

The Origin of Ancient Kamatapur

Dr. Sailen Debnath

The kingdom of ancient Kamatapur emerged in the area which had historically been for long a part of Kamrup. Pargiter states that the kingdom of Pragjyotisha in the period of the Epics included the greater portions of modern Assam, along with Koch-Bihar, Jalpaiguri, Rangpur, Bogra, Mymensing, Dacca, Tripura, portions of Pabna and probably a portion of Nepal.¹ "It seems therefore that Pragjyotisha included, in ancient times, the modern district of Purnea in Bihar and extended the north-west, as far as the Kosi."²

As the historical geography of Kamatapur was involved in that of Kamrup, Kamatapur constituted the westernmost part of Kamrup. Kamrup was divided into four piths or areas viz. (i) Ratnapith between the Karatoya and the Swarnakosha (Sankosh),³ (ii) Kamapith between the Swarnakosha and the Kapila, (iii) Swarnapith between the Pushpika and the Bhairavi and (iv) Saumarapith between the Bhairavi and the Dikrang rivers.⁴ But according to the Yogini Tantra⁵ the four piths were Ratnapith, Bhadrupith, Saumarapith and Kamapith and was bounded by the Karatoya in the west, the Digaru in the east, the Kanra hills in the north and the Navalaya in the south. But as once Kamatapur emerged as an independent political unit, it no longer remained a part of Kamrup, rather it so came about that Kamrup as a political unit ceased to exist and its place was taken over by expanding Kamatapur. But during the period when Kamatapur had not yet sprung up, the political destiny of the geographical location of what later on came to be Kamatapur and that of Kamrup more or less remained in the same line. Ups and downs nearly in the same footing influenced the entire zone. The history of Kamatapur as has been tangled with the history of Kamrup, a closer scrutiny into the source-materials of the history of Kamrup has brought to the fore the fact that hitherto historians have highlighted the Brahmaputra valley more than the Karatoya-Sankosh valley in locating the ancient historical sites. Tista, Jaldhaka, Torsha, Kaljani, Gadadhar, Raidak and Sankosh all these are great rivers of Ratnapith or the area bounded by ancient Karotoya and Sankosh or Swarnakosh.

There is no doubt about it that this part of Kamrup between the Karatoya and the Sankosh was the seat of many ruling dynasties from the early times of history. Mahasengupta, a descendant of the latter Guptas and, most probably, the father of Sashanka defeated and killed Susthitavarman (585-593), the king of Kamrup and father of Bhaskar Varman (593-648) in a battle that, perhaps, continued intermittently from 590 to 593. The war, most probably, was for the mastery on the land between the Karatoya and the Mahananda. As a result of this discomfiture, the land in the west of the Karatoya

was lost to Mahasengupta. As a matter of fact, this ceded land became the bone of contention between the heirs of both the monarchs. Sashanka, the son of Mahasengupta, right from the beginning of his rule, in alliance with Devagupta of Malwa, tended to follow aggressive postures not just against Kamrup, but also against the Pushwabhutis of Thaneswar and the Maukharis of Kanauj. In view of Sashanka's victories against his adversaries, Bhaskar Varman, the ruler of Kamrup too pursued the policy of diplomacy for alliance with Harsha Shiladitya, the righteous heir to the throne of Thaneswar and Kanauj together. In the long run, on account of Sashanka's defeat, Bhaskar, perhaps, was able to annex some territories from the possession of the former; though for the full occupation of the whole of northern Bengal, he had to wait till the death of Sashanka. Some historians of Assam have exaggerated the military achievement of Bhaskar against Sashanka. But from Si-yu-Ki as well as from 'The Life of Hiuen-Tsang' by Shaman Hwui Li⁶ it appears that Bhaskar was not the overlord of Karnasuvarna when the Chinese monk visited it in the last leg of his stay in India. Bhaskar got hold of a huge area of Sashanka's kingdom only after his death.

In view of the contiguity of Ratnapith with the territories of Karnasuvarna or Gaur, it can be surmised that Bhaskar gave a lot of importance to the western flank of his empire i.e. the land in the west of the Swarnakosh or Sankosh. Soon after the occupation of a major portion of Sashanka's kingdom after his death, the extent of Bhaskar's territories far extended even into Magadh or Bihar and Samatata of Bengal.

