpture, iron and copper smelting, brickmaking, dress and jewellery. But in Assam these have not been excavated extensively as many potential archaeological sites are even today under human habitation. Very often they help to corroborate other sources and also throw light on hitherto unexplored aspects of the history of ancient Assam. Therefore the use of material remains for the reconstruction of the history of Assam is significant.

Check Your Progress

1. What do you understand by material remains? Show how they can help in the reconstruction of the history of ancient Assam.

2. Write short notes on the following:
   (i) Da-Parvatia gateway
   (ii) Remains of Cole Park
   (iii) Sri Sri Surya Pahar
   (iv) Ambari remains

2.5 Summing Up

After reading this unit you are now in a position to discuss the nature and subject matter of the different sources both literary and archaeological, which are used to reconstruct the history of ancient Assam. We have seen how literary texts, both religious and secular contain a wealth of information on different aspects of history. Accounts of travellers also provide insights into the culture of a people. Several archaeological sites have been discovered in different places of this region, but many of them are yet to be fully excavated and studied. Systematic excavations and the study of the numerous archaeological sites of Assam are essential for a more complete understanding of the socio-economic and cultural patterns of this region.
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Unit III

State Formation in Early Assam

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3.5 Summing Up

3.6 References and Further Readings

3.1 Introduction

In this unit we shall learn about the process of state formation in early Assam. What is a "state"? This question is best answered by examining the characteristics of a state. Kautilya (Chanakya) the Prime Minister of the Mauryan Empire, the first historical state in India describes the nature of a state in his treatise the Arthasastra. According to him, a state has seven limbs or parts known as Septanga. A state refers to a demarcated territory known as the Janapada that includes both the land and people. It consists of a central authority in the form of a ruler termed as the Rajan and who governs with the aid of a council called the Amatyas or Mantri Parishad. They collect taxes and tributes from the people and deposit them in a treasury or Kosa, from which the state is maintained. Authority is enforced by means of Bala or Dandu, i.e. force. The state is protected by fortifications termed as the Durga. The state also maintains diplomatic relations with other states. These friendly states are termed as allies or Mitra. The Kalika Purana in a section designated as Rajniti or Politics also refers to these seven constituents of a state. Historians like Romila Thapar, D.D. Kosambi, R.S. Sharma,
amongst others have also described the characteristics of a state that loosely correspond to the Saptanga theory discussed above. According to Romila Thapar, “A State has been described as a sovereign political entity and its rise assumes a complex network of conditions. These would include a density of population with a concentrated drawing on resources, agricultural or other; control over a defined, recognized territory; an urban centre as the location of authority, which would also be the location for craft activities that were produced for both local consumption and commercial exchange; diverse communities coming within a network of stratification and accepting unequal statuses; a political authority managing the incoming revenue from taxes and their redistribution through at least a minimal administration; the assertion of authority through a monopoly of the agencies of coercion, both of armed force and the imposition of regulations and obligations; the awareness of diplomacy; and the sovereignty of the State being represented in the King as the focus of authority. The emergence of a State system frequently coincides with unequal power relations and access to resources and some social disparity. Such changes would also have sought support from various ideological justifications.” (Thapar:2002:138.) Claessen and Skalnik in their Early State also define the state by a number of structural characteristics that correspond to Kautilya’s Saptanga theory. According to them “the early State is a centralized and hierarchically organized political system in which the central authority has control over the greatest amount of coercive force in the society. Sub-units are tied into the hierarchy through their relations to officials appointed by and responsible to a ruler or a monarchical head of State. These officials maintain the administrative structure of the system and attempt to ensure its continuity by having among them a set of electors who choose and/or legitimate a new monarch.” (Claessen and Skalnik:1978:36). However, in their definition of the state structure or factors responsible for the formation and maintenance of the state a common ideology is also given importance. But an ally or mitra finds no mention.

Robert L. Carneiro describes a state as “an autonomous political unit, encompassing many communities within its territory and having a centralized government with the power to collect taxes, draft men for work or war, and decree and enforce laws.” Thus according to Carneiro, a state can be defined as a form of government in which there exists “a centralized authority, hierarchical differences in access to power and basic resources between individuals, reinforced by institutionalized coercion, usually accompanied by the decline of kin structures.”
It is also necessary to enquire into the conditions that enabled the formation of a state, i.e. the causes of state formation. Why do we see the emergence of states in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam? Why did state formation not take place in the hills surrounding the valleys during the period of our study? These are the questions we shall be discussing in this unit.

3.2 Objectives

After going through this unit you will be to

- **Discuss** the causes of state formation in early Assam
- **Trace** the development of the state of Pragiyotisa-Kamarupa under different dynasties
- **Describe** the characteristics of the cultural zones in the Kapili-Jamuna Valley and the Doiyang-Dhansiri Valley.

3.3 State Formation in the Brahmaputra Valley

In this section we shall examine the causes of state formation in the Brahmaputra Valley. However, we also need to have a brief idea about the causes of state formation in general, so that we can examine whether these causes hold true for the Brahmaputra Valley as well.

3.3.1 Causes of State Formation

There are different theories about the origin of a state. These can be broadly divided into two categories, namely voluntary and coercive. According to traditional beliefs, a state was created voluntarily. The Greek philosopher Aristotle who was unaware of any other form of political organisation than the state believed that the “state” had always existed naturally and did not require any explanation. Early Indian writers subscribed to the theory that people voluntarily created a state with a king in charge. According to this theory of origin of kingship, i.e. before the creation of a state, *matsyanyaya* or anarchy prevailed. So the people entrusted a person from among themselves to govern them and end this state of anarchy in which there was only the rule of the jungle where might is right. For maintaining law and order and protecting the people, the ruler or chieftain would be paid in cash or kind. This same theory has been echoed by the French philosopher Rousseau who enunciated the theory of Social Contract. According to V.
Gordon Childe, states evolved naturally. “The invention of agriculture automatically brought into being a surplus of food, enabling some individuals to divorce themselves from food production and to become potters, weavers, smiths, masons, and so on, thus creating an extensive division of labour. Out of this occupational specialization there developed a political integration which united a number of previously independent communities into a state.” However, agricultural surplus is dependent upon many factors like technology, climatic conditions, geography of the land, etc. and seldom happens naturally, and many agricultural communities that existed contemporarily with states did not produce any surplus. According to Friedrich Engels “...At a certain stage of economic development, which necessarily bound up with the split of society into classes, the State became a necessity owing to this split.” (Engels:1884:170.) It was, according to him, with the gradual emergence of private property that the process of State formation began. Thus the formation of a state was inevitable or natural.

Another voluntary theory is Karl Wittfogel’s “hydraulic hypothesis.” He believed that “in certain arid and semi-arid areas of the world, where village farmers had to struggle to support themselves by means of small-scale irrigation, a time arrived when they saw that it would be to the advantage of all concerned to set aside their individual autonomies and merge their villages into a single large political unit capable of carrying out irrigation on a broad scale. The body of officials they created to devise and administer such extensive irrigation works brought the state into being.” (Wittfogel:1957:18). However, many states developed well before large-scale irrigation.

The theory of coercion holds that groups of people that resided in villages under a chieftain were coerced or forced into submission by the chief of a more powerful village or settlement and the latter created a bigger settlement with a centralised form of government to form a state. Sometimes different settlements may have initially joined hands for more efficient management of resources. Their increased prosperity may have attracted other settlements to conquer them and control their resources, thus creating a larger unit with more complex division of labour and diversification of arts and crafts. That war or conquest lies at the root of state formation has often been observed throughout history. Herbert Spencer in his Principles of Sociology states that war or force led to the formation of states. European writers like Ludwig Gumplowicz Gustav Ratzenhofer, and Franz Oppenheimer also support this theory of coercion or warfare in the formation of states. Historical and archaeological evidence indicate that in the early stages of state formation in Mesopotamia, Egypt, India, China, Europe and South America, war played
a decisive role. However wars have been fought in many parts of the world where the state never emerged. Thus, while warfare may play an important role in state formation, it cannot be the only cause.

According to Robert L. Carneiro certain factors are common to areas of the world in which states arose indigenously, as for example in the valleys of the Nile and Tigris-Euphrates in Africa, the Indus Valley in Asia and that of Mexico and Peru in South America. Although these areas differ from one another in in altitude, temperature, rainfall, soil type, drainage pattern, and many other features, they are all areas of limited agricultural land. Each of them is surrounded by mountains, seas, or deserts and these environmental features sharply delimit the area that simple farming peoples could occupy and cultivate. Thus, to increase the land under cultivation and produce surplus powerful communities or chiefdoms had to necessarily conquer the land of the less powerful chiefs as extension of agriculture was not possible beyond a certain limit.

We shall now examine how far the above theories can be applied to the valley of the Brahmaputra in ancient Assam. A study of the historical process in the region indicates that the first historical state emerged around the fourth century C.E. under Pusyavarman, a contemporary of the Gupta monarch Samudragupta. Pusyavarman ruled over the kingdom of Kamarupa and we also find evidence of another kingdom in the Kapili-Jamuna valley, known as Devaka. While not much is known about the latter, the sources indicate that Pusyavarman and his successors primarily used force or conquest to enlarge the boundaries of their state and engaged in constant warfare with their contemporary rulers. But how did the state emerge in the Brahmaputra valley? An examination of the Brahmanical literature indicates the penetration of the Indo-Aryans into the region around 700 B.C.E. Prior to their advent we do find references in the Epics to legendary chieftains like Naraka, Bhagadatta, Vajradatta and Bana who are said to have ruled over Pragjyotispur and Sunitpur. The Kalika Purana refers to the settlement of Brahmans in the valley during the time of Naraka. Prior to that the land was known as belonging to the Kiratas or Mongoloid people who were pushed further east beyond the Dikkaravasini after the death of their leader Ghataka, a non-Aryan chieftain. The penetration of the Indo-Aryan groups into the Brahmaputra Valley set in motion the process of state formation.

The valley of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries comprise of rich alluvial flood plains. The valley is surrounded by a chain of mountains like the Eastern Himalayas in the north and the Barail Range in the south. With more than a hundred tributaries on both banks of the river, the topography
and climate was eminently suitable for the cultivation of rice and other agricultural products. The region beyond the flood plains was full of forests where wild elephants roamed. Thus agriculture in the valley was restricted to the region along the Brahmaputra River and its tributaries where people practiced cultivation but probably produced no surplus till the advent of the Aryans. The archaeological remains belonging to our period of study indicate the riverine nature of the early settlements.

