Chapter IV

ECONOMIC LIFE

Economy always plays a vital role in the building of a civilization and in ushering of the development of the culture and tradition of a society. A strong economy suggests the successful continuation of a stable society in its political set up. However, the emergence and continuation of a strong economy depends on a variety of factors. First and foremost, the geographical setting of a place, its physical features, flora and fauna play an important role in determining the economic pursuits to be followed by the people living in that particular region. In the second place, a vigorous economic life can prevail in the society, only if there is a strong political organisation which can control the labour, the production process, the transportation process and the distribution of goods and services in the society. At the same time, it should also bring about peace and stability in the society and root out any external and internal disturbances. Last but not the least, the continuation of a strong economy depends on the demand and supply of goods and services produced in the society.

The region in and around Tezpur during the period of study fulfilled all the above criteria which resulted in the flowering of a vibrant economy. A chain of small hills surround the region which form a natural barrier alongside the river Brahmaputra. According to the Kalika Purana which has been attributed to the 10th century C.E. Kāmarūpa was divided into four pithas or sacred areas: Ratnapitha, Kamaapitha, Swarnapitha and Soumarpitha. The region of Sonitpur forms a part of Swarnapitha. The Dikkaravasini of ancient literature is the river Dikrang which now flows east of Sonitpur district. Besides, the Bharali and Barnadi are two main rivers of Swarnapitha which flows through Sonitpur as Tezpur was earlier known as. In the 7th century
C.E. the river Bharali changed its course and shifted eastward due to which a shallow branch of the Bharali River known as Marabharali flows through Tezpur.\(^1\) This also caused a number of holas or inlets to be formed in and around Tezpur from time to time. The soil as such is naturally alluvial in most parts of the region, which must have resulted in a rich yield of crops. The river Brahmaputra, which has been mostly referred to as Lauhitya in the inscriptions\(^2\) must have rendered the easy transportation of goods to and from the region.

The term *pura* of Sonitpura, the ancient name denoting Tezpur in a number of Sanskrit *Puranas*, mostly refers to a city or town, or at least an urban centre. During the reign of the Sālastambhas, Haduppesvara or Hattapesvara, which is identified with the modern Tezpur region, became the headquarters of their kingdom. Even during the rule of the Palas, Hadapyaka (identified with Tezpur) continued to be their political centre, although occasionally we find the rulers shifting their capital to Durjjaya\(^3\) and Kamrupnagara\(^4\). Being a political centre, the area naturally emerged as a nerve centre of economic activities. Agricultural surplus in the adjoining rural areas (which is one of the important pre-requisite for an urban economy) must have catered to the requirements of the townspeople who must have been engaged in trade and commerce and other specialized art and craft activities.

Although the archaeological remains found during the period have been primarily religious in nature representing numerous gods and goddesses, occasionally they also throw light on the economic condition prevailing during the period. The archaeological remains are mostly in the form of sculptures of deities, a great number of the Brahminical pantheon and also quite a

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\(^2\) Tezpur copper plate of Vanamalavarman, line21

\(^3\) Bargoan copper plate of Ratnapala, line40

\(^4\) Puspabhadra grant of Dharmapala, line20
few belonging to the Buddhist faith. These sculptures are generally made of stone while there are also a few figurines in terracotta, as well as terracotta plaques. Other remains consist of architectural components like pillars, door sills, lintels, ruins of temple walls, stone ceilings, ghatas etc. Pottery or pottery remains are basically utilitarian in nature. However a few hoards of coins belonging to the Sālastambha dynasty have been discovered near the Tezpur region. Quite a few epigraphs have also been found in the region of which one is a royal charter relating to settlement of dispute, one relates to grant of villages and veyas for the maintenance of the temple of Hetukasulin, one relates to the establishment of an alms house and grant of villages for its maintenance, while the others deal with donation of land by the rulers to the Brahmanas.

The epigraphic evidences show that granting of lands by the rulers to the learned brahmanas was a common phenomenon which was also practiced during the contemporary period in northern India. The system developed from the notion that granting of land as a support to kingship could be more effective than performing sacrifices and that land was regarded as a mahādāna or ‘great gift’. These land grants had certain economic implications. Most of the granted lands included several villages as well as wastelands and pasture lands. The Uttar Barbil or Howraghat plates of king Balavarman refers to a plot of land granted together with vastu (homestead land), kedar ksetra (low land), sthala (upland), jala (water bodies), go-prachāra (pasture land) and avakara (probably mounds). The Nagaon Plates of the same king also records the grant of a land which included homestead land and other types of land similar to that described in the Uttar Barbil plates. It was thought of as the task of the grantee to take upon themselves the role of a pioneer in introducing agriculture. Thus granting of lands was also a sort of investment by the kings which aimed at improving the cultivation of fertile, irrigated lands.

