

Aspects of the
Medieval
History
of
Assam

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Aspects of the Medieval History of Assam

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Lectures delivered at
INDIAN INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDY
RASHTRAPATI NIVAS, SHIMLA

LECTURE I

An Outline of the History of Ancient and Medieval Assam

Śri Sarasvatyaiḥ Namaḥ

(Adoration to the Goddess of Learning)

Sadasé Namaḥ

(Homage to the Learned Assembly)

In my lectures before you I propose to talk about two aspects of the medieval period of Assam that are of great significance but little known outside Assam. First, I propose to talk about the Āhoms, a branch of the great Thai race—or, discarding this much abused term—the great Thai people, and their rule in Assam for six centuries from AD 1228 to 1826. Secondly, I would like to introduce Śri Śaṅkaradeva, the great saint and reformer of Assam who brought the neo-Vaiṣṇava *Bhakti* movement to Assam in the 15th-16th century and heralded a new socio-political and religious era.

However, it appears desirable to me to first present a bird's eye-view of the history of Assam from the pre-historic times to the rule of Āhoms and the age of Śaṅkaradeva to enable us to see the Āhoms and Śaṅkaradeva in the proper historical perspective. It appears necessary to give this introduction, because, I believe, most of us have only a hazy and vague idea of the history of Assam. Most works on the history of India dismiss Assam in just a few sentences—be it the pre-history, the ancient India, the medieval period or the British period.

In fact, the study of regional histories in India has not received adequate attention both before and after Independence. The little that has been done has been mostly by the local scholars only and, therefore, lacks wider perspective and often suffers from parochialism and excessive emphasis on sub-Indian

nationalism. Many scholars and educational authorities seem to believe that the study of regional histories will give rise to divisive tendencies and will be harmful to the growth of Indian nationhood. To me, exactly the opposite appears to be the case. The lack of proper knowledge of the various regions hinders desirable interaction between them and contributes to their isolation and alienation. In case of the north-east the situation is particularly unsatisfactory, if not alarming. Even today, there is no dearth of educated people all over India to whom Assam conjures up the image of a land of magic and witchcraft, of untamed dangerous people and a land that is different from India (whatever their concept of 'India'). It is like the image of India as one of snake-charmers and the rope trick that is still perceived by some ignorant Westerners.

Please allow me to recount a personal experience only to bring home the point I am making. Way back in 1963, during my very first posting in Assam, at Jorhat, I had a visitor from U.P. A well-placed civil servant, he had come to Assam on a holiday. He told me that he wanted to meet some tribals but was disappointed to find none. I promised to show him one and the next morning I took him to meet my boss, the Deputy Commissioner, who belonged to the Khāsi tribe. My learned visitor was astonished to find a highly Westernised person who was speaking far better English than himself. He was even more astonished when told that the Deputy Commissioner was an M.A. in English literature and was selected to I.A.S. from the general category, i.e. without the benefit of reservation. I don't know whether my visitor was more astonished or disappointed. He had obviously expected to see spear-wielding, long-haired people in headgear of buffalo-horns jumping and shouting 'ho-ho' all over the roads of the town as one sees in the Hindi films.

In recent decades the situation has no doubt improved thanks to the Chinese invasion of 1962, better communications and improvement in general awareness but the ignorance about Assam and the other north-eastern States continues to be colossal throughout India and the notion that this area is different from the rest of the country deplorably still persists. This gives rise to estrangement and lack of fraternal feelings on the part of the

people outside the region and, on the part the insiders, a feeling of isolation and neglect. Militant movements demanding even separation from India are a natural corollary to such feelings aggravated by the propaganda that this region was never a part of India.

In today's presentation I will make an attempt to remove some misconceptions about the isolation of Assam by tracing the course of its history from the pre-historic times and its Indian context.

It is indeed almost impossible to condense the history of a few thousand years in a talk of just forty five minutes or so but in view of what I just said about most of us not being adequately informed about it, I venture to attempt the impossible like the little squirrel of Kalidasa trying to cross the ocean:

tīrshurdustaraṃ (mōhādu) dupēn āsmi sāgaraṃ

After all, we belong to the tradition in which the voluminous Śrīmad Bhāgavat is summarised in four ślokas—the Chatuḥślōkī Bhāgawat—and the Rāmāyaṇa in just one śloka—the Ēkaślōkī Rāmāyaṇa.

I would like to present the bare facts without getting into interpretations and controversies. In any case, not being a professional academic, I can well-afford to steer clear of the left and the right and also to bear th criticism that I am presenting more of a chronicle than history.

Let me first define or delineate the region we are talking about. By "Assam" I surely do not mean the present state of Assam. In the context of history, the term connotes a much larger area, surely including the present State. It is inevitable to be so, just as when we discuss the history of India we include the territories of Pakistan, Bangladesh and even Afghanistan and Myanmar. In our reference to Assam, we include, beside the present state of Assam, the states of Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. All these territories were parts of the Assam province of British India. The states of Manipur and Tripura also get included in our discussion whenever the facts so demand, even though they were princely states during the British days and thus not parts of the province of Assam.

