UNIT 4: SOCIETY, ECONOMY, RELIGION AND ADMINISTRATION OF ANCIENT ASSAM

UNIT STRUCTURE

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4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- explain the social conditions of ancient Assam,
- describe the economic system that prevailed in ancient Assam,
- discuss the religious life of the people and the administrative system of ancient Assam.

4.2 INTRODUCTION

In the earlier unit, you learnt about political dynasties and the kings ruling over the land, popularly known as Kamarupa. In this unit we will learn about the social conditions, the economic system, religious affairs and administration that existed in ancient Assam. It focuses on the non-political aspects of the day to day life of the people.

4.3 SOCIETY IN ANCIENT ASSAM

The mixed migration of the Aryans and the Brahmanas that began in the later part of the fifth century A.D. influenced the culture of Ancient Assam. The caste system in ancient Assam was not strictly adhered to. The society

Women wore two garments in the upper and lower part of the body. The women adorned themselves with ornaments like *kasturi, kinkini*, necklace of beads, etc. They used *kundalas* and *nupuras*.

The people of ancient Assam knew about the art of dyeing both yarn and cloth. The *Kalika Purana* mentions the use of garments of blue and red for religious purpose. The dyeing of cloth was very much common even among the hill tribes of Assam. Dice was a popular indoor game among the people. Hunting and fishing were very much popular. Dancing and music were popular amusement.

There were two types of inheritance system: the *mitakshara* and the *dayabhaga* which varied according the tribe. According to the *mitakshara* system, a child inherited the ancestral property at the time of its birth, while in the *dayabhaga* system the son could claim the property after the death of his father. As for the burial practices, the dead body was buried but after the influence of Vedic Hinduism, cremation of the body was practiced. This ritual differed among the different tribes of the region.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1: The society of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa was based on which system?

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Q2: Mention the popular form of marriages prevalent in ancient Assam?

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Q3: The *vesyas* are mentioned in which inscription?

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Q4: What was the name of the upper garment worn by men of upper class in ancient Assam?

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Q5: What led to the change in the burial practice that was followed in ancient Assam?

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Assam was with the neighbouring states and foreign countries like Sri Lanka, Myanmar (Burma), China and Tibet. The chief articles of trade were silk cloth, lac, aloe wood, musk, gold, ivory, etc. All the business transactions were carried on by barter. The *Tezpur Rock Inscription* of Harjaravarman indicates that cowrie shells were used for payment of fines and other petty transactions.

Gold washing and jewellery making seems to be important occupations of the period, Gold was found in abundance in many rivers of Assam. The *Tezpur grant* mentioned that Lauhitya-Sindhu carried gold dust from the huge golden blocks of Kailasa Mountains.

The *Tabaquat-i-Nasiri* mentioned about numerous images of gold and silver and of a huge image of beaten gold. The *Bargaon Rock Inscription* of Ratnapala mentioned about the existence of copper mine within his kingdom which yielded him considerable income. The abundance of sculptural and architectural remains indicates the presence of stone masons and stone carvers. Thus a large number of people lived on metal working in ivory engraving and stone carving.

Various minor craft such as the brick making, carpentry, working in ivory, bell metal, and cane were the other occupations of the people. The carpenters of ancient Assam were skilful workers. The ivory and bell metal products of Assam had a great demand both inside and outside the kingdom of Kamarupa. Another important product was bamboo. The epigraphs mentioned about the bamboo forests as marking the boundary line of denoted lands. Epigraphs mentioned that pottery was an important craft in the villages. The *Harshacharita* refers to leather workers and distillers of wine. The forests of Assam supplied resins, aromatic woods etc to the rest of India and abroad. Pragjyotisha also produced Red Sandal. Agaru was found abundantly in Assam. Musk was produced in Assam.

The people of ancient Assam also knew about the art of dyeing which was made of lac, indigo and other products. The lac culture was a specialty of ancient Assamese people. The epigraphs also mentioned clans of professional weavers called *Tantavayas* who were expert in weaving. The art of rearing cocoons for manufacture of various silk cloths was also known

the religious system, giving rise to special cults and sectarian rites and beliefs.

The earliest Hindu religion that prevailed in ancient Kamarupa was Saivism. It was the dominant religion of the ruling dynasties. The *Kalika Purana* mentioned sects of Saivas in Assam, viz, the Kalikas and Pasupatas. The *Yogini-Tantra* of 16th century tells about the other two sub sects of Saivism namely, the Kaulas and Avadhutas dual worship of Siva and Shakti. Siva was a very popular deity amongst both the aborigines and Aryanised people. King Vanamalavarman repaired the lofty temple of Hetuka Sulin (Saiva). In the *Gachtal* inscription, king Indrapala is mentioned as constructing a series of white washed temples dedicated to Shiva. The tradition of Devadasis was one of the special features of Saiva cult that prevailed in ancient Assam.