5 Romilla Thapar, Early India, p. 291
6 Lines 40-43
and at the same time also to encourage the settlements of waste lands. The Brahmanas were usually learned people having knowledge of the seasons, irrigation and agricultural technology. They would have naturally acted as supervisors and guides for agrarian activities to the local people. This must have helped in creating pockets of prosperity at the local level even though the rulers did not always enjoy the revenue generated out of those granted lands.

Theoretically as such, the state was vested with the ownership of all the lands giving the right to the rulers to grant it to whomsoever they wanted. Thus according to the Uttar Barbil plates, king Balavarman granted a plot of land producing two thousand measures of paddy. The land was also exempted from all troubles associated with the tolls to be realized from hastibandha (entrapping of elephants), naukābandha (anchoring of boats), chaurrādharana (catching thieves and recovering stolen property), dandapāsa (police tax), uparikara (tax on temporary tenants) and utkhetanā (taxes payable on other accounts) and also from the grazing of elephants, horses, camels, cows, buffaloes, goats and sheep of the state. The Nagoan plates of the same king also record the grant of a plot of land yielding four thousand standard measures of paddy per year. The land granted by the king was also made free from the entry of such creators of unhappiness to the tenants as the queens, princes, noblemen, courtiers, male and female watchmen of the harem, collectors of taxes on hastibandhika and naukabandhika, chauraddharanika, dandapasika, collectors of minor taxes or taxes from temporary tenants (aupakarika), collectors of revenue (autkhetika), chhatravasa (probably the umbrella bearer), etc. In the Caratbari plates, king Ratnapala is recorded to have granted a plot of land in the Havvanga-vishaya yielding four thousand standard measures of paddy per year. The Gachtal plates of king Gopala also register the gift of a plot of land yielding annually eight thousand standard measures of dhānyā (paddy). The gifted land was granted along with its homesteads,
paddy fields, dry lands, ponds, grazing grounds, refuse lands, etc., and also freed from all troubles on account of the fastening of elephants, fastening of boats, searching for thieves, inflicting of punishment, tenant’s taxes, duties due to different causes and grazing of animals.\textsuperscript{7}

Thus the lands granted were rendered free “from all kinds of oppressions in water, land, etc.”\textsuperscript{8}

These “oppressions” were mainly in the nature of different types of taxes that were collected by the state through its royal agents. That collectors of revenue and also collectors of various other types of minor taxes were appointed by the state is known from the land charters of the period. There were even collectors of taxes on entrapping of elephants, anchoring of boats, catching thieves and recovering stolen property. This indicates that the state imposed a number of taxes on its subjects. However, the major portion of its income must have been derived from land. Waterways, pasturelands, refuse lands used by the people all fell within the arena of taxable resources of the state. Moreover, as can be gathered from the land grants of the period, even the animals which belonged to the state or royalty, like elephants, horses, camels, cows, goats, buffaloes and sheep seems to have a free run on the village grazing land. The numerous references to the \textit{rājas, rajaṅis, ranakas, rājanyakas, rājāputras, rājavallabhas}, etc. in the land grants show their empathy to the ruling group and their power and influence amongst the people of the countryside as the upholders and protectors of the institution of kingship. The fact that they were informed about the donation of plots of land by the king invariably suggests the numerous types of graded rights which they must have enjoyed on the land of the general peasantry. Naturally they must have used their oppressive power to claim such compulsory rights on the land of the common people.

\textsuperscript{7} Lines 33-38
\textsuperscript{8} D. Sarma ed, KS p223
For the efficient collection of taxes from land, the land must have been veritably classified and divided on account of its productivity. As mentioned above, the land was divided into various categories like homestead land, paddy fields, dry lands, uplands, grazing lands, refuse lands etc. The land grants also refer to the productive output from the paddy fields. The Nagoan plates of Balavarman records the grant of a plot of land yielding four thousand standard measures of dhānya, the Gachtal plates refers to grant of a plot of land producing eight thousand measures of paddy. The other grants of the period are similar in nature referring to the produce from the fields. Although no information can be gathered from the inscriptions relating to the revenue that must have been collected from the various categories of land, nevertheless, some sort of classification must have existed while collecting taxes from the various types of land. The unproductive land must have served as grazing lands for the animals.

Apart from the numerous taxes and tolls that were collected from the people, the state also imposed fines as penalty for not obeying royal orders. The Tezpur Rock inscription of the Sālastambha ruler Harjaravarman documents the penalty or a fine of five butikas (i.e. five budis = 100 cowrie-shells) imposed by the then Mahāsāmanta and Senādhyaaksha ruling the area, named Suchitta for deviating from royal orders. According to H.P Sastri, the deviation refers to an official decision to the effect that the boatmen should sail their boats not near the river bank (i.e. northern bank of the Brahmaputra) but only by the middle of the river.\(^9\) The settlement of the dispute clearly indicated the use of force by the state machinery against those who breached the law. This became imperative in view of the necessity sometimes to subjugate indigenous communities whose traditional land occupancy rights, water rights etc. were gradually encroached by the state authorities.