It is customary to describe the geography—and even geology—of a region before narrating its history. I will try to do so very briefly.¹ Assam, broadly consists of two physical units: the north-eastern and the central hill tracts and the two valleys of the Brahmaputra and the Barāk. On the north of Assam lie the Eastern Himalayas reaching the highest altitude to 7756 metres at Namchu Burwa. The different parts of the sub-Himalayan region, comparatively lower in elevation, are named after the semi-Mongoloid tribes that inhabit these hills—the Bhuṭiās, the Akās, Daflās or Nishis, Abors or Ādis, Miris or Mishings and the Mishmīs. These hills comprise Arunachal Pradesh. The range continues towards the south-east and joins the Patkoi hills that form the natural boundary between Assam and Myanmar. The so-called Assam range in the middle of Assam, rarely rising over 2000 metres, is also occupied from the east to the west by the various tribes of the Nagās, Kūkīs, Jaintiās or Syntengs, Khāsīs, and Gārōs. On the south lie from north to south the Chin and Mizo hills, Chittagong Hill tracts and Hill Tipperah, the last two being in Bangladesh. Though hemmed on the three sides by mountain barriers Assam was linked with the neighbouring countries by several routes. Of the Assam-Burma routes in the east, the one that runs through Cachar and Manipur helped the migration of the racial elements from south-east Asia; another, viz., the Patkoi route was followed by the Thais—Āhoms in the 13th century and other Thai communities like the Khāmṭī, the Khāmjang, the Turung, the Āiton and the Phāke or Phakiāl in the 18th century. There is also a tradition that the Shāns or the Thais of Upper Burma invaded Assam and Manipur as early as the 8th century through this route. Of the Thais and particularly the Āhoms I propose to present a fuller account and my next lecture will be devoted entirely to this subject.

More frequented route from Assam was the one going to the west of the Brahmaputra valley that connected this region with the great indo-Gangetic plains as it does today. Aryan elements entered the Brahmaputra valley obviously through this route. The Brahmaputra valley has always been regarded as Assam proper—and often synonymous with it—although the other plains area, viz. The Barak valley or Cachar also have been a part of

Assam through the ages. The two valleys are separated by the Assam range that I just mentioned running east to west and were joined by routes cutting across this range in the olden days as today. On this route lie the habitat of the Karbis or Mikirs and the various other tribes of the great Bodo people.

We have ample evidence to show that there had been frequent intercourse between the peoples of the hills and the plains. The hill men depended by and large on the plains for their foodstuff and other necessities while the plainspeople used to purchase the forbearance and good behaviour of their neighbours by providing them their requirements." There has, therefore, been considerable inter-mixture between the two—racially, linguistically and culturally in general—and also existence of political relations of war and peace.

Before coming to the subject proper of today, a few words about pre-history—if for nothing else, to give this presentation a semblance of completeness.

Paleolithic sites have been discovered throughout the Assam range from Naga hills to Garo hills and also in Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur. Coming to the Brahmaputra valley we find that it is dotted with small isolated hillocks throughout its length of over 700 kms., from east to west, and a number of these have yielded neolithic materials that go to indicate that the neolithic people of Assam preferred to live on the hills and on high grounds well above the flood plains; they were rudimentary agriculturists, not equipped with the technique of cultivation in the wet lands of the plains, rather they practised shifting cultivation on the hill slopes.³ This practice persists even now on a large scale amongst all the tribals of the hilly areas from Arunachal Pradesh to Manipur and is known as "jhum" cultivation. We also have ample evidence of the existence of the megalithic cultures in the Assam range and their traces continue even to the present day. Thus we have the famous gigantic menhirs at Nartiang in the Jaintia hills in Meghalaya—believed to have been erected not more than 300 years ago—and the traces of this culture extend even to the plains areas in the Brahmaputra valley. The table stones near Jagi Road in the Nagaon district are most noteworthy in this regard.

