CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Ancient Assam known as Prāgijyotisa or Kāmarūpa comprising the modern seven states, is situated on the north-eastern part of India. It lies between latitudes 28°18' and 24° North and longitudes 89°46' and 97°41' East.

It is bounded on the north by the sub-Himalayan ranges of Bhutan, Akā, Dafla, Miri, Ābor and Mishimi. Previously, the whole region, inhabited by the tribal people, was under the jurisdiction of Assam. Now this region is known as Arunachal Pradesh. To the west of this region, lies the territory of Bhutan. On the east the state is bounded by the Patkai range, which defines the western boundary of Burma (i.e. present Myanmar), the intervening ranges being inhabited chiefly by the various tribes of Nagās and Manipuris. The hills bordering Myanmar occupied by the Nagās were previously in Assam. Now, the Nagās have their own state - Nagāland. Towards the south of Nagāland lies Manipur, which comprises hills and plains alike and which is a full-fledged state now. To the south lies Mizoram (Lushāi hills), bordering Myanmar and Bangladesh. To the west, just near the Mizoram, lies Tripura, three fourths of which are surrounded by Bangladesh. The south-west corner of Assam is bounded by the Meghālaya state comprising Khasī, Jaintiā and Gāro hill Districts, also bordering Bangladesh. Right on the west of Assam there are no
hills. The southern portion of the western boundary of Assam touches Bangladesh while the northern portion of the same is touched by the Cooch-Bihar District of West-Bengal, which was a part of Assam in the past.

The 'Assam range' broadly divides Assam into two valleys i.e. the Brahmaputra valley or Assam valley and the Suramā valley or Barāk valley. The Brahmaputra is one of the largest rivers of the world, flowing majestically through the heart of Assam. The Suramā valley or the Barāk valley comprises the southern plains of Assam with its tributaries Suramā and Kusiārā which enter in to the present Bangladesh after crossing the Gāro hills. The history and culture of ancient Assam is very intimately connected with the Brahmaputra river. The valley of Brahmaputra is a compact geographical unit in present Assam.

Prāgjyotiṣa-Kāmarūpa covered the whole of Assam, Eastern Bengal down to the sea, a part of Bihar and the mountainous zone of Bhutan; and it also touched the border, in the eastern side up to Myanmar. The boundaries of ancient Assam was changing from time to time, but there is no denying the fact that it was much more larger than the present state of Assam.

Prāgjyotiṣa was a famous ancient kingdom. The earliest mention of the city of Prāgjyotisa is traced back to the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata, the two great Indian Epics. In the Raghuvamsa of Kalidasa both the names have been mentioned.

In the Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta Kāmarūpa has been referred to

as frontier state. The date of the inscription has been assigned to the c. 350 A.D.

The history of Assam starts with the traditional rulers called the Dānava and the Asuras. Mahiranga Dānava is said to be the first ruler of Prāgjayotisa-Kāmarūpa who had his capital at Mairaṅka. The probable historical character of the Chief seems to be indicated by the existence of a hill, the Mairaṅka Parvata at Beltola near modern Guwahati; but how and when the kingdom was established are not known. They were non Aryan people. The last ruler of this dynasty was uprooted by Naraka who was an adopted son of Janaka, the famous king of Mithila. Naraka’s heroic episode is described in the Kalika Purāṇa, the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, the Visnu Purāṇa, the Harivamsa and other sstras. Naraka came to this land to establish Aryan culture and he settled a number of learned Brahmans well versed in almost all the Vedas. After Naraka came to power and rose to prominence in his kingdom, the name of which was changed from Prāgjayotisa to Kāmarūpa. Naraka was succeeded by Bhagadatta and Vajradatta. P.C. Choudhury opined that Naraka-Bhagadatta might have flourished in about 100 A.D.

