PART I

A GEOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNT OF THE TOWN
CHAPTER I

GAUHATI - AN INTRODUCTION

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The Manusamhita says: -

Dhanvadurgam Mahidurgamabdurgam varksameva va,
Nṛdurgam giridurgam vā samaśritya vaset puram. (1)

"The king should live in his capital resorting to either one of the following varieties of forts e.g. fort with desert on all sides, or with brick-ramparts around, or with waters all around, or surrounded by thorny plants, or male of elephants, horses, infantry or fort in an uphill."

In the next sloka it enjoins: -

Sarvegatu prayatnena giridurgam samasrayet,
Eśāṁ hi bāhugunyena giridurgam visisyate. (2)

"The king should by all means resort to a fort called Giridurga; for all the forts it is called the best owing to its various advantages."

From the above one may presume with safety that the ancient Hindu kings generally preferred a giridurga or a mountain-fort. If we consider the topography of the present town of Gauhati we shall find that it is still an ideal side to build up any variety of ancient forts as prescribed by the Manusamhita with the possible exception of the first one. So it is no wonder that Gauhati has a very chequered history throughout the ages as a prominent centre of government in Eastern India.
The modern Guwahati (Assamese-Guahati) has been identified as the ancient Pragjyotishpura so frequently mentioned in the epics and the Puranas.

The Kalika Purana, a work of the 10th century A.D. says, "Formerly Brahma stayed here and created stars; hence the city is called Pragjyotishpura a city equal to the city of Indra." Most of the historians of Assam have accepted this etymological explanation given by the Kalika Purana. Thus Gait writes, "Prag means former or eastern and jyotisha a star, astrology, shining. Pragjyotishpura may be taken to mean the city of Eastern Astrology. The name is interesting in connection with the reputation which the country has always held as a land of magic and incantation and with the view that it was in Assam that the Tantrik form of Hinduism originated." But K.L.Barua while accepting the etymology explains it in a different content. He writes, "It is significant that to the immediate east of the town Guwahati there is a temple on the crest of a hill known as Citracala, and this temple is dedicated to the Navagrahas or nine planets. It is probable that this temple is the origin of the name Pragjyotishpura." (4)

On the other hand Dr. B. Kakoti's surmise is that Pragjyotishpura is connected with the topographical features of the rather than with any religious cult. He writes in his book - "The Mother Goddess Kamakhya", that earlier references clearly illustrate that "Pragjyotisa or Pragjyotisapura was on an extensive hill." This topographical features of Pragjyotisa as described in the earlier texts correspond to an Austric formation like Pagar - juh (jo) - tic (c' = ch) meaning a region of extensive hills. Thus
Pragjyotisa may be a Sanskritisation of a Non-Aryan formation.

Whatever is the origin of the nomenclature of the city ancient Pragjyotisa or Pragjyotisapura was the flourishing capital of several dynasties during the epic and classical periods. Narakasura and his illustrious son Bhagadatta, of the Mahabharata fame ruled in Eastern India with their capital at Pragjyotisapura. The fame of their capital city was such that sometimes the whole kingdom was known as Pragjyotisa. According to Puranic traditions the name of the country was changed to Kamrupa due to Kamadeva's resurrection after he was reduced to ashes by an angry Siva to be pacified subsequently by an entreating Rati. The country was known as Kamrupa during Hsien Stang's visit. Al Beruni also refers to the country as Kamaru or Kamrupa. But the name of the capital perhaps remained unchanged. However one cannot be very sure about this due to lack of authentic historical evidence.

During the mediaeval time the city of Pragjyotisapura assumed a new name. It was known as Guahati or Guahata. During the Koch and Ahom period Guahati lost its classical glory as the capital of a flourishing empire. But still it was an important city both strategically and culturally.

THE ORIGIN OF THE NAME - GUWAHATI

There are two theories as to the origin of the name of Guwahati. Some scholars say that Guwahati surrounded as it is with hills full of caves (Assamese Guha) the name of the city may be derived as Guha (Cave) hati (a row) that is a city with a row of caves. This derivation may be equated with Dr. Kakoti's derivation of ancient Pragjyotisapura as 'city on an extensive hill'.
But others say that Guwahati is associated with Guwa (Skt.-guvaka) e.g. arecanut, 'hati' being a row of houses, that is a village or a town. Thus Guwahati means a town full of arecanut groves. In the Afsad inscription of Adityasena (6th century A.D.) there is reference of songs sung by pairs of Siddhas reclining under the shade of nagadrums on the banks of the Lauhitya (Fleet, III, P. 203). The copper inscription of Balavarman of Kamrupa, echoes Kalidasa's Raghuvamsa, (6.64) to speak of arecanut trees wrapped with betel creepers—Tambula-valli parinaddhapurgam. So Dr. Neog concludes "It seems, Guwahati, situated on the Brahmaputra and identified with Pragjyotisapura, has ever been associated with Tambula." (6) However one wonders how the name of such an important city be derived from Guwa (arecanut). Assam is a land of arecanuts and one finds arecanut trees almost in any part of Assam. So to distinguish an important city like Guwahati from other places only arecanut does not seem to be a very important criterion. So the first derivation seems to be more logical and plausible.

During the mediaeval period the Koch rulers with their capital at Cooch Behar and the Ahom kings with their capital at Gorgaon always tried to possess Gauhati. Even the strategic importance of Gauhati was well known to the Moghul invaders. So in a sense Gauhati became the bone of contention among them. The Koch rulers were dispossessed of Gauhati by the Ahoms. But the Ahoms in turn had to lose the town to the Moghul invaders. However (Saka 1590) after a few months of strenuous fighting the Ahom forces commanded by the illustrious Lachit Borphukan succeeded in expelling the Moghuls from Gauhati and Lower Assam as far as to the Manaha river was returned to the possession of the Ahoms. On receiving this glad piece of news the then Ahom ruler Chakradhwaj Singha exclaimed "It is now that I can eat my morsel of food with pleasure."
Loss of Gauhati was great blow to then Moghul emperor Auranzeb. He at once deputed a large force under Raja Ram Singha of Ambar to recover Gauhati and Lower Assam from the Ahoms. Ram Singha at first tried diplomacy to recover Gauhati, but the Ahoms considered their possession as 'a casket of gold'. The Buragohain, one of the Prime ministers said, "where shall we take our stand if we abandon Gauhati with its fortifications."(7)

Thus the strategic importance of Gauhati had always been recognised by the rulers of Assam. The Ahoms made Gauhati the administrative centre of their viceroy in Lower Assam.

The British who became the successors to the Ahoms concentrated their main activities at Gauhati. Of course they built up Shillong as the administrative capital of the province. But to all intent and purpose Gauhati remained the virtual capital of Assam. This state of affair is still continuing and Gauhati is still the virtual capital of the State of Assam in independent Indian Union.

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