The pre-historic stage of Indian history continued longer

in the eastern frontier including Assam.¹ The earliest settlers in Assam appear to be the branches of the great Bodo tribe whose habitat extended right upto the North Bengal and North Bihar in the west and to the East Bengal and Tripura in the east and the south.⁵ Having said so, the paucity of time prevents me from going into details of racial or ethnic composition of the people of our region at different ages. Suffice it to say that different branches of the great Sino-Tibetan speaking peoples, the Austric and possibly the Dravidian people also arrived here and when the Aryan speaking elements from the west came to settle here a great ethnic synthesis took place giving birth ultimately to the Assamese identity in the medieval period.⁶ We must, however, keep in mind that Assam was the main reservoir of the Mongoloid people who, in course of time, spread to the entire Hmalayan and sub-Himalayan regions right upto Himachal Pradesh and who were known by the generic term "*Kirāta*" in the Védic and Purāṇic India. They, along with the Aryans and Dravidians, played an important role in the evolution of the Indian identity—both physically and culturally—and thus they are the co-authors of the composite culture of India in the true sense of the term.⁷ Assam had to meet all the tribal movements from the east involving the advent into India of the Tibeto-Chinese speaking Mongoloids; and it was in Assam primarily that this great element in the formation of the Indian people became largely Indianised—particularly in the Brahmaputra valley, Assam with Nepal helped very largely in the absorption of this "*Kirāta*" element in the formation of the North Indian (Hindu) people.⁸ Suniti Kumar Chatterjee considers it to be Assam's great contribution to the synthesis of cultures and fusion of races that took place in India.⁹

Having noted Assam's place in pre-historic India let us now turn to the historical age. At the outset, let me say a few words about the periodisation of the history of Assam as it is not co-terminous with the periods of the general Indian history. In the context of Assam the ancient period is taken to be from the earliest times till the disintegration of the old Kāmarūpa kingdom towards the end of the 12th century. From the 13th century when the Āhoms came to Assam till the end of their rule in the early 19th century we regard as the medieval period of the history of

Assam. Thereafter, we have the British and modern periods as for the rest of India.

About the earliest historical times some facts are known only from the legends—both Purāṇic and folk. Western Assam was known as “Prāgyōtish” or “Kāmarūpa” in the period of epics. While the first name remained in use till the end of the 12th century AD, the other name “Kāmarūpa” persisted much longer and even today it is retained as the name of a district in Assam. These names are mentioned in Kauṭilya’s *Arthasāstra* also which gives us important information about the produce and manufactures of this country. One place in the region of Kāmarūpa is mentioned as *Swarnakudyā* where golden-hued silk was produced. Interestingly, the memory of this name persists in the name of a village, Sonkudihā which is located near Suālkuchī in the Kāmṛūp district of today’s Assam which is the biggest centre of silk production in the State.¹⁰ The golden-hued silk obviously refers to the mūgā silk which is produced only in Assam and nowhere else in the world. Regarding the name *Prāgyōtish* and its location there is considerable confusion because its location given in the epics and the *Purāṇas* do not tally.¹¹ In many texts it is located in the east while in some others it is shown to be in the north. The *Vālmiki Rāmāyana* at one place locates it even to the west of *Kishkindhā* and describes it to be surrounded by the sea. However, that there was a country known as Prāgyōtisha in the east with its capital at *Prāgyōtishapur* there is no doubt and its identification with the region of western Assam is also beyond doubt. There is a hypothesis that Prāgyōtish was originally located between the region south of Kashmir and north of Himachal Pradesh and certain people migrating from this region through the sub-Himalayan routes reached Assam.¹² They carried the names and their legends—mostly related to the *Mahābhārata*—with them and thus the *Prāgyōtish* in Assam was founded. It is like York and New York, England and New England and Cambridge, the original and Cambridge in the U.S.A. Certain common traditions prevalent in the Kinnaur and some other areas of Himachal Pradesh and Assam lend credence to this view. Thus we have the Rēṇukā lake and the āśram of *Jamadagni* in Himachal and Paraśurāma Kuṇḍa in the north-eastern corner of Assam, now in Arunachal Pradesh.

The kingdom of Śōṇitapur which was ruled by Bāṇāsura whose daughter, Ushā, was carried away by Krishṇa and married to this grandson Aniruddha is located in Himachal Pradesh as per the popular lore. In Assam also there is Tezpur that is supposed to be the Śōṇitapur of Mahābhārat, the word 'Tez' in Assamese meaning blood, the same as 'Śōṇit'. Then we have some places in Himachal Pradesh connected with Hiḍimbā of whom the Paṇḍava Bhīma got enamoured during the Paṇḍava's exile in the forest and by their union Ghaṭōtkacha was born. In Assam too there is Dīmapur, now in Nagaland, which is supposed to be Hiḍimbāpur, the abode of Hiḍimbā and her brother, Hiḍimb or Hiḍimbāsura. This was the principal seat of the Kachārīs, a Bodo tribe, ruling in the southern Assam in the medieval period. Interestingly, the Kacharis trace their origin from Bhīm and Hiḍimbā and the tribe is also known as *Hēramba* or *Hédamb*. Apart from such association of places and place-names in Himachal Pradesh and Assam being common, certain peculiarities common to the Assamese language and the dialects spoken in the Kinnaur region of Himachal Pradesh are also noticeable. The scholars subscribing to this hypothesis of migration, however, have yet to take note of another place-name, in Himachal, viz., *Kāmru*. This immediately reminds us of *Kāmarūpa* and would indicate that the said migration must have taken place when the name *Kāmarūpa* had already come into common usage. *Kāmru-Kamachchhā* is the common description for *Kāmarūpa-Kāmākhyā*.

