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Political System of Ancient Kamrupa as Reflected in Historical Texts

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1.0 Introduction

It is about the political systems existed in ancient Kamrupa during the period from 3000 B.C. to 500 A.D. The proposed research work is intended to analyse the political system and culture of ancient Kamrupa. The system of political structure of ancient Kamrupa was not uniform. Many scholars have given different ideas about the political structure of Kamrupa. But it is difficult to define a uniform structure of political system that existed during ancient period. Most of the historiography on this period is confined to limited study of political system. Therefore, through this study an attempt will be made to study the structure of different aspects of political system and also carry on a descriptive study on the different rulers of kingdom that existed in Ancient Kamrupa.

Pragjyotisha also known as Kamrupa in subsequent period was considered as very important place from the earliest period of history. The scope of the study of the political system of ancient Kamrupa with its capital in Pragjyotisha is very wide, which covers it are both the political and cultural aspects. The Aryans first started its process of penetration in Eastern India by installing a ruler of their choice, *Naraka* in Pragjyotisha. Later the king *Naraka* of Pragjyotisha became a great hero of Hinduism after defying Krishna. *Bhagadatta* the king of Pragjyotisha was famous as he fought in Kurukshetra war bravely. He was killed by draft plan of Krishna and which Arjuna exhausted with his hands in the great *Kurukshetra* war.

The kingdom of Kamrupa found retained her independence during the imperial Mauryan rule also. In the Varmana dynasty, *Bhaskarvarman* was an intelligent ruler with international outlook in both politics and culture, which was rare in those days in all lands and particularly in India. *Bhaskarvarman* had also his capital at Pragjyotisha. As ruler he could achieve to such a high rank and estimate. Though there is no any concrete evidence of the date of establishment of Pragjyotisha. In *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and in Kalidasa's *Raghuvamsam* prove undoubtedly the great antiquity of the city of Pragjyotisha and this oldest city of the region. It had the potential to become a capital city of different dynasties for very long period. So, there is vast scope to study properly the political and cultural aspects of ancient Kamrupa from its capital Pragjyotisha. Though there

are some notable writings of high standard on history of ancient Kamrupa, different opinions of different scholars have not been united so far.

2.0 Objective

The objective of this paper is to focus on political system of ancient Kamrupa that reflected in historical literatures.

3.0 Significance

This study is significant to unearth the political system existed in the ancient Kamrupa. The findings of this study will be beneficial to research scholars of political science, public administration, economy, sociology, anthropology and public policy.

4.0 Limitations of the Study

This paper is limited to its nature and content. The sources of secondary data are secondary confined to the political system existed ancient Kamrupa. The least literatures are available in this field accommodation of information is made at optimum level.

5.0 Methodology

The study is based on descriptive research. The collection of information is exploratory in nature and findings are described through observation method. The data or information is collected through the library work consulting books, journals, inscriptions, grants containing history and political culture. The data of the present research work are collected from the mythological epics and puranas are considered as primary data. And also the data published works of different scholars, journals, periodicals, books, pamphlets, reports of archeology are secondary. All the data collected with the help of library work visiting different libraries of different Universities. To make this study, original record such as inscriptions and similar other records of the ancient kingdom of Kamrupa are primarily studied. The materials of the present study are collected the help of library work visited different Universiies, Kamrupa Anusandhan Samiti, Assam State Museum, Directorate of Archaeology, Assam.

6.0 Discussion

6.1 Pragjyotisa or Kamrupa

Ancient Assam was known as Pragjyotisa also known as Kamrupa comprising the modern seven states, situated on the north-eastern part of India. It lies between latitudes $28^{\circ}18'$ and 24° North and longitudes $89^{\circ}46'$ and $97^{\circ}4'$ East. It is bounded on the north by the sub-Himalayan ranges of Bhutan, Aka, Dafla, Miri, Abor and Mishimi. Previously, the whole region, inhabited by the tribal people, was under the jurisdiction of Assam. Now this region is known as Arunachal Pradesh. To the west of this region, lies the territory of Bhutan. On the east the state is bounded by the Patikai range, which defines the western boundary of Burma (i.e. present Myanmar), the

intervening ranges being inhabited chiefly by the various tribes of Nagas and Manipuris. The hills bordering Myanmar occupied by the Nagas were previously in Assam. Now, the Nagas have their own state.

Towards the south of Nagaland lies Manipur, which comprises hills and plains alike and which is a full-fledged state now. To the south lie Mizoram (Lushai hills), bordering Myanmar and Bangladesh. To the west, just near Mizoram, lies Tripura, three fourths of which are surrounded by Bangladesh. The south-west corner of Assam is bounded by the Meghalaya state comprising Khasi, Jaintia and Garo hill Districts, also bordering Bangladesh. Right on the west of Assam there is no hills. The southern portion of the western boundary of Assam touches Bangladesh while the northern portion of the same is touched by the Cooch-Bihar District of West-Bengal, which was a part of Assam in the past.

