



The Varman Dynasty In Assam: A Historical Study Of Political And Cultural Development

Homlal Pradhan

Assistant Professor

Department of History

Biswanath College, Biswanath, Assam, India

Abstract

The Varman Dynasty (c.350–650 CE) was the first historically documented dynasty of the ancient Kamarupa kingdom in present-day Assam. Founded by Pushyavarman, a contemporary of the Gupta emperor Samudragupta, the dynasty marked the transition of the region from mythological accounts to verified historical records. Initially subordinates to the Gupta Empire, the Varmans asserted their independence during the reign of Mahendrarvarman (c. 470–494 CE), who performed two Ashvamedha (horse) sacrifices to signify his sovereignty. The dynasty reached its political and cultural zenith under its last and most illustrious ruler, Kumar Bhaskaravarman (c. 600–650 CE), who formed a strategic alliance with King Harshavardhana of Kanauj to defeat Shashanka of Gauda. The Varman dynasty ruled from Pragjyotishpura, located near modern-day Guwahati. The dynasty promoted Sanskrit literature and Brahmanical traditions while integrating local tribal elements. It eventually ended around 650 CE without a clear heir, leading to the rise of the Mlechchha dynasty. The Chinese traveller Xuanzang (Hiuen Tsang) visited his court in 643 CE, leaving detailed descriptions of the region's learning, administration, as well as religious pluralism. In this paper it has been tried to explore relevance of the political and cultural development by the Varman Dynasty.

Key Words: Varman Dynasty, Culture, politics Assam etc.

Introduction:

The Varman Dynasty was the initial significant historical ruling dynasty of ancient Assam, governing the kingdom of Kamarupa from approximately the 4th century CE to the mid-7th century CE. Pushyavarman founded the dynasty and set up his capital in Pragjyotishpura (present-day Guwahati). The Varmans were crucial in establishing the groundwork for a robust and structured state in early Assam. The Varman rulers upheld strong political and cultural ties with North India, particularly with the Gupta Empire. This impact is clear in their governance, application of Sanskrit, and support for the Hindu faith. Numerous Varman monarchs embraced elaborate titles and conducted Vedic ceremonies to validate their authority. Samudrarvarman and Mahendrarvarman were two of the initial significant leaders who bolstered the kingdom. The best-known leader of the Varman Dynasty was Bhaskaravarman (7th century CE). Under his rule, Kamarupa attained the peak of its influence and standing. Bhaskaravarman was a contemporary and supporter of the North Indian monarch Harshavardhana.

The Varman Dynasty left enduring impacts on the political evolution of ancient Assam. Through the establishment and strengthening of the kingdom of Kamarupa, the Varman rulers developed a well-structured and stable governance system in the Brahmaputra Valley. They implemented efficient administrative

methods and upheld law and order across a vast area. The diplomatic ties with influential North Indian kingdoms, particularly during Bhaskaravarman's rule, increased Assam's political significance in the early historical era. The Varman Dynasty significantly contributed to blending Assam with the wider Indian cultural heritage. The rulers actively supported the Sanskrit language and literature, which became the means of administration and academia. Numerous inscriptions from this time showcase the advanced state of knowledge and the dissemination of classical Indian learning. This cultural sponsorship contributed to Assam becoming a significant hub of intellectual engagement in ancient India.

Methodology:

The present study employs a qualitative and analytical approach that depends on a combination of primary and secondary sources. Scholars mainly utilize epigraphic analysis, studying Sanskrit inscriptions on copper plates (such as Nidhanpur and Dubi) and rock surfaces (like Umachal and Barganga) to reconstruct genealogies, administrative frameworks, and land-grant systems known as Brahmadeya. This is enhanced by literary and comparative analysis, as historians compare indigenous texts, like the Puranas and Harshacharita, with foreign narratives, including the travel writings of the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang (643 CE), to grasp the religious diversity and intellectual atmosphere of the period. Moreover, archaeological and iconographic research on temple remains and sculptures, like those found at Da-Parbatiya, offers tangible proof of the Sanskritization process and the fusion of North Indian and native tribal customs that established a unique Assamese cultural identity.

