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# The Urban Settlements of Ancient Assam: A Study of the Contemporary Local Inscriptions

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**Abstract:** Every pan Indian socio-economic movement has had always found its way into the state of Assam from ancient past to modern times; of course, with local variations. The present paper makes an attempt to study and draw a general profile of the urban settlements of Ancient Assam as found and depicted in the contemporary inscriptions of the land. Although, ancient Assam lacks adequate source of historical information, the kings ruling over her had left a number of copper plate inscriptions which refer to a number of urban settlements. In the light of these references, the paper tries to draw the pattern of these urban centres. Simultaneously, an attempt is also made to find their existence in other available sources. Urbanisation is a very important aspect of any civilization belonging to any age. Hence, the study of urban centres in ancient Assam definitely fills a gap often seen in the academic pursuits.

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**Keywords:** Urbanization, Pragjyotishapura, Epigraphy, Inscription, Salastambhas, Varmans, Palas

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## Introduction

Cities by nature possess two basic characteristics. Firstly, they encourage a greater concentration of population in a comparatively smaller area, thus encouraging a higher density of population, and secondly, social heterogeneity. This complex phenomenon of urbanisation in its second wave made headway in North India in sixth century BC (Singh 2019: 278). According to D.K. Chakrabarti (Chakrabarti 2006: 315), the possible date is c 800 BC. The urban settlements or the cities grew up by bringing numerous villages under their ever-expanding perimeter. Along with the villages, were also brought the untamed forest areas which were in abundance. The two earliest cities of Assam are Pragjyotishapura and Sonitapura. Both were essentially connected with the characters of the Indian *epics*. The city of Pragjyotishapura has been named in both the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* while Sonitapura has been referred to in several *Puranas* such as first and the fifth book of the *Visnu Purana*, the tenth book of the *Bhagavata Purana*, the *Harivamsa* (Vishnu Parvan) and the local *Kalika Purana* (ch 39) in connection with the Usha-Aniruddha episode and King Bana (Sharma 1978: 0.9-0.10). While *Puranas* are anonymous literary texts likely to have been composed by many authors

spanning several centuries, the Usha-Aniruddha-Bana episode is a popular legend of Assam. The story of king Bana and Usha-Aniruddha is a very interesting one and an extremely popular local tradition of Assam.

Banasura (Bana+*asura*) was the king of Sonitapura. The Sanskrit word '*asura*' literally means a demon. This was one of the several derogatory terms used by the Aryans to denote the indigenous non-Aryan people of India. Interestingly, Bana's daughter Usha developed an affair with Lord Krishna's (King of Dvaraka) grandson Aniruddha. Usha's friend, Chitrlekha, by using her magical power brought Aniruddha to Usha's palace in Sonitapura. Bana imprisoned Aniruddha. At this crucial juncture, Krishna came from Dvaraka with an army for the rescue of his grandson. A great battle took place and Bana eventually lost his life. The two lovers finally got married. This battle is called the Hari-Hara Yuddha or the Battle between Hari and Hara (Hari means Lord Krishna while Hara denotes Lord Shiva). Lord Shiva sided in this battle with Bana because Bana was his ardent devotee. They represent the mythological period. Interestingly, they not only bear archaeological evidences showing their connection with the *epic* figures, the available ruins also present a continuous archaeological profile of the two cities down to the early medieval period.

The city of Pragjyotishapura is identified with modern Guwahati, the capital city of Assam while Sonitapura with modern Tezpur, a city located on the north bank of river Brahmaputra. In the context of north India too, many of the major cities mentioned in literature have been identified (Singh 2019: 279). In the medieval period also, under Ahom administration, both the cities were important seats of administration. In addition to these two, the inscriptions discovered so far have referred to several other urban centres. They are: Pragjyotishapura, Hadappesvara or Haruppesvara, sometimes also called Hadapyaka, Durjjaya, Kamarupanagara and Kirtipura. It is to be noted that the historical city of Hadappesvara developed on the very ancient site of Sonitapura, the headquarter of the kingdom of legendary king Bana (Sonitapura was also the name of his kingdom).