Anthropological studies indicate that the Brahmaputra valley lies in one of the great migration routes of the world. The earliest settlers of the region were the Australoids who came from the south east of Assam in the remote past. Represented by the Khasis and Jayantias, the Mon-Khmer language used by them is spoken by the Kols, Mundas and Nicobarese of India, and in parts of Myanmar and Vietnam today. These Mon-Khmer speakers gave the many geographical features, especially the rivers their names. As for instance, the name of the river Dihong is derived from the Australoid word hong, meaning water, to which was later added the prefix di by the Tibeto-Burmans who followed them, di being their word for water. Many of the rivers of Upper Assam, even today, reveal their linguistic antecedents: Dihong, Dibang, Dihing, Disang, Dikhow, etc.

The Tibeto-Burman speakers came from western China. They followed the Brahmaputra up to Dhubri. Some turned south of the river, and occupied the Garo Hills and Tripura. Others went up the Kapili valley into North Cachar. Others occupied the Naga Hills and became the ancestors of the different Naga tribes. A group from Myanmar settled in the Lushai (Mizo) Hills, Cachar, and parts of Manipur and the Naga Hills. The Tibeto-Burmans that had established themselves in different areas of Assam, in course of time, came to be known by various names like the Rabha, Kachari, Bodo, Tiwa, Karbi, and Dimasa.

Linguistically, the Tibeto-Burmans can be divided into two main branches: North-Assam and Assam-Burmese (Myanmar). The tribes of modern Arunachal Pradesh like the Abors, Akas, Dassas, Miris (Mising) and Mishmis form the North-Assam branch. The Assam-Burmese group includes the Bodos, Nagas and Kuki-Chins. The term “Bodo” denotes a large number of people who speak the Bodo group of languages, like the Garo, Rabha, Kachari, Koch, Mech, Hajong, Lalung (Tiwa), etc. Before the advent of the Aryan speakers this Bodo group of speakers occupied almost the entire Brahmaputra valley, including the Garo Hills, northern Bengal, Cachar, Sylhet (now in Bangladesh) and even Tripura (Barua:1986:7-8).
From the west came the Aryan speakers with their Vedic culture (Barua:1986:9). In circa 700 B.C.E. they entered into Assam (Barpuijari:1991:23.) from the plains of the Ganga, from Mithila (Bihar), Kasi (Uttar Pradesh), Gauda (Bengal) and Pundra (North Bengal). According to the Kulika Purana, Naraka and his son Bhagadatta made Aryan settlements in Assam. Their descendants actively patronized them, especially the Brahmins, as indicated by their land grants. Naraka, according to legends had replaced Ghataka, the ruler of the Kiratas (Australoid people). His descendants later began to rule over a major part of the Brahmaputra valley.

The three main historical dynasties of Assam - the Naraon, Salastambhas and Palas - who ruled from circa fourth century to twelfth century C.E., trace their descent from the legendary Naraka in their land grants. The inscriptions of ancient Assam reveal that they actively patronized the Brahmins who came from Bengal, and the areas which today incorporate modern Bangladesh, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh by granting them rent-free land called agrahara grants. These lands were situated along the banks of the river Brahmaputra and its numerous tributaries or beside ponds and streams. Aryan settlements helped to Sanskritise the people of Assam, especially the Brahmaputra valley.

The Aryan speakers who came from the Ganga Valley (where we have evidence of state formation as early as the sixth century B.C.E.) introduced new technology into the region they occupied. They brought with them an advanced method of agriculture known as “wet rice cultivation” in which the rice saplings are transplanted after being submerged in water by a system of creating water logged small plots of land through bunds. This new method greatly increased agricultural output. Secondly, they introduced the use of iron tools and implements like the iron plough-share and the iron axe which not only helped in the extension of agriculture but also increased efficiency in the cultivating process. In course of time, with increased agricultural output and the creation of surplus food production, one finds diversification of arts and crafts as different professional classes emerged. Over the next few centuries, the Aryans also introduced their social institutions like the caste system into the region as they assimilated the non-Aryans into their fold through a process of acculturation that included marriage. The Aryans possessed a highly organised stratified social system - the varnasrama dharma, a highly developed body of literature, namely the Vedic literature and philosophy, as also a written form of language like Sanskrit. These inherent advantages enabled them to “Aryanise” and “Sanskritise” the local people. As society and polity now became more complex state
formation became possible and in course of time. Pusyavarman an ambitious
chieftain established the first historical state by force or conquest. His
successors further enlarged the boundaries of the state which later came to
be ruled by other dynasties like the Palas and Salastambhas. The Brahmins
sought to legitimise the rule of Pusyavarman and his successors by citing
the necessity of maintaining social order to avoid masyamya or anarchy.
Thus the Nidhanpur grant of Bhaskarvarman states that Pusyavarman’s son
Samudravarman’s reign was free from masyamya. It further declares that
Bhaskarvarman was born to “re-establish the Varnasramadharmas that had
fallen into disuse”. In the Guwahati grant of Indrapala it is specifically
mentioned that the king’s reign was according to the rule of law as the four
castes and four stages of life (i.e. the Varnasramadharmas) was properly
maintained”. The maintenance of this social order was regarded as
Rajadharma or the royal duty of kings. Thus to a certain extent, an ideology
was also used as a tool to legitimise the necessity of a state as embodied in
the king or ruling authority.

During the rule of the first historical dynasty of the Varmans in ancient
Assam. Pragijotishapura became the seat of the coercive authority that
controlled the complex network of conditions, conducive for the smooth
functioning of the state. The sources at our disposal indicate the presence
of the different constituents of a state as defined by the Suptanga theory, in
the state of Kamarupa established by the Varman dynasty of Pusyavarman.
Thus we find a specific territory, a king, army, treasury, ministers, fortified
capital cities as well as an ally and an ideology, thus subscribing to the
traditional view of a state. From the foregoing discussion we can conclude
that no single factor contributed to state formation in the Brahmaputra Valley.
Rather it was a combination of different factors. The location of the valley,
i.e. topography and climate played an important role. These can be termed
as environmental factors. Secondly, migration from the east and west led to
increase in population as well as introduction of new technology that
facilitated agricultural surplus. This in turn led to diversification of arts and
crafts and the emergence of new professional classes. The need to control
these resources led to more organised settlements and chiefdoms. Ultimately,
an ambitious chief and his descendants used war and conquest to create a
state with all its complex political and socio-economic constituents. They
patronised the priestly class, the Brahmins, by granting them special favours
in the form of rent-free holdings and important administrative positions. In
turn the Brahmins created the myth of a divine origin of the ruling dynasties,
making them descendants of Visnu, a Vedic divinity, thus assimilating the
ruling elite into the Sanskrit Brahmanical fold. They also provided the rulers with the ideological justification – maintenance of social order to prevent anarchy – to seize power and assert their political authority to legitimise their control over the resources of the state.

Check Your Progress

1. What do you understand by a state? What are its characteristics?
2. Discuss the different theories of the origin of the state. How far can these be applied to state formation in the Brahmaputra valley?

3.3.2 The Kingdom of Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa

The state of Kamarupa as mentioned earlier came into existence around the fourth century C.E. The Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta describes Kamarupa as a tributary state on the eastern frontier of the Gupta Empire. It was located on both banks of the Brahmaputra River with its capital at Pragjyotisapura or modern Guwahati. Although contemporary literature and inscriptions from other parts of India refer to this kingdom as Kamarupa, its rulers all claim to be lords of Pragjyotisa (Pragjyotisadhipati) as indicated by local epigraphs and seals. Inscriptions of the Varman dynasty indicate that the founder of the Kamarupa kingdom was Pusyavarman. There were thirteen kings of his line. In the genealogical list given in the Doobi and Nidhanpur copper plates of Bhaskarvarman, the last ruler of this line, Pusyavarman is compared to Indra, the powerful king of the devas, and described as “the destroyer of enemy soldiers” His son Samudravarman was “responsible for causing bewalings of the wives of the enemies...adored by the host of kings...and capable of subduing others”. Samudravarman’s son and successor Balavarman is likewise described as having defeated his enemies in the battle-field, accompanied by large armies. His son Kalyanavarman was said to be “equal in strength to Indra.....and having killed huge hosts of enemies”. The description of his successors in similar terms leaves no doubt that the state of Kamarupa was established by force. The war-like activities of successive rulers resulted in enlarging the boundaries of the state.

During the reign of Pusyavarman the extent of Kamarupa was probably limited to the area of undivided Kamrup District. To its east lay the kingdom
of Devaka in the Kapili-Jamuna Valley. To its west lay Tamralipti, Samatata and Gauda (present day Bangladesh and West Bengal). As a tributary state of the Imperial Guptas Pushyavarman and his successors paid taxes and obeyed imperial decrees. In the fifth century, following the death of Skandagupta, the Kamarupa king Mahendravarman threw off the Gupta yoke and proclaimed his sovereign status by performing two asvamedha or horse sacrifice. The seal attached to the Doobi copper plate records that not only Mahendravarman, but successive rulers like Mahabhutivarman and Sushthitavarman also performed asvamedha. The Umachal Rock Inscription indicates Mahendravarman’s jurisdiction over the Guwahati region. By the sixth century the Varman had conquered the Kapili Valley as evidenced by the Barganga Rock Inscription issued by Mahabhutivarman’s vishayamatya Avaguna. Mahabhutivarman’s copper-plates indicate the conquest of southeast Bengal as well. However, he may have suffered a setback at the hands of Yasodharman of Malwa as claimed in the Mandasor Inscription. This claim is doubtful because his grandson Sthitavarman not only performed two horse sacrifices, but also built a new city on the banks of the Lauhitya (Brahmaputra). His son Sushthitavarman however suffered a reverse at the hands of Mahasenagupta of Malwa as recorded in the Apsad Inscription of his grandson Adityasena the Later Gupta king. Following the death of Sushthitavarman his eldest son Supratisthita ascended the Kamarupa throne. His reign in marked by the invasion of Gauda and the loss of the Kamarupa territories in Bengal, primarily Pundravardana. Supratisthita was succeeded by his younger brother Bhaskarvarman, the last ruler of his line. Bhaskara formed an alliance with Harsavardhana of Thaneswar and defeated the forces of Gauda, issuing the Nidhanpur grant from his victory camp (jayaskandavara) at Karnasuvrana, the capital of Gauda.

For the reign of Bhaskarvarman we have a variety of sources at our disposal. The Harsacharita of Bana describes in details the alliance between him and Harsavardhana. Bana states that as soon as Bhaskara came to know that Harsa was proceeding against Sasanka of Gauda, he decided to form an alliance with the latter. Bhaskara’s seals have also been found at Nalanda. He had sent messengers with letters to Silabhadra, the Rector of Nalanda Monastery requesting that the Chinese pilgrim Hieun Tsang who was residing at Nalanda be sent to Kamarupa to enlighten him about Buddhism. The pilgrim who visited India in the first half of the seventh century also visited Kamarupa. In his Si-yu-ki he describes the land as profusely cultivated and prosperous. Its western boundary was the Karatoya River and to its east were dense jungles where wild elephants roamed. Further afield were
impregnable mountains contiguous with China. Bhaskarvarman had
diplomatic relations with China as described in The New History of the
Tang Dynasty. He assisted the Chinese mission that visited India in c. 648-
49 C.E. and also gave them many gifts including a map. Bhaskarvarman is
believed to have remained unmarried and after his death in c.650 C.E.
Pragjyotisapura ceased to be the Kamarupa capital as the succeeding rulers
shifted their headquarters to the region of Sunitpur or Tezpur.