At this stage I would also like to mention a few facts about the relation of *Kāmarūpa* and Kashmir that should serve as food for thinking over the hypothesis I have just presented. Kalhaṇa in his *Rājatarangīnī* informs us that Méghavāhana, the king of Kashmir in the 1st century AD had married a princess of Prāgjyōtish named Amritaprabhā who was a great devotee of the Buddha and erected a large stupa near Śrinagar.¹³ Most of us would find it difficult to visualise a matrimonial alliance between Kashmir and *Kāmarūpa* in the 1st century although in later times the relations between the extreme west and extreme east and also the east and south are not unknown. Thus Vāpyata, the father of Gōpāla, founder of the great Pāla dynasty of Bengal and Bihar came to the east from North-west Punjab.¹⁴ *Rājatarangīnī* also tells us that the

Kashmir King Lalitāditya Muktāpīḍa had invaded *Gauḍa* in the 8th century, imprisoned its king and treacherously murdered him. On getting news of this sad and provocative event, the followers of the unnamed *Gauḍa* king went all the way from Bengal to take revenge. They were surrounded in the temple of Parihāsa-Késava where they died fighting, being killed to a man, after performing prodigies of valour.¹⁵ It is difficult to give credence to such stories. But Amritaprabhā's story can be easily explained by the hypothesis of the original Prāgyōtisha being in the region of Kashmir-Himachal Pradesh. In this connection, I would also mention a very intriguing archeological find, viz., an inscription found in Gilgit in Kashmir (now in the Pak-occupied Kashmir) which mentions a king of the north-eastern frontier tract, *Śri Nava Surēndrāditya nandi dēva* who is described as *Bhagadatta vaṃśa sambhūta*.¹⁶ While the reference to the *Bhagadatta vaṃśa* can be easily explained on the basis of the original Prāgyōtish being in Kashmir-Himachal, the reference to the north-eastern frontier is really intriguing. North-east here might be referring to the north-east of the kingdom of Kashmir and not to the north-east of India. But in that case we shall also have to presume that the original Prāgyōtish kingdom surrounded Kashmir both on the South as well as north or north-east. Another but even less plausible proposition would be to presume that the migration under reference had taken place from the east to the west rather than the other way round. Let me proceed with our subject leaving the game of conjectures unfinished and wait for new sober evidence to come up.

Next to Prāgyōtish and Kāmarūpa the most important geographical name in Assam is that of the river Brahmaputra which is the life-line of Assam proper and on whose banks—both north and south—the civilisations developed from the neolithics age to the present day. Brahmaputra, is regarded as a *nada* and not *nadi* and as such a male river—the only male river in India, the other *nada*, viz., Sindhu, now flowing for most part in Pakistan. Brahmaputra, was also called Lauhitya. Thus, in *Raghuvamśa*, Kālidāsa, refers to Prāgyōtish and places it beyond Lauhitya. This river is even now also called *Lōhit* or *Luit*. *Lauhitya* or *Lohit* appears to be the sanskritised form of this word. At this point it would be

relevant to note that the names of many rivers in Assam begin with *ti* or *di*, like *Disāng*, *Dikrong*, *Dihing*, *Dikhow*, etc. The word *ti* or *di* in the Bodo language means water and thereby also river. *Luit* is just a variant of *Tilāo*, by which name the river is known in its upper reaches. As we have seen earlier, the Bodos are perhaps the earliest settlers in Assam and, therefore, the rivers bearing Bodo names should not surprise us. Even Brahmaputra is perhaps the Sanskritised form for the Bodo formation *Balam Bathar* which means gurgling noise.¹⁷

As regards the word Assam, its origin is obscure. The word came into use only during the Mughal period after the Tāi-Āhoms settled here. The Tāi-Āhom came from North Burma where they were known as *Shāns* and are so called even now. It is probable that on this side of the Patkoi range *Shān* became *Shām* and the country occupied by them came to be called *Āshām* by the people coming from the Mughal India according to Persian usage. From *Āshām* to *Āsām* and then to anglicised Assam were but quick steps. It is equally probable that *Asom*, the Assamese form of Assam, is derived from *Āhom*. Yet another hypothesis, that appears to be most plausible is that the word Assam comes from the Bodo formation *Hā-sām* that in the Bodo means low country, and indeed, through the ages, it is the lowlands of the Brahmaputra valley, as opposed to the hills on the north and on the south that have been considered to be the Assam proper.

These facts and surmises prompt us to think that it is not always appropriate to look for the roots of words and traditions in Sankṣrit—or what is described as the great Tradition. Often it is more worthwhile and logical to look for them in the indigenous tribal lore—the Lesser Tradition.

