Chapter VI

CONCLUSION

The foregoing chapters indicate continuous growth of human habitation in the ancient city of Sonitpur. The archaeological remains found in the region form the focal point of the discussions of the earlier chapters.

The earliest structural remains at Da-Parbatiya date back to the 4th-5th century C.E. During this time Prāgjyotisa was ruled by the Varmans and the region of Tezpur must have been under a minor chief owing allegiance to the kings of the Varman dynasty. However, E.A Gait refers to a ruler named Nagasankar or Nagakhya, who flourished towards the end of the 4th century at Pratapgarh near Biswanath.\(^1\) He is credited with the building of the temple of Nagasankar which still stands at Jamuguri. Thus it is most likely that before Sālastambha made modern Tezpur the capital of his newly founded dynasty, the region may have been under the influence of the rulers of the Sankar dynasty at least for some period of time. But the Da-Parbatiya remains show clear traits of Gupta art. From the Allahabad Prasathi it has become clear that Prāgjyotisa and Davaka were the frontier kingdoms of the Guptas (\textit{pratyanta-nripati}). The inscriptions also mentions that the frontier kings fully gratified the imperial commands of the Gupta emperor by giving all kinds of taxes and obeying his orders and coming to perform obeisance.\(^2\) Interestingly, the Varman ruler Pusyavarman, even named his son and daughter-in-law Samudravarman and

\(^1\) E.Gait, \textit{AHA}, p.17
\(^2\) \textit{sarva-kara-dana-jnakarana-pranāma-gamana-paritoshita-prachanda-sasana}, Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum, iii, p.8; cited in \textit{CHA}, vol.1,p.97
Dattadevi respectively after the name of the Gupta emperor Samudragupta and his queen Dattadevi. This reveals the connection of the Varman dynasty with the Guptas and most likely also the exchange of artistic traits from northern India to early Assam. As such some parts of the region of Tezpur must have formed a part of the kingdom of Prāgjyotisa under the Varmans, if not the whole of it, if the traditional account of the kings of the Sankar dynasty ruling at Lauhityapur is to be believed.

The rule of the Varmans ended with the death of Bhaskaravarman and Sālastambha founded a new dynasty with its capital at Haduppesvara in the modern Tezpur region. From the evidence of the Life and the Nidhanpur grant it is known that Bhaskaravarman made his new base at Karnasuvarna. The Nidhanpur grant was issued from Karnasuvarna itself which has been referred to as a “skandavara” which may mean a military camp or even a capital city wherein the king is said to have resided along with his admirals, elephant corps, cavalry and infantry. Even the Life mentions that the king of Kāmarūpa proceeded to meet the king of Kanauj, Harshavardhana with an army consisting of 20,000 elephants and sailed down the river Brahmaputra and up the Ganges to Kalanjala in a fleet numbering 30,000 ships. This shows that the king left his kingdom unprotected by leaving with all his forces. Hiuen Trang also mentions that Bhaskarvarman after reaching Kalanjala accompanied Harsha to Kanauj and Prayaga and attended the religious ceremonies conducted by Harsha. The absence of the king for such a long period of time from his own kingdom must have its toll on the administration of the country and anarchy may have reigned supreme. This might have given the local chiefs or the governors of the

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1 S.Beal, translation, The Life of Hiuen Tsiang by Shaman Hwii Li, Book V, pp 172ff
2 KS,p.20ff
frontier areas, who had their support base in their own locality, the opportunity to revolt. Sālastambha might have been one such powerful governor ruling in the frontier area of the modern Tezpur region who taking advantage of the situation must have fulfilled his royal ambitions.

The exact reason for the shifting of the capital from Pragjyotishpur to Haduppesvara is not known. Probably the ruler wanted to secure his position from any rival claimants. And if the view that Sālastambha was acting as the governor of this frontier area may be taken to be correct, then there would be no better place than Haduppesvara to make it his political base where he had already enjoyed the allegiance of his people. The political enmity between Kāmarūpa and Gauda from the time of the Varman dynasty of Pusyavarman might also have been another eminent factor for the transfer of capital to a safer distance further upstream on the north bank.