The Varmans established a state based on hereditary monarchy. They were
assisted by a council of ministers designated as the Montri Parishad in the
Harsacharita. The kingdom was divided into different administrative units
like bhukti, (province) vishaya, (district) and villages or grama for efficient
governance. Taxes were collected from the people in kind. As agriculture
was the mainstay of the economy, a part of the produce was collected from
each district or vishaya and deposited in the bhandagar on royal granary
maintained by the bhandagarika. Other revenue in the form of fines, tributes,
tolls, etc collected in cash was deposited in the royal treasury or kosa under
the charge of the kostagarika. The kings also had many feudatory chiefs
under them. Besides military functions they also performed administrative
duties. In the Nidhanpur copper grant Mahasamanta Divakaraprabha was
in charge of the royal granary. Another officer mentioned in the Nidhanpur
grant was the simapradata who demarcated the boundaries of land which
were owned either by the state or by individuals and families. Certain
categories of land were exempted from payment of revenue. These were the
agrahara lands granted to the learned Brahmans by the state. The
Nidhanpur grant refers to the agraharakshetra called Mayurasalmala located
in the Chandrapuri vishaya that belonged to the descendants of the Ghosa
family. This grant also refers to different officers under the Varmans like
Sri Gopala who proclaimed the grant, Sri Ksikunda, the headman of
Chandrapuri, Janardanasvami the nyayakaranika, Haradatta the vyuvahari.
Dundunatha the Kayasta, the tax-collector Dattakarapurna, the composer
and writer of the grant Vasuvarmna and the engraver or copper-smith Kaliya.
This grant thus offers a glimpse into the different functionaries of the state
during the time of the Varmans.

Check Your Progress
1. Trace the rise of the Kamarupa under the Varman dynasty
2. Discuss the importance of the Nidhanpur copper-plaque as a historical
source.
In the middle of the seventh century an ambitious chief, probably a feudatory or governor of the Varmans established the rule of a new dynasty in Kamarupa after the death of Bhaskarvarman. He assumed the title of Salastambha as he claimed to be as powerful as a pillar of the Sal tree. In the Barghaon copper-plate of the Pala ruler Ratnapala, Salastambha is termed as a mlechcha, an outcaste who usurped the throne of Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa from the rightful heir of Bhaskarvarman. Salastambha was followed by twenty rulers of his line, the last of whom Tyagasimha died childless, thus ending their rule. Although the dynasty is termed as mlechcha by the Palaś, the descendants of Salastambha, like the Varmans before them claim to belong to the dynasty of Naraka and Bhagadatta. Very little is known about the early rulers of the Salastambha dynasty. As their inscriptions are all issued from their capital city Hadappesvara it is probable that Salastambha was the governor of Tezpur area during the reign of Bhaskarvarman. Following the death of the latter who died without issuing an issue condition of anarchy must have prevailed in the kingdom and Salastambha took the opportunity to seize power and occupied the throne. He shifted the capital to Hadappesvara (Tezpur) probably because his power base was in that area. In the Guwahati region the Varman loyalists may have created problems for the new ruler. The dearth of archaeological remains in the Guwahati area from the mid seventh century onwards, up to the mid tenth century indicates that it ceased to be the capital city. However, very little is known about the immediate successors of Salastambha as we have no records of their reign up to the time of Harjaravarman when we find the Tezpur Rock Inscription dated 510 in the Gupta līṇa, corresponding to 829 C.E. Inscriptions of later rulers record that Salastambha was followed by Vigrahastambha (Vijaya), Palaka, Kumara, Vajradeva, Sri-Harisa (Harsadeva), Balavarman, Salambha (Chakra) and Arathi the father of Harjaravarman. The inscriptions describe the qualities of these rulers as warlike and engaged in subduing enemies, indicating continuous conflict to consolidate their hold over the kingdom. Inscriptions of Sri Harsadeva, Harjaravarman and others indicate their hold over the territories of present Tezpur, Darrang, the Kapili-Jamuna Valley as well as the North Cachar Hills area.

Before the advent of Harjaravarman a powerful ruler of this dynasty, we have a single copper-plate of Harsadeva and a reference to the same ruler in the Pasupatinatha Temple Inscription of king Jayadeva Paramachakrakama of Nepal dated 737 C.E. This inscription states that Harsadeva had married Rajyamati, the daughter of the king of Nepal and that he belonged to the
family of Bhagadatta. The inscription describes him as “lord of Gauda.
Odra and other countries as well as of Kalinga and Kosala” but these claims
are not borne out by contemporary evidence. Harsadeva’s own inscription
found at Dighaligaon is also silent about these achievements. We find
numerous grants issued during the reign of Harjaravarman, namely the
Hayunthal, and the newly discovered grants at Kuruwabahi and Dighaligaon.
Inscriptions issued during the reign of Harjaravarman indicate the growing
importance of feudatory chiefs in the administrative structure of the
Salastambha state. The Hayunthal copper plate issued by Vanamalavarman,
Harjara’s son who was the crown prince or yuvaraja states that Harjara was
installed on the throne by the princes and merchants in the presence of
feudatory chiefs and subordinate kings. He also had jurisdiction over the
hill regions whose rulers approached him to settle their disputes. This
inscription also provides us information regarding the existence of different
officers like the commander-in-chief of the army, mahasenapati Gana, the
governor of the passes, mahadvaradhipati Jayadeva, the mahapratihara or
minister-in-attendance, Janardana, ministers or mahamatyas Govinda and
Madhusudana as well the officer in charge of gifts to be made to Brahmans,
Brahmanadhiraka Bhatta Srikantha.

The constant reference in the land grants to different categories of feudatory
chiefs who had specific rights over the land and were required to be informed
when the royal authority granted land indicates growing decentralisation in
the administrative structure of the Salastambha state. Thus the inscriptions
refer to raja, rajni, ranaka, rajanaka, rajaputra, rajavallabha, etc as
enjoying specific rights over the land. The growing importance of feudatory
chiefs or the sumantas is further indicated by the Tezpur Rock Inscription
of Harjaravarman that is issued not by the king or crown prince but by the
mahasamanta Sri Suchita from the Salastambha capital Hadappesvara itself.
Sri Suchita was also a senadhyakshyu or military commander. This
inscription records the settlement of a dispute regarding the plying of boats
on the river that disturbed the fishing rights of the Kaivartas or fishing
community. Thus the sumantas not only enjoyed rights over land revenue,
but also performed regular military and administrative functions besides
assisting the ruler with soldiers in times of need.

While land revenue continued to be the main source of wealth we also find
references to tribute bearing chieftains and feudatories, tolls and fines, and
other levies to maintain internal law and order. However, with the extension
of land grants the Salastambha rulers lost much of their rights over the
agrahara lands. This is in marked contrast to the land grants of their
predecessors the Varmanas where only the land revenue was exempted. the state retaining all other rights over the land. During the Salastambha period we thus find increasing feudal tendencies as the right of entry of state police and troops, the right to moor royal boats, catch elephants, etc. were forfeited to the beneficiary of the land grant. Besides Harjaravarman, only two of his successors, namely his son Vanamalavarman and the latter's grandson Balavarman issued land grants. Vanamala's Tezpur copper-plate granted lands in the Rangpur District of Bangladesh to the Brahman Indoka while his Parbatiya plates record the repairing of the temple of Hletukasulin (Siva) in Tezpur, and the grant of a village called Haposagraham in the Svalpa-Mangoka mandala on the north bank of the river Brahmaputra. Vanamala was succeeded by his son Jayamala (Virabahu). In the Nagaon grant of the latter's son Balavarman, Vanamala is described as a builder of palaces. Balavarman's copper plates indicate that the jurisdiction of the Salastambha's probably extended to the Barak Valley as the lands granted in the Uttarbarbil (Howraghat) plates, namely in Bappadeva pataka in the Varasopattana vishaya has been identified with the area of the Barasai Hills to the south of Silchar.

Balavarman's grants, namely the Uttarbarbil, Nagaon and Ulubari copper plates provide us glimpses into the administrative structure of the Salastambhas. Besides the different categories of feudatory chiefs and others who enjoyed specific rights over the land, as discussed earlier, we find references to enforcement officers like the dundika, dandapasika, dandapasa etc. Different taxes on land like the uparikara, utkhetana, are also mentioned. besides different categories of land like vastubhumi (homestead), kedarksutra (low land), sthala (upland), jala (water bodies like ponds and lakes), go-prachara (pasture land) and avakara (mounds), etc. Officers like the autkhetika (revenue collector) and royal umbrella holder (chhatravasa) also find mention.

Earlier historians believed that two rulers known only from inscribed stone images found in the Deopani region of Golaghat District in Assam, namely Dighalekhavarman and Sri Jivada belonged to the Salastambha line. These two names are inscribed in letters datable to the 8th-9th century C.E. on the sculptures of different forms of Visnu. But the names of these rulers are conspicuous by their absence in the genealogical lists of the Salastambhas. Moreover, the jurisdiction of the Salastambhas over the Doiyang-Dhansiri area is not indicated by known sources. The eastern limit of their state was the Tezpur region on the north bank of the Brahmaputra, while Nagaon formed the eastern boundary on the south bank. The Karatoya probably
continued to mark the western boundary of the state. Inscriptions of the Pala dynasty of Bengal hint at conflict between the Palas of Gauda and the Salastambha ruler Harjaravarman or his son Vanamalavarman. Jayapala, the general of king Devapala of Gauda (c. 812-850 C.E.) claims to have defeated the ruler of Pragjyotisa and made him a subordinate. The last ruler of the Salastambha dynasty was Tyagasimha. According to the Bargaon copper plate of Ratnapala, Tyagasimha died without leaving any issue and the prakritis (learned assembly of men) selected Ratnapala’s father Brahmapala, a member of Pusyavarman’s dynasty to ascend the throne of Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa. It is to be noted that while contemporary inscriptions generally refer to the kingdom as Kamarupa, the kings of Kamarupa also referred to themselves as Pragjyotisadhipati or “lord of Pragjyotisa”.

