UNIT 1: SOURCES OF ANCIENT ASSAM

UNIT STRUCTURE

1.1. Learning Objectives

1.2. Introduction

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1.8 Further Reading

1.9. Answers to check your progress

1.10. Model Questions

1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- identify the various source materials for the study of Ancient Assam
- discuss the literary sources and archaeological sources of Ancient Assam
- describe the foreign sources for the study of Ancient Assam

1.2 INTODUCTION

In this unit we are going to discuss about the sources of ancient Assam in brief. The history of ancient Assam roughly covers the period from the days of the Epics to the early part of the 13th century A.D.

For an in-depth study of the history of the ancient period of Assam, we have to depend upon different types of sources. The various sources that help in the reconstruction of the historical past of Ancient Assam can be mainly divided into two types- Literary and Archaeological.

1.3 LITERARY SOURCES

Literary sources are a very important source of information for the

Vikramankadevacharita, Kalhana's *Rajtarangini, Kathasaritsagara* by Somadeva, *Brihatsamhita* by Varahmihir and Sandhyakaranandi's *Ramacharita*.

The Buddhist or Jain literature too throws light on the history of Ancient Assam but it has yet to be corroborated by other evidences. The *Nikayas* mentions *Lohicca* which is identified as Lauhitya in connection with two Brahmanas who came to the greater kingdom of Magadha. The Buddhist literature associates ancient Assam with the *Mahaparinirvana* of the Buddha, which is said to have taken place at modern Hajo.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1: Which Purana mentions Kamarupa as a pilgrimage centre?

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Q2: Mention the names of some of the Tantrik - Buddhist literatures?

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Q3: Name the author of *Brihatsamhita*?

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1.5 FOREIGN LITERARY SOURCES:

The works of foreign writers refer to the land of Kamrupa and its people. But it is difficult to identify the places and people mentioned in them. *Herodotus mentions the Kalatiai along with Gangaridae and Prasioi of Assam. Megasthenes and Strabo refer to the Derdai of the east*, who were noted for their working in gold. It is probable that the reference is to some hill people of this region. Pliny in his *Natural History* refers to a number of people of the frontier and trans-Himalayan regions, who can be identified with some Tibeto-Burman tribes of Assam. In the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* and Ptolemy's *Geography,* we find references to people and places which may possibly be identified as being located in ancient Assam.

The Chinese works were another important source. I-Tsing in his account refers to King Devavarma of Eastern India who held sway over the Nalanda region. This Devavarma has been identified with King Avantivarman.

impressed on clay seals. No genuine history of ancient Assam can be written without the epigraphic evidences which are reliable to a great extent. Hence, as historical sources inscriptions have great significance. The local epigraphs or inscriptions of Assam are found in many numbers. They are engraved on copper plates, stone tablets, rocks, pillars, outer parts of caves, temples and other buildings.

More than fifty inscriptions belonging to the early period have so far been discovered. The *Tezpur Rock Inscription* of king Harjaravarman is the earliest known dated inscription of ancient Assam. It is dated 510 of the Gupta era corresponding to 829 A.D. Most of these inscriptions are copper plate grants. Among this are the *Umachal Rock Inscription*, *Barganga Rock Inscription* and *Doobi Copper Plates*, which provide information about the Varman dynasty. For the history of the Salastambhas, we have the *Tezpur Rock Inscription*, *Hayungthal Copper Plate*, *Tezpur Copper Plate* and *Parbatiya Copper Plates*. The history of the Pala dynasty can be known from the *Caratbari Copper Plates*, *Bargaon Copper Plates*, *Soalkuchi Copper Plates* and *Guwahati Copper Plates*.

There are some other local inscriptions providing information about ancient Assam. The prominent ones are – the *Kamauli* grant, the *Assam Plates* and the *Kanai Barasi Bowa Rock Inscriptions*. The *Kamauli grant* of Vaidyadeva (c.1126-1140A.D.) found at Varanasi records the victory of Mayana, the general of the Gauda ruler Ramapala, over the king of Kamarupa and Vaidyadeva's conquest of the western part of the kingdom of Kamarupa. The *Assam Plates* of Vallabhadeva (c.1180-1200 A.D.) give the names of three kings who were probably the successors of Vaidyadeva. The *Kanai Barasi Bowa Rock Inscription* dated 1205 A.D. records the destruction of the Turkish army while invading Kamarupa.

Some contemporary inscriptions from other parts of India too contain information on the history of early Assam. In the *Allahabad Prasasti* of Samudragupta the name of Kamarupa occurs as a frontier kingdom, whose king owed allegiance to king Samudragupta of his own accord. The *Mandasore Inscription* of Yasodharman mentions Yasodharman's invasion upto the neighbourhood of the Lauhitya. The *Aphsad Inscription* of Adityasena

non-Aryan elements in Assam. Old monuments in between the period 5th to the 12th Century A.D. are found scattered throughout the land. These consist of remains of architecture and fortifications, sculptured designs and icons of various deities. As a subject of historical study, they are useful not only for their artistic value but also for the light they throw on the religious conditions of the people. The temples and images of the various deities of different faiths supply us with information about the state of social and religious life of the people.

Some of the prominent monuments are the door frames found at Dah-Parvatia, remains of a gigantic Sun temple at Tezpur, Buddhist, Saivate, Shakti and Vaisnavite shrines lying scattered throughout the state. Only few places have been satisfactorily excavated. At Dah Parvatiya near Tezpur some early sculptures and statues were discovered of which some belong to the Gupta age. A few years back, a good number of remains were unearthed at Narakasurgaon. Then at Ambari in the city of Guwahati, beautiful architectural remains of the ancient period came to light along with an abundance of icons of Mahisamardini Durga, Surya and Indra.

Thus, the ancient architecture and monuments help us a lot to understand the evolution of the artistic and cultural development of our ancestors. These also inform us about different schools of art, its development and the amount of foreign influence upon it.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q6: Which is the earliest known dated inscription of ancient Assam?

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Q7: Name the Rock Inscription that records the destruction of the Turkish army while invading Kamarupa?

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Q8: The Silimpur Stone inscription was issued by whom?

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Q9: The Bhagalpur Grant belongs to which ruler?

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(iii) Minhajuddin Siraj ———————— (b) Tabaqat-i-Nasiri

(iv) Hiuen Tsang ———————— (d) Si-Yu-Ki

Ans to Q. No. 5:

i. Strabo

ii. Tabaqat-i-Nasiri

Ans to Q. No. 6: The *Tezpur Rock Inscription*

Ans to Q. No. 7: The *Kanai Barasi Bowa Rock Inscription*

Ans to Q. No. 8: Prahasa

Ans to Q. No. 9: Narayanapala of Gauda



1.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Very Short Questions:

Q1. Who was Prahasa?

Q2. Name a few Sanskrit literary texts which throw light on the ancient history of Assam?

Q3. The *Kanai Barasi Bowa Rock Inscription* dates back to which period or time?

Q4. Where is the Pasupati Temple Inscription situated?

B) Short Questions:

Q1. What is recorded in the Allahabad Prasasti?

Q2. Why is Si-Yu-Ki an important literary source?

C) Long Questions:

Q1. Explain the importance of the numismatic sources in reconstructing the history of Ancient Assam?

Q2. Explain the political history of Ancient Assam through the Rock Inscriptions left behind?

Q3. Describe the works of the foreign travelers in understanding the history of Ancient Assam?

Q4. Discuss the significance of the indigenous texts in writing the history of Ancient Assam?

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