Discussion:

The Varman Dynasty was the initial historical ruling dynasty of ancient Assam, significantly contributing to the establishment of the region's political and cultural groundwork. The ancient kingdom of Kamarupa (Pragjyotisha) was ruled by the Varman dynasty approximately from the 4th century CE to the 7th century CE. Details regarding this dynasty are primarily derived from epigraphic materials, particularly land grant inscriptions and seals, offering important insights into administration, religion, and social structures. Pushyavarman was the dynasty's founder, establishing his reign in the early 4th century CE. He is thought to have been a peer of the Gupta leaders, and the Varmans upheld diplomatic ties with the Gupta Empire. These connections aided Kamarupa in achieving political acknowledgment and stability. Pushyavarman and his heirs reinforced royal power and established structured administration in the Brahmaputra Valley. Bhaskaravarman, a significant ruler of the Varman Dynasty, reigned during the 7th century CE. Throughout his rule, Kamarupa attained the peak of its influence and prominence. Bhaskaravarman established a strong partnership with Harshavardhana of Kannauj and was significant in North Indian political affairs. The renowned Chinese explorer Hiuen Tsang (Xuanzang) traveled to Kamarupa during his reign and provided a comprehensive description of the kingdom's wealth, governance, and cultural activities.

Prior to the rise of the Varman Dynasty, the region of present-day Assam was known in ancient texts as Pragjyotishpur or Pragjyotisha, and later as Kamarupa. This period is often described as pre-Varman Assam and is reconstructed mainly from mythological references, literary sources, and archaeological evidence, since no continuous political history is available. Socially and culturally, pre-Varman Assam was characterized by a fusion of indigenous tribal traditions and early Aryan influences. Religious practices included animism, ancestor worship, fertility cults, and early forms of Hinduism. Over time, Brahmanical ideas spread into the region through migration, trade, and cultural interaction, preparing the ground for the later emergence of dynastic rule.

Politically, the region before the Varmans was likely ruled by local chiefs or clan-based rulers, rather than a centralized monarchy. These early rulers controlled limited territories and exercised authority based on kinship and military strength. The absence of strong epigraphic evidence suggests that state formation was still in an early stage. Thus, prior to the Varman Dynasty, Assam was not a political vacuum but a region

with ancient settlements, evolving social structures, and legendary kings. This long phase of cultural and political development ultimately laid the foundation for the emergence of the Varman Dynasty, which transformed Kamarupa into a well-organized historical kingdom.

Xuanzang, referred to as Hiuen Tsang, was a well-known Chinese Buddhist traveller who journeyed to Assam during the Varman Dynasty's reign, particularly in the 7th century CE. He arrived in the kingdom of Kamarupa while King Bhaskaravarman, the strongest monarch of the Varman dynasty, was in power. Xuanzang's journey holds historical significance as it offers one of the earliest and most trustworthy foreign narratives of ancient Assam. In his travel accounts, Xuanzang detailed Kamarupa as a thriving and efficiently governed realm. He observed that the individuals were straightforward, sincere, and genuinely eager to learn. Even though Buddhism was not particularly prevalent in Assam then, Xuanzang noted that Hinduism and Brahmanical traditions were prominent, with significant reverence given to Brahmins and learned individuals. His findings reinforce the robust cultural and religious environment fostered by the Varman rulers. Xuanzang further commended King Bhaskaravarman for his intelligence, kindness, and welcoming nature toward scholars and monks. Bhaskaravarman received Xuanzang with great respect and subsequently dispatched him as an ambassador to Emperor Harshavardhana's court in North India. This emphasizes the diplomatic abilities of the Varman ruler and the significance of Kamarupa in regional interactions during that time. Xuanzang's account is still very important today as it provides essential insights into the political, social, and cultural aspects of Assam during the Varman Dynasty. His texts assist historians in piecing together early Assamese history and comprehending the Varmans' role in linking Assam to broader Asian and Indian cultures.