Check Your Progress

1. Discuss the nature of the Salastambha state with references to your sources of information.

2. Write short notes on the following:
   (i) Tezpur Rock Inscription of Harjaravarman
   (ii) Extent of the Salastambha state

The dynasty of Brahmapala came to power in the beginning of the tenth century C.E. The circumstances under which he occupied the throne have already been discussed in the earlier section. He continued to rule from Hadappesvara and was followed by his son Ratnapala. The latter initially continued to rule from the old Salastambha capital as evidenced by the Carathari grant issued in his twelfth regnal year. But he later shifted his capital to a new city called Sri Durjaya, probably in the vicinity of the old city of Pragjyotisapura (Guwahati). Ratnapala’s Bargaon and Sualkuchi grants, issued in his 25th and 36th regnal year respectively are issued from this new city described as “impregnable” and striking terror in the hearts of the contemporary rulers. The inscriptions describe Ratnapala’s military prowess and he and his successors extended the boundary of their kingdom by war. We learn from the Gahttal Inscription of Gopala that his great-grandfather Ratnapala defeated Rajyapala, king of Gauda. As Ratnapala enjoyed a long reign, his son Purandarapala predeceased him and he was succeeded by Indrapala who issued two grants, the Guwahati and Guakuchi copper-plates, granting land, like his grandfather to learned Brahmanas. His
son Gopala’s Gachtal plates record that Indrapala defeated Kalyanachandra, son of Sri Chandra the ruler of Vanga. Indrapala had matrimonial relations with the south. Gopala’s mother and Indrapala’s Queen Rajyadevi was a Rashtrakuta princess. Gopala’s grant is issued from Hadappaka and not from Sri Durjaya. Gopala was succeeded by Harsapala who has left no records. The next ruler Dharmapala again shifted the capital to Kamrupnagara, identified with North Guwahati where his Puspadhara grant was discovered. Like his predecessors he extensively granted land to the Brahmans and his two other copper-plates. namely the Subhankarapataka and Khonamukh, discovered in Nagaon district indicate that the process of decentralisation that had started in the Salastambha period, continued. As more and more lands were granted, the central authority weakened. While earlier inscriptions demarcated the boundaries of the agraharas by natural water bodies or trees, the lands granted during the Pala period increasingly border on sasana lands, i.e. those already over which the state had relinquished all rights.

The erosion of central authority attracted the attention of the neighbouring rulers of Bengal. We have already referred to conflict with the rulers of Bengal during the reign of Ratnapala and Indrapala who had emerged victorious. After the death of Indrapala, Kamarupa was besieged by the Jatavarman who conquered Anga and subdued Kamarupa. Jatavarman’s exploits are described in the Belava copper-plate of his grandson King Bhojavaran of Vikramapura. During the reign of Dharmapala Kamarupa could no longer withstand the onslaught of successive invasions from the west. We learn from Bilhana’s Vikramankadevacharita that during the reign of the Chalukyan king Some, svara I of Kalyan(1042-1068 C.E.) his son Vikramaditya VI conquered Gauda and “uprooted the prosperity of the Kamarupa king” According to Sandhyakaranandin’s Ramacharita, Ramapala (c.1072-1126 C.E.) the king of Gauda conquered Kamarupa. This claim appears to be substantiated by the Kanauli grant of Vaidyadeva dated 1142C.E: this grant states that Tingyadeva was appointed as a governor of the newly conquered province (Pragystytsabhukti of Kamarupamandal) of Gauda. During the reign of Ramapala’s son and successor Kumarapala, Tingyadeva asserted his independence. To punish him, Kumarapala sent Vaidyadeva, his minister and general to Kamarupa. Vaidyadeva defeated and killed Tingyadeva and began to rule as a feudatory chief of Gauda. Following the death of Kumarapala he assumed imperial titles and issued the Kanauli grant from his headquarters at Hamsakochi in present Kamrup District. Thus the rule of the Pala dynasty of Assam came to an end. However
till the third decade of the thirteenth century we find stray inscriptions of rulers bearing the title Pala, like the Silimpur inscription of Jayapala and the Ambari inscription of Samudrapala. The Palas of Assam may have continued as feudatory chiefs of the Palas of Bengal or reasserted their independence after the death of Vaidyadeva.

Check Your Progress
1. Describe the origin and growth of the state under the Palas
2. The Pala period in Assam was marked by conflict with Bengal.
   Comment

3.4 Emergence of Political Centres

Besides the state of Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa we also find the presence of different political centres in our period of study. The rise of the State of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa, led to the growth of political centres, in which were stationed the authorities that looked after the maintenance of the state, the government being one of the most important elements of a state. These political centres developed as subsidiary hubs of the state machinery. However, literature and epigraphs indicate the presence of political centres outside the jurisdiction of Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa. As early as the fourth century C.E. we find reference to the kingdom of Devaka, quite separate from the Kamarupa kingdom, mentioned in the Allahabad Pillar Inscription of the Gupta king Samudragupta. In the same period we find references in inscriptions to two rulers in the Doyang-Dhansiri valley in Upper Assam, whose names are conspicuous by their absence in the genealogical records of the Kamarupa line of kings and those of Devaka as found in literature. Extensive archaeological remains in the form of temple ruins, tanks, ramparts and other fortifications and structures indicate that these areas developed as the seat of political authority.

3.4.1 Kapili-Jamuna Valley

The Kapili-Jamuna Valley in the present day Nagaon district of the state of Assam in India is formed by the rivers Kapili and Jamuna and their tributaries. The presence of these rivers has made the plains of Nagaon District very fertile, attracting human habitation from times remote past. We learn from the Sri Rājamālā that in early times the kingdom of Trivega
was located in the fertile tracts of the Kapili-Jamuna and Kalang Valley. The name Trivega was probably derived from *Tri-Sruta*, a reference to the three streams or rivers, namely the Kapili, its channel the Kalang and its tributary the Jamuna. The Doboka region of the Kapili Valley is identified with Devaka of the Allahabad Pillar Inscription. This inscription states that during the reign of the Gupta monarch Samudragupta (335-375 A.D.) there were five kingdoms on the eastern frontier of his territory, namely Kartripura, Nepal, Samatata, Kamarupa and Devaka. The kings of these five states were so overawed by the might of the Gupta ruler that of their own accord they surrendered their suzerainty to him, agreeing to pay all taxes, obey his imperial decrees and render homage in person. Thus in the fourth century the kingdom of Devaka became a tributary state of the Gupta Empire along with Kamarupa located to its west. In 428 when Emperor Kumara Gupta was ruling in North India, a king of the Kapili Valley is said to have sent an embassy to China. This indicates that by the second quarter of the fifth century the kingdom of Devaka had broken free of Gupta yoke. The *Srī Rājamālā* provides us a genealogy of the kings of the Tripura kingdom up to the middle of the fourteenth century. According to this text, Druhyu, one of the ancestors of the Tripura kings constructed a city in the Trivega region with its capital on the banks of the Kapili River. Druhyu was the son of Yayati by Sarmistha according to Pauranic lore. Thus, while retelling the history of the kings of Tripura the myth of a Pauranic origin is fabricated by the Head Priest Durlabhendra in the court of Dharma Manikya. The names of the sixteen kings that ruled over the Trivega kingdom after Druhya were, in chronological order: Prataṛdana, Pramath, Kainba, Mitra. Barebartha, Karmmuka, Kalanga, Bhisan, Bhanumitra, Chitrpes. Chitrasena, Chitranatha, Chitrayudha, Daitya, Tripur and Triluchan. According to the narrative of the *Srī Rājamālā* Drikpati, the eldest son of Triluchan married the daughter of the king of Hedembra. As the latter had no son Drikpati succeeded to the throne of his father-in-law while his younger brother Dakshin succeeded Triluchan on the throne of Trivega. However, Drikpati laid his claim to the paternal throne and compelled Dakshin and his other brothers to migrate to Cachar where they founded a new capital at Khalangma on the banks of the river Varavakra (Barak). However there is no reliable historical evidence to corroborate the account of the *Srī Rājamālā*. Moreover this text does not assign any dates to the rulers and their time period is obscure.

In the first half of the sixth century the Kapili-Jamuna Valley is included in the kingdom of Kamarupa. The Barganga Rock Inscription located in Doboka records the establishment of a religious institution by Avaguna, the
vishayâmûtya or District Governor of king Bhutivarman of Kamarupa who was a performer of the aśvämedha or horse sacrifice, a ritual symbolizing imperial ambitions. However, after the Kapili-Jamuna region became incorporated into the kingdom of Kamarupa, at least from the time of Bhutivarman, we do not find much reference to it in the records of the Varman kings. In the first half of the seventh century C.E., during the reign of the last ruler Bhaskarvarman the Chinese pilgrim Hien Tsang visited Kamarupa. While discussing the extent of the kingdom he states that Kamarupa lay to the east of the Korotoya River while its eastern boundary was bounded by a line of hills and on the south-east of the country of Kamarupa herds of wild elephants roam about in great numbers. During the reign of the kings of the Salastambha and Pala dynasties that succeeded the Varmans we find copper plate inscriptions granting land in the area of present day Nagaon district by Harsadeva, Harijaravarman, Balavarman III, Gopala and Dharmapala.

Although literary and epigraphic sources are scanty to reconstruct the political history of the area under study, the abundance of material remains in the form of temple ruins, stone and terracotta sculptures throughout the Kapili-Jamuna Valley stand mute testimony to the presence of a flourishing kingdom in the region. The massive temple components that have survived the vagaries of time clearly indicate that the ruling dynasties of the area must have actively patronized the construction of massive temples in the area around modern Hojai and Doboka.

3.4.2 Doyang-Dhansiri Valley

Excavations in the valley of the Dhansiri River in the Golaghat district of Assam have brought to light massive fortifications in the Duboroni area. The discovery of epigraphic records in the region has yielded the names of four rulers belonging to the period of circa fifth to the eight century. They are Sri Ratnavarman, Sri Vasundharavarman (in c. 5th century) and Maharajadhiraja Sri Jivara and Maharajadhiraja Diklekhavarman (in 8th century). We find reference to these rulers in a land grant recorded in the (now fragmentary) Nagajarikhanikargaon Stone Inscription, the Duboroni Stone Slab Inscription, the Deopani Visnu image and the Sankar-Narayana stone image inscription, all recovered from the valley of the Doyang-Dhansiri. The Duboroni stone slab inscription issued by Vasundharavarman commemorates the establishment of a wharf on the river, probably used for trade purposes. The names of all these kings are conspicuous by their absence
in the genealogy of both the Varman and Salastambha rulers of the Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa kingdom, as well as in the (largely mythical) genealogy of the Trivega kingdom in the Kapili Valley. This indicates the emergence of a separate political centre in the region.

The archaeologist remains of the area are all located along the riverside. "The settlements are fortified by raising ramparts, dykes, ditches and embankments... Tanks were excavated within the fortified settlements. The settlement pattern of the inhabiting sites found to have been laid as per the principle of the ancient Indian Silpasastras even if they be built in a hilly area or in a forest area or in the basin of the Doyang-Dhansiri system" (Dutta:2012:152). The evidence of iron smelting, brick built temples, clay seals, sculptures and other remains all indicate the development of a political centre in the Doyang-Dhansiri valley at the same time as the kingdom of Kamarupa, centred round the region of Guwahati and later Tezpur. This independent kingdom in Upper Assam was later absorbed into the powerful Kachari kingdom that extended over a large part of eastern Assam prior to the establishment of the Ahom kingdom.