\(^9\) KS, p 184
The inscriptions of the period establish the fact that from the time of the Sālastambhas, the rulers tried to exercise intensive control over the various resources of the state which included, besides the agricultural lands, also forests and waterways. This had the twin benefit of improving the economy of the state, besides being a means of generating control over the regions of the state. The rulers now encouraged larger arable lands to be brought under cultivation. We find that from the time of the Sālastambhas, more and more lands on both sides of the Brahmaputra Valley were brought under wet rice cultivation. The epigraphs refer to the practice of making embankments and the use of improved irrigational techniques which is prerequisite for cultivation of wet rice. This was undoubtedly done with the aid of the Brahmanas who were granted vast tracts of lands, especially in the rural pockets to improve the agricultural output in those areas. The Parbatiya grant indicates a high embankment and the tank of Dhavala as two of the boundaries of the donated land in the village of Haposagrama.\textsuperscript{10} The Nowgong copper plate grant refers to \textit{Koppa} which may be the prakritised form of \textit{Kupa} or a well\textsuperscript{11} Lines It also refers to a tank and ponds as forming the boundary of the donated land.\textsuperscript{11} These must have facilitated the irrigation of the fields. All these indirectly aimed at the extension of agrarian rural settlements which were in the nature of fairly small groupings of human settlements with place names ending with the suffix \textit{pataka} or \textit{bhumi} or grāma, indicating their presence as productive units.\textsuperscript{12} These villages or localities within the village were further brought under the bigger territorial divisions called the \textit{vishayas}. In the Uttar Barbil plates, king Balavarman granted a plot of land taken out of Bappadevapataka situated in the Varasapattana \textit{vishaya}. King Ratnapala’s grant of a

\textsuperscript{10} Lines-48-51
\textsuperscript{11} Lines-47-49
\textsuperscript{12} M.Momin, ‘Urbanization in the Brahmaputra Valley’, Cited in Jai Prakash Singh, Gautam Sengupta ed., \textit{Archaeology of North-Eastern India}, p.267
plot of land was situated in Lavukuti-kshetra together with a portion taken out of Vamadevapataka situated in the Trayodasa-grama-vishaya.

It is against this backdrop of the importance of the native rural folk and their direct relation to the scheme of agrarian affairs, that the whole process of urbanization gradually emerged. Agriculture which formed the backbone of the economy of the state must have supplemented the life in the city. This must have helped in the emergence and maintenance of the urban cities and puras. The Tezpur rock inscription of Harjjaravarman (line 1) refers to Hadappesvara as a pura. However, the Hayunthal plates of the same king and in the Tezpur Copper plates of Vanamala, his successor, Haruppesvara, the royal capital has been referred to as a skāndhavara. Obviously, the two were used as interchangeable terms during the period. The emergence of the region as a political and military camp must have corresponded to its rise as a pura or urban city. The urbanization of the region was also associated with the emergence of the region as a religious centre. By renovating the temple of Hetukasulin, and endowing it with villages, elephants and vesyas, Vanamala developed the region around the temple as a pilgrimage centre, ultimately giving rise to an urban centre with establishments of shops, rest houses and other amenities. This transformation of local cult spots into ceremonial centres may also have taken place in the temple of Mahagauri Kamesvara, temples of Da-Parbariya region etc. The Nagaon Plates of Balavarman refers to the kataka of Hadappesvara (srimiti Hadappesvara - namani katake – kritavasati, line29). If the term kataka denotes a village, then the inscription may be taken to describe a grāma ultimately growing into a pura centering a religious shrine as one of the most famous cities of ancient Assam.

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13 Tezpur Copper Plate, Parbatiya Copper Plate, verse 24
14 Tezpur Copper Plate Incription, lines 11-13, Parbatiya Copper Plate Incription, lines 39-41
15 Nirode Barua, Early Assam, p 260
16 Strabo, xv.1.10, cited in H.K borpujari, CHA, Vol I, p244
The inscriptions of Vanamalavarman specifically mention the grant of villages for the maintenance of the temple of Hetukasulin. This might presumably mean that the revenue and other products occurring from the villages granted were attached to the temple and was under the management of a committee of the Brahmanas or under someone specially appointed by the king for the purpose. In the land grants of the period found elsewhere, like the Guakuchi grant of Indrapala, we come across the expression *Kamesvarayorddevasatkasasanapandaribhumyos-simni* (ll.60-1). This shows that the demarcated area thus indicated was the property of the deities Kamesvara-Siva and his wife Uma, which must have been managed by the chief priest or the temple authority. These clearly reveal how the line of corporate activity even extended to the religious institutions in ancient times.