Before proceeding to outline the political history of our region I would like to say a few more words about the origin of certain words and legends. First, the name of *Prāgjyōtisha*. It could be the Sanskritised form of the Austric group of words *pāu* meaning hill + *ger* also meaning hill + *jō* meaning high and *tic* meaning long, thus the whole composition meaning the land of high and long hills.¹⁸ Vasudeva Sharan Agrawal had given an entirely new derivation for *Prāgjyōtisha*. He thinks that it is a variant of *prāg-jyōtika*.¹⁹ *Jyōtika* means a highway as in *Uttarajyōtika*

referring to the route leading to the cenral Asia through the north-west mentioned in the *Mahābhārata*. Thus *prāg-jyōtika* or *poorva-jyōtika* would mean the eastern passage. Convincing indeed, if we chose to rely on the Great Tradition. Kāmarūpa and Kāmākhyā are perhaps connected with an Austric basic word meaning "a grave, a corpse,"²⁰ the place-names being connected with the legend found in the *Purāṇas* of Satī's dead body being cut up in pieces and the *yōni* falling in the *Kāmākhyā* hill and the other story of the god of love, *Kāma* being burnt to ashes by Lord *Śiva* and regaining his life and form in this land, hence *Kāmarūpa*. What seems certain is that this country was connected in some way with the death or worship of the dead—it is likely that some legends of the Austric or the Bodo people were incorporated in the *Purāṇas*.²¹ Kāmākhyā, incidentally, situated on the Nīlāchal hill that is an offshoot of the Khasi hills on the south, was perhaps a goddess worshipped by the matriarchal khasis. *Kā* in khasi, an Austric tongue, denotes the feminine gender and *Kāmākhyā* appears to be the Sanskritised version of *kā-mei-khā* which means the supreme goddess on the hill.

Purāṇic as well as the popular folk traditions tell us that the earliest rulers of the land were of the Asura or Dānava clans, i.e. non-Aryan. Mahiraṅga Dānava is said to be the first ruler of the country. Of his lineage the last ruler was Ghaṭakāsur. Ghaṭaka was supplanted by Naraka who came from Vidēha or Mithilā in North Bihar. Legends describe him as the son of Viṣṇu in the Varāha or boar incarnation and the Earth or Bhūmi and hence he and his descendents are called Bhauma. Naraka is said to have been brought up by Janaka, the kind of Mithilā. A sober interpretation of the legend would appear to be that Naraka was a fugitive prince of Mithilā who defeated Ghaṭakāsur and founded his own dynasty in Prāgjyōtish or Kāmarūpa. It is stated in the *Purāṇas* that he became friendly with the *Asur* ruler, Bāṇa, of the neighbouring Śonitapur and under his influence gave up proper Vedic conduct and himself became an *Asura*. He was ultimately killed by Kṛṣṇa, an incarnation of Viṣṇu, even though his father Viṣṇu himself had installed him as the ruler of Prāgjyōtisha.

The association of Bhūmi and Janak is well known. Sitā is also said to have been born of Bhūmi and brought up by Janaka.

Considering the inter-relationship between Bhūmi, Janaka, Sītā and Naraka and Naraka's movement to the east of Mithilā, one is tempted to interpret these legends as allegories signifying the movement of the agriculturist Aryans from the west to the east, in which Great Extension, Vidéha or Mithilā was an important stop-over. Let us remember that Sītā means the furrow dug by the plough.

Naraka was succeeded by his son Bhagadatta who is the link between the legends and the history of Assam as all the three ruling dynasties of ancient Assam claim their lineage from Bhagadatta. He is respectfully mentioned in the *Mahābhārata* as a great warrior who, with his army of Kirātas and Chīnas, fought from the side of the Kauravas and was killed by Bhīma.

The earliest archaeological evidence of the kingdom of Kāmarūpa is found in the Allahabad pillar inscription of Samudragupta in the 4th century AD where it is enumerated as a frontier State alongwith Samatāṭa and Davāk, which was subjugated but not annihilated by the great Gupta conqueror. Incidentally, Davāk has been satisfactorily identified with the Central Assam region in the valley of Kapilī, a tributary of Brahmaputra where the name persists in the name of a place, Daboka, in the Na-gaon district.

