CHAPTER-II

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF GUWAHATI

2.1 Nomenclature

The modern Guwahati was known as Pragjyotishpura. i.e. the eastern city of astronomy during the epic and puranaic period. The Kalika Purana, a work of 10th century A.D. says “Formerly Brahma stayed here and created stars, hence the city equals to the city of Indira”Edward Gait, in his book “A History of Assam” mentions ‘Prag’ means former or eastern and ‘Jyotish’ means a star, astrology shining and therefore Pragjyotishpur may means ‘the city of Eastern Astrology’. On the other hand, according to B.K. Kakati, Pragjyotisha or Pragjyotishpura was on an extensive hill and there the city of Pragjyotisha was connected with the topographical feature of the area rather than any religious cult.

2.2 Origin of the name of Guwahati

There are two theories regarding the origin of ‘Guwahati’. According to some scholars, ‘Guha’ means ‘a cave’ and ‘hati’ means a row. Therefore ‘Guwahati’ means ‘a city with a row of cave’. This derivation may be similar with the view of B.K. Kakati’s derivation of ancient Pragjyotishpura as ‘city on an extensive hill’. Some other scholars associate ‘Guwa’(skt-Guvaka) mean ‘areca nut’ with ‘hati’ means a

1 B.K. Barua; Cultural History of Assam, Lawyer’s Book Stall, Guwahati, 1969, p.12
3 B.K. Kakoti, The Mother Goddess Kamakhya, Guwahati, 1948 p.6
row of houses making a village or town, thus meaning ‘Guwahati’ to be a town full of areca nut groves. The copper inscription of Balavarman of Kamrupa echoes Kalidas’s Raghuvanssa to speak of areca nut trees wrapped with betel creepers—‘Tambula-Valli Parinaddhapuram’⁴. This fascinating line clearly indicates that even in those ancient days Pragjyotishpura, the capital of Kamrupa was noted for the beauty of its groves or avenues of betel-nut trees. However one wonders how the name of such an important city be derived from Guwa (areca nut). Moreover Assam is a land of areca nuts and one finds areca nut trees almost in all parts of Assam. So to distinguish an important city like Guwahati from other places only areca nut does not seem to be a very important criteria. So, the first derivation seems to be more logical and plausible.

In addition to these theories one pseudo-antiquarian attempted to put forward a queer theory that the present town owed its name to its original position as a cattle-mart (‘Gau’ means Cow and ‘Hati’ means a mart). But ‘Guwahat’ occurs in its present Assamese form in different historical periods and old Assamese chronicles. So there is no doubt that ‘Guwahati’ gives the correct spelling and pronunciation of the word. The English name ‘Gauhati’ is corrupt anglicized version of the assamese name, ‘Guwahati’ and it came into vogue and became firmly established in English official parlance and correspondence and other office records during the British period. However the anglicized ‘Gauhati’ has abolished and now people use correct assamese name ‘Guwahati’. This has now been officially accepted name for the city.

Whatever be the origin of the nomenclature of the city, ancient Pragjyotisha or Pragjyotishpura was the flourishing capital of several dynasties during the epic and classical periods. Both the Ramayana and Mahabharata mention Pragjyotisha-Kamrupa on more than one occasions, which adequately prove the antiquity of this kingdom

⁴ Balavarman III Nowgong Copper Plate (C, 875 AD.)
and its popularity in other regions of the country, Narakasura and his illustrious son Bhagadatta of the Mahabharata fame ruled in Eastern India with their capital at Pragjyotishpura. The fame of their capital city was such that sometimes the whole kingdom was known as Pragjyotisha.

2.3 Historical development

2.3.1 Epics and scriptures:

That the regions east of the Ganga were not known to the Vedic Aryans is proved by the fact that none of the Vedic literatures has mentioned Pragjyotisha-Kamrupa. Even the Hinayana Buddhist scriptures have not referred to this region. We find the earliest reference to this area in the Brahmanas and the Grihyasutras. Kautilya’s Arthasastra also seems to have referred to the products of the Brahmaputra valley and we can logically surmise that Pragjyotisha gradually attracted the attention of the rest of India since this time. During the beginning of the Puranic period Pragjyotishpur must have gained additional importance which helped it to be involved in some of the all Indian events. In fact, this growing importance gave it a place in the two epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.

The Kiskindhya chapter of the Ramayana refers to Pragjyotishpur as a beautiful city and the capital of the intrepid Naraka. The Sabha, Karna, Bana and Udyoga chapters of the Mahabharata mention this kingdom, and three of its most importance events, such as, the Pandava’s Digvijaya, the Kuruskhetra war and the Asvamedha Yajna give it due importance. Kalidasa’s Ragbuvamsa also includes Kamrupa in its narration and it appears that during this time Pragjyotishpur had developed into a city of all-India importance.