The urban life of Hadappesvara is well highlighted in the Parbatiya Copper Plate inscription of Vanamalavarman – “The illustrious (city of) Hadappesvara…..is inhabited by fully contented people of all the *varnas* and all the *āśramas* … the home of innumerable good soldiers, virtuous and learned men, the royal roads of which (city) are crowded by the great kings, seated on beautiful elephants, horses and palanquins, engaged in the act of coming and going back for the purpose of serving (or saluting) the Lord of the earth (i.e. Vanamala) which has the whole of it completely filled up by the armies consisting of innumerable elephants, horses and foot soldiers, and which is situated on the bank of the river Lauhitya …"¹⁷ Hadappesvara was thus basically a political centre largely peopled by political and military figures. It stood on the banks of the Lauhitya and was apparently the centre of the surrounding countryside. Being a capital city, its economic splendour was, however, more magnificent. We

¹⁷ M.M Sarma, *IAA*, pp.122-3
also find evidences of *mahā-rājamārga* (royal road) in the city of Hadappesvara.\(^{18}\) Thus the city being situated on the bank of the river Lauhitya and connected by highways naturally must have helped in the growth of a market centre. Merchants and traders must have made their way to the capital city to sell their goods with carts full of wares. Moreover Hadappesvara was strategically located, being in close proximity to the Sadiya region and the Himalayan foothills on the north-east, the Patkai range of hills on the south-east and having easy access to Pragjyotishpura which was already an established urban centre from the time of the Varmans.\(^{19}\) Such contacts with the neighbouring areas and local rural exchange centres ushered in the emergence and establishment of Hadappesvara as an urban exchange centre (*hātta*). The products brought and sold in the *hātta* consisted mostly of the locally produced agricultural and non-agricultural goods. Of them, rice must have been the staple food of the land as the cultivation of rice constituted one of the chief economic pursuits of the people. Land itself was measured according to *drona*, i.e., the measure or unit of measurement of the paddy produced, referring to the production capacity of the land. It is quite probable that in the land of Assam that witnessed heavy rainfall and was furrowed by rivers and canals, people paid more attention to the cultivation of paddy than other kinds of Rabi crops like pulses, wheat, barley etc. This might also be one of the reasons why we find no mention of these cereals in the early epigraphs of the period. Apart from rice, vegetables and fruits may have formed other items of sale in the market. The Bargaon grant records the gift of a lavukutikshetra, which according to Hoernle was “a field with clusters of gourds.”\(^{20}\) The epigraphs also refer to *jambu* (Eugenia jambalana), *sripalavrikshah* (fig tree),

\(^{18}\) Tezpur Grant, Lines lines 1-4
\(^{20}\) K.S, p118
suvarnadaruvrikshahoh (sonaru tree), amravrikshah (mango tree) and jativrikshah.\textsuperscript{21} Plums\textsuperscript{22} and black-berry trees\textsuperscript{23} must also have been found in abundance. Reference to the betel-vines and the areca palm trees as extensively growing in the country is also mentioned in the Nagaon grant of Balavarman.\textsuperscript{24}

Fishing must have constituted another important economic activity of the people. The reference to the Kaivarttas in the Tezpur Rock inscription indicates the presence of a fishing community who earned their living by catching fish in the river. However, their attachment to cultivable land, and the fact that all social groups, except perhaps the Brahmanas, caught fish from rivers, streams, ponds, etc., cannot not be overlooked.

Apart from the agricultural products the forests products also played an important role in the economic life of the area. The grant of Balavarman (v.9) cites large belts of forests (vana) in the capital city of Haduppesvara. The products of the forests were undoubtedly used for making many craft items. Cane and bamboo working may have been a major profession of the people as forests of Assam are full of canes and bamboos. Furniture of cane and bamboo, bamboo fences, even beds, utensils, mats etc., made of bamboo were possibly not unknown. Bamboo must have also supplied for the construction of houses especially for the poorer class of the society. Even today bamboo is used for construction purposes. The reference to bamboo bushes occurs in the Parbatiya copper plates of Vanamalavarman.\textsuperscript{25} The Bargaon grant of Ratnapala, whose land grant falls within the present Tezpur region, refers to the cane trees, the Kasimbala tree, the

\textsuperscript{21} Nagaon grant, lines 47-9  
\textsuperscript{22} Bargaon grant of Ratnapala, lines 65-72  
\textsuperscript{23} Uttar Barbil plates of Balavarman,lines 52-54  
\textsuperscript{24} Verse5  
\textsuperscript{25} Lines 48-51
salmali or the silk-cotton trees. The Kadam, sonaru, palasa, and banyan trees also adorned the forests of Assam. The epigraphs also refer to the black sandal wood trees and the agaru trees that adorn the forests adjoining the city of Haduppesvara. The agaru or aloe wood is a very valuable product which must have been used as incense and also for perfumes. In the list of aromatics produced in Assam, we should also include the musk produced by the musk deer of Assam. The Nagaon grant of Balavarman makes reference to Kailāsa-katāka-mrigamad (verse2). This seems to indicate the presence of musk deer in the forests of the region. Ivory carving may also have been practiced in the region as we find numerous references to elephants in the inscriptions of the period. Elephants and horses were also recruited in the military and were generally regarded as ideal for the battle ground.