## **Objective of the Paper**

The objective of the paper is to bring forth the various facets of the urbanisation process in ancient Assam. Assam was located in the eastern most part of the Indian sub-continent and a vast distance used to prevail between Assam and mainland India. But what is important as well as interesting is the fact that, in spite of the distance, there was connection between the two regions, be it in the field of politics, social and cultural interaction or trade and commerce. The profiles of the five ancient cities of Assam prove the above statement.

## **Methodology**

The present work is prepared by following the qualitative method of historical research. The original records (translation works) of the inscriptions have been studied. The inscriptions examined in this study include The Dubi Copper Plates of

Bhaskaravarman, The Seal attached to the Dubi Copper Plates of Bhaskaravarman, The Nidhanpur Copper Plates of Bhaskaravarman, The Hayunthal Copper Plates of Harjjaravarman, The Tezpur Copper Plates of Vanamalavarmadeva, The Parbatiya Copper Plates of Vanamalavarmadeva, The Uttarbarbil Copper Plates of Balavarman III, The Bargaon Copper Plate grant of Ratnapala, The Coratbari Copper Plate grant of Ratnapala, The Gachtal Copper Plate Grant of Gopalavarman, The Gauhati/Guwahati Copper Plate Grant of Indrapala, The Puspabhadra Copper Plates of Dharmapala, The Kamauli Copper Plates of King Vaidyadeva, and The Assam Plates of Vallabhadeva. Along with them, some primary literary works concerning ancient Assam have been consulted. Field studies are also done in order to have a first-hand knowledge of the archaeological evidence unearthed so far, needed for corroborating the literary evidence. Regarding the archaeological evidence, there is an utmost necessity to explore more. From this point of view, the nature of the study may also be termed as an exploratory one. Still, a bunch of information has been collected and then also collated. A careful examination of the data leads to the inferences incorporated in the study. Besides, some exiting oral traditions are taken into account while an attempt is always made to corroborate the same with actual physical evidence. Two short documentary films have also been consulted made on King Narakasura and the archaeological finds unearthed in Guwahati especially the Narakasur hill.

## Discussion

The five above-mentioned cities namely, Pragjyotishapura, Hadappesvara/Haruppesvara or Hadapyaka, Durjjaya, Kamarupanagara and Kirtipura have been discussed below as they are described in the various local inscriptions.

## Pragjyotishapura

Pragjyotishapura was the most ancient city of Assam. It was an important urban centre or a capital city during the mythological period when the legendary and the mythological Bhaumas were ruling over the kingdom of Pragjyotisha. It was also a capital city during the historical period which is reckoned to have begun from the emergence of King Pushyavarman, the founder of the Varman dynasty in mid fourth century AD. In the most ancient period, it was located to the south of Guwahati city; most likely atop the hill named Narakasur hill. Apparently Narakasura was the first king of Assam if we are to believe even partially the popular local traditions about the legendary figure of Narakasura. Recently, an ancient brick-built long wall has been unearthed in the Narakasur hill though in fragments. The wall seems to have surrounded a great portion of the hill. In all probability, there was a hill fort (*giri durga*), the unearthed fragments of the wall representing the boundary wall of the fort complex. The new site, however, needs more exploration followed by sincere archaeological study and neutral interpretation. The Kishkindha Kanda (ch. 42) of the *Ramayana* refers to the city of Pragjyotisha and its king Naraka. According to this reference, however, the city of Pragjyotisha lay towards the west and was situated in

the Varaha Mountain. This connection between Varaha Mountain and Naraka may be due to the fact that Naraka was the son of Lord Vishnu through his Boar (varaha) incarnation (Sharma 1978: 0.5). The Udyoga Parva (ch.48, vv.80-85) of the *Mahabharata* describes Pragjyotisha as a great citadel which was the abode of the valorous Naraka with the epithet of Bhauma meaning the son of Bhumi or the Earth.