It is, therefore, possible that Guwahati continued to be a city of importance since the epic period and that, in spite of many ups and downs during the long period of its
existence, it has successfully retained its glories, even if most of the facts took the form of legends and traditional lores with time.

The history of Guwahati is as obscure as in the case of Pataliputra, Varanasi of Rajgir. On the basis of available source materials the antiquity of this city cannot be taken back beyond the age of the Imperial Guptas. The two indigenous sources, Kalikapurana (circa 9th century AD) and Yoginitantra (circa 16th century AD) mention the exploits of the legendary king Naraka. Even the earlier legend of the land is associated with this might king. The Kalikapurana states that Janaka, the king of Videha and father of Sita, the wife of Rama, was Naraka’s foster father. It is stated that, as Janaka found him in his corn-field with the head of the new-born baby supported on a human skull, he was named Naraka (Nara means man and Ka means skull). The Purana further states that when Naraka attained his manhood as a prince, a conspiracy was hatched to kill him to put on end to his likely claim to the throne, whereupon his foster mother Katyayani brought him secretly to Pragjyotisha where the prince carved out a kingdom of his own by subjugating the aboriginal Mlecchas. Thus the kingdom of Kamrupa was established and then Naraka brought and settled Brahmins (Dvijas, the twice-born) in the Brahmaputra valley, presumably for the first time. This episode tends to show that Naraka was the first Aryan monarch of the Brahmaputra Valley. Though the description of the Kalikapurana seems to be based on historical facts, it lacks in conclusive historical or archaeological evidence to prove his historicity. The only silver-lining of Nárika’s being a historical figure is that all the early medieval ruling dynasties of Pragjyotisha-Kamrupa since the 4th century AD have claimed him as their progenitor and that, historians have not been able to link as yet most of the historical-archaeological source-materials, particularly of the first four centuries of the Christian era. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Guwahati and its neighborhood
with its extensive ruins is the only prospective area of the Brahmaputra Valley where one can expect to unearth evidences of this phase which evidently was the ancient city of Pragjyotishpur.

In the Kalikapuran it is mentioned that the legend of Narakasura who used to rule the wide area in and around Narakasura hill married Maya, the daughter of the king of Vidarva, and was greatly favoured by Lord Vishnu who advised him to worship the goddess Kamakhya. Though, in the beginning he was pious, subsequently under the influence of Banasur, King of Sonitpur, grew irreligious and addicted to drinks. Seeing exquisite beauty of Kamakhya, he wanted her as his wife. After being tormented continuously, very reluctantly she agreed on condition that the demon will within a night erect a temple in her honour on Nilachal hill, excavating a tank over there and construct four leading roads from the plain to the temple on Nilachal hill. When the demon almost accomplished the task, goddess caused a cock to crow before dawn proclaiming that the night has passed and the day is dawning. The work remained incomplete and the demon was unsuccessful to keep his promise. Then Kamakhya Devi refused to marry him.

Guwahati is also culturally and economically connected with the other side of the river Brahmaputra where even now stands the temple of Aswakranta or Aswakanta, the place where the horse of Aswamedha was tired. Arjuna raided the kingdom of Pragjyotishpur which was then ruled by Bhagadatta. The first temple erected in the historical time was destroyed by Kalapahar in 1554-56 AD. The archaeological findings in the Ambari reveals that civilization was in existence within the locality as back as 200-300 AD. There are clear evidences that trade relations existed between the people of this region and the countries, such as China, Rome, Ceylon, Java etc. The first historical reference of Kamrupa can be observed when the area was tutelary state under Samudragupta. Near 350 AD Pushya Varma, the distant descendant of Naraka, was the king of Kamrupa. His dynasty extending over 12 generations ruled for a period...
of three hundred years. Of them Vaskar Varma was the prominent one. In Dashakumar Charit, there is a reference of Kalinga Varma who appears to be one of the descendant of Vaskar Varma.

In 640 AD Huen Sang visited Assam and he recorded his observations in his Travel Diary. At that time Kumar Bhaskar Varma was on the throne of Kamrupa. Huen Sang observed more than one hundred Hindu temples but none of the Buddha Viharas or Sangharams. He found the animal sacrifices in Hindu temples. Being devout Buddhist Huen Sang was not happy to see any of the residents to observe Buddhist doctrines. It was however not exactly known when the image of Lord Buddha was engraved at Janardan Hill close to Panbazar area.