Saktism is the cult of worshipping female goddess as the supreme deity in her various forms as Devi Durga, Kali, Kalika, Kamakhya, Tara etc. The *Kalika Purana* refers to many other seats of Devi worship and among them the most important was the temple of Tamreswari at Sadiya, where the goddess in her Kesaikhaiti (eater of raw flesh) form was propitiated with human and animal sacrifice. This goddess is known as Dikkarvasini in the Tantras and Puranas.

The worship of Surya or the Sun God was also prevalent in ancient Assam as referred in the *Markandeya Purana* where the king Rajyavardhana offered prayers to the sun god to restore his youth. Among the other Brahmanical deities worship of Surya occupied a very prominent position. The *Kalika Purana* gives evidences of the worship of the Sun God as it refers to the Raviksetra on the Tattva hill which is now identified as Sri Surya Pahar. Pragjyotisha was the centre of sun worship as is mentioned in the Griha Sutras. According to Taranath, before the introduction of Buddhism, the people of Kamarupa were sun worshippers.

Vaishnavism existed in Assam from very early times. Pragjyotisha had long been associated with Vishnu worship. Naraka is said to have traced his descent from the Boar incarnation of Vishnu. The Barganga epigraphs mentioned king Bhutivarman as Parama-Daivata-Paramabhagavata.

The king as the head of the state looked after the smooth functioning of the administrative machinery ensuring prompt action and maintaining the rule of law. They bestowed lands to the Brahmanas, patronized the learned and promoted different arts and crafts.

In the affairs of administration, the king used to be assisted by a Council of Ministers. The *Kalika Purana* states that a king should appoint learned and wise Brahmanas as ministers and the *Kamauli* grant shows that these posts were generally held by the Brahmanas and were often hereditary. The ministers are referred to in the inscriptions as *Mantrins*, *Amatyas* and *Sachivas*. A set of officials used to help the king in discharging the duties which included the *Rajaguru* (royal priest), *Bhisaja* (physician), *Mahadvaradhipati* (chief warden of the passes), *Mahapratihara* (head chamberlain), etc. There were various classes of messengers called *Dutaka* who performed the duties of couriers and served as peace time messengers and escorts. The *Lekhaka* were the scribes who recorded administrative matters and functions as clerks.

The kingdom was divided into several administrative units namely, the *Bhukti, Mandala, Vishaya, Pura* and *Agrahara*. The local units did not enjoy much autonomy. The *Bhukti* was the biggest administrative division. Corresponding to a modern district, there were many *Vishayas*. Below it was the *Pura* which was the city. *Agrahara* was a unit made up of many villages or *gramas*.

The inscriptions of ancient Assam indicate that justice was administered according to Hindu law books. There were probably courts of justice at the capital and local administrative units. Some officers namely, *Nyayakaranika, Vyavaharika*, *Kayastha, Dandika, Dandapasika,* etc used to perform the judicial functions. In the epigraphs we also found the name of two types of police officers namely, *Chauroddharanika* and *Chata-bhata*. Nothing could be said about the nature of punishment given to the criminals, except that fines were imposed. The rulers of ancient Assam had an effective revenue administration. The principal source of revenue was however the land revenue, known as *Kara* and *Upakara* or *Upaskara* levied on the cultivators which could be paid in cash or in kind. Taxes were also levied on the cultivators during special occasions in the form of *Uparikara* and

(iii) Pura ———-——— (c) tax collector

(iv) Mahasainapati -—— (d) police officers



4.7. LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have learnt about

- the social life of the people in Ancient Assam
- the economy in Ancient Assam
- the religion system followed in Ancient Assam, and
- the various aspects of the administration existing in ancient Assam

4.8. 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.*



4.9. CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No. 1: *Varnasramadharma*

Ans to Q No. 2: *Brahma, Prajapatya, Daiva, Arsha* and *Asura*

Ans to Q No. 3: The *Tezpur grant*

Ans to Q No. 4: *Uttariya*

Ans to Q No. 5: The influence of Vedic Hinduism

Answer to Q No. 6:

(i) Kaivartas

(ii) The Tezpur Rock Inscription of Harjaravarman

(iii) The Harshacharita