Check Your Progress

1. Briefly trace the emergence of the kingdom of Devaka with reference to your sources of information.

2. What light do inscriptions throw on the political centre located in the Doyang-Dhansiri valley?

3.5 Summing Up

After going through this unit we have learnt about the process of state formation in the Brahmaputra valley. We have discussed about the different constituents of a state and the probable causes of the emergence of the state of Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa. We have seen that besides the existence of this state that developed under the Varmans, Salastambhas and Palas, there were other political centres in the valley of the Kapili and Dhansiri rivers. These centres initially developed under a line of rulers separate from that of the Kamarupa kingdom. In course of time the independent state in the Kapili valley was assimilated in the Kamarupa kingdom while that of the Dhansiri valley in the Kachari kingdom.

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4.1 Introduction

The Brahmaputra Valley is situated in one of the major migration routes of the ancient world. It is the meeting place of different cultures and linguistic groups. In the remote past, from the south east of Assam, came the Australoids, represented by the Khasis and Jayantias today. They speak the Mon-Khmer language and the same is spoken by the Kols, Mundas and Nicobarese of India, and in parts of Myanmar and Vietnam today. To these Mon-Khmer speakers are given the credit for giving the names to geographical features, especially the rivers. As for instance, the name of the river Dihong is derived from the Australoid word *hong*, meaning water, to which was later added the prefix *di* by the Tibeto-Burmans who followed them, *di* being their word for water. Many of the rivers of Upper Assam, even today, reveal their linguistic antecedents: Dihong, Dibang, Dihing, Disang, Dikhow, etc.

The Tibeto-Burman speakers came from western China. They followed the Brahmaputra upto Dhubri. Some turned south and occupied the Garo Hills and Tripura. Others went up the Kapili valley into North Cachar. Others occupied the Naga Hills and became the ancestors of the different Naga...
A group from Myanmar settled in the Lushai (Mizo) Hills, Cachar, and parts of Manipur and the Naga Hills. The Tibeto-Burmans that had established themselves in different areas of Assam, in course of time, came to be known by various names like the Rabha, Kachari, Bodo, Tiwa, Karbi, and Dimasa.

Linguistically, the Tibeto-Burmans can be divided into two main branches: North-Assam and Assam-Burmese (Myanmar). The tribes of modern Arunachal Pradesh like the Abors, Akas, Daflas, Miris (Mising) and Mishmis form the North-Assam branch. The Assam-Burmese group includes the Bodos, Nagas and Kuki-Chins. The term “Bodo” denotes a large number of people who speak the Bodo group of languages, like the Garo; Rabha, Kachari, Koch, Mech, Hajong, Lalung (Tiwa), etc. Before the advent of the Aryan speakers this Bodo group of speakers occupied almost the entire Brahmaputra valley, including the Garo Hills, northern Bengal, Cachar, Sylhet (now in Bangladesh) and even Tripura.

From the west came the Aryan speakers with their Vedic culture. In circa 700 B.C. they entered into Assam from the plains of the Ganga, from Mithila (Bihar), Kasi (Uttar Pradesh), Gauda (Bengal) and Pundra (North Bengal). According to the Kalika Purana, Naraka and his son Bhagadatta made Aryan settlements in Assam. Their descendants actively patronized them, especially the Brahmins, as indicated by their land grants. Naraka, according to legends had replaced Ghataka, the ruler of the Kiratas (Mongoloid people). His descendants later began to rule over a major part of the Brahmaputra valley. The three main historical dynasties of Assam – the Varmans, Salastambhas and Palas – who ruled from circa fourth century to the twelfth century C.E., trace their descent from the legendary Naraka. The inscriptions of ancient Assam reveal that they actively patronized the Brahmins who came from Bengal, and the areas which today incorporate modern Bangladesh, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh by granting them rent-free land called agrahara grants. These lands were situated along the banks of the river Brahmaputra and its numerous tributaries or beside ponds and streams. Aryan settlements brought about changes in the polity, economy, society and religion of the Brahmaputra Valley. In this unit we are going to learn about these changes.
4.2 Objectives
After going through this unit you will be able to

- Describe the different racial and linguistic groups that migrated into the Brahmaputra Valley
- Discuss the changes in the polity and economy as a result of these migrations
- Analyse the causes of the change in the socio-cultural life of the people
- Trace the development of Vaisnavism, Saivism, Saktism and other minor religious sects.

4.3 Changes in the Political and Economic Structure
We have already learnt in the previous unit the different causes leading to state formation in the Brahmaputra Valley. The migrations from the Gangetic Valley led to the introduction of advanced techniques of agriculture and the use of iron tools and implements. This resulted in surplus production. While the hill areas surrounding the valley of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries continued to practice subsistence agriculture using the less productive 'slash and burn' method, the plains of Assam practice wet-rice cultivation. Agriculture in the hills was supplemented by hunting of animals and gathering of edible roots and fruits from the forest. In the valley, the production of surplus to diversification of arts and crafts. In course of time this resulted in specialization and the growth of social stratification. This was followed by the formation of states, and people vested the ruling authority with the right to collect a part of their surplus and maintain law and order. While the Epics and Puranas refer to powerful legentary chieftains like Ghataka, Naraka, Bana and Hidimba, from the fourth century onwards we find references to powerful kings like Mahendravarman, Mahabhubivarman, Harjaravarman, Ratnapala, etc. The historical evidence points to the emergence of kingdoms like Kamarupa and Devaka and growth of political centres in the region of Tezpur and the valley of the Dhansiri. Thus from self sufficient village communities loosely bound together under a chieftain, there was considerable changes in the political structure of the Brahmaputra Valley. Kingdoms emerged with all the major features of state machinery.

The nature of state was monarchical and there was no evidence of ganarajyas or republics. Inscriptions compare the rulers of Assam to divinities like Indra. Moreover, kings claimed a divine origin by tracing descent from the
legendary Naraka, who, by the end of the Gupta period, had been assimilated into the Vedic-Aryan fold and given a mythical origin from Varaha, Visnu and Bhudevi. Rulers of Assam were also compared to Epic heroes like Arjuna, Yudhisthira, etc. These mythical claims were strongly entrenched in popular lore and the Chinese pilgrim Hieun Tsang states that Kumara (king Bhaskarvarman) was a descendant of Narayanadeva (Visnu) and the family had been ruling for three thousand years. Bana compares Bhaskarvarman to the Epic hero Bheeema, probably a reference to his wisdom and celibate state. Kings were regarded as the upholder of the law (dharma) and were also required to maintain social stability by ensuring the adherence to the four fold caste system and stages of life (varnasrama dharma). It was the royal duty (rajudharma) of the king to maintain this divinely ordained law to prevent anarchy (matsyendrya). The king issued ordinances (sasanas) from time to time. He was the fountainhead of justice which was administered according to the rules laid down in the Vedas, Angas, Dharmasastras and Puranas. The Dharmasastras were the code of sacred law, while case-law, customs and traditions were also taken into account. Laws were interpreted by learned Brahmans. The office of the Chief Justice was termed as the Dharmadhikarana. The inscriptions refer to different categories of officials related to the administration of justice. We find references to the Nyayakarana (Chief Judicial Officer), the Vyavaharin or Vyavaharika who conducted judicial proceedings and the Kayastha who was probably a law clerk. To enforce law and order there were the chata (policemen), bhata (irregular footsoldiers), and the chauradharika whose duty was to catch thieves and recover stolen property. Senior police officers were known by different terms like Dandika, Dandupasika and Mahadandapasaika. The Mahadandapasyaka was probably akin to modern magistrates who combined in them both police and judicial duties.

With the emergence of the state it became necessary for the king not only to maintain law and order but also protect the kingdom from internal threats and external aggression. Rulers had a regular army as well as voluntary militia. The Nidhanpur copper plate inscription issued by Bhaskarvarman refers to the armed forces which comprised of foot soldiers, charioteers, cavalry, elephant corps and the naval forces. Other inscriptions also refer to soldiers (bhata), policemen (chata), and army chiefs (senapoti senadhyaksha) like Guna and Sri Suchita. The latter was also a mahasamanta, or great feudalary chief, indicating that able feudatories were also entrusted with important military duties.
The king was assisted by a council of ministers, which, along with the crown prince or yuvrajya constituted the executive. The council is referred to in the Si-yu-ki as the mantriparishad and as sachivasamaja in the Kanauji grant of Vaidyadeva. Inscriptions refer to different categories of ministers like anayya, sachiva and mantri. While Kautilya's Arthasastra uses all three as synonyms, the Kandakija Niti differentiates between the three posts as regard to the type of ministerial duty. Mantris were required to formulate state policy and advise the king about the use of the four means of government viz: peace, corruption, dissension and force. Amatys dealt with revenue matters while Suchivas were war ministers. Govinda and Madhusudhana were mahamatyas of Harivarman the Salastambha king, while Avaguna was a vishayamotya of Mahabharatvarman. Vaidyadeva was a suchiva of Gaudesvara Kumarapala. Inscriptions also refer to other officers of the royal court like the Mahapratihar (chief chamberlain), Mahasenapati (commander-in-chief of the armed forces), Mahadvaradhipati (commander of the passes), Mahallakupradahika (old female guard of the harem) and Mahadundanayaka. The Rajgura (king's preceptor) and the bhisaj (physician) were also important members of the king's household. Besides them we find references to courtiers, king's favourites, princes, feudatory chiefs, scribes, envoys and others.

For administrative convenience the kingdom was divided into provinces known as bhukti, sub-divisions or mandala and districts or vishaya. The grama or village was the smallest administrative unit. Agriculture was the mainstay of the economy and land revenue was the main source of state income. With the emergence of the state of Kamarupa land was no longer collectively utilized by the community. Theoretically it now belonged to the state. Land was divided into different categories like vastubhumi (homestead), keidalakshetra (lowland), goparachara (pasture land) sthala (highland), jala (water bodies), etc. The arable land was parcelled out in the form of land holdings and tenancy upon which a variety of taxes was levied, mainly on the produce. While the crown lands were directly utilized by the king, the revenue from the rest of the land was utilized to fulfill the administrative needs and duties of the state. Agraharas were rent-free holdings donated to learned Brahmans for perpetuity. Regular taxes on the produce of the land were known as kora and uparikara. The former was a tax on cultivable land while the latter was a tax levied on temporary tenants. Irregular taxes were known as Upakara or Upaskara a tax on land levied for special purposes, while Ughhetana was an extra tax paid by landless labourers. Besides these, the land grants refer to other occasional taxes or
impositions which the people were required to pay, like cattahatrapravesa, chauradhurana, hastihanda, naukabandah etc. During the visits of the feudatory chiefs, courtiers, royal princes, lesser chieftains, and other government officers, etc. the people of the locality had to host them entailing extra burden referred to as pidah or exactions. We also find reference to sulka (tolls) and fines.