In Buranji literature specially in Assam Buranji the chronological history of Ahom kings extending from 1228 AD to 1816 A.D. is recorded. In Kamarupa Buranji and Padsah Buranji the descriptions of Mughals and of Mahamedan invasions were recorded. In one of Assam Buranji there is reference of 17 Buddha kings like Jayanta Chakrapal Bhumipal etc. One hundred years after the death of Vaskar Varma, Shalastambha became the king of Kamrupa. He was succeeded by Shalamabha. His dynasty ruled over a period of two hundred years. The last king of Salastambha dynasty was Tyag Sinha. He died in the earlier part of eleventh century. After his death his relation, Brahmapal, became the ruler and established his capital at Durjaya which is believed to be in present Guwahati. Last ruler of the Brahmapal dynasty was Dharamapal who reigned during the earlier part of twelfth century. After Dharamapal serious disorder prevailed in the country. Powers surrounding the kingdom of Kamrupa invaded and did havoc in the area. They are Coch, Mech and hill people of Cachar.

Thereafter the King Niladdhaj of Kamatapur ruled Kamrupa. He was succeeded by his son Chakradhaj and subsequently by his grandson Nilamber who defeated
Rukumadhing Barbak Shah, Sultan of Bengal at that time Husen Sung, Nabab of Bengal, conquered Kamrupa. It was happened between the period of 1498 to 1502 A.D.

According to latest Buranji Kamrupa was invaded by Coch king Viswarup and reigned from 1498 to 1508. His worthy son Naranarayan was the most powerful king of the Coch dynasty. He ruled the area during the periods 1534-1584 A.D. He went into an alliance with the Mughal Emperor Akbar and parted with a portion of Assam valley. That portion came under the Muslim rule. However, in 1654, the Ahom Raja Jayodwaj Singh drove away the Muslim ruler and occupied the area. The town of Guwahati continued to be the spirit of the contending powers of the Ahoms and the Muslims. Finally, in 1681 it was recaptured by the Ahom kings. Till the middle of the 18th century the Maharashtrian insurrections broke out. As a result the normal way of life and cultivation of land was suspended and no harvest could be reaped. Ultimately famine broke out and took a heavy toll of lives in this area. In 1786 the Maharashtrian rebels under Bharat Singh invaded the area and inflicted defeat on the royal troops and took the capital Rangpur by storm. During the reign of Chandrakanta in 1809, the Barphukan of Guwahati incurred displeasure of the Bargohain and fled to Burma. With the help of the Burmese Army in 1861 the Barphukan tried to reinstate himself and succeeded in his attempt. Next, it is the Ahom king Chandrakanta who was deposed and appealed to the Burmese king. Bunnese Army returned with a large force and reinstated him on the throne. Then it was the period when the British power was expanding in rest of India. In 1824 the British declared war against the Burmese. In the following year i.e. in 1825 Assam was ceded to the East India Company and a separate province under a Chief Commissioner was created. The headquarters of the new administration was shifted from Guwahati to Shillong.

On the 15th August, 1947 with the end of the British rule the subcontinent was
divided into two parts- India and Pakistan. The creation of East Pakistan has affected the State of Assam very materially through the dismemberment of a part of the province and its annexation with East Pakistan now Bangladesh. As a result all its communication links were disrupted to a large extent. The river traffic became entirely stopped as it depended as the river and channels from Assam through the East Pakistan. The main railway link from Calcutta to Assam via Parbatipur was cut off and realignment of Railway line along the northern boundary of Assam from New Jalpaiguri was quickly completed. As a result the development of Guwahati got a different shape. Socio-economic condition and cultural setup of Guwahati is the result of all these historical development.

2.3.2 Antiques and Artifacts :

Guwahati has the pride of place of having the earliest archaeological evidence in the Brahmaputra valley. The Umachala Rock inscription of the 5th century AD on the north-eastern slope of the Nilachal hill within the city is not only the earliest historical rock -cut inscription of the state, it’s contents are of vital importance for the reconstruction of Assam history. Written in the eastern variety of the Brahmi script and in Sanskrit language, the palaeograph reads as follows:

Maharajadhiraja sri
Surendravarmana kritam
Bhagsvatah valabhadra
Svaminaya idam guham

From this inscription one can infer at the construction of the earliest Brahmanical temple on record in this region. This apart, it has certain other religio-political elements which are of great importance implication of this epigraph is that it has conclusively shown the propagation of the Brahmanical ideas to this part as early as the 5th century AD.
A few scattered building components with exquisite carvings in the precincts of the Kamkhya temple on top of the Nilachala hill are typically Gupta in art-style and may be assigned to 5th-6th century AD. Sculptures and carved members presumably from Hindu temples and ranging from 7th century AD onward are unearthed in plenty from some municipal wards of the Guwahati City. With the increased number of erection of multi-storeyed buildings, which obviously need deeper foundations, many more numbers of archaeological objects have been discovered in the city which speak of its great antiquity. Even terracotta objects of high standard have been unearthed in certain spots of the city which prove the existence of a long and matured plastic tradition.