Apart from cane, bamboo and ivory work, people must have practiced weaving, carpentry, wood craft and pottery making. The reference to the salmala (silk-cotton tree), alternatively also called in the epigraphs as kasimbalā tree, indicates that it provided the raw material on which the silk worms fed to produce the silk which was used for weaving cloth. Assam was also the home of the two best qualities of silk, viz., dukula and patrona as mentioned by Kautilya. Again in the Harshacharita, we find that Bhaskarvarman sent to Harsha silken towels (kshaumani). From these, it can be presumed that from the time of Bhaskarvarman the weavers of Assam wove three varieties of silk cloth – dukula, patrona and kshaumani, distinguished by their colour, texture and materiaLines. Although no epigraphic records are available which refers to silk clothes or items during the Sālastambha rule, nevertheless, its use cannot be ruled out. Even during the Pala period we find reference to dukula in the Bargaon

26 Lines65-72
27 Uttar Barbil plates of Balavarman, lines 52-54
28 Parbatiya plates of Vanamalavarman, K.S.p. 123; Tezpur copper plates of Vanamalavarman, lines 6-7
29 Tezpur plates of Vanamala, lines 1-4
30 *ArthaSastra*,ii.11.102-13
grant of Ratnapala which proves the continuous use of silken cloth. The Gachtal copper plates mention broad white umbrellas which undoubtedly must have been woven of silk. Likewise, people must have also known the art of dyeing clothes. Wood craft must have been another important industry in the region. The city of Haddapesvara being situated near the river Lauhitya, boat making must have been a major profession. The description of the artistically carved, painted and decorated boat in the grant of Vanamala, testifies to the high proficiency earned by the early wood workers in their craft. Gold industry must have also developed in the region and goldsmiths and jewelers’ shops must have been located in the rich, urban localities to cater to the needs of certain sections of the society. Haduppesvara being the seat of the royalty, ornaments and jewellery must have been very much in demand by the royal ladies, their hosts of attendants, courtesans and women in ordinary circumstances. Even boats were highly ornamented and designed as recorded in the inscriptions of Vanamala. According to the Tezpur grant, king Vanamala rebuilt the golden temple of Hetukasulin at Haduppesvara. The inscriptions of Vanamala also refer to the water of the river Lauhitya as being polluted with the mud of gold, which comes from the huge gold-rock of the Mount Kailasa. This implies that the water of the river Lauhitya contained gold dust. That the royal authority took measures to procure it by engaging groups of people cannot altogether be ruled out. Gold was found in abundance till later times in the rivers of Assam, namely, Subansiri, Dikhau, Jaglo, Dihing, Bharali and Dhansiri.

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31 Plate ii, lines38  
32 verse14  
33 Tezpur Copper Plate Inscription, lines14-20, Parbatiya Copper Plate Inscription, lines 33-47  
34 M.M. Sarma, IAA, p 116
During the Ahom period, gold washing was practiced by a class of people known as the Sonowals. From these, it appears that the practice was an ancient economic pursuit.\(^{35}\)

Pottery making must have been another important activity of the people. The specimens of terracotta figurines and pottery discovered from the Da-Parbatiya region of Tezpur with beautifully carved designs on them speaks highly of the skilled expertise of the potter community of the region. The pottery discovered so far is mostly utilitarian in nature and must have been used by the people of the city in their daily life.

Thus the market places must have displayed a wide variety of wares. These may have included rice, fish, agricultural goods like fruits and vegetables, betel leaf and nuts, black aloe wood, perfumes, as well as pottery vessels, wood crafted items etc. Other items must have been clothes, ornaments, head-dresses, and other items displayed by the sculptures of the period. In the 17\(^{th}\) century, locally non-available items such as salt, salt-petre, sulphur and other articles were traded at the Assam Chauk from traders of Bengal with gold, musk, agar, pepper and silk.\(^ {36}\) Similarly, the merchants of Lhassa carried on trade with Assam “…conveying bullions to the amount of one lakh of rupees, and a considerable quantity of rock-salt, for sale to the Assamese merchants; the latter brought rice, which was imported into Tibet from Assam in large quantities, Assam silk, iron lac, otter skins, buffalo horns, pearls, etc”.\(^ {37}\) This trade links must have been a continuation of the earlier times which even continued down to the turn of the twentieth century. As late as the nineteenth century, iron was also imported from the surrounding Khasi and Naga hills in the shape of hoes by the people of the Brahmaputra Valley for agricultural purpose and