Kāmarūpa witnessed a long and continuous rule of at least three royal dynasties in the historic period. The three indigenous royal dynasties were chronologically the Varman dynasty of Puṣyavarman, the Sālāstambha dynasty and the Pala dynasty of Brahmapāla. These three dynasties ruled from the 4th century A.D. to the 12th century A.D. After the fall of the Pālas, in the early part of the 12th century A.D. the history of Prāgjayotisa - Kāmarūpa again appears to be disconnected, fragmentary accounts of kings and events till the coming of the Ahoms
in the beginning of the 13th century A.D. The Ahoms had established a new political setup in Assam and ushered in a new era in the history of Assam.

The history of the early period is marked by the gradual expansion of the Aryan culture in the land. All the rulers of these dynasties claimed their descent from Naraka and wanted to identify themselves with the mainstream of Indian culture. By this time Sanskrit became the most popular language of the Upper class people. The general feature of Indian culture made their influence on almost all the aspects of life of the people of ancient Assam.

Inscriptions are the much more valuable and authoritative source of history which give us a clear picture of our past. An epigraph records primarily information about genealogy of the king in addition to referring to his achievements in political, religious, economic and cultural life. In dealing with such informations it sometimes supplies us with some information which may not be found elsewhere. A king’s identity or his period which was not known from other sources including even those belonging to the records of the king’s own life and descendant may be found in a reference made to him in records of a place lying far beyond his own political jurisdiction. Thus inscriptions provide us with some basic information for the purpose of historical research. They no doubt contain a good deal of political information and attempt at glorifying the reigning monarch and his predecessors, like any ancient text, which should be scrutinised before use. In fact we come across considerable data in these historical documents that are open to scientific analysis.
Importance of inscriptions, in case of ancient Assam become much greater since they form the only source of information for reconstructing her past. Inscriptions of ancient Assam are of immense value because it spread over several centuries. Moreover ancient Assam did not produce any work of the type of Kalhana’s chronicle on Kashmir entitled Rajatarangini or of Bana’s Harsacarita and Bilhana’s Vikramaṅkadevacarita. Of course there are some literary sources like the Kalika Purana and the Yogini Tantra that abound in legends and myths making it difficult for a student of history of Assam to glean the truth out of it. On the other hand meagre amount of archaeological evidence pertaining to the period has been discovered.

A brief survey of earlier literature:

The historical importance of North-Eastern India and the necessity of reconstructing its ancient history had been realised for the first time in 1835, when Captain Westmacott had published a report about ancient temples at Charduar near Tezpur. The earliest mention of ancient inscriptions of Assam appeared in 1840 in the Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal.

In 1892 the Kamauli Copperplate Grant was discovered and deciphered by Arthur Venis, the Principal of Benares Sanskrit College. In 1897, Dr. Hoernle published the text of the Nowgong Copperplate Grant of Balavarman III, with

4. A. Venis, ‘Copper Plate Grant of Vaidyadeva, king of Kamarupa’, E.I., Vol. II., PP. 347ff
translation and notes and photograph of the seal and the plates in the Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal. The Department of the Ethnography discovered four inscriptions-the Rock Inscription of Harjaravarman (A.D. 829-830) at Tezpur, the three copperplates and one seal known as the Bargāon Grants of Ratnapāla in Sonitpur District and the two plates (the first plates is lost) of the Suwālkuchi Copperplate Inscription of the same king discovered in Kamrup District and published in the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. The Kāmarūpa Anushandhāna Samiti brought to light the Nidhanpur Copper plates of Bhāskaravarman found at Sylhet; the Hayunthal Copper plates of Harjaravarman found in the Karbi Anglong District; the Kānābarasi bowā Rock Inscription in North-Guwahati; the Guwākuchi Copperplate Grant of Indrapāla found in the Kamrup District; the Subhāṅkarāpataka Copperplates of Dharmapāla, the place where found is not known and the Puspabhadra Copperplate Grant of Dharmapāla found in North Guwahati.