The extent of Pragjyotisha or Kamrupa varied in different times. According to “Mahabharata”, the kingdom of Pragjyotisha extended in the west up to the river Karatoya and in the south to Bay of Bengal. The river Karatoya was regarded as sacred as Ganges in those days.

The “*Puranas*” were composed much later than the “*Mahabharata*”. Ancient Assam was known as Kamrupa in the “*Puranas*”. While according to “*Kalikapurana*”, the temple of *Kamakhyā* was the center of Kamrupa, the “*Vishnu-Purana*” gives four hundred fifty miles as an extent of Kamrupa in four directions from the temple. According to these account, therefore, the kingdom of Kamrupa included Assam, East Bengal and Bhutan.

“*Jogini-Tantra*”, which was composed even much later than the “*Puranas*” also, gives an extensive boundary to Kamrupa. It is said to comprise the whole of the Brahmaputra valley, Bhutan, Rangpur district (Bangladesh), Cooch-Bihar, Part of *Mymensingh* district (Bangladesh) and probably *Garo* hills.

According to “*Jogini-Tantra*”, ancient Kamrupa kingdom had four main division: (1) Ratnapith, included the land between the river Karatoya of North Bengal in the west and river Sankosh in the east; (2) Kamapith, extended from the Sankosh to the Rupahi in the east; (3) Swarnapith included the track between the Rupahi and the Bharali and (4) Saumarpath, included the whole of eastern Assam between the rivers Bharali and Dikrang in upper Assam. Scholars of different discipline have propounded different theories regarding the origin of the name “Pragjyotisha-Kamrupa.” R.M. Nath suggests that a branch of the Chao-Theius people of China migrated to India on some ancient date and established three important centres in the sub-continent in India, Assam in the east, in the centre at Bareilly in Uttar Pradesh and in the north west in Afganistan. These centres were called Prag-Zuthis, Madhya Zuthis and Uttar Zuthis respectively, those who came to the North-East were known as Prag-Zuthis in India. The term “*Zuthis*” in course of time got Sanskritised to ‘*Jotisa*’. However, this theory lacks evidence.

The *Kalikapurana*, a work of the 10th century A.D. describes “Formerly Brahma staying here created the stars; so the city is called Pragjyotisapura- a city equal to the city of Indra”. This etymological explanation given by the *Kalikapurana* has been followed by the historians of Assam.

Among the modern scholars, Sir Edward Gait writes, “Prag” means “*forner*” or “*eastern*” and “*Jyotisa*”, “*a star*”, “*astrology*”, “*shining*”. Pragjyotisapura may be taken to mean the “*City of Eastern Astrology*”. The name is interesting in connection with the reputation and this view holds that it was in Assam that the Tantrik form of Hinduism originated.

Rai Bahadur K.L. Barua accepts the etymology but reads it in a different connotation. It is significant that to the immediate east of the town of Gauhati there is a temple on crest of hill known as Citracala and the temple is dedicated to Navagrahas or the nine planets. It is probable that this temple is the origin leading to the name of Pragjyotisapura.

Dr. B.K. Kakati talked about the Pragjyotisa as the Sanskritisation of a Non-Aryan formation. Considering the topography of the land, he suggested that the name Pragjyotisa was derived from an Austric phrase: Pagarjuh(jo)tic(c=ch) meaning a region of extensive high hills.

It is found that Edward Gait and K.L. Barua have explained the term in connection with the city Pragjyotisapura, while B.K. Kakati explains the term taking to be the whole country. It is quite likely that the country derived its name from the name of the capital city; or reversely, the capital city derived its name from the name of the country.

6.2 Politics

Polity is the principle depending upon which type of administrative machinery of a state is decided in order to protect the integrity of the state and to look after the welfare of the subjects or citizens. The nature or form of the government whether absolutely monarchical or limitedly monarchical varied and depended upon the will of the people which is considered as supreme.

The ancient kingdoms of Kamrupa, although roughly equivalent to Assam, generally occupied an area larger than that of the modern province, and extended westward to the *Karataya* River, thus including the Kuch Bihar State and the *Rangpur* District. The earliest notice of the kingdom which is of any use for the purposes of the historian is the statement in Samudragupta's inscription on the Allahabad pillar, recorded about 360 or 370 AD, that Kamrupa was then one of the frontier states outside the limits of the Gupta empire, but paying tribute and owing a certain amount of obedience to the paramount power.

