

INTRODUCTION

It has rightly been suggested that for a correct understanding of the history of a country a thorough knowledge of its geography is essential. Historical geography tries to find the historical roots of present form and conditions of settlement and to trace the stages of colonisation and desertion that have affected the cultural landscape. So far a proper and comprehensive understanding of the history of a country the necessity of historical geography can hardly be overemphasised.

Many a scholar have studied the historical geography of the various regions of Europe¹, but in Indian history the number of good geographical studies is limited. Among the pioneer works in this field we may refer to A. Cunningham's Geography of ancient India (1871). Though this work is primarily concerned with the description of the route followed by Tsan Chwang, it contains a lot of informations about ancient India. Cunningham was, however, followed by various scholars some of whom wrote stray articles in this line.²

Valuable contributions in this respect have, however, been made by other scholars such as S.N. Majumdar Shastri, H.C. Raychowdhury, D.C.Sircar, B.C.Sen, H.D. Sankalia, K.D. Bajpai, S.B. Chowdhury, P.K. Bhattacharyya and others.³ But very little attempt has so far been made to write about the historical geography of Prājyotisa-Kamarupa which possesses a chequered history of its own.

In the present work, however, we intend to attempt a similar study of the territory of Prājyotiṣa-Kāmarūpa, the

boundaries of which are indicated in the Yoginī Tantra⁴ :

Uttarasyāṁ Kanjagirī Karatoyātu Pascims // V. 17

tīrthasreṣṭhā Dikṣu nadi pūrvasyāṁ giri Kanyake /

dakṣiṇe Brahmaṇḍasya Lakṣyāyāḥ Saṅgamaśvedhiḥ /

Kāmarūpa iti khyātaḥ sarva śāstresu niścītaḥ // V. 18

i.e. the Kanjagiri (Kanchanagiri) probably the Kanchanjāngā^{was} is the north and the river Karatoyā was the western boundary of Kāmarūpa. The Dikṣu (associated with Dikkarevāsīn near Sadiya in the north-eastern Assam is the modern Jikhu river falling in the Brahmaputra near Sibsagar) was the eastern boundary. The confluence of the Lakṣā (Lakhyā) and the Brahmaputra was the southern limit of Kāmarūpa. It thus appears that the present State of Assam (lying between latitudes 23° 13' and 24° N ; and longitudes 89° 46' and 97° 4' E.) may considerably be a part of the ancient territory of Prāgjyotiṣa-Kāmarūpa.

The physiography moulds the geographic base for human activities and settlements. The geographic personality of a region is erected over this base. The expression form of the geographical pattern is determined by the technics adopted and the stage of the material culture of the people.⁵ On the basis of the physical components Prāgjyotiṣa-Kāmarūpa may be divided into following regions : (a) North-Eastern Frontier Mountain Ranges or the Assam Himalaya or the Eastern Himalaya, (b) Souther hill Ranges or Pūrvācala, (c) Assam plateau or Meghalaya plateau, (d) Surma Valley, (e) Brahmaputra valley or Assam valley.

North-eastern Frontier Mountain

This region extends between the Tista river in Sikkim and the Namcha Barwa peak (25,445 ft) in the Mishmi hills. Here the Brahmaputra makes a 'hair-pin' bend and has cut across the mountains before flowing into the plains of Assam. The total length of the region is about 450 miles. This Himalayan region is divisible into several sections. Bhutan Himalaya extends from Sikkim to Dhansiri river (Assam), Aka hills from Dhansiri to Dikoral river, the Dafia hills from Bharali river in the west to Rangasadi in the east, the Miri hills in north of the Lakhimpur District, the Abor hills between the Sisa river and Dibong river and the Mishmi hills between Dibong and Dihang rivers.

The southern edge of the Assam Himalaya is abrupt and it rises from the Brahmaputra plain with abrupt slope whereas the northern edge facing Tibet is comparatively gentle. The rivers in this part are turbulent. They cut vertically the mountains into steep gorges and flow southward to meet the Brahmaputra.

In addition to Namcha Barwa, there are two other peaks, several glaciers and an important lake named Yegrongtso in the region.

South-eastern hill ranges or Purvacala

The Purvacala is the southern extension of the eastern Himalayan region and is characterised by relatively low relief. The Assam Himalaya or North-eastern Frontier Ranges run in the east-west direction. The ranges are extended to extreme south-

eastern hills of Mizo District. All the hills viz. Patkal, Naga, Barail, high lands of Manipur and Lushai hills are included in the group of south-eastern hill ranges. The general elevation of the ranges is 3000 ft or 915.5 metres above sea level. The region is very much unstable and falls into an important seismic zone of the world.