On several occasions (Sabha Parva, ch.26, vv 7-16; ch. 30, vv 26,27; ch. 34, v. 9b-10a; ch.51, vv 14-16; Bhisma Parva,ch. 95; Drona Parva,ch. 25-28; Karna Parva,ch. 5vv. 15-16), the *epic* narrates the contact between Naraka's son and successor, king Bhagadatta of Pragjyotisha and the Pandavas, and the valour shown by the former in the Kurukshetra War followed by his death at the hands of Arjuna as well as the killing of one of his sons (Kritaprajna) by Nakula. The Asvamedha Parva of the *Mahabharata* also describes the valour shown by Bhagadatta and his son and later successor Vajradatta in the Great War. The later- day local epigraphs uniformly refer to Vajradatta as the son and successor of Bhagadatta. What is interesting is the fact that all the three historical dynasties of early Assam such as the Varman (ruling between fourth and the seventh century AD), the Salastambha (ruling between eighth and the tenth century AD) and the Pala (ruling between tenth and first half of the twelfth century AD) have claimed descent from these legendary rulers called the Bhaumas. The various *Puranas* like the *Visnu Purana*, the *Harivamsa*, the *Bhaagavata Purana*, the *Brahma Purana*, the *Garuda Purana*, the *Agni Purana* etc. also contain references to the Bhaumas (Sharma 1978: 0.8-0.9). The *Markandeya Purana*, while mentioning about Pragjyotisha and Lauhitya (the name Lauhitya denotes both the river Brahmaputra and Assam), also refers to a city called Vijaya atop a hill of Kamarupa of the East, another popular name of Assam prevalent during the ancient period. The same source further mentions a forest named Guruvisala which was located in a mountain in Kamarupa suitable for the worship of the sun (Sharma 1978: 0.10).

The *Vayu Purana* mentions Lauhitya as a holy place suitable for *Sraddha* and describes Pragjyotisha as an eastern country (Patil 1973: 298). The secular literature belonging to the first and the second millennium such as the *Brihatsamhita*, Dandin's *Dasakumaracharita*, Rajashekhara's *Kavyamimamsa*, Kalidasa's *Raghuvamsa*, Bana's *Harshacharita*, Bilhana's *Vikramankadevacharita*, Sandhyakaranandi's *Ramacharita*, Kalhana's *Rajatarangini*, the various Tantric texts including the local works like the *Kalika Purana* and the *Yogini Tantra* have references to Pragjyotisha and Kamarupa. Many a time, Kamarupa has been described to have situated towards the east as well as the northern direction while Pragjyotisha, uniformly has been described to be situated only in the east. This may be due to the fact that the name of the kingdom which stretched from the east to the north was Kamarupa and the name of the capital city was Pragjyotisha (Sharma 1978: 0. 12). So, this eastern city grew up on the bank of the river Brahmaputra or Lauhitya. The contemporary foreign accounts especially the Chinese account (*Si-yu-ki*) left by Hiuen Tsang who visited king Kumar Bhaskaravarman's court in the 7<sup>th</sup> century elaborately describe Kamarupa (Beal 1914: 128-165). However, all these literary evidence lacks uniformity and are also vague and

confusing. Under these circumstances, the epigraphical information poses as the most reliable data regarding ancient Assam. Several inscriptions from mainland India refer to Assam mostly by the name of Kamarupa but hardly they offer any information as to the cities of this region. Fortunately, the local epigraphs do contain certain references with regard to the cities.

There is a verse in the Dubi Copper plate inscription of Kumar Bhaskaravarman that one of his ancestors named king Sri Sthiravarman had built a new city on the bank of the holy river Brahmaputra after spending some time in the old city (v. 49); he shifted to the new city along with his citizens, servants and the relatives (Sharma 1978: 24). It is clear that the new city was built in the plain area of Pragjyotisha or modern Guwahati. It may be presumed that previously the Varman kings used to live in some hill fort. Apparently, this is the first claim ever made by a Kamarupa king in historical times as to building a capital city. To be noted, the legendary and the mythological period of Assam's history started and ended with the valorous Bhaumas. The rule of the Bhaumas was succeeded by a long period of uncertainty or a gap till the emergence of Pushyavarman (350 AD). Pushyavarman was the founder of the Varman royal dynasty and hence the first historical ruler of ancient Assam. King Sri Sthiravarman, the builder of the new capital city has also been described as the performer of two horse sacrifices (Asvamedha Yajna) in the seal attached to the Dubi Copper plate inscription of Bhaskaravarman. Two of his predecessors are also credited with performing horse sacrifices in the available epigraphical sources. The important adjacent localities by the names of Rajgarh (the royal rampart) and the Bhangagarh (the breached or the broken rampart) of today's Guwahati city do carry much significance in this regard.