The earliest inscriptions found in Assam itself are those of the Varman kings of whom the first was Pushyavarman or Pushyabhūti-varman. The most famous and the last ruler of this dynasty was Bhāskaravarman in the 7th century. We know quite a lot about him from Harshacharit of Bāṇa on the one hand, and on the other, from the accounts of the Chinese pilgrim, Hieuen-Tsang. For the first time since Bhagadatta, and really for the first time in the historical period, we find Assam playing an important role on the national stage of India. Bhāskaravarman was a close ally and friend of Harsha of Kānyakubja and alongwith him, one of the four greatest rulers of his age, the other two being Śāśāṅka of Gauḍa or West Bengal and Chālukya Pulakéśin of the South. Bhāskaravarman helped Harsha in punishing Śāśāṅka who had treacherously killed Harsha's brother. The outcome of the alliance between Kānyakubja and Kāmarūpa was undoubtedly a crushing defeat of Śāśāṅka and his exile to the Kāliṅga country. His capital

city, Karṇasuvarṇa in Puṇdravardhana Bhukti was occupied by Bhāskaravarman as we find him issuing land grants from this place.²² In fact, these land grants are really renewals of earlier grants given by his forefather Bhūtivarman or Mahābhūtivarman which would imply that parts of the Gauḍa territory where these lands were situated though not the capital city had come under the Kāmarūpa kingdom during some earlier conflicts. Bhāskaravarman's copper plates of Nidhāmpur and Dūbī conclusively prove these facts. Bhāskaravarman's inscriptions provide us with very useful information on many aspects of the contemporary social, political, economic and religious life of the region. But of immediate interest is the fact that he traces the lineage of his forefather Pushyavarman, the founder of the dynasty, to Naraka and Bhagadatta. Clearly an attempt to win over the hearts and minds of the local population! Bhāskaravarman ruled from about 600 AD to 650 AD. It may be possible to predate his accession to the Prāgjyōtish throne by a few years to 593-94 AD. Computation on the basis of the geneology given in his inscriptions and another inscription of Bhūtivarman, would place Pushyavarman in the middle of the 4th century, i.e., soon after the conquest of Samudragupta. Bhāskaravarman was the 13th ruler of the dynasty and ascending the throne probably in 593-94 AD he enlarged the kingdom into an empire as large in area as that of the contemporary Harsha. It extended upto Kosi river in North Bihar and included the neighbouring States of Davāk and other tribal territories. Apart from Gauḍa or West Bengal wrested from Śaśāṅka it also included East Bengal or Vaṅga which is indicated by the provenance of his copper plate charter of Nidhānpur which is in the Sylhet district, now in Bangladesh. His capital, Prāgjyōtishpur is definitely identified with modern Gauhati and its name probably survives in Dispur, which is a suburb of Gauhati. Hieuen-Tsang has given an elaborate description of this city, the kingdom and the ruler. Some scholars have opined that Ādiśura, the powerful ruler mentioned in some later day inscriptions of Bengal, was none other than Bhāskaravarman.²³

In this context let me also indulge in the luxury of proposing a hypothesis. In some late records of Assam there is the mention of a Kāmarūpa Saṃvat but no details of the same are available as

yet.²¹ On the other hand, what is called the Banglā Samvat or San commenced in the year 593-94 AD—at present we are living in the year 1406. Who established this era is not known. I venture to suggest that it was none other than Bhāskaravarmā who established this era from the year of his ascension to the throne of Kāmarūpa-Prāgyōtish and who during his reign extended his empire to include substantial parts of Vaṅga and Gauḍa. When Kāmarūpa lost its importance this era fell into disuse and the Gupta and the Śaka eras became popular in Assam but it continued in the regions of Vaṅga and Gauḍa and, in course of time, acquired the name of Banglā Samvat.

Bhāskarvarman's end was also the end of a dynasty that had seen many powerful rulers who had performed more than one *Aśvamedha* sacrifice.²⁵ After an anarchy of a few years the Kāmarūpa throne was occupied by Śālastambha around 655-660 AD and a new dynasty was born. Interestingly, in the inscriptions of this dynasty all the rulers claim their descent from Naraka and Bhagadatta—perhaps a passport to legitimacy to rule Kāmarūpa-Prāgyōtish! The most important ruler of this dynasty was Harshavarman who must have ruled about 725 AD to 760 AD. He has been convincingly identified with Harshadēva mentioned in the Paśupati inscription of Nepal's Lichchhavi king Jayadeva-II in which the queen consort, Rājyamati, is proudly described as '*Bhagadattarāja-Kulajā*' and also '*Gauḍoḍrādikalīṅgakōśalapatiḥ Śrī Harshadēvātmaajā*'. The inscription is dated 748 AD.²⁶ There is no evidence of the existence of any Harshadeva in Orissa or anywhere else in eastern India in this period except our Harshavarman of Kāmarūpa. Also, there is no other dynasty claiming descent from Naraka and Bhagadatta. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to hold that Harshavarman really extended his empire to Oḍra, Kālīṅga and Kōśala regions while Gauḍa may have been inherited from the earlier dynasty. One argument against this identification is that while the epigraph mentions the States of the Orissa region why is it silent about Kāmarūpa itself. The reason is not far to seek. The panegyrist under instructions from the royal couple was emphasising only the character of Rājyamati's father as a conquerer. That he was the king of Kāmarūpa was so obvious that it needed no mention. After all, he was composing for the