Land revenue was mainly paid in kind and depending upon the productive capacity of the land, it varied from one-sixth to one-fourth. The state thus appropriated the surplus production. Revenue officers like the Aupariku were entrusted with the collection of the produce which was deposited in the royal granary, while taxes collected in cash were deposited in the treasury. The Bhandagarika and Kosthagarika were in charge of the granary and treasury respectively. Mahasamanta Divakara was in charge of the bhandaguru or royal granary during the reign of Bhaskarvarman. The Aukhetika collected the Utkhetana tax. Fines, war booty and tributes were other sources of state income. Ratnapala’s grant indicates the presence of copper mines. Inscriptions provided graphic details of subordinate kings coming in procession bearing gifts for the rulers.

From the inscriptions that form our main source of information we learn that during the reign of the Varman dynasty the state was highly centralized. Although the system of granting rent-free holdings to Brahmanas began at least as early as the fifth century during the reign of Mahabhattivarman, up to the middle of the seventh century the beneficiaries of such grants were exempted from paying land revenue alone. The state retained other rights over the granted land. But from the reign of the Salastambha dynasty the state appears to have relinquished all rights over the granted lands, and police duties, magisterial duties, the right to catch thieves and recover stolen property, the right over forest products, trapping of elephants, tethering of boats accrued to the new owner. This resulted in the growth of powerful land-owning Brahmanas over which the state had little or no control. Feudatory chiefs also began to play an increasing active role not only in providing military service, but also in other administrative services. According to the Hayunthal grant of Harijaravarman, his coronation was not performed by the Brahman priest, but by the feudatory chiefs, merchants and traders. Moreover, under the Salastambha and Pala rulers, while granting land the king also informed a hierarchy of feudal officers like the raja, ranaka, rajanaka, rajavallabha, etc., all of whom appear to have enjoyed certain rights over the land. Thus it is evident that the economy was gradually developing along feudal lines.
Stop to consider
Feudal System

In ancient time, society was dependent on the "feudal" system, which was based on allocation of land in return for service. The king would give out grants of land to his most important noblemen (barons and bishops), and each noble would have to promise to loyally follow him and supply him with soldiers in time of war. The nobles then divided their land among lower lords, or knights who also had to become their vassals (servants). In the lowest spot in society sat the peasants who worked on the land itself. They had almost no rights, tiny pieces of property - and no vassals.

In the riverine Brahmaputra Valley, the Austro-Asiatics were perhaps the first to have started the cultivation of rice. In the valley surrounded by hills and mountains the people extensively practiced shifting agriculture as well as terrace farming. They also started the cultivation of many fruits and vegetables like banana, betel, coconut, brinjal, pineapple, sugarcane, etc. They also seem to have introduced the method of taming elephants. The Aryans speakers who entered Assam from the Gangetic Valley introduced wet rice cultivation into the region as discussed in the last unit. The land grants indicate extensive cultivation of paddy during the period. Moreover, by actively promoting settlements of Brahmans, the rulers of Assam increased agricultural production. The land was very fertile and fit for the cultivation of a large variety of crop. Hieun Tsang refers to irrigation and the production of coconuts and pineapples. Besides paddy, people cultivated other crops like pulses, mustard, sugarcane and various kinds of foods and vegetables. The cultivation of sugar cane is indicated by the fact that among the presents sent by Bhaskara to Harsha. was guda (molasses) prepared from sugarcane. Bana mentions other presents of Bhaskara like pumpkin gourds, containing painting materials, juice of the mango in bamboo tubes, cane stools, birds in bamboo cages painted golden, etc. The extensive plantation of areca nut and the betel vine is supported by the local epigraphs as well as by the Harshacharita and the Apsahad inscription of Adityasena. The plantation of various fruit trees of different varieties is proved by various sources. The inscriptions mention kantaphala (jackfruit) amara (mango), sriphala, sakhotaka (walnut) tambhula (betel nut) etc. The Kalika Purana mentions a large number of trees considered precious including saralu (pine), sala, chadana (sandalwood), agaru (aloe) bamboo etc. The abundance of tejpat (bay leaf) is testified by other sources.
Fishing, pottery and weaving were other occupations of the people. Epigraphs mention a class of people called Kaivartas or the fishing community. They also refer to Tantuvarayas (weavers) and Kumbhakara and Hadi (potters). Gold washing and making jewellery were also important occupations of the period. Gold was found in abundance in the sands of many rivers of Assam. However, gold washing was done on an elaborate scale only in the later period, under the Ahoms. The Tezpur grant of Vanamala states that 'the river Lauhitya carried gold dust from the gold-bearing boulders of the Kailash Mountain'. Tabaqat-I-Nasiri of Minhaj says that numerous idols both of gold and silver, a huge image of beaten gold weighing two or three thousand maunds stood in a temple in Kamarupa where the fleeing army of Bakhtiyar took shelter. Our sources indicate that metal works on copper, engraving and stone carving were other economic activities. Among other important crafts, mention may be made of brickmaking, extraction of iron from ores etc. as evidenced from the material remains. The Kamauli and Nidhanpur grants refer respectively to Kumbhakara, (potter) and Kumbhakaratagarta (the potter's pit) and it is obvious that pottery was also an important village craft. The discovery, of a potter's kiln at Barbhita in Goalpara district, as well as the unearthing of pottery specimens during excavations at Ambari, Cotton College campus and other sites corroborate the inscriptional evidence. From a reference in the Harshacarita regarding the different presents sent by Bhashkarvarman to Harsha we can have an idea of various minor crafts prevalent in ancient Assam. Basket making, carpentry, wicker works. use of bark finely prepared for the purpose of writing on them, ivory work and working in coral, gold and reed were prevalent in the period. Another important product of Assam was bamboo. Bamboo supplied materials for the construction of houses. In the epigraphs bamboo groves are often mentioned as marking the boundary of land donated. besides bamboo fences.

Many of the articles as well as forest and mineral products of the Brahmaputra valley were exported to the neighbouring states and to the countries of Sri Lanka, Myanmar, China and Tibet. The main route from Kamarupa to Bengal, Bihar and Orissa was by the rivers Brahmaputra and Ganga. The Si-yu-ki informs us that Hiuen Tsang started his journey from Magadha, passed by Champa (modern Bhagalpur), Kajangala (Rajmahal) and Pundravardhan (Rangpur) and going eastward reached Kamarupa after crossing the Katoraya River. It may be surmised that this may have been the regular route from Magadha. Harsha sent a messenger from Ganjam to Kamarupa. The reference indicates that there were regular routes to Kamarupa from Nalanda and Orissa.
The cultural and commercial contact between ancient Assam and China both by land and sea routes is indicated by a number of sources. The earliest reference to commercial relation between India and China through the Assam-Burma routes is found in the account of Chang Kien (200 B.C.). According to P.C. Bagchi the Assam-Burma route to China started from Pataliputra (Patna), passed by Champa (Bagalpur), Kajangala (Rajmahal) and Pundravardhan (North Bengal) and proceeded up to Kamarupa (Guwahati) in Assam. There were three routes from Assam to Burma in the early times as is the case today. They include one route by valley of the Brahmaputra up to the Patkai range and then through its passes up to upper Burma, the second through Manipur up to the Chinwin valley and the third through Arakan up to the Irrawaddy Valley. All these routes met on the frontier of Burma near Bhamo and then proceeded over the mountains and across the river valley Junansu i.e., Kumming which was the chief city of the southern province of China."

The references in the Wu Shung Shu (A. D. 420-79) that a king of the Kapili valley in Assam sent an embassy to China probably through the Assam-Burma route, indicate the early political and commercial contact between Assam and China. This relation was strengthened during the 7th century A.D. during the time of the visit of Huien Tsang to Assam. The existence of a land route and the intimate relation between the two lands are revealed by the testimony of the pilgrim. The chief articles of trade probably consisted of silk and silken cloth, bay leaf, buffalo and rhinoceros' hide and horns, iron, aloes wood, musk, gold, ivory etc. The barter system was followed for the purpose of internal affairs, while cowrie shells were used to pay fines as indicated in the Tezpur Rock Inscription of Harjaravarman. The statement in the Harshacarita that Bhaskarvarma presented Harsha with 'heaps' of black and white cowries seems to indicate that for inter-state relations within India and also possibly for paying taxes the subjects used cowries or paddy of prescribed weight. Many land grants speak of druma in connection with the production capacity of land, which is a unit of measurement and exchange for paddy.

Thus, migrations from the east and west and the resultant state formation brought in many changes in the polity and economy of the Brahmaputra valley. The extension of agriculture, cultivation of rice and other crops on an extensive scale, forest products all contributed to a vibrant economy while the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries provided links to other lands encouraging trade and commerce. The state played an important role in these activities by maintaining law and order, guarding against external threats and facilitating trade and commerce.
4.4 Socio-Cultural Changes

The political and economic changes also let to the emergence of diverse social classes. The migrants from the Ganga valley resulted in the introduction of the varnasramadharma – a hierarchical system or law (dharma) of different classes (varna) and the four stages of life (asrama). We find references in the inscriptions of Assam to the varnasramadharma.... The early rulers of Assam were required to take special care to preserve the traditional divisions of society namely Brahmanas, Ksatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras based on occupation. These were respectively, the priestly class, those engaged with trade and commerce such as merchants and the calss who performed menial tasks considered lowly. It should however be noted that varna had in course of time lost its original significance and became synonymous with jati, the system which laid emphasis on birth and heredity. Consequently the original division of the people into four varnas had expanded resulting in numerous sub-castes. In Assam, as in other parts of India there are references to sub-castes based on occupations. In course of time the society of the Brahmaputra valley became broadly divided in to two social classes, viz : the Brahmanas and the non-Brahmanas, the latter being denoted by the generic term Sudra.

The Brahmanas occupied the highest position in the society. They were actively patronized by royalty, given rent-free lands and occupied high administrative posts like that of ministers and advisers to the monarch. All the land grants discovered till date are in favour of Brahmanas alone. The Brahmana society was based on their vedusakha, gotra and pravara which determined their exogamous marriage relations. The vedusakha denoted the special branch or expertise of learning to which a Brahmana scholar belonged. The gotra and pravara denote the genealogy and lineage of the Brahmanas who are all believed to have descended from ancient rishis (seers), the progenitor of their family.

Literature and epigraphs indicate that many Brahmanas observed the orthodox rules and duties relating to yagana (worship), udhyuma (study), adhyapami (teaching), dana (making gifts) and pratigraha (accepting gifts). They also follow other injunctions relating to snana (bath), japu (the muttering of the Gayatri and other holy mantras), sandhyav (prayer offered at morning, noon and evening) and other sacrifice.