In the subsequent period, the Gachthal Copper Plate grant of Pala king Gopalavarman (last quarter of eleventh century) mentions Pragjyotisha as the capital city of the king. It says that the capital city had high ramparts and these were touched by the waves of the eastern sea and the city could boast of white-washed high palaces. (v8) (Sharma 1978: 214).

**Hadappesvara/Haruppesvara or Hadapyaka:** Hadappesvara/Haruppesvara or sometime also called Hatappesvara was the capital city of the Salastambhas. The Salastambha royal dynasty was the second historical ruling dynasty of Assam. They were the rulers of Pragjyotisha but unlike the preceding Varman dynasty, they had their official headquarters at Hadappesvara identified with modern Tezpur town, located on the north bank of river Brahmaputra in middle Assam. This city grew up on the ruins of the mythological Sonitapura. The Mahabhairab temple (king Bana was a great devotee of Lord Shiva), the Agnigarh fort wherein Bana imprisoned his daughter Usha's lover and Krishna's grandson Aniruddha, (the fragments of the fort/rampart are still visible and under preservation), all point out to the historicity of these mythical characters. In the Hayunthal Copper plates of king Harjaravarman (mid ninth century), it is stated clearly that the king held a grand coronation ceremony wherein not only the princes of noble birth and vassal rulers but also the merchants assembled to sprinkle

the king with water collected from all sacred places contained in a silver pitcher (vv. 13-14 Sharma 1978: 92). In the Tezpur Copper plates of Vanamalavarmadeva (mid-9<sup>th</sup> century), several lines describe the capital city- 'There the people belonging to all the castes and all the stages of life (*asrama*) are extremely happy. This is the place of residence of innumerable fortunate and honest scholars, where royal roads remain crowded with kings who come to pay homage to the monarch and go back being seated on colourful elephants, horses and *sivikas* (palkins) and where all the quarters always remain blocked with innumerable military potentialities in the form of elephants, horses and soldiers (lines 1 to 4). This prosperous city of Haruppessvara is blessed with the presence of the Lord Lauhity (line 21)' (the translation is being done in the light of an earlier Bengali translation given by P.N. Bhattacharyya; Sharma 1978: 103-04).

The term 'palki' means a palanquin. Following this, several lines of the inscription describe the beauty of the waters of river Lauhitya or Brahmaputra as well as the parks or the forest areas located in the city of Hadappesvara. It is also mentioned that there was a mountain called Kamakuta on the shore of the river and it was the abode of illustrious god Kamesvara and the goddess Mahagauri. Next, it was disclosed that the nearby regions on both the banks of the river were embellished with rows of speedy boats (Sharma 1978: 104). This is a clear indication that the kingdom under the Salastambhas maintained an elaborate marine transport system. The scribe highlights the great speed of the ornamented boats and says, (as if) they were the consorts of god Pavana (Vayu). These speedy boats are also compared with expert dancing girls whose movement or trembling increases with the approach of dancers (Lines 14-20) (Sharma 197: 104). And the Lines 21-23 of the inscription clearly state that from that city of Haruppessvara/ Hadappesvara, Maharajadhiraja Sri Vanamaladeva, who is a great devotee of Mahesvara (i.e., Siva), engrossed in the meditation on the feet of the parents, with his soul attached to the supreme god, enjoys well-being and makes the gift of a village (Sharma 1978: 105). The Parbatiya Copper Plates of the same king reiterates the same glorious things about the 'illustrious city of Hadappesvara' from where the king had issued another charter making a tax-free land grant to a pious Brahmin donee (Sharma 1978: 122-24). The Uttarbarbil Copper Plates of king Balavarman III (last quarter of ninth century AD) also refers to the ancestral capital city of Hadappesvara wherein the king issued a land grant.

The Coratbari grant of king Ratanapala belonging to the succeeding Pala dynasty mentions a city named Hadapyaka and this Hadapyaka has been generally identified with Hadappesvara or Haruppessvara (Sharma 1978: 0.21) while king Ratnapala, the greatest Pala monarch is said to have resided in a city called Durjjaya meaning invincible.

