



Urbanization of Ancient Kamrupa: A Historical Overview

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Abstract:

The urbanization of ancient Kamarupa (Modern Assam) developed over several centuries, influenced by political, economic, and social factors. Limited historical documentation before the 12th century requires reliance on diverse sources such as inscriptions, foreign traveler accounts, and archaeological findings. This paper examines key urban centers, including Pragjyotisapura, Hatappesvara, and Durjjananagar, focusing on their role as political hubs and their connection to regional and maritime trade networks. The study reveals that these centers were not only administrative capitals but also sites of significant commercial, religious, and cultural exchange. Inscriptions and archaeological discoveries, particularly at sites like Ambari and Duboroni, offer insights into urban planning and local economic activities. Unlike trends in other parts of ancient India, Assam saw a continuous and progressive urbanization process, with settlements growing in response to both external influences and internal developments. This article contributes to the understanding of early urbanization in Northeast India, illustrating its unique trajectory within the larger Indian subcontinent.

Keywords:

Urbanization, Ancient Kamarupa, Pragjyotisapura, Hatappesvara, Trade Networks, Archaeology, Epigraphy, Early Assam, Maritime Trade, Political Capitals.

Background

Assam's history has undergone significant stages of development, ultimately reaching its present state. However, prior to the 12th century AD, historical documentation and records were sparse. Consequently, historians relied on various sources to piece together Assam's past. These included references in the Puranas, Sanskrit texts, Buddhist literature, and accounts by foreign travelers. Additionally, archaeological findings, such as monuments, inscriptions, numismatics, and pottery, have contributed valuable insights into the history, culture, and urbanization of Assam until the 13th century AD.

The Kalika Purana, a late text dating to the 9th–10th century AD, mentions Mahiranga Danav, the earliest ruler of Assam, who belonged to the Bodo-Kachari Danava dynasty. He was succeeded by Naraka, who founded the Naraka dynasty. Naraka's death at the hands of Krishna led to the rule of his son, Bhagadatta, who participated in the Battle of Kurukshetra on the side of the Kauravas, commanding an army composed of kiratas, China, and other eastern coast inhabitants.

Simultaneously, in central Assam, the Asura Kingdom was governed by another Bodo-Kachari dynasty. The 4th-century Allahabad pillar inscription by Samudragupta refers to Kamrupa and Davaka (central Assam) as

frontier kingdoms of the Gupta Empire. Eventually, Davaka was absorbed by Kamrupa, which expanded into a vast kingdom that spanned from the Karatoya River to present-day Sadiya, covering the Brahmaputra valley, North Bengal, parts of Bangladesh, and sometimes extending to Purnea and parts of West Bengal.

The kingdom was ruled by three dynasties, all claiming descent from Narakasura: the Varmanas (350–650 CE), the Mlechchha dynasty (655–900 CE), and the Kamrupa-Palas (900–1100 CE). The capitals of these dynasties were located in present-day Guwahati (Pragjyotishpura), Tezpur (Haruppeswara), and North Gauhati (Durjjayanagar). During the reign of Bhaskarvarman (600–650 CE), a Chinese traveler, Xuanzang, visited the region and recorded his observations. After the decline of the Kamrupa-Palas, the Kamrupa tradition continued until approximately 1255 AD.

Urbanization: Concept and Context

Urbanization refers to the process through which settlements evolve into urban areas. This process is not only demographic and ecological but also contributes to economic development and social change. Scholars like G. Sjoberg and Oliver C. Coz have emphasized the role of industrialization in urbanization, distinguishing cities as 'pre-industrial' and 'industrial.' In the Indian context, urbanization is complex, making it difficult to categorize cities based on a single characteristic. M.S.A. Rao describes early urbanism as "traditional urbanism," differentiating it from modern urbanization, with the introduction of Pax Britannica as a dividing line.