Assam plateau or Shillong plateau

The Assam or Shillong plateau is known as Meghalaya - 'Abode of clouds'⁶, includes the Garohills, Khasi and Jaintiya hills and Mikir hills. The length of the plateau from the river Dhansiri in the east and Singinaxi river on the west is approximately 260 miles and the width is 25 miles on the average. The general elevation of the plateau varies between 4000 to 6000 ft. The plateau has been taken to be a part of the massive block of peninsular India.⁷ The Assam plateau, with the exception of the south-eastern part, is surrounded by the plains of Brahmaputra, Surma and the Kopili rivers.

This bulk of plateau is widely dissected, covered with dense jungle and scoured by the highest rainfall in the world.⁸ The recent discovery of coal on the plateau is of some significance to the Assam tea industry.⁹

The tribes - Garo, Khasi, Jaintiya have Mon-Khmer or Tibeto-Burman affinities generally live by shifting subsistence agriculture; the villages often shift with the fields (ihug).

Surma Valley

It may be noted that half of the total areas of the state of present Assam is occupied by the two alluvial plains namely the Brahmaputra and the Surma valley. The Cachar plain of modern Assam is a part of the Surma valley the major portion of which lies in Bangladesh.

The Surma valley as a whole is a flat plain about 135 miles long by 60 miles wide, shut in on three sides by ranges or hills. The river from which the valley takes its name rises on the southern slopes of the mountain ranges on the borders of the Naga Hill Districts, and flows south through the Manipur hills.

The Brahmaputra valley or Assam valley.

The Brahmaputra valley which is hemmed in between the North-east frontier hills, patkai and Naga hills and the Assam plateau, occupies a most significant part in the physiography of Assam. The valley is very extensive - 450 miles in length and 60 miles in width on the average. The river Brahmaputra and its numerous tributaries flowing from either side are mainly responsible for supplying the alluvial debris from the elevated parts from the north and south.

The general slope of the valley decreases from east to west. Sadiya, situated, at the extreme end of the valley has an elevation of 440 ft, above sea level, Dibrugarh 340 ft, Gauhati 166 ft. It is interesting to note that the Brahmaputra valley is considered to be the eastern most continuation of the Indo-Gangetic trough.¹⁰

The flatness of the Brahmaputra valley is broken by the presence of numerous low hills which are the outlying parts of Assam plateau.

The present Assam valley or Brahmaputra valley became the centre of political activities and civilization of Assam right from the early period. The region possesses a rich ancient heritage dating back to the epic period when it was referred to as Pragjyotisa with its capital at Pragjyotisapura, the present city of Gauhati.

Leaving behind the dim and hazy past of the mythological period, we next come to the historical period which commences roughly with the early centuries of the Christian era. From the 4th century A.D. to the beginning of the 13th century A.D., several dynasties ruled over this region. The earliest of these dynasties was the Varman dynasty which ruled for nearly four hundred years. The great king of this dynasty Bhaskaravarman was an ally and a friend of king Harshavardhana of Kanauj and a contemporary of the celebrated Chinese pilgrim Yuan Chwang.

The Varman dynasty was succeeded subsequently by the families of Śālistambha and Brahmapāla. The rulers of Śālistambha family made Haḍapeśvara (or Haḍappeśvara) their capital which was situated in this region. After the decline of this line, the rulers of Brahmapāla family shifted their capital city to Durjjayā, situated on the bank of the Brahmaputra, and next to Kāmarūpanagara, probably to the western side of the Kingdom. Vaidyadeva, Vallabhadeva were some of the later rulers who also emerged prominent till the period when Kāmarūpa became a prey to various invasions of the muslims and the Āhōms towards the 13th century A.D.

The state of Assam and its adjoining regions have a typical climatic personality. The state is again very rich in raw materials which may be divided into following categories :

- (a) Mineral-based ^{materials are} Petroleum, natural gas, coal, limestones, iron ore may be included in this group;
- (b) Forest-based materials are timber, plywood, cane etc. ;
- (c) Agriculture and live-stock based ^{materials} include cotton, sugar cane, rice etc.

These are the geographical bases of Prāgjyotiṣa-Kāmarūpa to which we have confined our discussion. The present work embodies the results of an intensive study of the mountain and river systems, territories and capitals, districts, cities, villages, routes of Prāgjyotiṣa-Kāmarūpa on the basis of the early Indian literature like the Brāhmaṇas (eg. Satapatha Brāhmaṇa, Aitareya Brāhmaṇa etc.), the epics (eg. the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata), the purāṇas (eg. Mārkaṇḍeya, Kālikā, Varāha, Skanda, and others), Tantras (e.g. Yoginī Tantra, Kāmaratna Tantra, Saktisāgama Tantra etc.), astronomical works (e.g. Bṛhatsamhitā) and the Buddhist and the Jaina texts.