**Durjjaya:** The third important city of ancient Assam was Durjjaya. The Bargaon grant of king Ratnapala ruling in the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century AD offers a clear description of this city (Sharma 1978: 162-64). '(King Ratnapala) used to reside in the befittingly

named city of Durjjaya, in the kingdom called Pragjyotisha' (Line 40). 'The heat of the city of Durjjaya was allayed by the shower of the drops of ichor flowing from the temples of the rows of the spirited elephants presented by the hundreds of kings defeated by the power of the of (the king's arms) entangled with the series of rays issuing from the sharp swords' (Lines 28-30).

'The city was fit for the residence of great men, although it was full of the forests of the trees in the form of the arms of the strong warriors, ever eager to plunder the cities of all the enemies. (Line 30-31). Here the orb of the sun used to be covered from view by the tops of thousands of white-washed mansions, as white as the smile of the intoxicated beautiful dames. (Line 31-32). This city was the residence of hundreds of people devoted to enjoyment (*bhogin*) like the (sandal) trees, growing on the soil of the mount Malaya, which are infested by hundreds of snakes (*bhogins*). Like the sky embellished with (the planets) Budha, Guru (i.e., Brihaspati) and Kavya (i.e., Sukra), this city was the place of poetical figures (*kavyalamkaras*) created (or discussed) by the learned men (*budhas*) and the preceptors (*gurus*). Like the peak of the mount Kailasa, which was the abode of Paramesvara (i.e., Lord Siva) this city was also the abode of Paramesvara (i.e., the king or the lord Siva of the local temple) and like the peak of the mount Kailasa, inhabited by the god Kuvera (i.e., Vitesse), this city was also inhabited by rich men (i.e., *vittesas*).' (Lines 30-34).

'The outskirts of the city of Durjjaya were covered by a rampart which was like a stout cage for the play-bird in the form of the king of Sakas, a fever for the king of Gurjjaras, a Kutapakala disease for the untameable elephant in the form of the king of Gauda, a bitumen (*silajatu*) for the mountain in the form of the king of Kerala, a veritable source of fear for the kings of Bahika and Tayika, a pulmonary consumption for the kings of the Deccan; because of destroying the side of the enemies it (i.e., the rampart) was like a (white silken) cloth covering the door panel in the form of the chest of the king.' (Lines 34-36).

'The city of Durjjaya was beautified by the sea-like Lauhitya, which was the remover of the fatigue caused by erotic dalliances of the beautiful damsels, seated on the open tops of the palatial buildings, with the help of the particles of water, issuing out of the waves very lightly stirred by the beautiful breeze mingled with the cackling of the host of intoxicated female swans, which (i.e., the Lauhitya) was like the silken banner carried by the elephant in the form of mount Kailasa, and which was like a bejeweled mirror of the damsels of the heaven, working as an aid to their preparation for amorous sport.' (Lines 36-39).

'The city of Durjjaya was the object of adoration for innumerable hosts of kings.' (Line 39). 'In that city of Durjjaya, there used to be *jadata* (i.e., liquidness only in the Pearl-) necklaces but never any *jadata* (i.e., dullness) in the sense organs; there used to be *cancalata* (i.e., fickleness) only amongst the monkeys but never any *cancalata* (i.e., fickleness) in the minds (of people); there used to be *bhangurata* (i.e., fickleness) only in

the play of brows but never any *bhangurata* (i.e., undoing or breach of trust) in respect of deeds undertaken: there used to be *sopasargata* (i.e., prefixing of *upasargas*) only in respect of the roots (i.e., *dhatu*s) but never any *sopasargata* (i.e., illness) in respect of the subjects; there used to be *vamata* (i.e., beauty) only in the damsels (and never any *vamata* or crookedness in respect of others); there used to be *skhalitam* (i.e., faltering of steps) only in case of the beautiful women elated through the intoxication caused by wine (and never any *skhalita* or breach of conduct of the people in general); there used to be a sense of apathy (*nihsprihata*) only towards the wrong-doers (and never towards ordinary fellow beings); there used to be desire for incessant *madhupana* (i.e., sucking of honey) only in case of swarms of bees (and *niratyayamadhupansasakti* or interest in incessant drinking of wine was never to be seen in case of ordinary citizens); there was to be excessive allegiance to the beloved only in case of the cakravaka birds (and never in case of the citizens) and there used to be taking of meat (*pisitasita*) only in case of the animals (and never in case of the citizens)' (Lines 40-43).