The geographical features of Hadupesvara with its rising hillocks and its proximity with the river Brahmaputra made Hadupesvara the most suitable administrative centre of the Sālastambhas along with forming a natural obstruction for any intrusion. This was probably the reason why the Pala rulers till the time of Ratnapala favoured it as their seat of government. Though Ratnapala transferred his capital to Durjaya, his grandson, Gopala later made Hadapyaka (modern Tezpur) his seat of power, probably because of its suitability and effectiveness as an administrative centre. In this geographical background, the fortifications that were undertaken by the Sālastambha rulers in their personal capacity further provided for the security of the capital city and prepared the ground for a stable economy and social base with a strong political setup which continued till the end of Pala
rule. The Tezpur Rock Inscription refers to Hadupesvara as *pura* (fortified town). The Parbatia Plates also describe the innumerable soldiers, horses and elephants that thronged the capital city. Hadupesvara was situated at a central location, which made administering and controlling the kingdom much effective for the rulers. It enjoyed the advantage of easy accessibility with the distant Sadiya region and the Himalayan foothills in the north-east and the Patkai range of hills on the south-east. It could equally foster a good connecting network both by land and the river with the earlier established political centre of Prāģjyotisa, which had already grown to become an important trade and exchange centre from the time of the Varman dynasty. The control of the trade routes was vital for the stability of the government and the prosperity of the kingdom and the physical features of the region along with the centrally located seat of government proved advantageous for the rulers to do so. The *Mahadvaradhipati* or the governor of the passes was entrusted with guarding the *duars* or the passes of the hills along with maintaining a cordial relation with the hill people.⁶ Epigraphs testify to the amiable relation of the hill tribes with the plains and King Harjjaravarman was even approached by the rulers of the hilly regions for settling their disputes. The *duars* were also the life-line of trade and interchange of goods and items of the hills with the plains. The present Udalguri and Charduar areas on the confines of Tezpur were centres of exchange during the Ahom and the British period where tribesmen with their goods bartered with the people of the plains. This practice undoubtedly must have been a continuation from the pre-Ahom times. Inland trade activities must have taken place along the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries. Hadupesvara, being located on the banks of the river Brahmaputra must have evolved into

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⁶ Hayunthal Grant, *K.S*, pp.92-93
a major commercial hub. It played the significant role of the nodal centre of exchange of goods between the rural areas situated near the capital city with those of the far-flung regions of the state and outside it.

The remains found in the region throughout the period of study do not indicate the existence of any form of popular government by the people. State functioned under the monarchical system of government and the king had the absolute authority over all affairs. However, numerous officers were appointed to look after various aspects of the administrative setup. The feudal lords also functioned as an important pillar of the state administration assisting the ruler in times of need with necessary requisitions. None the less, an interesting feature that comes to light from the Tezpur Rock Inscription is that it was issued in the capital city itself, not by the king Harjjaravarman but by an officer called Sri Suchitta who was a Mahasamanta and the Senadhyaksha at the same time. All other land grants of the period were otherwise issued by the king or the crown prince. This definitely suggests limited amount of distribution of power among the functionaries of the state by the king. The numerous references to the rājās, rajañīs, ranakas, rājanyakas, rājāputras, rājavallabhas, etc. in the land grants whereby they were informed about the donated piece of land show their power and authority in the countryside where they represented the royalty and must have enjoined the various amenities enjoined with it. Distribution of power amongst the different ranks of the state functionaries by the ruler must have led to the disbursement of effective administrative control over the remote and far-flung regions of the state, besides strengthening the political fabric of the state with
mutual trust and dependence between the ruler and his state functionaries; so vital for the continuation of smooth governance.