Kamrupa was a typical Hindu kingdom. The rulers believed in worship of Shiva, Sakti and others Hindu god in ancient Kamrupa. The name Kamrupa, or more properly Kamrup, which now designates as a district of Assam, was formerly applied to the whole of the eastern province of the ancient *Bharatavarsha*. It is synonymous with Pragjyotisha, which, however, seems to have been the older appellation for the country. In the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* the country is called *Pragjyotisha*, and its ruler, the Pragjyotisheswara. The term Kamrupa is first used in some of the *Puranas* and *Tantras*, which are admittedly of a later date than the great epics.

6.3 Political System

A political system is the totality of political institutions, norms, values, ideas, and relations in which political power is realized. This category came into political philosophy from sociology in the 50-60's of the 20th century to help the researchers. It relates to organize the description of political process, to clarify the internal patterns of the development of political structures. Conceptual outlines of the category "political system" acquired in the work of American political scientist David Easton and Gabriel Almond, who stressed that the political system unites not only the organize sides of political life but also such factors as consciousness, ideas and worldview. The system named this vast network of political relations and interdependence: if any element of this device changes, then the result is a change in the political system as whole.

The political system has an institutional, ideological, normative, communicative and value system. The institutional subsystem includes the state, political parties and movements, lobby groups, the media. The ideological subsystem forms theoretical level political ideologies, principles, ideas, slogans, ideals, concepts. The empirical level political psychology: feelings, moods, prejudices, emotions, opinions traditions. The communicative is a set of relations and forms of interactions that develop between nations, classes, social groups and individuals about their participation in the organisation of political power. The normative subsystem combines political norms and moral principles that determine and regulate the political life of society. Finally, the cultural subsystem acts as integrating factors, which with the help of cultural values, traditions and customs, can stabilize the political system as a whole.

There are numerous classifications of political system, since the time of Plato; classification is known as according to the forms of government.

- Monarchy is the rule of one person; its distorted form is tyranny.
- Aristocracy is the rule of several worthy people and its distorted form oligarchy.
- Polity the rule of many or all of the people and its distorted form Democracy.

Quiet often, typology of political system is used depending on the form of the political regime. In this case, totalitarian, authoritarian and democratic political systems and their verities are single out.

6.4 Monarchy

A monarchy is a system of political government in which the dynasty embodies the country's national identity and one of its key members, called the monarch, exercises a sovereign power. Traditionally and in most cases, the monarch's post is passed from one generation to another. Hereditary monarchies impose requirements regarding the religion, age, gender, mental capacity; in some cases it may be a rotating turns among the high chiefs in monarchy. Monarchies are associated with political or socio-cultural hereditary rule, in which monarchs rule for life and pass the responsibilities and power of the position to their child or another member of their family when they die. Most monarchs, both historically and in the modern day, have been born and brought up within a royal family, the Centre of the royal household and court. The kingdom of Kamrupa was ruled by three major dynasties, all of which drew their lineage from the legendary aboriginal king Naraka, who is said to have

established his line by defeating another aboriginal king Ghatakasura of the *Danava* dynasty. The Varman kings were the first rulers to emerge into history in first millennium Assam (Pragjyotisha), and the first to be mentioned for the region since the mythological kings of the Mahabharata period. The Varman claimed direct descent from the Naraka kings. The kingdom was situated around the Brahmaputra river valley, around present day Guwahati and Tezpur.

6.5 Expressions in Literatures

The review of related literature on the subject is made to develop the research proposal. Historical texts of national and international repute with high authority are consulted for the purpose. The king of Pragjyotisha was a contemporary of Rama. He was preceded in the kingdom of Kamrupa by five other kings, the first of who, *Mahiranga Danava*, is said to have been the first king of the country, who had flourished at least one century before *Naraka* (Kālikāpurāṇa, 10th century). The origin of the kingdom would thus date twelve centuries before the time of the *Mahabharata*, or more than four thousand years before the present time.

The *Yoginitantra* is popularly regarded as a great authority on everything connected with Kamrupa. It contains a good deal of information regarding the ancient geography and history of the country. According to it, ancient Kamrupa was bounded on the north by the *Kanjagiri*, on the east by the hill stream *Dikshu*, and on the west by the *Karatoya*; and it stretched southward as far as the junction of the Laksha with the Brahmaputra.

Harsacarita is called a *mahakavya* is a literary masterpiece and narrated romantic story rather than sober history which gives a cultural picture of the life of the society of the ancient Kamrupa. The great merit of the *Harsacarita* consists in the fact that it is a very early attempt at an historical romance the style which resembles the *estiloculto* of Spanish literature. *Harsacarita* may best be treated as romance, which it is all essentials, based on historical origin. *Harsacarita* is a unique work in Sanskrit literature, a landmark in literary history and a historical romance.

The *Arthasāstra* states the political realism that analyses the political world. It narrates how politics does work and not very often stating how it ought to work, also discloses to a king what calculating and sometimes brutal measures he must carry out to preserve the state and the common good.