In ancient India, urban centers were often termed "pura" in Brahmanical texts. Various types of cities were recognized based on their functions, such as trade, commerce, military, and administration. For example, "nagara" referred to fortified towns focused on inland trade, while "pattana" was a large commercial port situated along rivers or seas. Similarly, other terms like "drumamukha" (market town on river deltas) and "kheta" (small towns near villages) were used to describe urban areas.

Some urban centers, such as royal capitals, were meticulously planned with walls, watchtowers, and gardens. These cities were divided into different sections for palaces, administrative offices, the military, and civilian areas. Additionally, there were university towns, such as Nalanda, that functioned as centers of learning, as well as religious cities like Haridwar and Gaya, which attracted pilgrims.

Major Urban Centers in Early Assam

Key urban centers in ancient Assam included Pragjyotisapura, Karnasuvarna, Hatappesvara, Durjjayanagar, Kamarupanagara, and Hamsakonci, among others. The Kamauli copper plate inscription mentions Hamsakonchi as a royal headquarters, though its exact location is uncertain. Nevertheless, the historical record provides strong evidence that Pragjyotisapura, present-day Guwahati, served as a major political and cultural center. The Kalika Purana references the place where Hyagriva was killed, which is associated with the modern area of Hajo in Assam, where the Hayagriva-Madhava temple stands.

The Dubi inscription of Bhaskarvarman (37) states that his predecessor, Sthitavarman, built a new capital on the banks of the Brahmaputra River, likely an extension of Pragjyotisapura. Xuanzang, the Chinese pilgrim, visited the region and recorded that the city's circumference was approximately 8 km, which roughly aligns with present-day Guwahati. After Bhaskarvarman's reign, the capital shifted to Hatappesvara, and later, in the 11th century AD, to Durjjayanagara in North Guwahati. The expansion of Pragjyotisapura over time reflects the growing significance of urban settlements in the region.

Factors Influencing Urban Growth

The growth of urban centers in Assam was influenced by several factors, including trade, agriculture, and the increasing influx of people seeking employment. Xuanzang noted the presence of workers from distant lands in Bhaskara's capital, suggesting the city's role as an economic hub. Occupational groups such as potters, weavers, and fishermen had designated lands for cultivation, with urban centers serving as points for trading surplus agricultural goods. Evidence of pottery, religious icons, and stone blocks from the 1st to 13th centuries AD found in Ambari, Guwahati, supports this notion.

Inscriptions from the period also mention roads like "vithi" and "catushpatha," facilitating trade and communication. The discovery of copper coins from the 9th century AD in Kamrup district further corroborates the significance of trade in these urban areas. Additionally, maritime trade along the Brahmaputra River was vital, with fleets of boats recorded in historical accounts. The Dighalipukhuri, near Ambari, is believed to have been an ancient water channel connected to the Brahmaputra, facilitating the transport of goods by boat.

Hatappesvara and its Role in Urbanization

Hatappesvara, identified with present-day Tezpur, emerged as a major political and economic center by the 9th century AD. Inscriptions from the era, such as the Tezpur Rock Inscription and the Hayunthal inscription of Harjaravarman, highlight its prominence. King Salastambha's establishment of the capital at Hatappesvara in the 7th century AD helped reorganize agriculture, commerce, and infrastructure. Maritime trade, the use of elephants for transportation, and the introduction of copper coins played a crucial role in the economic development of the region.

Urbanization in the Nagaon-Davaka Region

The Nagaon-Davaka region of central Assam also saw significant urbanization, aided by the availability of materials like brick-clay and gneissic rocks. This facilitated the creation of architectural structures and fostered commercial activity. Oddiyana (modern Hojai) and Cha-pa-ho-lo (the capital of the Kapili kingdom) were important urban centers. Archaeological evidence, such as the discovery of copper coins in Marigaon district, points to a vibrant trade network connecting Assam with other regions, including China.