Donation of land by the rulers was a common feature found in the region, of which Tezpur was a part. In fact, all the beneficiaries of the royal grants were supported by land, which was in the nature of agricultural land, pasture land, wasteland, waterways etc. Most of the land grants of the period were granted to the Brahmanas who incidentally were settled amidst the local population for the spread of Aryanisation, along with having the responsibility of generating economic prosperity in the newly settled areas. The Brahmanas were also the die-hard supporters of the institution of kingship and by their theory of divine origin of the rulers; they might have been successful in generating reverence and fear among the common people for the royalty. Thus, the land grants of the major dynasties that ruled ancient Assam, viz., the Varman dynasty, the Sālastambha dynasty and the Pala dynasty trace their lineage from the legendary king Naraka of the Bhauma Naraka dynasty who was of divine origin, being the son of Vishnu and Mother Earth.  

Although the Brahmanas were the most significant land holding class in the society, the beneficiaries of large plots of land which at times included many villages, the society was by and large fairly egalitarian. Ancient Assam did not seem to follow the extreme nature of casteism as was the case in many places of contemporary northern India. Sanskritization of the land must have been a slow phenomenon which was carried out by the systematic settlement of the Brahmanas, (who were generally of northern Indian

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7 KS, pp 1529(verse 2);182 (verse 3); 222 (verse 1-3)
origin), amidst the local tribes and gentries of the land. Being fewer in population and being made to settle down amongst the common people having their own distinctive customs and practices, the Brahmans had to make certain adjustments and make way for some laxity in the social norms to be followed. Moreover in ancient Assam land holdings were not restricted to the Brahmanas. The epigraphs proves that many categories of people had their own land holdings like the Kaivarttas, the weavers, the potters, who in the traditional Hindu social hierarchy would be ranked at the bottom of the social strata. Since economy plays a determining factor in the society, the condition of the native inhabitants being fairly prosperous made it difficult for the Brahmanas to bring them totally under the fold of the varna-jati system. Even the Brahmanas did not stick to their traditional duties of performing religious functions and initiating in sacrifices. They held administrative posts and were also charioteers and archers by profession.8

Urban life in the city was generally supported by the villages which lay on both the banks of the river as the land grants suggest where most of the agricultural land lay. Agriculture was the main economic pursuit of the people. As mentioned above, even those people practicing different occupations had their own cultivable lands. The riverine nature of the settlements suggests that cultivation of rice was predominant in the region. The channels of the river Lauhitya must have irrigated the fields and made it most suitable for the cultivation of rice. Besides, the numerous references to water bodies in the inscriptions suggest the supply of water to the fields. Almost all the inscriptions refer to the measure of

8 N. Lahiri, Pre-Ahom Assam, p 137
paddy that was cultivated in the fields. Rice still continues to be the staple food of the state. However, a number of vegetables, fruits and pulses were also cultivated by the people.

The archeological remains throw important light on the various occupations that were carried on by the common people in early times. The special patronage given to traders (vaniks) proves that trade played an eminent role in the economic scenario of the state.\(^9\) Trade and cultural contacts of early Assam with the rest of the country and also with China, Tibet and Bhutan is fairly conclusive on the basis of the inscriptive evidences. Inland trade must have been carried out mostly by the process of barter which was a predominant feature till the advent of the British in Assam. The Sālastambha rulers, however, issued coins but the frequency of their use and distribution must have been limited. No coins belonging to the Pala rulers have been found. This might suggest that the coins issued during the Sālastambha period must have lost its relevance as a standard of exchange among the merchants who came from outside the region because of which, their use must have been discontinued by the Pala rulers. Or it is also probable that due to the recurring wars between the Pala rulers of Assam with those of Bengal, the economy of the state detoriated, which resulted in lower trade exchanges and subsequently no necessity of fresh issue of currency. The frequent change of capital by the Pala rulers might also be a pointer to this direction. Nevertheless, the use of cowries might have continued for smaller denominations and for paying tolls and fines.\(^10\)

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\(^9\) The Hayunthal grant (verses 13-14) refers to vaniks who assembled at the coronation ceremony of king Harjjaravarman