Now the question is important as to where the capital of Bhaskar was; where the nucleus of his kingdom was. The historians of Assam have taken it to be very easy and congenial to say that the capital of Bhaskar was on the bank of the river Brahmaputra. But they have not yet been able to ascertain what they claim so emotionally; i.e. they are still far off the solution of locating the capital. They have neither arguments to reckon with in their favour; nor even a single and simple logic they have to prove their ground. But if we go minutely through the report left by Hiuen-Tsang (Yuan Chwang), we may come to a logical conclusion or sound alternative view. Hiuen-Tsang traveled to Kamrup at a time when he was scheduled to return to his own country China after he would have had completed his special interview with Harsha Siladitya. But before that Bhaskar Varman had exercised heavy pressure on Shilabhadra, the chief rector of Nalanda University, to send Hiuen Tsang to Kamrup. The king of Kamrup was influenced by a Brahmin of Kamrup who had gone to Nalanda to have a debate with the Chinese pilgrim only to be impressed through his own defeat in the debate. Shaman Hwui Li writes in the '*Life of Hiuen-Tsang*' that after repeated requests Shilabhadra ultimately agreed to send the Chinese monk to Kamrup; and that too was done devoid of any prior communication with Harsha, who was equally expecting to meet the monk. Anyway, Hiuen-Tsang stated his eastern peregrination towards the capital of Kamrup from Nalanda; and he measured the distance of Kamrup from Pataliputra.

The Varman dynasty which has so far been supposed to have developed in the

Brahmaputra valley, it can, on the basis of Hiuen-Tsang's Si-Yu-Ki, be asserted that the capital of Bhaskar Varman was somewhere between the Karatoya and the Sankosh (Swarnakosh) River and certainly not in the Brahmaputra valley. The area between Karatoya and Sankosh was the Ratnapith and that was one of the four piths of ancient Kamrup. It is not unlikely that the capital of the Varman dynasty as was in the Ratnapith, therefore, during the long period of rule of that dynasty, present Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri and part of Rangpur constituted to be the important hub of political activities. In the ancient times as the spring of political influence was from the Ganga-Jamuna basin, therefore, the proximity of Ratnapith with the mainland of India made it rather preferable for the establishment of political power in Rathnapith than in the areas farther east i.e. in the Brahmaputra Valley. Except the epical reference to Naraka, Bhagadatta and Bana there is no dependable archaeological evidence to prove that the Brahmaputra Valley was more important than the Karatoya-Tista-Sankosh Valley. The archaeological remains of Tezpur and Nagaon were associated not much with the history of the Varmans rather with king Vana and the Salstambha dynasty. Only the remains of Nilachala hills and Ambari in Gauhati may somehow be associated with the activities of the Varman kings; but in that case too strong proofs are wanting. Literary evidences left by Hiuen Tsang rather indicate to historical geography otherwise that most probably the capital of Bhaskar Varman was on the eastern bank of the river Karatoya.

The River Brahmaputra often created havoc by its inundations in the ancient times. It was for that reason that the hilly zones were selected as places for the construction of temples as well as palaces. The making of the Kamaksha temple atop the Nilachala hills was necessitated by the demand of making the shrine safe from floods that would occur nearly every year. There is no trace of any archaeological evidence yet to establish the claim that Naraka was a king in the Brahmaputra Valley or Bhagadatta went far-away to Kurukshetra to fight the epic-war against the Five Pandavas. In the epic too it is simply stated that Bhagadatta was from Pragjyotishpur-Kamrup but as to the exact location of his capital and description of his people nothing in detail is mentioned in the epic. For arguments' sake it cannot be said that if even Naraka and Bhagadatta were historical figures, as to their capital nothing can be ascertained; nor even is it known whether ancient Pragjyotishpur included the whole of the tract of land between the river Karatoya and the Brahmaputra.

Apparently the Varman dynasty was historical; and its last ruler Bhaskar Varman is said to have been the most reputed both in war and peace. Our searching of the history of Kamatapur actually begins from the end of the kingdom of Bhaskar Varman; though evidences prove amply that Bhaskar Varman was the ruler of Kamrup but his capital was in the area which later on was included in ancient geographical part of Kamatapur. Thus, though Bhaskar was not the ruler of Kamatapur yet in order to prove that the tract of land that emerged afterwards as important as Kamatapur had grown into a political centre even during rule of the Varmans.