The first and foremost duty of the Brahmanas was to pursue the study of the Vedas. Besides their scriptural duties, the Brahmanas also held high administrative offices. Ministers, administrators and court poets were mostly
members of their class. Janardana was a nyayakaranika (law clerk) in the
time of Bhaskara. The Subhankarapataka grant of Dharmapala refers to the
Brahmana Himanga, who was not only skilled in archery, but also an expert
in reading omens implied in the movement and fall of other people’s arrows.

In the epigraphs we find references to several occupational castes like
Kayasthas, Karanas, Lekhakas, as well as Kumaras, Hadis and Tantavayas.
Chief of them were the Karanas and the Kayasta. In the Sutras, Smritis
and in the Mahabharata the term Karana is used in the sense of a caste.
Kayasta is mentioned as an administrative officer in the Visnusmruti and
Vajnavalkyasmriti. In the Nidhanpur grant, the nyayakaranika
Janardhanasvami was a Brahmana and nyavaharin Haradatta a Kayastha.

There were also professional groups who acquired the status of sub-castes
at a later period. The Tezpuri Rock Inscription of Harjaravarman refers to
Kaivartas whose duty was to collect tolls on the rivers. Epigraphs also
indicate that some Kaivartas took to agriculture. They are now divided into
two sections – Halowa (those who work with ploughs) and Jalowa (those
who are fishermen). Other professional castes mentioned in the inscriptions
are Kumbhakaras (potters who use the wheel), Hadi (potters who do not
use the wheel), Tantuvayas (weavers), Nauks (boatman) and Dandis (rowers
of boat).

From the above discussion it can be said that it is evident that professional
groups practicing rules of endogamy and exogamy acquired caste status in
course of time. They were eventually assimilated into the Vedic Brahmanical
society within the Sudra fold.

The usramas or four stages of life, namely Brahmacharya (studenthood),
grihasi (householder), vanaprastha (going to the forest) and yati or sanyas
(rejuvenation) were perhaps not so strictly adhered to. We find evidence of
these stages of life only in the case of the priestly class and the ruling class
in the epigraphs, which are largely silent on the life of the common people
except for occasional references.

Besides changes in the social structure, the Brahmans from the Ganga valley
introduced Sanskrit language and literature into the pre-literate society of the
Brahmaputra valley whose early inhabitants are frequently referred to
as Kirata and mleechhha or outcasts. Sanskrit became the official language
of the state and court records were kept in Sanskrit. Assam produced literature
in Sanskrit. King Dharmapala himself composed the first eight lines of his
Puspabhadra inscription. With the introduction of Sanskrit literature in the
Brahmaputra valley, Vedic culture made inroads into the region. Education

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in ancient Assam centred round the guru griha. Sanskrit tolas and village schools established by the Brahmanas of agrahara villages. The poets and scholars, patronized by royalty also promoted learning. Huen Tsang observed that king Bhaskara as well as his subjects was fond of learning. Very little, however, is known about the curriculum of study. The epigraphs mention the study of vidya and kala. Vidya included the four Vedas, as well as Ayurveda, Dhanurveda, and the Tantras, the six Vedangas, Itihis, Puranas, Smritis, Arthasastra, Dharmasastra, Tarka, Nyaya, Alankara, Kanyata etc. Kala included Gandharva-veda and Silpasastras, or the study of various arts like music, dancing and painting. Thus the coming of the Brahmanas from the Ganga valley led to Aryanisation and Sanskritisation of the people of the Brahmaputra valley. But these changes were confined to western and central Assam alone where these is also the evidence of Brahmanical culture.

Stop to Consider:

Aryanisation refers to the process by which the Vedic-Aryan society assimilates non-Aryan groups into its social structure by assigning these groups a place in the Aryan social hierarchy or the caste system. It is generally marked by the adoption of Aryan social customs like the varnasramadharma; worshipping of Brahmanical deities or the identification of non-Aryan deities with Vedic divinities; and the use of the Sanskrit language. However in the process of Aryanisation the non-Aryan group or groups do not abandon their original social and religious customs, rites and rituals, but integrate them with that of the Aryan society which absorbs them over a period of time.

Sanskritisation is the process by which a Hindu caste that has a low status in the social hierarchy, or a tribal or other group changes its customs, rituals, ideology and way of life in the direction of a higher or more elite social group. Generally such changes are followed by a claim to higher position in the caste hierarchy that that traditionally conceded to the claimant caste by the local community. These claims are usually made over a period of time. Sanskritisation is generally accompanied by upward social mobility but does not lead to any structural change in the social hierarchy.
The Vedic-Aryan migrants followed patriarchal system and descent was also patrilineal. As Vedic culture expanded it assimilated the local people, many of them, including some tribes, who were previously matrilineal now adopted patriliney. Joint family was the general practice. Evidence of the joint ownership of landed property is furnished by the Nidhanpur Grant which endowed land to brothers jointly. In the Parbatiyah plate of Vanamaladeva, the donees are the four brothers Cudamani, Detobha, Garga and Sambhu who also lived together.

Manu recognized as many as eight kinds of marriage. These are Brahma (based upon Vedic rites), Daiva (by which a girl is offered to a priest), Arsha (marriage by purchase in which the bride's father normally receives from the bridegroom a pair of oxen), Kaiva or Prajapatiya (in which the marriage takes place after the proposal being made by the would-be bridegroom), Asura (marriage by purchase), Gandharva (a love match without parental consent), Raksasa (marriage by force or capture) and Paisacá (rape or seduction of a woman during intoxicated, drugged or deranged state). While the local inscriptions refer to only marriages arranged by parents, Pauranic literature and the Mahabharata contain instances of Asura and Raksasa forms of marriage. That marriage was sometimes determined by state policy is evident from instances of matrimonial alliances alluded to in the epigraphs.

The inscriptions and local literature indicate the position of women in ancient Assam. These refer however only to the queens, wives of feudatory chiefs, women officers of the royal place and to the wives of Brahmana donees. It is not clear whether the women had any direct role in the administration but it appears from the inscriptions that a woman’s role revolved around being a good wife or mother of valiant sons. Queen Jivada, the mother of Harijaravaman was allegedly worshipped by many. In Harjara’s. own record she is compared with Kunti and Subhadra. Nayana, wife of Gopala, was a queen of wide fame. Harshapalas’s queen Ratna and the Brahmana lady Pauka were well-reputed for their works of piety and clarity, and were described as being like the Goddess Parvati. Ratnapala’s Bargaon grant speaks of a Brahmana lady Syamayaka who was adorned with many good qualities.

Regarding the education of women, the Kamauli Grant of Vaidyadeva states that Monoratha’s son of the Brahmana, Rajguru Murari, and Padma, his wife were not only educated, but skilled in the art of poetry and rhetoric. Queens also received education, but hardly anything is known about the education of women other than the wives of the kings and Brahmans. However, the sculptures of the period portray women as playing on musical instruments and dancing. The purusha system was probably unknown and
the Baraun inscription of Ratnapala indicates that women even took their bath in the open and the vesyas or prostitutes of Durjaya occupied the best areas in this capital city. The Tezpur Grant of Vasmala refers to the devadasis or temple dancers. Many literary works, particularly the Trancic works like the Yogini Tantra make references to the temple dancers dedicated to the service of the deity, particularly in the Siva temples of Hajo and Tezpur. The Kuttanimatam of Damodargupta states that a concubine of king Bhaskarvarman committed sati after his death.

4.5 Development of Vaisnavism, Saivism, Saktism and Other Religious Sects

Assam was originally a land of the Kirata (Mongoloid) who were animists. Their animistic beliefs included fertility cult, head hunting, human sacrifice, ancestor worship, rites connected with the dead, belief in spirits, magic and sorcery. With the coming of the Aryans speakers, particularly the Brahmanas Vedic rites entered Assam. However, the Aryans assimilated many non-Aryan beliefs and practices into their religious fold.

A distinctive feature of Brahmanical society are the rites and rituals known as Shrasta, those that are in accordance with Shruti or scriptural revelation, and Smarta, those based only on religious tradition or Smriti, concerning almost every stage of an individual's life. The spread of Aryan culture was largely due to the settlement of Brahmanas in the land. It was the systematic policy of the rulers to create agraharas for them. Royal patronage thus helped in the spread of Brahmanical Vedic beliefs and practices. The Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang refers to "hundreds of Deva temples", evidently of Brahmanical deities that existed in the capital city of Kamarupa indicating that during the 7th century A.D. Brahmanical culture was widespread in the land. The Nidhanpur grant states that Bhaskara spread the 'Aryandaharma' by dispelling the darkness of the Kali age.

The copperplates of different rulers of ancient Assam indicate that the Brahmanas performed various rites and rituals. The Puspadbhabra grant of Dharmapala states that the Brahmana beneficiary Madhusudana lived in the village of Khyatipalli inhabited by many religious Brahmanas. In this village, "the smoke of sacrifices overcast the sky and the Vedas were chanted aloud.

The Brahmanas practiced the six fold duties of yajana, yajana, adhyapana, and the agnivhota sacrifice, one of the Smarta rites, required to be performed
by the Brahmanas throughout their lives. The agnistoma, one of the seven soma sacrifice was also performed by the Brahmanas. Both literature and epigraphs further refers to the performance of other orthodox rites such as tapas (meditation), yapa (chanting), tirtha (sacred spot), snema (ritual bath) and dana (donation), all of which formed an important part of the life of a Brahmana. The orthodox Brahmanical culture of the Aryadharma thus established itself in Kamarupa. Inscriptions also refer to the performance of different Vedic sacrifices like asvamedha and rajasuya by different kings of Kamarupa. Vedic culture and religion centres around the worship of deities like Visnu, Surya, Indra, etc., evidence of which we find in the Brahmaputra valley. However there is a stronger tradition of the worship of Siva and associated deities, as well as Shaktism.

Vaisnavism is the cult of worshipping Vishnu as the supreme deity in any one of his several forms. Hymns are addressed to Visnu in the Rigveda itself but there the deity is almost identical with the Sun god Surya. In course of time Visnu came to be identified with Krishna-Vasudeva. The Pauranic doctrine of the avatara (incarnations) identified Visnu with heroes like Rama and Krishna. The Mahabharata and Bhagavata Purana have detailed references to the legends of Vishnu-Krishna. In earlier times the deity used to be worshipped according to a procedure prescribed in a set of texts known as the Pancaratra Samhitas. The Pancaratra form of worship is marked by the predominance of the rituals common to the Tantric-Sakta cult, besides mantra (magical chants) and yantra (mystical drawings). These texts mark the first emergence of Sakta principles in the Vaishnava sect. According to P.C. Choudhury the two cults merged though there was little connection between Vasudeva and the Visnu of the Vedas. In course of time the Vedic deity Visnu, Narayana of the Pancaratras, Vasudeva-Krishna, a Yadava hero, and Gopala of the Abhiras came to be worshipped under the unified name of Visnu.