The Gauhati/Guwahati Copper Plate grant of king Indrapala (mid eleventh century) also refers to Durjjaya as the invincible capital city of the Palas. This city of Durjjaya also appears to have grown up on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra adjacent to the earlier capital of Hadappesvara or Hadapyaka.

**Kamarupanagara:** A new name was added in the list of ancient Assam capital cities in an inscription named Puspabhadra Copper plate grant issued by king Dharmapala, apparently the last ruler of the Pala dynasty. In the said grant, it is disclosed that this king used to live in Kamarupanagara (Sharma 1978: 223). Unlike the earlier capital cities of ancient Assam which were situated on either south or north bank of river Brahmaputra, the Puspabhadra grant has not referred to any river including Brahmaputra. This very fact has led to some scholars like P.N. Bhattacharyya (Bhattacharyya 1338 B.S.: 29-34) and N.N. Vasu (Vasu 1922: 174) to place the city in distant Kamatapur (near modern Koch Bihar town, West Bengal) and the more distant Rangpur of Bangladesh respectively. On the other hand, the 'city of Kamrud' of the Muslim writers of early medieval India has been placed in modern North Guwahati, the other side of Guwahati on the north bank of the Brahmaputra opposite to Guwahati city. K.L. Barua places it in the area near the Asvakaranta temple of North Guwahati and identifies it with Kamarupanagara (Barua 1966: 93). N.N. Vasu and P.N. Bhattacharyya also place the 'city of Kamrud' in North Guwahati (Choudhury 1959: 263). P.C. Choudhury himself supports the view and has added that even the Chinese records call Kamarupa as 'kamelu' (Choudhury 1959: 263-64). He is also of the opinion that the old city of Pragjyotisha was not abandoned and the establishment of Kamarupanagara was simply an extension of the old city to the northern bank of the Brahmaputra (Choudhury 1959: 264). This view is, however, not acceptable because, several centuries ago, the northern side of the Brahmaputra had become more urbanised in the wake of the establishment of two capital cities namely, Hadappesvara and Durjjaya. Even, M.M. Sharma strengthens this identification by offering two more place names in this regard (Sharma 1978: 224). The two places are Rajduar or Rajaduar



meaning 'the royal gate' and Rangmahal meaning 'the pleasure palace'. The area behind the bank just opposite Guwahati is called Rajaduar while Rangmahal is a village situated in the hinterland about two miles to the north of Rajaduar. The said grant was also discovered at the dried bed of the river Puspabhadra situated at the Jalah village, a few kilometres from Rajaduar.

**Kirtipura:** The Assam Plates of Vallbhadeva (c1185 AD) refer to the town of Kirtipura. Nothing much is written about this town except that king Vallabhadeva constructed an alms house for the hungry ones, at the instance of his father, for his mother's obtaining the heaven for ever in the vicinity of the town (*pura*) of Kirtipura (vv 13-14) (Sharma 1978: 298).

