UNIT 3: RULING DYNASTIES OF ANCIENT ASSAM

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3.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- describe the ruling dynasties in Ancient Assam
- explain in details about the Varmana, the Salastambha and the Pala rulers
- discuss about the political situation during the rule of earlier dynasties in Ancient Assam

3.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we are going to study about the political history of Ancient Assam through a brief study of the ruling dynasties that ruled over the kingdom known as Pragjyotisha and Kamarupa. The Varmans (c.350-650 C.E.), Salastambhas (c.655-900 C.E.) and the Palas (c.900-1100 C.E.) were the earliest known ruling dynasties of ancient Assam.

Let us begin with the Varmana dynasty.

3.3. THE VARMANAS

In the middle or later half of the 4th century A.D, the Varmans were able to carve out a kingdom in the Kamarupa region of ancient Assam.

Unable to face the combined attack, Sasanka fled away to Orissa where he continued to rule till 619-620 A.D. By this victory Gauda with its capital city of Karnasuvarna came to the possession of Bhaskaravarman. To commemorate the occasion, he issued from his victorious camp at Karnasuvarna the famous Nidhanpur grants reconfirming the land grants made by Bhutivarman in Pundravardhana.

Later Bhaskaravarman too participated in the religious assembly at Kanauj and religious convocation at Prayaga arranged by Harshavardhana. The Chinese pilgrim Hiuen-Tsang visited the kingdom of Kamarupa and stayed at the court of king Bhaskaravarman. The Chinese pilgrim was very much pleased with the hospitality of Bhaskaravarman and with the peace and prosperity prevailing in the kingdom of Kamarupa. Bhaskaravarman was a celibate and died leaving no successor to the throne and thereby marked the end of the rule of the Varmans.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1: Name the first ruler of the Varman dynasty?

Q2: Pushyavarman was succeeded by which ruler?

Q3: Bhaskaravarman made an alliance with which ruler and against whom?

Q4: The Prayaga religious convocation was arranged by whom?

Q5: Name the Chinese pilgrim that visited the kingdom of Kamrup during the time of Bhaskaravarman?

3.3 THE SALASTAMBHAS

With the death of Bhaskaravarman, the kingdom of Kamarupa passed under the rule of the Mlechchhas. As indicated in the *Bargaon Copper Plate* of Ratnapala (a king of the Pala dynasty which succeeded the Salastambhas), the chief of the Mlechchhas, Salastambha (c. 655-670 A.D) laid the foundation of the rule of a new dynasty called the Salastambhas after his name.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q6: Fill in the blanks:

(i) The ..... of Ratnapala states that the dynasty of Salastambha had 21 kings.

(ii) ..... built a lofty temple for *Hetuka Sulin.*

(iii) ..... was the last ruler of the Salastambha dynasty.

(iv) ..... was the first Kamarupa king to assume high sounding title *Maharaja-dhiraja Paramesvara Paramabhattaraka.*

3.5 THE PALAS

After the death of Tyagasimha it was decided that someone from the race of Naraka should be appointed as the ruler of Kamarupa. Under such a situation Brahmapala (c.900-920 A.D) was elected as the king due to his proclaimed kinship with the Bhauma-Naraka clan. The Pala rulers to show their relations with the earlier Bhauma-Naraka kings added the word 'Varman' after Pala in their names.

Brahmapala was possibly a governor in the western part of the kingdom. In the inscriptions of his son Ratnapala, Brahmapala is described as a great warrior and is styled as Maharajadhiraja. The *Bargaon Copper Plate* of Ratnapala records that Brahmapala abdicated in favour of his son, Ratnapala. Ratnapala (c.920-960 A.D) was a powerful ruler of the Pala dynasty.

In his three grants namely, *Caratbari Copper Plate*, *Bargaon Copper Plates* and *Soalkuchi Copper Plates* Ratnapala is described as *Paramesvara-Paramabhattaraka-Maharajadhiraja* Ratnapalavarmandeva indicating his imperial status. It is known from the *Gachtal Copper Plates* of his great grandson Gopala that Ratnapala defeated king Rajyapala of Gauda. He was succeeded by his grandson Indrapala.

In the *Gachtal Copper Plates* of Gopala it is stated that Indrapala defeated king Kalyanachandra, son of Sri Chandra of Vanga (Bengal) of the



3.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you have learned about,

- the ruling dynasties of ancient Assam which included the Varmanas, Salastambhas and the Palas.
- the political developments in Kamarupa between the fourth and the twelfth century A.D. have been discussed in detail so that a comprehensive account is obtained regarding the state of affairs during this period.
- the ancient kingdom of Kamarupa was ruled by the Varman, the Salastambha and the Pala dynasties, besides other minor kings.

3.7 FURTHER READING

1) Barpujari, H.K.(2003)*: The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vol. I, II 2nd edn, Publication Board Assam, Guwahati.
2) Baruah, S.L.,(1996): *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi.
3) Bhuyan, A.C., (1999): *Political History Assam*, Publication Board Assam, Vol. I, II 2nd edn, Guwahati.
4) Choudhury, P.C., (1959): *The History of Civilization of the people of Assam to the 12th century A.D.*



3.8CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No. 1: Pushyavarman

Ans to Q No. 2: Samudravarman

Ans to Q No. 3: Harshavardhana of Thaneswar against Sasanka

Ans to Q No. 4: Harshvardhana

Ans to Q No. 5: Hiuen Tsang

Answer to Q No. 6:

i. The *Bargaon Copper Plates*

ii. Harjaravarman