CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

The study on the inscriptions of ancient Assam in the preceding pages offer an insight into the social, religious and cultural life of the people of ancient Assam. Here an attempt is made to review our whole study in brief and to sum up the findings.

The earliest inscription so far discovered in Assam is the Nağājari-Khanikargāon Fragmentory Stone Inscription assigned to the 5th century A.D. on palaeographic ground. If the date of the inscribed stone slabs discovered in Dubarani assigned to c. 200-300 A.D. is accepted then the date of the inscription may extend to c. 2nd - 3rd century A.D.

The first epigraphic mention of Kāmarūpa is noticed in the Allahabad Pillar Inscription where Kāmarūpa refers to the land of the frontier kings. Before it the inscriptions of the Mauryan period is silent regarding Prāgjyotisa-Kāmarūpa. The Mahasthana inscription seems to suggest the inclusion of North-Bengal in the Mauryan empire. But it didn’t refers to any information regarding Prāgjyotisa-Kāmarūpa. On the other hand so far not a single specimen of Punchmarked coinage, which formed the currency of the Mauryas has come to light in ancient Assam.

The real political history of Prāgjyotisa-Kāmarūpa begins with Puṣyavarman, the founder of the Varman dynasty. When we go through the different phases of the political history of Prāgjyotisa-Kāmarūpa, we notice the rising power of the Varman
kings in the post Gupta period. Puṣyavarman the founder of the Varman dynasty and his two other successors had maintained a good link with the Gupta kings contemporary to them. Since the time of Mahendravarman who threw out the Gupta alliance by performing two horse sacrifices. Surendravarman of the Umācal Rock Inscription is identified with Mahendravarman. Bhūtivarman, his successor extended his sway upto Pundravardhan where he settled 208 Brāhmanas which was a bordering region of the Gupta and Kamarūpa kingdom. The Gupta king being very weak couldn’t check the rising power of the Varmans who established a very extensive kingdom which was not only confined within Kamarūpa, but also extended it to North-Bengal, i.e., the Pundravardhan.

The rising power of the Varman kings did not stop but continued till the time of Bhāskaravarman. Being contemporary to the emperor of Kanauj, Harṣavardhan and having friendship with him, Bhāskaravarman defeated the king of Gauḍa. It is stated that after the death of Sasāntika, the king of Gauḍa, his empire was divided between Harsa and Bhāskara.

Under the rule of the post-Varman kings, the Śalastambhas, Kamarūpa witnessed, though for a short period, the zenith of her military power and glory when the illustrious Harṣadeva extended his sway to Gauḍa, Odra, Kaliriga, Kosala and other lands. The Śalastambha kings continued the policy of making land grants to the Brāhmanas. The frequent conflict with the neighboring powers in the west have induced the Śalastambhas to undertake expansion towards the east, where they donated land to a number of Brāhmanas. The expansion of the kingdom offer an
opportunity to assimilate various people of different parts and to interchange their culture which added to the growth of a composite culture in this region.