\(^{36}\) E. Gait, *AHA*, p.274

by boat-builders for use as clamps.\textsuperscript{38} As has already been stated before, Haduppesvara was an important exchange centre (hatta) having close connections with the surrounding hills and plains and having easy access to the already flourishing urban centre of Pragjyotishpura. Haduppesvara being located close to the river Lauhitya, it must have easily facilitated the rise of maritime trade and commerce. The traders must have enjoyed unhindered movement in the city of Haduppesvara. This can be inferred from the fact that the Kaivarttas who resided alongside Nakkajosa, probably a rural area adjoining the capital city were bound to pay fines in cowries if they transgressed the boundaries earmarked for the movement of boats\textsuperscript{39} which were undoubtedly under state protection. Again the patronage extended to traders is borne out by the specific mention in the Hayunthal grant of vaniks or merchants who were accorded a high status along with rajaputras at the coronation ceremony of king Harjjaravarman.\textsuperscript{40} Very little is known about the medium of exchange that must have existed. Trade must have been largely carried out through barter. The use of cowries which must have been used for small day to day transactions cannot also be ruled out. The cowrie shells must have facilitated market trading in the capital city and the king also probably collected some taxes, and levied fines in the form of these cowrie shells.\textsuperscript{41} The Tezpur Rock inscription mentions about a fine which consisted of hundred cowries shells. Cowrie shells could also have provided for the payment by the kings for services rendered to the royalty or for public works and also for dispensing to charity.\textsuperscript{42} The Sālastambha rulers were also known to have issued copper coins by the ninth century C.E. Heaps of coins have been found in and around the region of Tezpur. The issue of coins would have facilitated the operation of weekly markets, and annual fairs, in which the traders brought products from the interior for

\textsuperscript{38}Ibid., p.273
\textsuperscript{39} Tezpur Rock Inscription, Lines7-9
\textsuperscript{40} verses 13-14
\textsuperscript{41} Nicholas Rhodes and S.K. Bose, \textit{Coinage of Assam}, Vol I, p.63
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., Vol I, p.63
ultimate export to other parts of the country. The coins probably fulfilled the same purpose as that of the cowries in the economic life of the region except perhaps the fact that coins were easier to handle than the cowrie shells. Also, while cowries were the most suitable medium of exchange for the common people for day-to-day transactions, metallic coins were probably used for slightly larger transactions. A trader dealing in trade outside Assam would not find it very convenient to move from place to place carrying a huge amount of cowrie shells. In such circumstances, weighing copper coins to determine the equivalent value of huge quantities of cowries and thereafter making payment was probably more convenient to the traders at that time.\textsuperscript{43} Until extensive excavations are carried out in Tezpur and its periphery, very little can be known regarding the frequency of the use of the coins and its distribution pattern. Moreover, because of the nature of the production prevailing in the Brahmaputra Valley, the use of metallic currency must have been very limited. However with the end of the Sālastambha dynasty, no coins belonging to the Pala rulers have been found in Assam. Probably, the rulers of the Pala dynasty refused to honour the coins for payment of taxes or may be as a result of the transactions of these coins, the trading class gradually became too powerful for the rulers to provide countenance, as a result of which issue of coins were probably discontinued.\textsuperscript{44}

The importance of the Tezpur region as an urban and religious centre also had some important economic implications. The archaeological remains like sculptures and architectural components throw light on the skilled expertise of a group of people who were patronized by the state to build huge temples and also palatial buildings. The Nagaon grant of Balavarman (v.14) refers to rows of \textit{prasādas} with many rooms having pictures in them. The remains, mostly temple ruins, found in the region during the period are generally of stone and bricks. Thus their

\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Ibid.}, Vol I, p.42
\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Ibid.}, Vol I, p.64
existence indicates the presence of not only masons, but also brick makers in the city. The very
great numbers of sculptures found in and around the region also depict vigorous economic
activity by group of artisans and sculptors who were most probably organized and functioned
under royal patronage. It is also noteworthy that local materials were overwhelmingly used for
structural activities. The sculptures it is seen are mostly made of sandstone, granite and gneiss,
which are locally available. Towards the twelfth century, we also find black basalt being used in
the sculptures of the period. However, the black basalt stone which could be intricately carved
was not available in Assam and must have been imported from the Rajmahal Hill of Bihar.45

In early times there was continuous intercourse between Assam and the rest of India. This
is evident from the sculptural remains found in the region. The display of all the canonical
features as is found in the sculptures produced in other regions of India, especially Bihar and
Orissa is also noticed in the sculptures found in the region of Tezpur. “The artists who fashioned
the sculptures were well acquainted with the ancient silpasastras like the Vishnudharmottara
Purana, which in the chapter titled Pratima Lakshana, lays down rules for making sculptures of
deities, demigods as well as those of ordinary people”.46 This holds true to all the pre-Ahom
sculptures found in Assam. That from the middle of the 4th century C.E. Assam had contact with
the Gangetic valley; the core of the Gupta Empire is supported by the archaeological remains
found in the Da-Parbatiya region of Tezpur. The Da-Parbatiya door frame reveals definite
features typical of the Gupta temple and plastic art. In the Da-Parbatiya door frame, the bottom
sections consisted of the figures of the river Goddesses and their attendants. This is a common
feature which is seen in a number of Gupta temples, including the Parvati temple at Nachna
Kuthara which is assigned to the early fifth century. Even the figures at the door frame display