contemporary people and not for the researchers of the 20th century! That he was an ambitious expansionist ruler also seems to be supported by the fact that he soon came into conflict with another *digvijayin*, viz., Yaśōvarman of Kannauj at whose hands he met his end.²⁷ Of the Śālastambha dynasty we know the names of 15 rulers although the epigraphs of the next dynasty state that there were 21 kings in this line. The Śālastambha rule ended with Tyāgasimha around 900 AD. A significant feature of the epigraphs of the Śālastambha dynasty is that in their geneological descriptions respect is shown to their maternal side also.²⁸ Thus every king is described as '*mātāpitṛpādānudhyāt*'. This would imply that their maternal side was as important as the paternal line. In other words, they may have married into matriarchal communities. They were also non-Aryans as they are described as '*mlechchhādhinātha*'.²⁹ Even today the hills of Meghalaya to the south of the Brahmaputra valley are occupied by the Khasis, the Jaintias and the Garos, all matriarchal tribes. I would suggest that Śālastambha belonged to a Bodo tribe who had married in the family of a Khasi or Garo Chief and thereby acquired greater military power—enough to enable him to occupy the throne vacated by Bhāskaravarman. The subsequent rulers perhaps continued to marry in these tribes of the hills in the south. The reason why they have not mentioned the names of their queens like the rulers of the earlier Pushyavarman dynasty or the Guptas did was perhaps because to the outside world they did not want to emphasise their tribal origins and relations. At the same time by remembering their *mātrkula* in all their epigraphs they were satisfying their matriarchal allies and ensuring their continued support. Some diplomacy! Just like the great Samudragupta describing himself as *lichchhavidauhitra* just to give honour and importance to his *mātrkula* of *lichchhavis*.

At this stage it is relevant to note that around the year 737 AD a new dynasty emerges in Orissa, viz., that of Bhaumakaras. They also declare Bhagadatta as their ancestor and call themselves by the epithet Bhauma.³⁰ Since their names ended with the suffix *Kara* like Śivākar, Śubhākar, etc., the dynasty is referred to as Bhauma-Kara. Considering these facts alongwith the Paśupati inscription of Rājyamati and the various dates involved, it would

not be fanciful to presume that after his conquest of the Orissa region soon after his accession in 735 AD. Harsha appointed some member of his own family as Viceroy who became the founder of the Bhauma-Kara line and independent of his master in due course. It is interesting to note that the first king of this dynasty is described in all the epigraphs simply as Mahārāja and not Mahārājādhirāja which implies his subordinate status. Great similarities between the plastic arts of Assam and Orissa from this period and the close similarity between the Assamese and the Oriya languages, both of which started to evolve around this period, would lend support to my hypothesis.

The last ruler of the Śālastambha dynasty, Tyāgasimha seems to have died intestate throwing the country once again into a state of turmoil and anarchy. Around the year 900 AD we find that the elders of the country being concerned at the state of affairs decided to elect a scion of the royal family as the king.³¹ This was Brahmapāla who established the third and last dynasty of ancient Assam that lasted for two centuries. The only other example of the election of a king in early history of India is that of Gopāla of the Pāla dynasty of Bengal that took place about a century earlier. Eight rulers of the Brahmapāla dynasty ruled till about 1100 AD. The Pālas of Kāmarūpa have left behind a large number of copper plate and stone image inscriptions. They also claim their descent from Bhagadatta and one epigraph seems to imply that it is they who really belonged to the line of Naraka and Bhagadatta and, were, therefore, the legitimate rulers of Kāmarūpa and the Śālastambha's line was really a line of usurpers. There is room to surmise that Brahmapāla was really a descendent of the old Varman line since the elders were looking for a scion of the royal lineage to place on the throne.

Before coming to the period after 1100 AD it would be interesting to take note of the capital city of these dynasties. Prāgyōtishapur was also known by the name Kāmarūpanagar and it was the capital city of the first dynasty of the Varmans. During the rule of the Śālastambha dynasty the capital was shifted to Haruppéśwar or Haḍappéśwar which has been identified with modern Tezpur on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. Thereafter, during the Brahmapāla dynasty, the second ruler

Ratnapāla founded a new city called Śrī Durjaya and shifted his capital there. It has been identified with the ruins at modern North Gauhati.³²

There is reason to believe that the ancient city of Prāgyōtishpur was spread over both banks of the Brahmaputra while the Gauhati city of today has shrunk to the south bank. Yet, the settlement on the north bank opposite Gauhati is named North Gauhati. It is likely that in the ancient days the main habitation of the city was on the north bank.

Between the rulers of Kāmarūpa and Gauḍa there was a constant struggle for supremacy, sometimes Kāmarūpa having the upper hand and at other times, Gauḍa. Thus we find that the fifth king of the Brahmapāla dynasty, viz. Gopāla, had his capital at Haḍappaka which is clearly the same as Haruppéśwar. It would appear that Gopāla being overpowered by the Gauḍa ruler was forced to evacuate the capital city of his ancestors, Śrī Durjaya and to recede to the city of the earlier dynasty. This may also be a reminder to the fact that he really descended from the ancient Varman dynasty.