The last historical dynasty was the house of the Pālas. The kings of the Pāla dynasty also continued to pursue the policy of their predecessors. Though they could not make extensive conquests like the Śālastambhas under Śrī Harṣadeva, there are epigraphic evidences to their political sway over North and South-East Bengal although at times it had to suffer brief interruptions. Earlier the period of the Pāla dynasty was assigned to the last part of the 10th century to the 12th century A.D. But now the period of the dynasty is assigned from c. 900-1132 A.D. on the basis of the discovery of the Gachtal Copperplate Inscription and the Stone Inscription of Samudrapāla. The disintegration of the dynasty started from Dharmapāla and it is difficult to get a continuous rule of the dynasty after Dharmapāla. Vaidyadeva of the Kamauli Grant ruled Kāmarūpa in 1142 A.D. But Prāgijotiṣa was a bhukti and Kāmarūpa was a maṇḍala in his kingdom. Vallabhadeva of Assam Plates also indicates a new line of kings. The Kāmarūpa ruler of the Silimpur Stone Slab Inscription was not his immediate successor but reigned after him. Samudrapāla of the Ambari Stone Inscription reigned in 1232 A.D. The Kānāibarāsibowā Rock Inscription (c. 1206 A.D.) and the Gachtal Pillar Inscription (c. 1362 A.D.) refers to two invasions led by Turks and the Yāvanas respectively, both of which were defeated by Kāmarūpa rulers. The inscriptions, however, are silent about the kings who had achieved this brilliant success. Soon after these invasions the old Kāmarūpa kingdom seems to have split into several independent
principalities. At the same time the Ahoms penetrated into the Brahmaputra valley, gradually occupied the old kingdom and started a new era in the history of Prājyotisa-Kāmarūpa which was then known as Assam. Thus it seems that three major dynasties ruled Assam in this period. All the dynasties traced their descent from Naraka, the son of Viṣṇu indicating the continuity of a particular political tradition. Generally the geographical focus of the dynasties of Kāmarūpa was the Brahmaputra valley. The distribution of find spots of the inscriptions indicate the fact. The line of hills which run along the Brahmaputra valley were not inhabited at least by the people of the inscriptions. Cultivation and habitation were basically limited to the vast plains of the Brahmaputra valley.

The Kāmarūpa kings greatly patronised the learned men and religious teachers. They encouraged the Brāhmaṇas to migrate to Kāmarūpa by adopting a policy of Agrahāra land grant. The process was started during the time of Vasundharavarman in the 5th century A.D. The process continued up to the 12th century A.D. As soon as the Indo-Aryans or the Sanskrit speaking people entered into and settled in the Brahmaputra valley, Assam embarked upon a new phase of civilisation as seem reflected in the society, religion and cultural life of the people.

Ancient Assam’s social system was moulded primarily on the Varna system. The Nidhanpur Grant of Bhāskaravarman states that he re-organised Varaṇasramadharma in his kingdom. The system was protected by the later Kāmarūpa kings also. But the study reveals that the society was divided into two categories - dvijas and Śuḍras. The class of people included in the dvija category is
not certain. But the reference to the Brāhmaṇa class in the inscriptions shows that they were the most privileged class in the society, the only class benefited by large scale donation from the Kāmarūpa kings in the form of land along with administrative power and privileges parcellized by the king.

Inscriptions of ancient Assam show that the Brāhmaṇa caste organised themselves under gotra, pravara and vedasakhās. Except the Upamanyu gotra, almost all the gotras mentioned in the inscriptions are popular in India. Upamanyu Gotra is found only in Assam. The pravara system was not popular as only two inscriptions, the Kuruvāvāhī and the Puṣpabhadrā Grant refer to the pravara of the donees. Vedasakhās of the Brāhmaṇas referred in the inscriptions shows the popularity of the Kāṇvasakhā of the Yajurveda. Rg and Śamaveda studies also current in ancient Assam. The Brāhmaṇas didn’t confine to their traditional duties. Besides their religious functions, they held important administrative posts. Besides, the Subhāṅkarapataka Grant refers to the donee as charioteer by occupation.

The Kṣatriya and the Vaiśya Varna are not referred to in the Varna reference term. But in the inscriptions the kings were referred as god on the earth and traced their genealogy from the Varāha Viṣṇu and the mother Earth. The inscriptions also refer to vanikas and their high place in the society.

Emergence of professional castes can be inferred from the reference of the construction of a cave temple in the Umācal Rock Inscription. Since the Nidhanpur Grant we get reference to a number of new castes. Among them the Kaivartta’s was organised community. The weavers also organised in guilds. In
ancient Assam all the professional castes held land of their own. Another important fact of the society of ancient Assam was that different communities lived in harmony in their respective localities where even the Brahmaṇas were also granted land to settle by the king. In the Suwalkuchi Grant of Ratnapala the Brahmaṇa Kāmadeva donated land in an area surrounded by plots held by boatmen. In the religious sphere as the Deopānī Viśṇu Image Inscription shows the Sudras was given permission to worship along with the twice born classes and women. Inscriptions refer to different classes of women. Mothers and wives were referred in respectful terms in the inscriptions. Besides, the inscriptions refer to prostitutes, devadāsīs, nātīs, rānīs and mahallaka-prauḍhikas who served the society in different spheres.