\(^10\) Tezpur Rock Inscription (Lines 7-9), K.S.,p.85
The land grants of the period highlights the numerous taxes that were imposed on the common gentry which included tolls to be realized from hastibandha (entrapping of elephants), naukābandha (anchoring of boats), chaurrentharana (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, besides looking after the royal agents. Thus the whole burden of maintenance of the royalty and the bureaucracy must have fallen on the common people. Moreover, although temples were built out of state initiative, they were usually maintained at public cost. The temple of Hetukasulin was endowed with villages, elephants and temple girls by the ruler Vanamalavaran.\footnote{Tezpur Copper Plate, Parbatiya Copper Plate, verse 24} Thus it was obligatory on the part of the villages concerned to provide the temple authorities with food and other supplies. The same policy must have been followed by the rulers for the maintenance of other temples. Even the alms house founded by Vaidyadeva was donated with several villages for its upkepment.\footnote{Assam Plates of Vallabhadeva, verses 15-17, K.S.298} As such, it seems that all state projects had to their credit the contribution and support of the commoners, upon whom the whole political fabric of the state depended.

The religious nature of the remains found abundantly in the region is not peculiar to Tezpur alone. It was a common phenomenon found throughout the region of ancient Assam. One of the key reasons behind it is that the rulers of the period thought it to be their primary duty to pay homage to their gods, mostly for gaining religious merit for themselves and for the kingdom. And as a mark of respect, they usually constructed huge
temple structures and edifices. It was also in a way, an attempt made by the rulers of the period to display their greatness and authority before their subjects, for whom building such huge and magnificent structures was unimaginable because of their economic constraints. These temples and shrines which dominate the region were generally built of stone which resulted in their permanency. Occasionally, bricks were also used. But the general people usually went for locally available, inexpensive materials for building their dwelling house. This wore out with time and as a result no such remains of the period have been found. The ordinary people of the land probably made their houses of thatch, bamboo and wood, plastered with mud which is a common sight even today in Assam. This is why Buchanan Hamilton, an Englishmen who visited Assam in the early nineteenth century, commented on the absence of standing architectural relics in ancient Assam. He stated that “the princes of the eastern parts of Kamrup continue, even to this day, to dwell in huts; nor is there any reason to suppose that his (Bhogodotta’s) accommodation was superior, while his power and probably the thickness of his forests, rendered fortifications towards the West unnecessary”. Excavation in the Garh Dol region of Da-Parvatiya has unearthed many brick structural ruins [see plates 10,11]. Completion of the excavation of the whole area may provide us with a better idea of the nature of the remains. It is possible that the structural ruins were the remains of the palatial buildings of the rulers of the Sālastambha period. If this presumption is correct, then the rulers or the elite sections of the society might have made use of bricks for the construction of their palaces.

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13 P.Sarma, *Architecture of Assam*, p 17
The temple shrines were usually built on raised grounds. The Tezpur copper plates of Vanamalavarman mention the “mountain Kamakuta, at the top of which there is the residence of the goddess Mahagauri…”\textsuperscript{14} The general perception must have centred behind the idea that the abode of God being not on this planet but in heaven, His abode in this world must also be on a higher platform than the rest of the inhabitants.

The religious life of the people is also well portrayed by the remains of the period. The region of Tezpur was an important religious centre as indicated by the nature of the remains. The construction of the temple of Hetukasulin must have added to the grandeur of the capital city of Hadappesvara as a pilgrimage centre. Siva was the most popular deity. Most of the shrines were dedicated to Siva. Besides Saivism, Vaishnavism was also dominant. Sakti cult also prevailed side by side. Besides, people worshipped a number of lesser gods and deities. However, Buddhism could not make much foothold in the region.

The archaeological remains of the period form an important pointer to the different aspects of life of the people in the pre-Ahom times. It reveals the importance of the region of Tezpur as a political centre with a vibrant social and economic life of its inhabitants. The people imbibed within themselves the traits of the Aryan culture which reveals its pan-Indian nature. All the sculpted divine figures depict the iconographic norms prevalent in other parts of India. The archaeological remains of the period under discussion also portrayed certain trends in the socio-economic and cultural sphere which continued even during the later period.

\textsuperscript{14} lines 11-130, K.S, p.104