45 R.D. Choudhury, *Catalogue of Stone Sculptures of Assam State Museum*, pp.xii-xiv
46 P.Das, *History and Archaeology of North-East India*, p.99
distinct traces of Gupta art. This sculptural evidence may even be suggestive of trade intercourse that might have taken place between the two regions. During the Pala period, we find that most of the sculptures are intricately carved in high relief and even the pedestals are decorated as the rest of the sculptural surface. This was possible because of the use of the fine grained *kasauti patthara* or the Black Basalt stone. As mentioned earlier, this stone is not common in Assam and was quarried from the Rajmahal Hill in the Santhal Paragana and Kharagpur in Monghyr, both situated in the state of Bihar.\(^47\) This reveals that Assam including the Tezpur region had a good trade relation with the Ganga Valley. It may also be possible that besides the trader and merchant communities who were regularly engaged in trade activities, even artisans and craftsmen might have travelled from those regions and settled in the urban centre of ancient Tezpur. This must have led to proliferation of art and craft activities, depicting typical north Indian elements in the artistic work of the period.

In the Pashupatinath Temple of inscription of king Jayadeva II of Nepal (737 C.E.), we find the king referring to his marriage with Rajyamati, who was the daughter of Harshadeva, ‘born in the royal family descended from Bhagadatta’. This Harshadeva was none other than Harshavarman of the Sālastambha dynasty.\(^48\) This shows that Assam had matrimonial alliance with Nepal during the ancient period. Such royal marriages would have probably been followed by trade and diplomatic relations. In the same inscription, Harshadeva is mentioned as ‘the lord of Gauda, Odra, Kalinga and Kosala.’\(^49\) Although very little importance can be attached to this statement due to the lack of reliable evidences, nevertheless it is important in that it suggests that Assam had political and maybe trade relations also with these areas. Assam’s relation with the

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\(^{47}\) R.D. Bannerjee ed., *Eastern Indian School of Mediaeval Sculpture*, p3  
\(^{49}\) *Epigraphica Indica*, p.25ff
distant southern region of India can be traced from the Gachtal Coppr plate of Gopala. It was recorded by the inscription that the mother of Gopala was a Rashtrakuta princess whose name was Rajyadevi. Thus Indrapala, Gopala’s father married into the Rashtrakuta family which is indicative of trade and cultural links of Assam with the rest of India.

Trade with Bengal must have taken place via the river Brahmaputra and Assam undoubtedly must have maintained her contact with the rest of the country through Bengal. Apart from salt which was procured from Bengal, the rulers must also have imported cowries from Bengal. Cowries which served as an important medium of exchange in Assam during ancient times were not locally available. Such cowries came from the Maldives Island and Assam had to import it through Bengal. In exchange, Assam probably exported some of her local products, indicating a positive balance of trade with Bengal. Surplus cowries generated by the trade with Bengal could have been exported to the Yunnan region of China, in exchange for silks and other goods. Such trade could have been financed either by the king himself or by rich traders.

The establishment of the capital city at Haduppesvara by the Salatambhas also led to the re-organizing and regularizing of the trade relation with Tibet, Bhutan and the Yunnan province of South-western China. From the Hayunthal Copper Plates of Harjharavarman, we come to know that at his coronation ceremony, the king was sprinkled with holy water contained in a silver pitcher by the merchants who came to pay their obeisance to the king. Since no silver mines have been found in Assam, so the silver with which the pitcher was made must have been imported, most probably from the Yunnan province of China. The epigraphs also mention about the camara deer (yak) who roamed in the forests of the region and we find reference to it in