Finally, Ramapāla, the Gauḍa ruler dethroned the eighth and last ruler of the Brahmapāla dynasty named Jayapāla and set up a vassal at Kāmarūpa named Tiṅgyadéva. This vassal, however, revolted soon and there began a period of alternate rules of the successors of Tiṅgyadéva and the rulers of Gauḍa. This state of affairs continued throughout the 12th century.³³ Inevitably, the once mighty empire of Kāmarūpa ceased to exist even as a kingdom and disintegrated into small independent principalities. One of these, that of the people called Khens, was of some consequence and the chiefs of this community established their seat at a new city naming it Kamatāpur and styled themselves as Kamatéswar or Kāmarūpéswar. With the disintegration of the Kāmarūpa kingdom the ancient period of the history of Assam comes to its end. By this time the glorious days of Bengal had also passed into history and it was reduced to a province—not even a feudatory state—of the Afghan rulers of Delhi.

In the very first years of the 13th century we find Kāmarūpa being invaded by the Muslims. The Kanāi Barsī Bowa rock inscription in North Gauhati records the annihilation of the

Turks as follows:

Śākēturaga yugmésē madhumāsa trayōdaśē
Kāmarūpaṃ samāgatya turushkāḥ Kshayamāyayuh

meaning "on the 13th day of Madhumāsa, i.e., Phalgun, in the Śaka year 1127 the Turushkas invaded Kāmarūpa and were destroyed".³⁴ This corresponds to the February or March of 1205 AD and in all probability refers to the invasion of Bakhtiyār Khiljī who was the Governor of Bengal and who later destroyed the universities of Nalanda and Vikramaśila. Some Muslim chronicles record Barthu or Prithu as the ruler who had vanquished Bakhtiyār. Prithu was perhaps a Khen King. In the year 1226 Sultan Ghayāsuddin Iwāz led another expedition into Kāmarūpa and in 1257 the invasion of Ikhtiyāruddin Yuzbek Tughril Khan took place.³⁵ With these invasions Assam's first contact with the Muslims started. We do not know much about the results of these invasions but that need not bother us much because we must now turn our attention to the eastern Assam where events of much greater significance were taking place.

In the year 1228, a Tai or Thai prince named Sukaphā with a few thousand followers including their family members crossed the Patkoi hills on the Assam-Burma border and entered the valley of Brahmaputra. They came to be called Āhoms and Sukaphā founded a dynasty that ruled over Assam till 1826. Sukaphā's was not an invasion as such, rather it was a migration of the Thais from Upper Burma in search of a land to settle down though Sukapha, being a prince, was consciously searching for a country where he could establish a kingdom. Sukapha's expedition immediately reminds us of Babar's expedition in the north-west three centuries later. Sukapha's objectives appear to be the same as those of Baber. The Āhoms and their rule is the subject matter of my next talk. For today, therefore, it is sufficient to state that in course of time, the Āhoms became completely Indianised and staunch Hindus and merged with the local population to give rise to the Assamese identity based primarily on the Assamese language. The Āhoms successfully resisted all attempts of the Afghan and Mughal rulers to establish their rule except for a couple of short spells in the 17th century in some parts of Assam. Śrī Śaṅkaradeva gave a new

socio-religious ethos with significant political implications during the Āhom days. Again at this stage, I refrain from saying much about him because Śrī Śaṅkaradeva and his contribution is the theme of my third and last lecture.

A very significant point that emerges from our study so far is that Assam managed to remain outside of the three great empires that India has seen, viz., the Maurya, the Gupta and the Mughal. Some mischevious elements have tried to make much of this fact and abuse history by saying that Assam was never a part of India and making it as the basis of their separatist demand. True, Assam did not come under the rule of the central authority till the advent of the British, but that is true of many parts of the country particularly in the far south. On the other hand, Afghanistan and Burma were ruled by the central authority at different periods of history. If the political criterion of being ruled by the central power is accepted we should send our troops to those countries and take them over. Clearly, it is an inverted, if not perverted, argument. India can be conceived essentially as a cultural entity, its nationhood not being based on the modern political concepts but being much deeper and Assam has always been a part of this entity, often contributing to its definition and creation.

I am sure the squirrel of Kālidāsa has not been able to cross the ocean but I do hope that I have been able to present a fair idea of the history of Assam from the pre-historic times till the Āhom period which should enable us to see Assam in the Indian context and as an integral and ancient part of this great nation. How Assam has always remained in the sentiments of the people of India as a part of their holy land we shall try to explore in my next two talks. Today's presentation, hopefully, will provide the necessary backdrop for our exploration.