Inscriptions refer to the simple diet and liking for vegetarian food, decent dresses together with their liberal and refined social manners. Inscriptions refer to the joint as well as separate family system but it seems that the people prefer joint family system as the donee of the inscriptions refers to their ancestors, sometimes for three or four generations.

With the spread of Aryan culture or Aryadharma in Kāmarūpa, Hindu religion in its various forms became very popular. The rulers of Kāmarūpa upto Gopālavarman invokes Siva as their tutelary deity as found in the inscriptions. Dharmapāla invokes Ardhayuvatśāsvara form of Śiva in his first two copperplates and Varāha-Viśṇu in the Puspabhadra Grant respectively. The inscriptions give us concept of Siva prevalent at that time. He was referred to as Rūdra, Mahādeva, Lord of the three worlds, Sthānu, Saṣīsekhara, Paṣupati, Hetuk śūlina and Bhava.
His consort is also popular in our period. She is referred to as Mahāgaurī, Pārvatī, Gaurī, Girijā, daughter of Himalayas, mother of Skanda or Kartikeya and Gaṇeśā and a beloved wife of Śiva. Śiva's tāṇḍava dance and abode Kailāsā were also referred to in the inscription. Śiva was worshipped with pinnace in the forest. Installation of Śiva idol in individual household by consecrating nāma-saṁkīrtana and construction and reconstruction of huge Śiva temples also referred to in the inscriptions. Temples were endowed with huge area of land, people elephants and devadāsis.

The beginning of the Viṣṇu worship in ancient period can be traced from the Bhauma-Naraka lineage of the Varman dynasty where they traced their origin from Viṣṇu through Naraka. If we accept the interpretation of the Bargāṅgā Rock Inscription as Paramadāivata Parama bhāgavata, then the worship of Viṣṇu has been found popular in Assam since the 6th century A.D. Different aspects of Viṣṇu are referred to in the inscriptions. He is referred to as Rāma-Kṛṣṇa, Nārāyana, Cakrapāṇi, Rathāṅgapani, Upendra, Puruṣottama, Janārdana, Hari etc. Avatāra theory was prevalent in ancient Assam. Kṛṣṇa legend was popular. Chanting of hundred names of Viṣṇu, nāma-saṁkīrtana as a mode of paying homage to Viṣṇu and Śiva and reference to bhakta imply that bhakti worship with nāma-saṁkīrtana was prevalent in Assam since the 8th century A.D. long before Sankardeva. The popularity of the worship of Viṣṇu was gaining a greater ground during the time of Indrapāla. Indrapāla invokes Śiva as his prime deity in his inscription but he was compared with a number of titles of Viṣṇu. His Guwākuchi Grant also contains four drawings of Garuḍa, Śankha, Padma and Cakra. Dharmapāla was a great patron of Viṣṇu. He invokes
Varāha Viṣṇu as his prime devata in his Puṣpabhadra inscriptions. Vaidyadeva and Vallabhadeva invokes Varāha Viṣṇu with the Prayer ‘om namo Vasudevaya’.

The birth place of Saktism as definite sect seems to have been eastern India, as remarked by Elliot. The inscriptions of ancient Assam refer to various manifestations of the goddess. Śiva was directly associated with Sakti in the Tezpur and Guwākuchi inscriptions and both coalesced into one in the Ardhayuvaśīvara aspect of Dharmapāla’s inscriptions. Sakti is equated with Viṣṇu in the Viṣṇu Image Inscription. The Gauhati Grant refers to the prevalence of Tantra as a subject. Traditionally the Śakta cult is considered to have its centre in Kāmākhya. But ancient inscriptions are silent about the temple and the worship of the Goddess. Though the Fragmentary Inscription from Nagaon refers to one goddess Kāmākṣi it is very difficult to identify the goddess with Kāmākhya.