Hiuen Tsang's (Yuan Chwang) Si-yu-ki, states that the Chinese monk traveled 900 li or about 150 miles to the east from Paundravardhana to cross the river Kolotu or Karatoya in order to get into the kingdom of Kamrup ruled by Bhaskar Varman responding to whose invitation the monk came for a visit. As he mentioned his crossing of the river Karatoya and then narrated his assessment of the kingdom it seems that he did not go too far to the east from Karatoya. Had he had so done, he certainly would have mentioned the names of other rivers too. On this ground it can be assumed that most probably the capital of Bhaskar Varman was not far away from Karatoya. Hiuen-Tsang's narrative of Kamrup is quoted under:

"The country of Kamarupa is about 10,000 li (nearly 1,700 miles) in circuit. The capital town is about 30 li. The land lies low, but is rich and regularly cultivated. They cultivate the jack fruit and the cocoanut. These trees, though numerous, are nevertheless much valued and esteemed. Water led from the river or from banked up lakes flows round the town. The climate is soft and temperate the manners of the people are simple and honest. The men are of small stature and their complexion dark yellow. Their language differs a little from that of mid-India. Their nature is very impetuous and wild; their memories are retentive and they are earnest in study.

They adore and sacrifice to the Devas and have no faith in Buddha; hence from the time Buddha appeared in the world even down to the present day, there never has yet been built one Sangharama as a place for the priests to assemble. Such disciples as there are are of a pure faith, say their prayers secretly and that is all. There are abundant Deva temples and different sectaries to the number of several myriads. The present king belongs to the old line of Narayan Deb. He is of the Brahman caste. His name is Bhaskaravarman, his title, Kumar. From the time that this family seized the land and assumed the Government, there have elapsed a thousand of generations.

The king is fond of learning and the people are so likewise in imitation of him. Men of high talent from distant regions, seeking after office, visit his dominions. Though he has no faith in Buddha, yet he much respects Sramanas of learning.

On the east, this country is bounded by a line of hills so that there is no great city to the kingdom. The frontiers are contiguous to the barbarians of the south-west of China. These tribes are in fact akin to those of the Man people (i.e. the south-west barbarians) in their customs. After a two months journey, we reach the south-western frontier of the province of Szechuen. But the mountains and rivers present obstacles and the pestilential air, the poisonous vapours, the fatal snakes, the destructive vegetation, all these causes of death prevail.

On the South-east of this country, herds of wild elephants roam about in numbers, therefore in this district they use them principally for war"⁷.

From the above excerpt we can deduce the following points as to the kingdom and capital of Bhaskar Varman:-

1. The kingdom of Kamrup was just across the river Karatoya and in the east of the kingdom there were the hills.
2. There is no elaborate mention of the Brahmaputra and no indication if the capital was on the bank of that river.
3. The circumference of the capital was 30 li; and on the east, the country was bounded by a line of hills so that there was no great city to the kingdom. The Brahmaputra valley including the Nilachala hills were in the east of the kingdom; and according to the Chinese pilgrim there was no great city, therefore, there was no question of the capital having been situated there.
4. Water led from the river or from banked up lakes flowed round the capital; and ostensibly, such canals and lakes could not have been constructed near the Brahmaputra, the broadest and rapidest river in India. Even modern technology has yet to prove such possibility that may endure inundations during the Rainy Season. Moreover, there have not been found any archaeological remains to support the view that such canals and lakes, as mentioned by Hiuen Tsang, were there near the Brahmaputra in the environ of which was built the capital of Bhaskar Varman in the vicinity of Gauhati.
5. The capital, as mentioned by the pilgrim, certainly was not in the Brahmaputra valley, nor in the vicinity of Gauhati, for there is no archaeological evidence.
6. The circumstances of the capital, as mentioned by the pilgrim, only correspond with the structural lay-out of the capital at Chilapata or at Singijani. At Chilapata, Nal Rajar Garh was surrounded by a canal named Bania River and that interlinked the Torsha and the Kaljani. At Singijani, the Atharonala River having connection with a lake supported by eighteen canals from the Torsha nearly encircled the capital on the west and the south. It is again important to notice that both the capitals at Chilapata and Singijani virtually had connection by canals with the Torsha. As the capital at Singijani originally was Kamrupnagar and, most probably, built by king Dharmapal, therefore, it is unlikely that Bhaskar Barman had his capital at Singijani. It is rather safe to conclude that Bhaskar Varman had his capital at Chilapata in the Dooars.