Guwahati has continued to be a human-habitat uninterruptedly through all the places of history to this day. It does not, therefore, exhibit any antique look and all the sites within this city exposed archaeological ruins have already been covered with modern buildings. The only site of the city wherein a patch of land could be reserved to exhibit its archaeological treasure is Ambari, where excavation is still continuing. The earliest antiquities so far unearthed in this site mostly to a period in between 11th to 13th century AD and consist of a huge number of stone sculptures, earthen posts, potsheds including a series of brick masonry walls indicating the existence of some architectural edifices. The objects of special interest in this site are (i) the exposition of several sets of sculptures of the same deity and of the same size. (ii) discovery of numerous miniature sivalingas and yonipithas of the same size and shape (iii) unearthing of a large group of very small terracotta sivalinga and (iv) discovery of celadon and kaolin potteries can provisionally be taken as indicating to the existence of a direct Assam-China trade-route in 11th-12th century AD.

In all probability a trend of architectural activity hewn out of natural rocks attained unusual momentum in Guwahati during 11th-12th century AD. Apart from a horde of
sculptures, friezes, stairways and temple-foundations on the rock of the rock of the Urvasi island in the midst of the Brahmaputra, both the banks of this river contain a good number of rock-cut sculptures. These are evidently part of the architectural legacy that this great city had acquired from the past.

2.3.3 Living Glories

From time immemorial Guwahati had witnessed all the major historical events of the Brahmaputra valley. Evidences show that the enemies led their war-campaign from the west to Assam throughout the medieval period and during the late-medieval period they gained momentum. When the Turkis captured Delhi in AD 1192, they with their might came out successful in subjugating the entire north India including Bengal by AD 1202. In AD 1205-6 they directed their campaigns towards Kamrupa and a decisive battle was fought on the north bank of the Brahmaputra within the greater Guwahati in which the entire Muhammadan army of 10,000 cavalry was annihilated. The details of this campaign has been recorded by the contemporary historian Minhas in his famous chronicle, the Tabaqat-I-Nasiri. To our misfortune, the local records on this glorious event are very scanty and the only evidence to it is a short rock-cut inscription of Saka 1127 (AD 1205) located at North Guwahati.

During the late-medieval Assam, Guwahati gained much importance, so much as that both the Ahoms and the Mughals tried to retain their hold on this city time and again even at the cost of heavy losses of life and resources. The Barphukan or the Ahom governor stationed in Guwahati enjoyed so much of power and prestige that at times he played the role of a kingmaker. The strategic importance of this city was so great that till now an elaborate systems of old moats and fortifications can be seen around this city, some with green glories of victory and sacrifice.
2.3.4 A Pilgrims' Paradise

The history of Guwahati is associated with the temples. Guwahati and its neighbourhood bound in old temples. All of these standing structures are the work of the late-medieval in their origin and the bases of all of them will go back at least to the 12th century AD if not earlier. The temples occupy positions which are naturally attractive and serene. The temples of Guwahati consist of three major classes, such as Saiva, Sakti and Vaisnava. Of them, the Saiva temples seem to be dominating. The Ugratara, Dirghesvari, Mangalachandi etc. are Sakti temples and they exist scattered in the heart of the city. But the highest concentration of Sakti temples is at Kamakhya on the top of the Nilachal Hill where ten forms of the Devi, known as Kali, Tara, Matangi, Dhumavati, Bagalamukhi, Bhubaneswari, Bhairabi, Sorashi, Chhinnamasta and kamala exist. In fact, Kamakhya is considered one of the greatest Saktipithas of India. The Vishnu temples are limited in this region, the best and the most attractive among them within easy reach being the two temples known as the Anantasayi and Kurma-Janardana temples at Asvakranta on the north bank of Guwahati. Of course, another historical temple namely the Janardana temple is located in the heart of the city. However, the pilgrims who are staunch followers of Vaisnavism may visit the small township of Hajo, about 30 km from Guwahati where exists the more famous Hayagriva-Madhava temple. Though historically unacceptable and archaeologically unauthenticated, the Bhutanese pilgrims consider some historical temples of Guwahati and its neighbourhood as the Buddhist monuments. They annually come to Umananda, Aswakranta, Kamakhya and the Hayagriva Madhava temples of Hajo and strangely believe that the Parinivana or the death of the Mahamuni or the Buddha took place at Hajo.

Some temple sites of Guwahati are spots of general attraction for the sightseers. The Bhubaneswari temple on the highest peak of the Nilachala hill helps the visitors
to enjoy a panoramic view of the city and the Brahmaputra. A visit to the Peacock island or the Umananda offers the pilgrims a pleasant cruise in a country boat, which also parallelly help them to explore the sand-bars and the rock-cut carving on the rocky outcrop of Urvasi. The hilly brook of the Vasisthasrarna with its babbling rapids refreshes the minds of those who visit it. Almost all the temples in and around Guwahati are located in natural settings which have brought peace and solace to the mind of the visitors through the ages.