The Kāmarūpasāsanavali (1931) compiled and edited by P.N. Bhattacharya was the first anthology of the inscriptions of ancient Assam. It included ten copperplate

12. Ibid, P. 146.
grants and the Tezpur Rock Inscription of Harjaravarman and the Kāṇāibarasī bowā Rock Inscription. However it was not a complete catalogue of all the relevant inscriptions which had been discovered till 1931. Furthermore the translations of the inscriptions and the preface were in Bengali. Nevertheless his work and his example were invaluable in the field of epigraphic studies in Assam.

After the publication of the Kāmarūpasāsanāvali a number of inscriptions have been discovered, deciphered and published. M.M. Sharma’s Inscriptions of Ancient Assam (1978) gives details of nine more copperplate grants, two seals, three more rock engravings and three inscriptions on stone images. He did not include the Kāṇāibarasī bowā Rock Inscription studied by P.N. Bhattacharya but includes sources for reconstruction of the early history of Assam.

D. Sarma’s Kāmarūpasāsanāvali contains twelve inscriptions which are included in the P.N. Bhattacharya’s Kāmarūpasāsanāvali and new fourteen inscriptions both copperplates and rock or image incised discovered after the publication of the Kāmarūpasāsanāvali. The Kāmarūpasāsanāvali of D. Sarma was published in 1981 by the Publication Board of Assam. In this work he made an attempt to reconstruct the history of Assam based on inscriptions and worked on certain aspects of inscriptions such as language, palaeography and trends in the growth of culture and religion.

In 1905 Sir E.A. Gait published ‘A History of Assam’ where he made extensive use of the inscriptions in reconstructing the history of Assam. He devoted only fourteen pages in his book to the period between the fourth century
and the thirteenth century A.D. The subsequent decades witnessed attempts by scholars to reconstruct the ancient history of Assam as a whole. Among them more prominent are N.N. Vasu, ‘A Social History of Kamarupa’ (1922); K.L. Barua, ‘The Early History of Kamarupa’ (1933); R.M. Nath, ‘Background of Assamese Culture’ (1948); B.K. Barua, ‘A Cultural History of Assam’ (1951); P.C. Choudhury, ‘The History of Civilisation of the people of Assam to the Twelfth Century A.D.’ (1958); H.K. Barpujari, (ed) ‘Comprehensive History of Assam’, Vol. I (1990); N.J. Lahiri, ‘Pre-Ahom Assam’ (1991). Recent discoveries have further contributed towards the reconstruction of ancient history of Assam by scholars. In recent years new inscriptions and other archaeological remains have come to light. In the Doiyang-Dhansiri valley a number of inscriptions including individual letters on small chiselled stone pieces are discovered along with other archaeological remains. Dr. H.N. Dutta and Dr. D. Chutia studied these inscriptions. Moreover the Kuruvāvāhī (Nagaon) Copper plate Grant of Harjaravarman and the Kaliabor Copperplate Grant of Vanamālavarmadeva have been discovered in recent times. These two inscriptions are deciphered and edited by Dr. D. Chutia and published in the J.A.R.S. Vol. XXVI and Benudhar Sarma Commemoration volume (Kāmarūpa Anusandhāna Samiti, 1987). A large number of inscribed coins has also been discovered in recent years in Assam. These inscribed coins also deciphered and studied by various scholars. At Vadagokugiri (Bhaitbari), a nearby area of Goalpara District, a number of archaeological remains were discovered. Scholars have given new interpretations to such discoveries. So it is essential for a micro study on inscriptions
of this period which can have authentic historical findings. We are quite confident that systematic observation will throw considerable light on the lost history of Assam specially on social, religious and cultural history and it would immensely help in the reconstruction of the history of ancient Assam.

More than forty three inscriptions belonging to the ancient period have been so far discovered. On the basis of the material used for writing the record inscriptions of ancient Assam may be classified as stone inscription comprising inscribed stone pieces, stone, pillar and stone images; clayseals and inscriptions on metal viz, copperplates, copper bells, bronze image and coins made of copper, bronze and gold. A study on the inscriptions of this period reflect some special features on social, religious and cultural history which are relevant to our study.