Review of Literature

E.A. Gait's groundbreaking work, *Report on the Progress of Historical Research in Assam* (1897), offers a detailed catalogue of all published materials pertaining to Assam. His monumental book, *A History of Assam*, was first published in 1905. In 1912, the *Kamrup Anusandhan Samity* was established in Guwahati, an organization dedicated to the investigation of Assam's antiquities. A significant contribution to the study of ancient Kamarupa's history is the *Kamarupa Sasanavali* compiled by P. Bhattacharya. Numerous prominent scholars have further enriched the study of Kamarupa's history, including K.L. Barua, N.N. Vasu, R.M. Nath, B.K. Barua, P.C. Choudhury, M.M. Sharma, D. Sarma, and R.D. Choudhury, whose works have left an indelible mark.

Chinese Accounts

Chang Kien's accounts from the 2nd century BCE describe the commercial and cultural exchanges between Kamarupa and China via Burma and other routes. Shung Shu's writings (420–479 CE) mention the exchange of embassies between India and China, including one from the Kapili valley, identified with the present-day Nagaon district. Hiuen Tsang's *Si-Yu-Ki* (629–645 CE) documents his visit to Kamarupa, providing crucial insights into the political and cultural life of the region. His association with King Bhaskaravarman is particularly significant. Furthermore, I-Tsing's writings shed light on Devavarma, the immediate successor to Bhaskaravarman, before the rise of the Salastambha dynasty in Kamarupa. The mission led by Wang-Hiuen-

ts'oe, documented in the *New History of the T'ang Dynasty* (648 CE), highlights the diplomatic relations between Kamarupa and China.

Greek and Roman Writers

Greek and Roman sources, such as those by Megasthenes, Strabo, Pliny, and Ptolemy (in his *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, 2nd century CE), mention places and tribes that could be linked to the northeastern region of India, including ancient Kamarupa. However, the exact identification of these locations remains speculative and subject to ongoing debate.

Muslim Accounts

Alberuni's *Tarikh al-Hind* (11th century) and Minhazuddin's *Tabqat-i-Nasiri* (13th century) provide valuable insights into the economy and administration of Kamarupa or Kamrud during the early medieval period.

Inscriptions and Literature of Ancient Assam

Ancient inscriptions and literature confirm that Pragjyotispura was the capital of ancient Assam during the reign of kings like Naraka, Bhagadatta, and the Varman dynasty. With the rise of the Salastambha dynasty (650-990 CE), the capital shifted to Haruppeswara, near present-day Tezpur. During the Pala dynasty's reign (990-1130 CE), the capital moved to Durjjayanagara and Kamarupanagara. King Ratnapala's reign saw the capital located in Durjjayanagara.

Ram Sharan Sharma's *Urban Decay in India (300–1000 CE)* (1987) examines the decline of towns in early medieval India, based on archaeological evidence from over 130 excavated sites. Sharma investigates the relationship between urban decay and the distribution of land grants to officials, priests, temples, and monasteries, showing how these grants facilitated economic and social transformations. His work provides important insights into the urban history of India during the Gupta and post-Gupta periods.

Definition, Rationale, and Scope of Study

The history of ancient Kamarupa, particularly the city of Pragjyotishpur, holds immense significance in understanding the political and cultural evolution of the region. Kamarupa's strategic position and independent rule during the Mauryan Empire make it an intriguing subject of study. Bhaskaravarman, a ruler with both political acumen and a cosmopolitan worldview, played a key role in Kamarupa's prominence during the Varman dynasty. The references to Pragjyotishpur in epic texts like the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and Kalidasa's *Raghuvamsam* attest to the city's ancient origins and enduring legacy as the capital of various dynasties. Therefore, this study aims to explore both the political and cultural aspects of ancient Kamarupa, with a particular focus on its capital, Pragjyotishpur.

Objectives

1. To explore the historical background of ancient Assam.
2. To investigate the urban development of ancient Kamarupa.
3. To study the capital cities of ancient Kamarupa.

Research Methodology

A historical research methodology has been employed for this study. A preliminary survey was conducted to identify primary sources, including inscriptions. Subsequently, materials were collected following scientific methods. The reports of the Archaeological Survey of India, Bulletins of the Assam State Museum, the *Journal of the Assam Research Society*, and reports from the Directorate of Archaeology were consulted to supplement

the survey. Secondary sources, including articles and papers from books and journals, have been utilized to provide a broader perspective on the inscriptions and other primary sources.