It is quite likely that in addition to the capital city, other towns existed. These were in the form of headquarters of the different administrative divisions such as the districts and the *skandhavaras* denoting mainly a camp of victory. Two such *skandhavaras* were Karnasuvana (Nidhanpur Copper Plates of king Bhaskaravarman who ruled from 594 AD to 650 AD) (Hazarika:147; Sharma 1978: 50) and Hamsakonci, also spelled as Hangshakochi (Kamauli Copper Plates grant of Vaidyadeva belonging to twelfth century AD) (Sharma 1978: 286). After defeating king Sasanka of Gauda or North-West Bengal) in a joint attack with emperor Harshavardhana of Kannauj, Bhaskaravarman occupied Sasanka's capital Karnasuvana (modern Kanson located in Murshidabad district of the Indian state of West Bengal) and from this *jayaskandhavaras* or victorious military camp, renewed an earlier land charter originally issued by one of his ancestors, King Bhutivarman (515AD-555 AD) (Hazarika:146). Similarly, Vaidyadeva, after defeating one Tingyadeva issued a land charter from the *jayaskandhavaras* of Hamsakonci. According to the Kamauli Copper plates, Vaidyadeva who was a minister of king Kumarapala of the kingdom of Gauda was sent by the king to punish Tingyadeva, the governor of Kamarupa as the latter had started ruling independently. Interestingly, Vaidyadeva too claimed independence and declared himself as a Maharajadhiraja or the King of Kings in the land charter which he issued from Hamsakonci located in the Vishaya of Bada or Bara, in the Kamarupa mandala, in the Bhukti of Pragjyotisha (Kamauli Copper Plates lines 47-50) (Sharma 1978: 286). These types of settlements must have been well-fortified, properly laid out and possessed a good network of roads and streets. All these facilities, no doubt, led to the growth of such settlements. They became the centres of trade as well as literary and cultural activities, thereby attracting all types of people to settle down in these areas. Most probably, these types of towns for being administrative headquarters were directly managed by the State.

## The Findings

Thus, we have got information with regard to five cities belonging to ancient Assam. All appear to have been administrative centres. Except Kirtipura, all are proudly declared to be the royal capital cities by the local epigraphs and they grew up on the fertile banks of the mighty river Brahmaputra. The local inscriptions especially those of

the Salastambhas and the Palas also vividly describe the beauty of their respective capital cities. They have described the scenic beauty of the place covering the beauty of the waters of river Brahmaputra, the beauty of the palaces or the palatial buildings, the beauty of the broad royal roads which had seen the coming and going of 'numerous' kings and *samantas* (feudal lords) being, seated on colourful elephants or horses accompanied by their respective troops, the beauty of the city temples, the beauty of the river wharfs with rows of speedy boats, the beauty of a strong rampart surrounding a capital city and so on and so forth. There may be some exaggeration in the literature of the epigraphs but at the same time they also pin-point the basic nature of the cities and the citizens.

Firstly, these cities were administrative centres. They were the abodes of the king and the other royals. Being the administrative headquarters, they used to attract lots of people belonging to different professions. That is why, people of all *Varnas* (castes) and *asramas* (stages of life) used to live in the cities. The cities used to serve as the places of residence for 'innumerable fortunate and honest scholars.'

Secondly, the ancient cities of Assam were also commercial centres. As mentioned above, these cities were also largely inhabited by the merchant class. In the city of Hadappesvara, the merchants are also said to have thronged the coronation ceremony of King Harjaravarman so that they could sprinkle the king with holy water collected from all the sacred places along with the princes of noble birth and the vassal kings. Certainly, they acquired that royal access on account of their money power and general influence in the society. The city of Durjjaya built by great Pala ruler Ratnapala could boast of 'hundreds of people devoted to enjoyment (*bhogin....*).' The same grant that is the Bargaon grant of Ratnapala compares Durjjaya with the peak of Mount Kailasa which is the abode of Kuvera, the god of riches. Because, Durjjaya was also 'inhabited by rich men or *vittesas*. Here, it must be noted that discovery of the first century AD Roman Rouletted and the ninth century AD Chinese Celadon pottery ware in the Ambari excavation site of modern Guwahati city, indicates one thing that all the capital cities of ancient Assam were developed on a convenient position from the point of view of transportation. Not only had they easy access to long distance waterway through their proximity to the great river Brahmaputra but were also strategically connected with other places both inside and outside the traditional boundaries of Assam through several land routes. The wares in the Ambari excavation site tempts anybody to conclude that this ancient kingdom certainly played an important role in the contemporary international trade. Even today, we cannot negate the importance of Northeast India owing to its strategically important location.