The worship of Śūrya was prevalent in ancient Assam. During the time of Harjara (815–837 A.D.) donation of syncrétic Śūrya-Nārāyana image was referred to in the Inscribed Sun Image on bronze of the Narakāsura hoard. Another instance of donation of Śūrya image during the time of Vanamāla was noticed in the Inscribed Sun Image from Kāki. The Inscribed Sun Image on bronze from Titabor also proved the Śūrya worship in the 8th century A.D.

The concept of Gaṇapati must have prevailed in ancient Assam. The Nidhanpur Grant refers to his innumerable qualities for the extermination of strife. In the 12th century he was invoked in the inscription of Vallabhadeva after the salutation to Vaśudeva.

References of few other deities of the Hindu pantheon have been noticed in
the inscription. Among them Indra is the popular god referred to the inscription. The prowess of Kāmarūpa kings was compared with the valour of Indra. In the Bargāon Grant Durjījayā, the capital of the Pālas also compared with the abode of Indra. The Copperbell Inscription of Śrīkumāra also indicate the worship of Indra and royal patronage of Indra worship is ancient Assam. Besides, Kubera, Sarasvati, Brahmā, Vāyu, Agni and Yama also are referred to in the inscriptions. The origin and spread of the different cults of the Hindu religion in chronological sequence in ancient Assam, is not clearly known. However, we can infer that the different cults flourished more or less simultaneously in ancient Assam and there was apparently no sectarian jealousy in the land. The Hari-Hara Image Inscription and the Sankara-Nārāyaṇa Image Inscription indicate that attitude. The Viṣṇu Image Inscription stands as a very good testimony to the spirit of religious toleration and the trend for syncratism among Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism and Śaktism.

Buddhism flourished among a very small section of people. This is supported by the veiled references found in the inscriptions and the accounts of Yuan-Chwang. Tantric Buddhism was prevalent in Assam mixed with Tantric Hinduism. The Stone Inscription of Samudrapāla refers to the savāsika satra establishment of siddhas which indicates the prevalence of Tantric Buddhism in ancient Assam at least in the time of Samudrapāla.

The pattern of administration through out the period was monarchy. Seven component parts called ‘prakṛitis’ in the Hindu lawbooks were the basis of administration. The inscriptions of ancient Assam show that protection of people
from Mātsyanyāya and establishment of Varnāsramadharma, paternal attitude and welfare of the subjects were the ideals of the Kāmarūpa monarchy. At the same time it is difficult to identify the relations between the king and the people at the grassroot level. Ancient Assam was basically a riverine agrarian society. Rice cultivation throughout the period was the major source of livelihood of the people. Reference to various art and crafts in the inscriptions indicates that villages emerged as a significant self-sufficient units. But donation of huge amount of land to the Brahmans along with various administrative privileges created a strong group of intermediary between the king and the people. Relationship between the donee and the people of that particular land was not defined clearly. On the other hand sometimes along with land its inhabitants were also donated by the king. The Kamauli Grant refers to donation of two villages along with four hundred inhabitant workmen. Besides, as the Assam plates refers to the grant of seven villages and six hamlets with five assistance along with their sons and wives shows another picture of the society. It indicates the prevalence of bonded labour in the society. Another noteworthy reference is ‘Sarvapida’ which is interpreted as ‘forced labour’ by many scholars.

Inscriptions of ancient Assam refers to various agricultural and industrial products. From very ancient times Kāmarūpa was noted for her textiles, sandal and agaru. Besides qualitative and quantitative development of Kāmarūpa’s industries and its good river systems, geographical position of the land provided the facilities to the early growth of commerce. As ancient Assam was a self sufficient land it
exported many items to other countries and these commercial enterprises definitely linked Assam with its neighboring countries. But interestingly enough, the inscription of ancient Assam did not link the land neither with China or other South-East Asian countries. Rather inscriptions of our period refers to a number of places like Karnataka, Rastrakuta kingdom, Gurjara, Tayika, and Vahika countries indicating Kamarupa’s relations with these kingdoms.