Inscriptions refer to the donation of agrahāra land to the Brāhmaṇas by the kings of Kamarupa. The Nagājarī-Khanikargāon Fragmentary Stone Inscription (5th century A.D.) refers to agrahāra ‘Gaurivātaka’. The Nidhanpur Copperplate Grant of Bhāskaravarman (7th century A.D.) refers to Mayūrasāmalagrāhāra where he granted land to two hundred and eight Brāhmaṇas. This grant was a renewal of earlier charter by his great great grand father Bhūtivarman whose period was assigned to the 6th century A.D. Beginning with Harjaravarman of Sālastambha dynasty the inscriptions show that land were being donated mostly to individual Brāhmaṇas with more privileges related to the administration of the donated land. The Brāhmaṇical settlement accelerated the process of Aryanisation in ancient
Assam, which popularised Hinduism in this region.

One of the most important features of the Aryan society was the Varṇāśrama system. The traditional divisions of society into classes (Varṇa) namely Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya and Śūdra and the four stages (Āśrama) namely Brāhmacharya, Grhastra, Vañapraśthina and Yati or Sannyāsa in to which law books divide the life of men is called as Varṇāśrama system or Dharma. The Nidhanpur Copperplate Grant states that Bhāskararvarman was created for the purpose of establishing the institution of classes and orders (Varṇāśrama) which had for long time past become confused. The inscriptions refer to the social organisation of the Brāhmaṇas, their gotra, pravara, vedasākhās, their duties, privileges and their high position in the society.

Most of the inscriptions refer to the genealogical list of the kings, depicted their life by referring to their qualities, education, patronage of religion and culture, expansion of territory, administration and their relations with the Sāmantas, Mahāsāmantas and other Vassal kings who played a dominating role in the society. The inscriptions also throw light on their relation with the contemporary Indian powers.

The inscriptions of ancient Assam refer to the Vañikas. The Vañikas played some important role in the politics as well as in the society of the period. One noteworthy fact is that the terms Kṣatriya and Vaisya in Varna reference term is absent in the inscriptions of our period.

Śūdra as a Varna reference term has been mentioned only once in the Deopānī
Visṇu Image Inscription. The inscriptions of our period refer to a number of terms viz Janapadas, Karsakas and Sahāyas. Probably all were common people or peasants. All were included in the Sudravarna. Tribal people of the region were also included in the Sudravarna as peasants.

A number of professional classes and low class people were also referred to in the inscriptions. The Subhāṅkarapātaka Copperplate Grant of Dharmapāla referred to Himāṅga, the donee, who was a Rathika (charioteer) and expert in the martial acts. His father devoted himself to Six Karmas of the Brahmaṇas and his grand father was also a renowned Brahmaṇa who belonged to the Śaṇḍilya gotra. This is an important fact of society of ancient Assam. Equally surprising a fact is that the Tezpur Rock Inscription refers to a Kaivartta who held office in the state. All these references help us to study the social condition of Assam in our period, specially the role of Varnāśramadharma on the society. More over the inscriptions of our period also throw light on other features of the society viz, the family institution, inheritance, marriage system, position of women etc., the study of which will give immense knowledge on social life of the people of ancient Assam.