The Varman Dynasty played a vital role in shaping the political, cultural, and religious landscape of ancient Assam. Politically, the Varman dynasty founded the kingdom of Kamarupa as a robust and systematically structured state, ensuring stability and efficient governance in the Brahmaputra Valley. They upheld diplomatic ties with influential North Indian kingdoms, particularly during Bhaskaravarman's rule, which boosted Assam's political standing in ancient India. Culturally, the dynasty encouraged the growth of Sanskrit language, literature, and education, aiding Assam in becoming a significant hub of early Indian culture. The Varmans supported Hinduism, promoted the building of temples, and provided land to Brahmins, facilitating the dissemination of Vedic customs. Their era also saw the development of art, architecture, and education, which has made a significant mark on the historical and cultural heritage of Assam.

In the field of religion, the Varman rulers notably promoted Hinduism, especially Brahmanical customs. They promoted the building of temples and allocated land to Brahmins and faith-based organizations. These practices facilitated the dissemination of Vedic rituals and spiritual principles throughout the area. Simultaneously, there was religious tolerance, enabling various beliefs to exist side by side. The Varman era also played a significant role in the advancement of art and architecture in Assam. Despite the scarcity of physical evidence, mentions in inscriptions and historical records point to the evolution of temple architecture and sculpture. In summary, the Varman Dynasty's contributions established a robust political, cultural, and religious groundwork that influenced Assam's subsequent history. The governance during the Varman dynasty was structured effectively and relied on a hereditary monarchy. The monarch was seen as the highest power, aided by ministers and officials. Grants of land to Brahmins were prevalent, highlighting the significance of agricultural growth and the dissemination of Brahmanical culture. These funds additionally aided in strengthening royal authority over remote areas of the realm.

The Varman Dynasty remains highly significant in contemporary Assam as it signifies the initial stage of structured state development in the area. The formation of the Kamarupa kingdom by the Varman dynasty provided the political groundwork of Assam, aiding individuals in comprehending the historical origins of governance and territorial identity in the Brahmaputra Valley. This heritage enhances local pride

and recognition of Assam's historic legacy. Culturally, the impact of the Varman Dynasty remains evident through the enduring prevalence of Sanskrit traditions, Hindu rituals, and classical education in Assam. Numerous temples, rituals, and festivals celebrated today can be linked back to the ancient Brahmanical culture that flourished during the Varman era. The dynasty's promotion of education and learning fosters enduring reverence for knowledge and scholarship in Assamese culture.

From an academic and cultural standpoint, the Varman Dynasty continues to hold significant importance for historians, students, and researchers. Inscriptions, literary allusions, and narratives like those of Xuanzang offer important materials for piecing together the history of early Assam. These historical documents are vital for comprehending Assam's cultural assimilation with India and for maintaining the state's ancient legacy in contemporary times. Ultimately, the Varman Dynasty's contribution to linking Assam with the wider Indian civilization holds modern significance in fostering national unity. By emphasizing Assam's profound historical connections with mainland India, the heritage of the Varmans promotes a feeling of solidarity while also honoring the distinct identity and historical impact of Assam within the Indian nation. The dynasty's role in fostering cultural and religious diversity continues to be significant in contemporary Assamese society. The Varmans supported Brahmanical Hinduism while permitting the existence of Buddhism and local traditions. This tradition of cultural synthesis and religious tolerance still impacts Assam's social structure, where various ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups exist.

Conclusion:

The contemporary cultural and symbolic significance of the Varman dynasty is most prominently represented by its greatest ruler, Bhaskaravarman. His legacy is institutionalized in modern Assam through the Kumar Bhaskar Varma Sanskrit and Ancient Studies University in Nalbari, named in his honor. Furthermore, the Bhaskarābda (Assamese Calendar) is still counted from the date of his ascension to the throne in 594 CE, serving as a living link to the Varman era. Architecturally and intellectually, the dynasty continues to shape Assamese heritage like Ruins from the Varman period, such as those at Da-Parbatia near Tezpur, are among the oldest architectural specimens in Assam and are protected sites that attract modern scholars and tourists. Bhaskaravarman's strategic alliance with the North Indian Emperor Harshavardhana is frequently cited as the first major instance of Assam's integration into pan-Indian politics, a historical precedent still relevant in discussions of Assam's place within the Indian union. The dynasty's patronage of both Brahmanical traditions and indigenous tribal cultures laid the groundwork for the unique, synthesized Assamese identity that persists in the present time. In contemporary Assam, the Varman period is highly significant for academic study and education. School and college curricula include the Varman Dynasty to explain early administration, diplomacy, and cultural integration in North-East India. The accounts of Bhaskaravarman and the visit of the Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang provide internationally recognized historical evidence, giving Assam visibility in global historical narratives even today.