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connection with the *devadasis* who used to fan the idol of Hatappesvara with camaras (yak tails). The yaks are generally found in the mountainous region and therefore it may suggest trade relation that took place with Bhutan and Tibet. According to N. Rhodes and S.K. Bose, this external trade probably took place along four routes; east to south-east China; north to Tibet through Bhutan; south to Chittagong and the sea route to South-East Asia and to China; and west to ‘India Proper’. Numerous mountain passes or duars still exist between Assam and Tibet through Bhutan. During the British period, regular fairs were conducted at Udalguri and Charduar areas where the Bhutanese people came to trade with their goods. These areas are on the confines of the region of Tezpur and trade with Bhutan must have been a regular feature along these duars ever since the rule of the Sālastambhas. In context with the trade with Tibet, one can note that the great Buddhist saint Padma Sambhava visited both Tawang and the Bhutanese villages of Paro and Bumthang during the latter part of the 8th century, in order to drive away evil spirits and promote Buddhism. The Buddhist saint undoubtedly must have made his way by following earlier existing trade routes. Contact with Tibet and Bhutan was nearly impossible without passing through Assam and it is most likely that by the 8th century these north-south trade routes must have been controlled by Kāmarūpa at the southern end. The traditional goods exported from Tibet included horses, wool, musk, gold, salt and yak-tails and these goods were in high demand in Assam during the rule of the Sālastambha dynasty. The route to Tibet and China must have existed from a very early period. As S.K. Chatterji as pointed out, communication between China and India (Assam) through the wild mountainous region between the two countries was exceedingly difficult, being two month’s march through

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53 Tezpur grant of Vanamalavarman, Parbatiya grant of Vanamalavarman
pestilential jungles and high mountains, … but it nevertheless did exist and for centuries before the days of both Hiuen Tsang and Bhaskarvarman.56

Although in early Assam, cowries fulfilled the purpose of economic transaction in the markets, the issue of copper coins during the period of the Sālastambha rulers must have been associated, either with a reduction in the supply of cowrie shells, or an increase in the volume of market trading.57 There was a great demand for cowrie shells in South-Western China, and particularly in the Yunnan province and following a shortage of supply from the China coast they were being imported from India. This additional demand may have depleted the supply of cowries into Assam, as a result of which the Sālastambha rulers felt the need to issue copper coins in Assam. However, no copper mines are known to have existed in Assam although the Bargaon grant of Ratnapala refers to the existence of copper mines in the region. The metal for striking the coins therefore, may have been imported from the Singhbhum mines in Bihar.58 Interestingly, a few pieces of coins bearing the letter ‘Ta’ belonging to Tyagasimha had distinct traces of bronze alloy in it. It appears thus that at some later stage the Sālastambha rulers changed the coins from a copper to a bronze alloy. The presence of tin in the coins suggests that they might have come via the Assam-Burma (Myanmar) trade route, possibly passing through Manipur from China. The Assam-Burma trade route has also been referred to in the ‘Kia tan’ written during the 8th century C.E.59 Besides land routes, the use of sea-route cannot also be ignored for we find Bhaskarvarman of Assam willing to escort Hiuen-Tsang to China if he preffered to use the southern sea-route to return to his country.60

56 S.K Chatterjee, Kirata-Jana-Krti,1951,p194
57 Nicholas Rhodes and S.K. Bose, Coinage of Assam, Vol I, p.33ff
58 Ibid., p.34
59 Ibid. p.18,cited in Ibid, p.37,
60 Ibid., p.37,P.C Choudhury, The History of Civilization of the People of Assam to the Twelfth Century A.D ,p.354
Thus, in the early period, the Tezpur region which was the headquarters of the Salstambhas and later during the Pala rulers, witnessed vigorous economic activity. Being the capital city, it was also the administrative centre of the kingdom. As recorded in the inscriptions, the city was situated near the river Lauhitya and well connected by highways. The Brahmaputra and also its tributaries was as such the lifeline of ancient Assam, providing an accessible means of communication. The reference to the royal navy in the Tezpur Rock inscription implies that it was stationed somewhere close to the river Brahmaputra, near the Da-Parbatiya region, which was also likely to be the place where the king and the court had their residence. The capital city being well connected by land and water, therefore, became an important urban and exchange centre where merchants and traders flocked with their wares and carried away local products to other parts of the country and as well as to the rest of Assam. In this context, the circulation of cowries and copper currency as a medium of exchange was noteworthy. Again, most of the architectural remains of the period have been found close to the river. Even the land grants refer to tanks, ponds and waterways suggesting the riverine character of the settlements. This riverine nature of settlement proves the importance of agriculture which was the basis of subsistence of the people of the region. Besides agriculture, people practicing different professions also settled in the urban city of Haduppesvara to cater to the needs of the royalty, the nobility and the wealthy class of people. Thus, the archaeological remains prove the existence of masons, stone-carvers, metal workers, potters, jewelers, merchants, fishing community, people who minted coins, professional poets, scholars and also engravers and composers.

The flourishing economy of the region brought about by the regulation of the agricultural economy by the state as well as by the development of industry and trade, brought beneficial
results not only to the rulers but also to the society at large. However, it is also true that the urban centres of Assam imbibed traits of rural character. They were fairly similar to the rural settlements in their general outlook, being surrounded by the agricultural lands of the local inhabitants, embankments, tanks and ponds. Although trade and commerce existed, agriculture was the chief source of livelihood of the people. Basically villages seemed to be a self-sufficient unit, catering to the needs of the royalty. Mostly, the urban centres suggest that they were the residences and seats of power of the reigning monarchs.