But despite the fact that Bhaskar had his capital in Ratnapith or in the geographical location of Kamatapur, still, he should only be considered as the ruler of Kamrup and not of Kamatapur. It was mainly because of the fact that during the regime of the Varman rulers and specifically in the period of Bhaskar Varman, the kingdom of Kamrup was intact devoid of any sign of disintegration. It was during his period, Kamrup expanded as an empire at the cost of the kingdom of Sashanka of Gaur or Karnasuvarna. The emergence of Kamatapur, of course, was in the offing.

As Bhaskar Varman was a 'Kumar' or bachelor, he had no immediate heir to succeed him; therefore, soon after his death; there ensued anarchy as to who would become his successor. It was obvious that in an heirless state, the powerful chiefs of the army and fief holders clashed among themselves for each of them wanted to become the ruler of the vast kingdom. But it was impossible for any single person to usurp the power of the whole empire as it had grown vast after the death of Sashanka. On the basis of the mention of a king named 'Avantivarman' in Visakhadatta's *Mudrarakshasa*, some scholars are of opinion that after Bhaskar's death in 650 or 648 AD. Avantivarman might have succeeded him.⁸ It seems that the Brahmins and the royal priests might have performed the coronation of Avantivarman to ascend the throne; and most probably since he was not the immediate successor of Bhaskar, Avantivarman's authority was not accepted by the ruling chiefs in different geographical locations. As a matter of fact, Avantivarman's reign was too short to leave any impression behind; and it is not unlikely that he was killed in the struggle for power or succession. As things appear to be clear from the subsequent emergence of power centres, along with the death of Bhaskar, his kingdom was divided among the claimants and the ultimate victors in the battlefield. According to Bhutanese sources Sangaldip, who was a Koch, became the ruler of western Kamrup (from Sankosh to Karatoya) and he is said to have defeated the ruler of Kamrup. In that case, most probably that ruler was none other than Avantivarman. But P.C. Choudhury⁹ holds the view that Avantivarman and Salastambha was the same person called by different names only. Choudhury's view also seems to rest on strong logic of it. It is noticeable that Salastambha, the first ruler and founder of the Salastambha dynasty, set up his capital at Tezpur, virtually secluded from Ratnapith as well as from Gauhati. It proves that Salastambha was defeated in the struggle for power and was afraid of some more powerful enemy; safety from that enemy was of paramount importance. We can cite the name of Sangaldip as that formidable enemy. If Salastambha was a different person from Avantivarman, in that case it can be said that in the beginning Avantivarman was defeated and ultimately in the battle between the remaining two belligerents, Salastambha was defeated, though not killed. Thus the stage got eventually set for the meteoric rise of Sangaldip in eastern and north-eastern India.

In this book Koch monarch Sangaldip is considered as the first king of Kamatapur in the beginning of the second half of the seventh century i.e. after the death of Bhaskar Varman. Some scholars may have disagreement to this view on the ground that at that time the name 'Kamatapur' was not in use. In this case our argument is that though at that time the name Kamatapur was not in use, yet, Sangaldip was not the ruler of Kamrup; rather he fought against the ruler of Kamrup, won the war and expanded his kingdom from the hills of Bhutan to the plains of Banga, Gaur, Bihar and Kalinga. The nucleus of his kingdom was the tract of land between the Karatoya and the Sankosh; though he expanded his kingdom farther east by defeating the reigning rulers of Kamrup; at that time, most probably, the Salastambha rulers were at the helm of power in eastern

Kamrup; whereas western Kamrup became a growing independent kingdom under Sangaldip.