A kind of all pervasive religious attitude is amply documented in the inscriptions. The Umācal Rock Inscription of Surendravarman refers to the construction of a cave temple for the worship of Balabhadravāmin. The deity Balabhadravāmin is not mentioned in any other epigraphical record of the Gupta period. The independent worship of the deity in the fifth century A.D. is an interesting fact of the religious history of Assam.
Saivism seems to be a fully developed cult in ancient Assam. Though the rulers of Kamarupa from all the three dynasties traced their lineage from Viṣṇu, they invoked Śiva in almost all the inscriptions, except the Puṣpabhadra Copperplate Grant of Dharmapāla where invocation was made to Varāha Viṣṇu. The worship of Viṣṇu as well as the development of Vaiṣṇavism can be gleaned from the inscriptions of Kamarupa. The inscriptions refer to the avatāras of Lord Viṣṇu. The worship of Viṣṇu by the cult of Nama-śaṅkirtana is referred to in the Śaṅkara Narayana Image Inscription of the 8th century A.D. The Deopāṇi Viṣṇu Image Inscription dated to the 8th century A.D. contains reference to ‘bhaktas’ which implies that the cult of Bhakti was gaining ground as early as the ninth century A.D. in ancient Assam. The Guwakuchi Copperplate Grant of Indrapāla contains four drawings Guruḍa, Cakra, Padma, Sarpa and Sāṅkha which symbolise Lord Viṣṇu Himself. The Puṣpabhadra Copperplate Grant of Dharmapāla (12th Century A.D.) invokes Viṣṇu in his Varāha incarnation for the first time. The Kamauli Copperplate Grant and the Assam Plates invoke Lord Vāsudeva in their inscriptions respectively.

The legend as well the text of the Tezpur Copper plate Inscription begins with the auspicious sign anjī. P.N. Bhattacharya holds that the anjī is connected with the satcakras (i.e., the mystic nervecentres) of the Tantras and probably stands as a symbolic representation of the Kuṇḍalinī nerve which resembles the Serpent-shaped divinity. This inscription also refers to the temple Kamesvara-Mahāgaurī. The Guwakuchi Copperplate Grant of Indrapāla also refers
to the temple Mahāgaurī-Kāmeshvara. The Gauhati Copperplate Grant of Indrapala refers to Tantra as a subject and king Indrapāla was well versed in the subject. It is quite interesting to find out how and when this culture entered into Assam. It is believed that Saivism and Saktism are two main sources of Tantra.

The antiquity of the cult of Śūrya is indicated by the very name Prāgjyotisa. Śūrya image bearing inscriptions have been discovered at the Narakāsura hoards, Kāki (Nagaon) and in the Doiyang Dhansiri valley of Assam. These images proved that Śūrya worship has been prevalent in Assam. Besides, the worships of Indra and other gods and goddesses are also referred to in the inscriptions.

The epigraphs of the past do not give any direct reference to the prevalence of Buddhism in ancient Assam. The Nidhanpur Copperplate Grant of Bhaskaravarman refers to Dharma. The Guahati Copperplate Grant of Indrapala refers to Tathāgata. Both the references had led some scholars to think that Buddhism existed in Assam. There are a number of references in literature and a number of images of Buddha discovered in Assam. The recent excavation at Bhaitbāri (Vadagokugiri) which has revealed the existence of a sprawling township with Buddhism, Hinduism (Saivism) and the amalgamation of the two, show that prior to the 3rd-2nd century B.C. Buddhism was prevalent in that area.

The inscriptions of ancient Assam throw light on the cultural life of the people. Culture of a nation or a race is a full fledged expression of all its pursuits and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society.

Political customs and practices and thoughts and ideas reflect in some
respects the culture of the people. The Allahabad Pillar Inscription refers to Karnataka a frontier kingdom which indicates ancient Assam witnessed monarchical system of administration. The inscriptions refer to the divine nature of the king. The laws were based more or less upon the Hindu texts. They performed their Coronation ceremony and held Asvamedha sacrifice and many other elaborate sacrifices.

A powerful state must have a strong social basis. The Nagajari-Khanikargaon Fragmentary Stone Inscription refers to the settlement of people on the fertile bank of the Dibru river and organisation of village. The inscriptions of ancient Assam furnish us with the names of a large number of villages and organisation of village lands. The Bargaon Copperplate Grant of Balavaran mentions that the donated land included homestead, paddy fields, ponds, grazing grounds and refused lands. The major part of the cultivated land was devoted to grow rice. The revenue was estimated in measures of Dhanya (paddy). Besides rice growing the inscriptions refer to a number of fruit trees, timber trees, flowering trees and some trees like black aloe, sandal, cardamon which were considered valuable from economic point of view.