Apart from these sources, the ancient Kāvyas, prose works and scriptures like Raghuvamśa, Haragaurīśaivada, Haragaurīvilāsa etc. supply us many interesting additional informations for our study. Old Assamese literature like the Burañjīs (e.g. Purāṇā Assam Burañjī, Kāmarūpa Burañjī, Pādsāh Burañjī etc.) through religions in tenor and imaginative in outlook contain a mass of

informations about socio-political history and geography like medieval romances of Europe. Again some other medieval works by muslim historians like Tabaqāt-i-Nāsiri, Riyāz-us-Salātin, Bahāristān-i-Ghaybī, Fāthiyā-i-ibriyā, Ālāngirnāsā etc. are no less important from our point of view. These indigenous literary sources are sometimes supplemented and corroborated by the accounts of foreign pilgrims (e.g. the accounts of Xuan Chwang, Jesuit travellers and so on) who visited the country in the early and medieval periods.

Besides the sources referred to above, we have other materials which are generally considered to be more genuine; they are epigraphs, coins and seals. The inscriptions sometimes refer to the boundary of a piece of land granted or the administrative unit in which a particular village, khukti or visaya were situated. A large number of inscriptions of the various ruling dynasties have been discovered from and outside of the territory of Prāgjyotiṣa-Kāmarūpa, and it is needless to emphasize their importance in this respect. In this connection, a few books may be worth mentioning. These are (a) P.N. Bhattacharyya, Kāmarūpa Śāsanāvalī, Rangpur, 1938 B.S., (b) M.M. Sharma, Inscriptions of Ancient Assam, Gauhati, 1978, (c) D.C. Sircar, Some Epigraphical Records of the Medieval period from Eastern India, New Delhi, 1979, (d) M. Neog, Prāgya Śāsanāvalī, Assam, 1974.

With these sources proper, we attempt to embark upon our study of historical geography of Prāgjyotiṣa-Kāmarūpa. The present work consists of several Chapters. The Introduction has been followed by a chapter on the Historical Background from the earliest time

down the advent of the Āhōms in Kāmarūpa towards the beginning of the 13th Century A.D. Here we have tried to trace in short an up-to-date historical information of the present territory on the basis of the latest discoveries and researches.

Next there is a Chapter on the Mountain System which is followed by another Chapter on ^{the} River System of the said region. A large number of mountains and rivers of this land played a significant part towards the growth of human settlement and civilization and find mention in the literatures and inscriptions.

The fourth Chapter is divided into two sections. In the first section we discuss the ^{Territories and} Administrative Divisions with the help of archaeological and literary sources. Capitals, Cities and Towns are dealt with in the second section. Here we ~~attempt to~~ ^{have} made a historical study of the place names. Place names do not originate by mere accident, but are the outcome of social and historical conditions with which a people are intimately connected.

The fifth Chapter also consists of two sections of which the first is connected with the Villages, both identified and unidentified and the second with the Route System of this ancient territory. The study of major routes in this part of India is no less important. In tracing the ancient routes we have mainly to depend upon the epics, itineraries of the travellers and other indigenous literary sources.

The Miscellaneous items form another interesting Chapter. Here we incorporate a few other geographical matters that cannot

be placed in the topics suggested above. These include pīthas, tīrthas, bhithis, bhitvis, bhumiś, ksētra, kundas, puskaraśrinīś, jola or joli and śuśrūta.

The Appendices form another interesting feature of the present work. These are related to the mountains, rivers, administrative units and village names. These names are generally available from the medieval sources - both literary and epigraphic.

Lastly, we present a map of this region which will, we think, be of some help for the proper understanding of the problems connected with the historical geography of ancient Prāggyotiśa-Kāśarūpa.

R E F E R E N C E S

- 1 Cf. E.G.R. Taylor, Historical Geography of England Before 1800; W. Gordon East, An Historical Geography of Europe (Roman Empire to the late 19th century); E.H. Bunbury, An History of Ancient Geography Among the Greeks and Romans, from the earliest age till the fall of the Roman Empire, 2nd edition, New York, 1950.
- 2 Works and various articles of B.G. Law may be quoted here, although in many places his observations and conclusions are not reliable and subject of criticism.
- 3 Works like Historical Geography and Topography of Bihar (~~1963~~)^{Delhi, 1963} by M.S. Pandey, and Historical Geography and Dynastic History of Orissa upto the rise of the Imperial Ganges, Calcutta, 1975,^{Calcutta, 1975} by D.K. Ganguli, may be cited here.
- 4 Yoginī Tantra (ed.) Swami Sarvasvarārendra Saraswati, Calcutta, 1385 B.S., Part II, Paṭala XI, Vs. 17-18. Incidentally, in the Kālikā Purāṇa also (Ch. 33, Vs. 123-33) the river Lalita Kāntā and Karatoya have been described as the eastern and western boundaries of Kamarupa.
- 5 S.P. Chatterjee in Geographical Review, March 1944.
- 6 O.H.K. Spate, India and Pakistan, 1967, p. 606.
- 7 Assam : An outline, Souvenir, 21st International Geographical Congress, Gauhati University, 1968, p. 15.
- 8 O.H.K. Spate, op. cit. p. 606.
- 9 Loc. cit.
10. Assam, An outline, p. 15, op. cit., p. 19