The struggle for power soon after the death of Bhaskar Varman was accentuated by a shattering blow given by Tibetan imperial army to the existing political power and set-up in the north and north-eastern India. In 648, the Chinese Emperor Taizong sent a good-will mission under the supervision of Wang-Hiuen-Tse to the Indian Emperor Harsha Siladitya. As bad luck would have it, Harsha had passed away before the mission could reach India. Subsequent to his death in 648, the power of the monarch of Kanauj passed into the hands of his minister Arjuna. Arjuna was against Buddhism; and he lacked the sagacity in his dealing even with the foreign Buddhists. Arjuna, in fact, usurped power; and out of stupidity and vengeance he demonstrated his aversion to the coming of the Chinese Mission. All postulations for peace forwarded by Wang-Hiuen-Tse fell in the deaf ears of the usurper. He looted all presents, meant for Harsha, brought by the Chinese missionaries and put most of the members of the mission to death. The survivors along with Wang-Hiuen-Tse fled to Nepal and then to Tibet. Wang-Hiuen-Tse pleaded for help at the court of the Nepalese government which at that time had been in matrimonial relation with Songtsen-Gampo (629-649), the Emperor of the Tibetan Empire. Songtsen-Gampo had the same kind of matrimonial relation with the Tang dynasty of China. Wen Cheng, the princess of China and Bhrikuti Devi, the princess of Nepal, were the most beloved queens of emperor Gampo. Besides, he was a devout Buddhist; therefore, upset on receiving the tidings from the persons of the mission, he soon dispatched soldiers- infantry and cavalry- to punish Arjuna to the effect of restoring the prestige and dignity of the Buddhists as it had been during the period of Harsha in India.

At that time the Tibetan army was at the peak of its power; and thenceforward nearly for more than a half century neither the Chinese nor even the Muslims of the Middle East could challenge the imperial army of Tibet. It was, therefore, an easy task for the Tibetan invaders that they defeated Arjuna in the battlefield of Bihar. It is said that vanquished Arjuna was first taken to Tibet and then was sent to China. 'Shi-kien-ma' (Sri Kumara) or Bhaskar Varman, the king of Kamrup helped the Tibetan army and Wang-Hiuen-Tse by delivering "thirty thousand oxen (most probably elephants) and horses and provisions for all his army, to which he added bows, scimitars and collars of great value".¹⁰

Both Bhaskar Varman and Songtsen-Gampo died soon after the war. Bhaskar, as was a bachelor, had no immediate heir to succeed him at a time when the Tibetan invasion blighted the existing political authority in northern India. It was the beginning of real '*Matsanyaya*' (anarchy and lawlessness) in Bengal also. In such a vacuum of power and authority Sangaldip and Salastambha fought each other to assert their respective positions in eastern India. Sangaldip proved to be better of the two in the battle field and in consequence of his taking advantage of the situation; he was able to extend his

kingdom into an empire. But the very nucleus of his jurisdiction was in the tract of land between the Karatoya and the Sankosh; though to the east his kingdom, most probably extended upto the Brahmaputra and in the West it included Gaur, southern and eastern Bengal and Bihar. Thus was laid the earliest foundation of the kingdom of Kamatapur, a sovereign land free from outer control. What was begun by Sangaldip, the first Koch king in the second half of the seventh century, continued in subsequent times; and thus, in spite of some intermittent gaps in regal continuity, Kamatapur remained as a centre of political authority and distinct socio-religious culture.

There is, therefore, no doubt that in the medieval period, besides Mahasthangarh, Gaur and Pandua, the most important place that became a seat of political power as well as a centre for the cultivation and dissemination of culture in the sub-Himalayan tract between the Ganga basin and the Brahmaputra basin was the kingdom of Kamatapur with its capital in sequence at Chilapata, Maynaguri, Prithu Rajar Garh, Singijani and Gosanimari. The findings of an interesting research carried out by me on the origin of the kingdom of Kamatapur has brought to light that Kamatapur as a separate political and administrative unit emerged in the middle of the seventh century and its first capital was not at Gosanimari but at Chilapata in the Dooars; and afterwards it was shifted to other places, as mentioned, before its final shifting to Gosanimari. The story that the Khens set up the kingdom of Kamatapur and they shifted their capital from Assam to Gosanimari is a historical concoction of orchestrated design for showing everything of Kamatapur coming from the Brahmaputra Valley. Such writers in doing this or being prone to do this always neglected the Tista-Sankosh basin being an independent seat of political and cultural ups and downs. One has to remember that between Assam and North India the Tista-Sankosh basin was the medium of communication. A closer study in the rise of Kamatapur as an independent political unit out of what had once been Kamrup bring to us the idea that independent of Gaur, Kamatapur emerged as a separate unit of socio-political and cultural existence.

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