Vaisnavism was established in Assam at a time when Surya worship and Brahmanical culture made considerable progress and archaeological sources indicate that the worship of both Visnu and his incarnations was prevalent in the land from early times. The Kalika Purana describes in detail about the worship of Vasudeva (Vishnu) with rituals and mentions as many as five reincarnations of the deity as being worshipped in different places of Assam. The Vishnu Purana states that Naraka, the king of Pragjyotishpura, was born through the Boar incarnation of Vishnu. Hiuen Tsang states that Bhaskara was descended from Narayanadeva (Vishnu). Bana in his Haracaritira describes that king as belonging to the family of Naraka.
The earliest reference to the worship of a Vaisnavite deity is found in the Umaechal Rock Inscription of Surendravarman, (identified with Mahendravarman of the Varman dynasty) which records the excavation of a cave temple to Balabhandrasvamin or Balarama, the elder brother of Krishna in the Mahabharata. The Badganga inscription of Bhutivarman, followed by a host of other inscriptions indicates the prevalence of Vaisnavism in early Assam. We find court officials whose names are synonyms of Vishnu, like Janardanasvami, Govinda, etc. Inscriptions offer salutations to different forms of Vishnu like Hari, Janardana, Narayana etc and king Indrapala had thirty-two aliases that are synonyms of the deity. The deity was also worshipped jointly with Siva in the form of Sankar-Narayana or Hari-Hara. Extensive remains of temples dedicated to Vishnu and his incarnations have been discovered in different places. The remains show that Vishnu was worshipped in his iconographic form as early as the 8th century C.E. Both literary and archaeological sources thus indicate that the worship of Vishnu and his incarnations was established in the land from early times.

Saivism prevailed in Assam from a remote period and it was the popular form of religion both amongst the aboriginals and the Aryanised people. The popularity of the Saiva cult in ancient Assam may be ascertained from the existence of a large number of centres of Siva worship. In the account of the holy places of Kamarupa as given in the Kalika Purana, the places connected with Siva are larger in number than those connected with Devi and Vishnu. The Kalika Purana mentions fifteen centres of the faith. Siva was originally a non-Aryan god, widely worshipped by the Mongoloid people, referred to as the Kiratas in early literature. Worship of Sakti was closely associated with the worship of Siva, as both represented the fertility cult. Siva was worshipped in iconographic representation as well as in the form of the aniconic linga. According to the Kalika Purana before the introduction of Devi worship in the form of Goddess Kamakhya who dwelt on the Nilachala, Sambhu (Siva) was the main deity of the land. The Yogini Tantra refers to a number of pithas where Siva was worshipped in different forms.

According to the Puranas Bana, the king of Sonitpur was a great devotee of Siva. Bhagadatta and Vajradatta were also devotees of Siva. The Harshacharita of Banabhata refers to Bhaskara's devotion to Siva. Moreover, the majority of the land grants issued by the rulers of ancient Assam commence with an invocation to different forms of Siva like Nataraja, Sambhu, Ardhanarishwara, Isvara, Rudra, Sankara, Paisupati, Hara etc.
Epigraphs of Assam refer to the worship of the deity and the erection of Siva temples. It is found in the Tezpur grant that Vanamala repaired ‘the fallen lofty temple of Hetukasulin (Siva).’ The Bargaon grant of Ratnapala compares the white washed temples of his capital Durjaya to the peaks of Mount Kailasha, the abode of Siva. The grant of Vallabhaddeva refers to a temple of Mahadeva; Hieun Tsang also records that during his visit to Kamarupa, there were hundreds of Deva temples, many of which were probably dedicated to Siva. The worship of Siva in his various forms is confirmed by the extensive ruins of temples and icons of the deity found throughout the Brahmaputra valley.

Saktism is associated with the worship of the Mother Goddess or Devi. It is based on the fertility cult which was represented by natural objects like stones and rocks, as well as the yoni. The worship of linga and yoni was very extensive in prehistoric times and even before the coming of the Aryans. They are the aniconic representation of the male and female organs of procreation. The yoni was later on been personified as the Mother Goddess and came to be known by different names such as Durga, Kali, Uma, Chandl, Kamakhya, Camunda, etc. The procedure of worshipping the goddess is mainly found in the tantras.

The Brahmaputra valley was an important centre of the Sakti cult. Kamarupa has been recognized as the principal centre of the Saktism with its chief shrine at Kamakhya where the yoni of Devi Sati is believed to have fallen. Through the ages Kamakhya has remained the most celebrated centre of the Sakti cult in Assam. The Kalika Purana was composed in ancient Kamrupa for the very purpose of glorifying the yoni goddess Kamakya. Iconographic representations of the Devi under various names have been found in the archaeological ruins discovered in different parts of Assam. The Tameswari temple at Sadiya was another important centre of Sakti worship. In the Doobi and Nidhanpur grants of Bhaskarvarman and the Tezpur and Parvatia grants of Vanamalavarmadeva we find traces of the prevalence of Saktism in ancient Assam.

Closely allied with Saktism, Tantricism was also prevalent in the Brahmaputra valley. Generally believed to be of non-Aryan origin many of its elements are also found in other pre-literate cultures of the world which include the use of magic and charms, esoteric rites, the use of wine, the belief in the efficacy of mantras (chants) and sexual orgies. These practices were assimilated into the Brahmanical cult of Sakti. Some Tantric works such as the Vinyini Tantra and Kamarupa Tantra were composed in
Kamarupa. Both the Indian and Tibetan sources refer to the prevalence of Buddhism in the form of Vajrayana in Assam. In the Buddhist Tantric literature Kamarupa and Kamakhya are said to be sacred. In the Buddhist tantric text Sadhanamala the four pithas of the cult are named as Kamakhya or Kamarupa, Srihatta, Purnagiri and Odiyana. It is significant that the Kalika Purana also names almost the same places as holy pithas where the sacred limbs of Sati fell.

Besides the prevalence of Vaisnavism, Saivism and Saktism we also find prevalence of other religions in the Brahmaputra valley like Buddhism and Jainism. While evidence of the latter is confined to Sri Sri Surya Pahar in Goalpara district, the former spread from western Assam at least up to the region of modern Kamrup district. It is generally contended by scholars like R.C Majumdar and N.K. Bhatias that the kingdom of Kamarupa, (ancient Assam) was the bastion of the Brahmanical faith till the time of Huen-tsang and there was no trace of Buddhism. The Chinese pilgrim who visited the court of the Kamarupa king Bhaskara in the third decade of the seventh century C.E. comments on the people of the country of Kamarupa in his Si-yu-kias thus: “...they worshipped the Devas, and did not believe in Buddhism. So there had never been a Buddhist monastery in the land, and whatever Buddhists there were in it performed their acts of devotion secretly; the Deva-Temples were some hundreds in number, and the various systems had some myriads of professed adherents.” However, scholars from Assam like Mukunda Madhav Sharma and Maheswar Neog have proved through a study of Tantrik Buddhist texts and Kalhana’s Rejeteshwargoti that the Vajrayana form of Buddhism was quite popular in Kamarupa where many believe it originated, in about the seventh century C.E. thus perhaps corroborating the statement of the Chinese pilgrim. Moreover, archaeological excavations in the last two decades have brought to light the evidence of Buddhism in western Assam prior to the seventh century A.D.

The earliest traces of Buddhism in Assam can be dated to the pre-Christian era. At Sri Sri Surya Pahar in Goalpara district of Assam have been found enormous rock-cut Stupas on top of hillocks. These structures belong to the period before the advent of Mahayanaism. One of them was later embellished with the figures of Brahmanical deities like Visnu and Siva. Terracotta salabhanjika have been discovered at the site of Sri Sri Surya Pahar, while dhyani Buddha images in hussarsamudra have been found at Paglatek and Barbhita, all in the Goalpara district.

Two terracotta plaques datable to the 8th century C.E. now preserved at the Assam State Museum, Guwahati, have been recovered from the Uzanbazar.
area of Guwahati city in Kamrup district. They appear to be Buddhist votive tablets depicting the motif of pagoda like stupas and the figure of the Buddha. As other archaeological evidence of Buddhism in Guwahati is absent in the early period, the discovery of the votive tablets were probably carried by a pilgrim. Excavations by the Archaeological Survey of India in the Bhaibilbari region have revealed the remains of a massive temple complex and part of a Buddhist Stupa.

Thus it seems probable that Buddhism had made inroads in Kamarupa long before Hiuen Tsang’s visit. There are traditions in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and Assam that the Buddha died in Kamarupa. On the basis of the traditions in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and Assam, it is said that the mahaparinirvana of Buddha took place at Hajo, near Guwahati. Even today the Hayagriva temple at Hajo is a place of pilgrimage of the Tibetan and Bhutanese Buddhists. In the Rajatarangini of Kalhana it is stated that, the daughter of the Kamarupa king Balavarman, was married to Meghavahana of Kashmir and she brought with her a Tibetan Buddhist Guru of her father called Stumpa who built a Vihara in Kashmir (Lo Stumpa). The evidence not only points to cultural relations between Kamarupa, Tibet and Kashmir, but also seems to establish the fact that Buddhism was prevalent in Kamarupa and was patronized by its rulers. From the latter part of the 7th century C.E. Buddhism underwent forms of mystic cults known as Mantrayana, Vajrayana and Tantrayana. There are evidences to show that these systems gained ground in Assam. Both the Indian and the Tibetan sources provide us with materials regarding the prevalence of later Buddhism in the form of Vajrayana in Assam.

We also find references in literature and inscriptions to other Brahmanical deities whose sculptural representations have been found in different parts of the Brahmaputra valley. There are images of such gods as Ganesa, Kartikeya, Indra, Agni, Kuvera, Surya, Manasa, Ganga, Yamuna etc.

4.6 Summing Up

From the foregoing discussion we have seen how new political and economic structures were established in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam due to cultural assimilation amongst the Austric, Mongoloid, Alpine and Indo-Aryan groups of people. After the arrival of the Vedic-Aryans, the process of assimilation began and this process brought a change in the indigenous culture due to Aryanisation of the Brahmaputra Valley. Along with state formation we find the development of an organised state administration. With the extension of agriculture and increasing patronage of Brahmins
from the Ganga valley who were granted rent-free holdings, we find the emergence of a feudal structure with powerful feudatory chiefs occupying important civil and military office. There slowly emerged a stratified society loosely based on profession. The introduction of Vedic rites and rituals, as well as wet-rice cultivation brought about changes in the religious and economic life of the people. Society came to be divided into two divisions—the Brahmanas and the Sudras. The religious sphere witnessed growing Aryanisation and Sanskritisation. Vedic deities like Visnu gained popularity along with Siva and Sakti.

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