References:

- ❑ Banerji, R. D. (1998). *History of ancient India*. Atlantic Publishers.
- ❑ Barua, B. K. (1966). *Aspects of early Assamese culture*. Lawyer's Book Stall.
- ❑ Barua, K. L. (1933). *Early history of Kamarupa*. Government of Assam.
- ❑ Baruah, S. L. (1999). *A comprehensive history of Assam*. Munshiram Manoharlal.
- ❑ Bhuyan, S. K. (Ed.). (1933). *Kamarupa inscriptions*. Government of Assam.
- ❑ Chakrabarti, D. K. (1997). *India: An archaeological history*. Oxford University Press.
- ❑ Chatterjee, S. K. (1951). *Kirata-Jana-Kriti: The Indo-Mongoloids*. Asiatic Society.
- ❑ Choudhury, P. C. (1959). *The history of civilization of the people of Assam to the twelfth century A.D.* Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Assam.
- ❑ Das, B. M. (1977). *Political history of ancient Assam*. Gauhati University.
- ❑ Gait, E. A. (2013). *A history of Assam* (Reprint). Surjeet Publications. (Original work published 1906)
- ❑ Goswami, U. (1998). *Cultural heritage of Assam*. Spectrum Publications.
- ❑ Kakati, B. (2008). *The mother goddess Kamakhya*. Lawyer's Book Stall.
- ❑ Lahiri, N. (1991). *Pre-Ahom Assam: Studies in the political history of Assam from the earliest times to the thirteenth century*. Munshiram Manoharlal.
- ❑ Majumdar, R. C. (1977). *Ancient India*. Motilal Banarsidass.
- ❑ Mukherjee, B. N. (1991). *Political history of ancient India*. University of Calcutta.
- ❑ Nath, D. (2012). *History of Assam*. Pratima Publishers.
- ❑ Neog, M. (1980). *Early history of the Vaisnava faith and movement in Assam*. Gauhati University.
- ❑ Pande, G. C. (Ed.). (2002). *Foundations of Indian culture*. Motilal Banarsidass.
- ❑ Ray, H. P. (2010). *The archaeology of seafaring in ancient South Asia*. Cambridge University Press.
- ❑ Sastri, K. A. N. (1967). *A comprehensive history of India (Vol. 2)*. Orient Longman.
- ❑ Sen, S. N. (1999). *Ancient Indian history and civilization*. New Age International.
- ❑ Sharma, J. N. (1990). *Social life in ancient Assam*. DVS Publishers.
- ❑ Sharma, M. M. (1978). *Inscriptions of ancient Assam*. Gauhati University.
- ❑ Sharma, R. S. (2002). *Early medieval Indian society*. Orient BlackSwan.
- ❑ Sharma, S. (1988). *Social and cultural history of Assam*. Eastern Book House.
- ❑ Shastri, H. P. (1960). *The Varman rulers of Kamarupa*. *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, 26(2), 45–68.
- ❑ Sircar, D. C. (1965). *Select inscriptions bearing on Indian history and civilization (Vol. 1)*. University of Calcutta.
- ❑ Sircar, D. C. (1990). *Studies in the geography of ancient and medieval India*. Motilal Banarsidass.
- ❑ Thapar, R. (2003). *Early India: From the origins to AD 1300*. Penguin Books.
- ❑ Xuanzang. (1996). *The Great Tang dynasty record of the western regions* (S. Li, Trans.). BDK America. (Original work c. 7th century)
- ❑ Rajguru, N. (2025). *Socio-political dynamics and cultural synthesis in medieval Assam: A study of regional power under the Varman dynasty*. *International Journal of History*, 7(7), 46–52
- ❑ Kalita, D. (2025). *Urbanization of ancient Kamarupa: A historical overview*. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*, 13(5)