Thirdly, the ancient capital cities also attracted great learned men. The Bargaon grant proudly declares that the city of Durjjaya was also the residence of poetical figures (*kavyalamkaras*) created by learned men (*Budhas*) and preceptors (*Gurus*). This fact also proves that these capital cities were also seats of learning. Fourthly, these cities were great religious centres. Both the available mythological information and the local

legends testify to the existence of the much-venerated temple of goddess Kamakhya. Legends say that king Naraka after coming under the influence of Banasura, the non-Aryan ruler of neighbouring Sonitapura or modern Tezpur, took to non-Aryan ways of life and even dared to propose goddess Kamakhya. For this purpose, he even built a stone staircase leading to the temple atop the Nilachal hill (the staircase called 'mekhela ujua' is still visible). But he couldn't complete the work within the stipulated time and thereby the marriage was averted. At last, he was killed at the hands of Lord Krishna. After killing Naraka, Krishna placed his good and valorous son Bhagadatta on the throne of Pragjyotisha. Interestingly, all the three powerful royal dynasties such as the Varmans, the Salastambhas and the Palas had claimed descent from Naraka and his son, Bhagadatta and grandson Vajradatta.

Equally interesting is the fact that they all were great devotees of Lord Kamesvara (Lord Siva) and his wife Mahagauri (great Gauri) or Kamesvari. Although the Varman kings claimed to be devout Vaisnavas, both the Salastambhas and the Palas were confirmed Saivites. As mentioned above, the Tezpur Copper plate inscription of Salastambha ruler Vanamalavarmadeva refers to a great temple of Lord Kamesvara and Mahagauri atop a mountain called Kamakuta which was on the shore of the river Brahmaputra and it was an added beauty of the capital city. No doubt, people used to visit in large numbers the cities in order to pay oblations to the great god and the goddess. Thus, this can be said quite conclusively that these urban centres though not grown up exclusively as seats of religion, their religious significance certainly added to the vibrancy of the settlement as an urban one.

Fifthly, the epigraphs have also referred to economic condition and mental status of the citizens. This is something rare in the annals of Assam's history but very significant at the same time. The citizens were taken into account. The verse 49 of the Dubi Copper plate inscription of Bhakaravarman has referred to King Sri Sthiravarman shifting to his new capital city by the holy river along with his citizens, relatives and servants. The line evidently shows that king Sthiravarman or for that matter the Varman kings knew the inseparable bonding between the ruler and the ruled. Afterwards, the scribe of the Bargaon Copper plate grant of king Ratnapala also analyses the condition and character of the citizens of Durjjaya while describing the varied beauty of the capital city. The scribe of the grant who appears to be a man of considerable literary quality gives a long list of certain juxtapositions (stated above) and thereby he draws the conclusions regarding the citizens of the Pala capital. He says that there was no dullness among the citizens and no fickleness in their minds either; they were loyal to each other and hence, no breach of trust and conduct amongst them. They were not crooked by nature and were never prone to faltering of steps. The citizens even though, were *Bhogins* (devoted to enjoyment), they normally abstained from drinking alcohol. They also abstained from taking meat. The people at large displayed a sense of apathy towards the wrong-doers but never towards the ordinary fellow citizens. They were also devoid of any illness and hence possessed good health. In totality, the city appears to be a vibrant one inhabited by loyal, hard-working, healthy, strong-minded,

righteous people. The king definitely wanted his subjects to possess the qualities of good citizens. As ruler, he knew that he should remain accountable towards the good fortune of his subjects. King Vallabhadeva of the Assam Plates is said to have constructed an alms house for the benefit of the hungry ones (mid twelfth century AD) in the vicinity of a town called Kirtipura.

## Conclusion

We have seen that available data on the urban settlements of ancient Assam is very less. The number of such settlement is also very few. But what is interesting about them is that these urban centres possessed all the qualities of any developed city of contemporary India. The local epigraphs, on their part have done a lot in presenting these ancient settlements in a comprehensive manner before us. This is notable in the face of the presence of numerous villages in ancient Assam as recorded in the inscriptions discovered so far. These inscriptions are largely royal charters issuing tax-free land grants to Brahmin donees. Still, they have offered lots of information regarding the ancient cities. Essentially on the basis of the data supplied by them, we can have a clear picture of the cities, their citizens and also the power of the different Kamarupa kings. Not only political and military power of the ancient kingdoms but the sound economic condition and luxury of the people at large are also discernible from the sources under consideration. It is again an important fact to be noted here is that the rulers preferred to rule a welfare state and their subjects supported it, of course by remaining obedient to the state authority.

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