Centrally, *Arthasāstra* argues how in an autocracy an efficient and solid economy can be managed. It discusses the ethics of economics and the duties and obligations of a king. The scope of *Arthasāstra* is, however, far wider than statecraft, and it offers an outline of the entire legal and bureaucratic framework for administering a kingdom, with a wealth of descriptive cultural detail on topics such as mineralogy, mining and metals, agriculture, animal husbandry, medicine and the use of wildlife. The *Arthasāstra* also focuses on issues of welfare (for instance, redistribution of wealth during a famine) and the collective ethics that hold a society together.

The book “A *Comprehensive History of Assam*” is also give us significant source of information (Barua 2019). Its object is to acquaint the readers with the forces and factors molding the society and culture of Assam through the ages. It analyses the salient features of Assamese civilization giving proper weight age to the contributions made by different tribes or ethnic groups of both the hills and the plains as well by the followers of different faiths towards its growth and development. The work is divided into four parts. Part I gives a brief idea of the present

state of Assam. It also discusses the source materials as well as the pre-history and the proto-history of the land. Part II deals with the ancient period beginning with the legendary kings till the dismemberment of the ancient kingdom of Pragjyotisha or Kamrupa in the close of the twelfth century AD. Part III treats the history of the medieval period from the rise of different tribal states on the ruins of the ancient kingdom till the fall of the Ahom monarchy in 1826. Part IV deals with the modern period covering the history of the British rule up to the attainment of the country's Independence in 1947. It also contains a chapter dealing briefly with the events after Independence.

Barpujari (1990), in his work "*The Comprehensive History of Assam*" records the events and activities of ancient Assam from the prehistoric times to the twelfth century A.D. The book extensively deals with the political history; polity and administration; social life, economic condition; language and literature; education; religion; iconography; art, architecture and sculpture of the land from the epigraphic, archaeological and literary sources.

In the book "*The Mother goddess Kamakhya*" (Kakati, 1948) tried to indicate the position of Saktism among the other sects prevalent in Kamrupa. He collected the information mostly from *Kalikapurana* and *Yoginitantra*. Moreover the work is an introduction to the study of the Aryan and non-Aryan practices under saktism. However the religious practices and worship of *Kamakhya* is mainly discussed in the work. Thus it highlighted only one aspect of the society of Assam.

The book "*Social History of Kamrupa*", Vol-I, II, III written by N.N. Vasu, (1998), is a relevant work. He has tried to discuss the historical value of *Kalikapurana* and *Yoginitantra* while giving an account of the society of Kamrupa in all its stages regarding the original inhabitants, their culture and value. Yet there is the necessity of more detailed discussion on the subject of the research as the volumes deal with only the early years of the period under review.

In the book "*A Cultural History of Assam*" (Barua 2011) is another book which is related to the study of the society of Kamrupa. In this text we find both the political and cultural history of Assam with references to the various sources but the changes that had entered into the society till the 16th century C.E. are not comprehensively discussed. Moreover, the period covered by the work is confined the period prior to the 13th century when the Ahoms and Koches occupy prominence in the history of the land resulting in many social changes.

Lahiri (1991) in his work "*Pre-Ahom Assam*" throws adequate light on the history of Assam in the pre-Ahom days. The literary and epigraphic record has been consulted in writing the text, though the book is primarily based on the inscriptions prior to the 13th century C.E. But no attempt has been made in a systematic manner to unfold the social and cultural life of this period.

Choudhury (1985) in his book "*The Historical Archaeology of central Assam*" describes Neolithic and Megalithic culture, Political and socio-religious history of Assam along with architecture, sculptures and iconography.

Baruah (1875) in his book "*Assam Buranji*" records relevant information of both ancient and mediaeval history of Assam. The ancient part was written on the basis of ancient myths and legends and oral tradition. No doubt the social system, influence of Muslim invasion, culture, religion are discussed in the text but detailed description of the above mentioned institutions are not properly indicated and the work lacks objectivity and scientific approach.

In a published lecture series of Biswa Narayan Sastri on the topic “*Kalikapuranat Pragajyotish Kamrupar Prasanga aru samakalin Sanskritir Abhas*” many aspects of the culture of early Assam has been described as found in the Kalikapurana alone without taking into account the other contemporary sources (Sharma 1996).

Thus, this discussion on the accessible literature, bring into notice that the scholars have made their priceless efforts to study the society during 10th to 16th century C.E., form different point of views. But still abundant possibility is there for further research in the field of studying social aspect of the region reflected in other sources of ancient period.

7.0 Conclusion

Political system influenced by religion and religious texts is found in Kamrupa as in other places of India. Kamakhya also devoted also as Kali or devi of Earth observed on *ambubasi* is the primary deity of Kamrupa or Pragajyotisha who inspired for adoption of divinely rule and endowed power to the rulers who devotes her. But the geography of Kamrupa is changed and confined to districts. The great Kamrupa is now several states and nations.

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