The inscriptions proved that varied industrial arts and crafts were developed in Assam at an early period. These were textiles, metal work, stone work, pottery work, brick making, masonry, gold washing, wood carving, ivorywork, leather work, aromatics, clay modelling etc.

Various agricultural and industrial products naturally led to the growth of both internal and external commerce. The core centres of exchange and manufacture
may have some times developed in to urban centres. Haḍapesvara, the etymology of the name suggests that it may once have been a haṭṭa i.e. market place. The inscriptions refer to a number of urban centres in ancient Assam. The Tezpur Rock Inscription indicates the use of cowries as currency by the 9th century A.D. The discovery of gold coins of the post seventh century A.D. at Paglatek and the issue of copper coins in the ninth century A.D. by Harjaravarman or Vanamala or Balavarman throw light on the economic condition of ancient Assam.

Economic stability led to the development of art and architecture in ancient Assam. As regards the architecture, religious establishment and secular references are found in the inscriptions. The Umācal Rock Inscription refers to the construction of a cave temple. The Tezpur Copperplate Grant of Vanāmala states that he re-constructed the ‘lofty temple’ of Haṭakasunī which had fallen down. The Gauhati Copperplate Grant of Indrapāla states that Ratnapāla constructed numerous white washed temples of Siva through out the kingdom. The Nowgong Copperplate Grant of Balavarman states that Vanamāla erected a huge palace. The Barbāra Copperplate Grant of Ratnapāla refers to his capital at Sri-Durjaya. Besides architecture, the Deopānī Viṣṇu Image Inscription, the HariHara Stone Image Inscription, the Saṅkara Narayana Stone Image inscription of Deopānī, the Sūrya Image Inscription of Titabor, the Sūrya Image Inscription of Kaki and Naralā hoard testified the development of iconography in ancient Assam. The Guwālā Copperplate Grant of Indrapāla depicts the figure of Garuḍa holding a Saṅkha Padma, Cakra and a Sarpa. The Copperplate Grants of the Kamarupa kings attested
with a Royal seal where the figure of an elephant seated as well as standing was depicted. Perhaps only the Kāmarūpa kings used elephant as their royal insignia in India.

Thus, the inscriptions give us evidence regarding the artistic pattern of architecture, sculpture and painting of ancient Assam. Inscriptions also help us to trace the development of music, dance, literature and script of our period. Thus inscriptions help us in drawing a picture of the social, religious and cultural life of the people of ancient Assam.

The inscriptions constitute the foundation to form an idea of the history of ancient Assam. The information thus elicited is organised as follows:

Chapter I: This chapter deals with the subject and its importance.

Chapter II: In this chapter an attempt is made to deal with the traditional and historical background of ancient Assam.

Chapter III: Chapter III deals with the inscriptions of our period. It is practically a major study in the context of the study of social, religious and cultural life of the people of ancient Assam.

Chapter IV: In this chapter social life of the people is discussed.

Chapter V: In this chapter religious life of the people is discussed.

Chapter VI: In this chapter cultural life of the people is discussed.

Chapter VII: It is the concluding chapter, the findings of the study have been presented in this chapter.

Methodology:

Historical methodology has been adopted. Initially a general survey was
conducted to identify the inscriptions, i.e. the primary sources. Then I follow the scientific way of collecting materials by approaching the technical research method. The reports of the Archaeological Survey of India, Bulletins of the Assam State Museum, Journals of the Assam Research Society and Reports of the Directorate of Archaeology were consulted to supplement this survey. Secondary sources i.e. published articles and papers in books and journals and literary materials have been consulted only so far as they have helped us to get a better perspective (time and intent) of our inscriptions.