Discussion

The historical development of Assam from ancient to early medieval times reveals a distinct pattern of political evolution and urban growth. Although written records before the 12th century AD are sparse, a diverse range of sources, including archaeological evidence, inscriptions, religious texts, and travel accounts, provides a solid foundation for reconstructing the region's history.

The *Kalika Purana* and epigraphic records trace the roots of Assamese political structures to the Bodo-Kachari lineage and the Naraka dynasty, followed by the Varman, Mlechchha, and Pala dynasties of the Kamrupa kingdom. These successive dynasties played a crucial role in consolidating political power and fostering urban expansion. Major capitals such as Pragjyotisapura, Hatappesvara, and Durjjaya-Nagari were not only political centres but also thriving hubs of trade, religious activities, and cultural exchange.

Urban development in ancient Assam followed a unique trajectory. Unlike other regions of India, which experienced cycles of urban decay and revival, Assam's urban centres exhibited continuous growth. Pragjyotisapura, initially confined to the area around Dispur, Jatia, and Narakasurgaon, expanded in three distinct phases, setting the stage for later urban developments such as Uzanbazar-Ambari and North Guwahati.

The region's rivers, particularly the Brahmaputra, played a pivotal role in facilitating trade and commerce, contributing significantly to urbanization. The presence of roads (vithi, catuspatha), coins (cowries and copper), market systems, specialized crafts (pottery, weaving, fishing), and maritime links, including references to embassies to China, underscores the economic vibrancy of ancient Assam. Inscriptions and archaeological finds from sites like Ambari and Duboroni provide further evidence of this thriving economy.

In addition to commercial centres, cities in Assam also developed around religious and educational institutions. Matha or Vihara-type settlements, such as Nalanda outside Assam, and local sites like Hajo or Duboroni within Assam, indicate that temple cities and university towns were integral to the region's urban life. These centres attracted religious devotees, scholars, and artisans, highlighting the cultural and intellectual significance of Assam's urban landscape.

Urbanization also extended to central and eastern Assam, particularly in areas such as Davaka, Kapili Valley, Nagaon, and the Doiyang-Dhansiri valley. Fortified cities like Duboroni, with their advanced defensive architecture and planned layouts, demonstrate the complexity and sophistication of early Assamese urban planning.

What distinguishes Assam's urbanization is its continuity and regional adaptability. Even during periods of political instability or feudal fragmentation seen elsewhere, Assam witnessed the creation of new urban centres, indicating a unique developmental trajectory that was largely insulated from broader pan-Indian urban trends.

Conclusion

The trajectory of urbanization in ancient Assam represents a unique pattern within the broader context of Indian history. Unlike regions where urban centers declined and resurged cyclically, Assam witnessed steady urban growth influenced by its strategic geographic features—especially its riverine networks, which enabled vibrant trade and communication systems.

Urban hubs such as Pragjyotisapura, Hatappesvara, and Duboroni illustrate a multifaceted urban environment. These centers functioned simultaneously as trade towns, religious sites, administrative capitals, and places of

learning. Although early textual documentation remains limited, archaeological findings and epigraphic records provide valuable insights into the socio-economic and political developments that shaped the region from the early centuries AD up to the 13th century.

This sustained pattern of urban growth challenges prevailing narratives of urban decay followed by regeneration, commonly observed elsewhere in the subcontinent. Instead, Assam emerges as a case where urban life adapted and evolved in response to dynastic transitions, shifting economic realities, and diverse cultural influences.

The urban evolution in Assam occurred in successive phases, with cities like Pragjyotisapura—capital of the Kamrupa kingdom—serving as pivotal centers for political authority, economic activity, and cultural advancement. The expansion of urban settlements such as Hatappesvara and Durjjayanagara underscores the region's vibrant and continuous urbanization. Rather than experiencing de-urbanization, Assam maintained a persistent urban character, making a lasting contribution to its historical and cultural heritage.

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