The inscription refer to the prevalence of cowries as a medium of exchange. The Silimpur Grant refers to the gold coins. The discovery of coins of gold, copper and bronze coins proved that at certain period Kamarupa kingdom used coins of gold, copper and bronze. The word puṭaka and droṇa that occurs in the Kuruvāvāhi and the Silimpur Grant respectively indicating the prevalence of the system of weights and measures in ancient Assam.

Studies in all branches of Indian philosophy were in vogue in Kāmarūpa. The Vyakarana, Sastra, Purvamīmamsa, Uttaramīmamsa, Śāṅkhya, Yoga, Nyāya, Vaisesika and other sāstras were taught and the philosophers had good knowledge in all kinds of Darsana sāstras. The Tantric philosophy was well established and well cultivated. Arthasastra and Jyotisa sāstra were also studied in ancient Assam.

Inscriptions of ancient Assam was inscribed in the Brāhmī script and written in Sanskrit. A careful study shows that the Sanskrit language was mixed with local prakrit and in some cases Assamese formation was used in the present forms and sense. Many scholars suggests the development of Kāmarūpi variety of Prakrit language which many scholars suggests a parallel variety of Magadhi Prakrit enriched
by various local dialects or the Kāmarūpi variety of the Magadhi Prakrit itself. In case of script also inscriptions of ancient Assam show the development of script from Brahmī to protonāgari or nāgari which was also suggested as Kāmarūpi variety of script by scholars.

People of ancient Assam were acquainted with Classical music and dance of India. Inscriptions refer to various musical instruments like conch, dunaivi, trumpet etc. Reference of devadāsi, naṭa, naṭi and duluhāṅganā pointed out that the art of dance was practised by the people of ancient Assam.

The Architectural monuments of the region between the period 4th to 12th century A.D. are scattered and in ruins. But the inscriptions refers to the construction and reconstruction of religious architecture like the cave temple, temples and bhaktasālās. Secular architecture also refers to in connection with the reference of descriptions of the capitals of the Kāmarūpa kings.

Discovery of a number of inscribed stone and metal icons show the development of art on stone and metellurgy in ancient Assam. The fine art of Assam tended to be closer to the art of the Guptas, the Pālas and the Senas. The Pāla school of Art was popularly known as the Eastern school of Art. This intercourse was possible because of the geographical factors. No sculpture definitely assignable to the seventh century has been authenticated in Assam as yet. Plastic art of ancient Assam whether in stone or metal, follows more or less a course that is parallel to that of the Eastern school in its sophisticated version. Simultaneously, a more popular idiom may be seen to exist side by side and this is noticed in stone as well
as in metal. The popular idiom found reflected in the physiognomy such as open eyes and lack of spiritualism, which is normally noticed in the Gupta sculptures. Another local characteristic is the pot belly which is almost invariably to be found in all images, even in cases where such pot bellies are not called for. Sculptures of this period are squat without stelae and frontally carved out of elongated stone boulder which provides a roughly round contour. Sculptors attempted the idealism of Gupta art in terms of high relief, plasticity of rounded modelling and artistic excellence of inner spiritualism. Religious sycratism is another characteristic of the sculpture of ancient Assam of this period. Sarasvati observes two trends in the sculpture of ancient Assam, one the sophisticated trend developed out of Gupta Classical heritage with the autochthonous and the other popular idiom which is largely dependent on the autochthonous. The inscriptions also refer to the prevalence of painting in ancient Assam.

Thus the study on inscriptions reveals that the kings of Kāmarūpa were great patrons of Aryan culture. Infuence of Aryan culture was reflected in the language, religion and social structure. Inscriptions also refer to the attempt of the people for the growth and development of art & culture in this region. The study reveals that inspite of diversity of language, religion and culture, the basic concept of Indian culture the ‘Unity in diversity’ always prevailed in this region for centuries. The present study would reveal that ancient Assam had its own contribution to the making and enriching various facets of Indian life and belief and it still remains as India’s sentinel in the eastern horizon.