UNIT 1: SOURCES OF ANCIENT ASSAM

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1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- identify various literary source materials for the study of history of ancient Assam,
- discuss the archeological sources of ancient Assam.

1.2 INTRODUCTION

Dear learners, this is the first unit of this course. In this unit we are going to discuss about the sources of ancient Assam . The history of ancient Assam roughly covers the period from the days of the Epics to the early part of the 13th century C.E. For studying the history of the ancient period of Assam, we have to depend upon different types of sources, these are basically literary and archeological sources. So, in this unit we shall discuss these sources of ancient Assam in detail.

1.3 SOURCES OF ANCIENT ASSAM

1.3.1 Literary Source

Literary sources are a very important source of information for the reconstruction of the past. These sources can be further

sub-divided into Indigenous and Foreign literature. We are now going to discuss both the Indigenous and Foreign Literary sources.

Indigenous Literature: The Brahmanical works of the early and later Vedic period are important for the study of the cultural relations between the Aryans and the Non-Aryans of India with eastern India. The gradual advance of the Aryans to eastern India is described in these works. The *Satapatha Brahmana* records the progress of the Aryan culture up to the river Sadanira, identified with the river Karotoya, the permanent western boundary of ancient Assam. The *Aiteraya Brahmana* records the progress of that culture in Kamarupa. The *Gopatha Brahmana* narrates a tradition regarding the origin of the name Kamarupa indicating an early contact of the Aryan and Non-Aryan elements. The *Sankhyayana Grihasamgraha* refers to Kamarupa as the land of sunrise.

The Puranas are invaluable for reconstructing the history of ancient Assam. Most of them like the *Garuda, Markandeya, Naradiya, Brahmana, Skanda, Agni* and *Vishnu* contain references to ancient Assam and her rulers. The *Garuda Purana* mentions Kamarupa and Kamakhya as great centres of pilgrimage. The *Markandeya Purana* mentions Pragjyotisha along with Udayachala, Lauhitya and Kamarupa as countries in the east. The *Varaha* (Boar) incarnation of Lord Vishnu, the killing of Naraka and the enthronement of Bhagadatta in Pragjyotisha are mentioned in *Vishnu Purana*. The latest form of Naraka legend is noticed in the *Kalika Purana*, which was composed in Assam during the 10th or 11th century C.E. The *Kalika Purana* depicts a clear picture about the traditional boundaries of Pragjyotisha- Kamarupa as well as the importance of Goddess Kamakhya in the religious life of the people of Assam. The *Kalika Purana* is invaluable for a study of the political and cultural history of ancient Assam.

In addition to the Puranas, the Tantrik-Buddhist literature of Eastern India, Tibet and Nepal contain materials relating to the religious and political history of ancient Assam. All of them mention

about Kamarupa-Kamakhya and other *pithas* of Assam. The *Hevajra Tantra* of the 8th Century C.E. mentions Kamarupa as one of the four ***pithas*** of India. The *Kamarupa-Yatra*, a Sanskrit work composed in Assam, deals with the mode of worship of Kamakhya and records the origin of the names of Pragjyotisha and Kamarupa. The *Tikkha-Kalpa* deals with the worship of Tara and the ancient geography of Kamarupa. The *Kamakhya Tantra* gives an account of Naraka-Bhagadatta. The *Yogini Tantra* discusses the ancient geography of Kamarupa and the cultural conditions of the people. The *Yogini Tantra* also mentions the Koch King Visvasimha. Another tantric work *Haragaurisamvada* which gives an account of the early history of the territories of Kamarupa contains the genealogy of the rulers of ancient Assam, and an account of the medieval Kamarupa rulers of the Indra-vamsa (i.e., the Ahom kings). However, the last work while giving details about mythical rulers fails to discuss actual historical rulers.



Pithas- Shakti-Shrines

LET US KNOW

Some other Tantrik works containing references to ancient Assam:

- The *Pag Som Zon Zan*
- The *Kahgyur*
- The *Tangyur*
- The *Kamakhya Guhyasiddhi*
- The *Goraksha-Samhita*
- The *Kamaratna Tantra*
- The *Sadhanamala*

Epics provide an illuminating picture of the political and social life of the people in ancient Assam. They are a valuable source of information about the foundation of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa. The *Adikanda* of the *Ramayana* records the foundation of the city of Pragjyotisha by Amurtaraja. The *Kiskindhyakanda* refers to Naraka's city of Pragjyotisha in the Varaha Mountain. The *Mahabharata* refers

to the city and the country of Pragjyotisha, to its ruler Naraka and Bhagadatta, and to the Chinas, Kiratas and other people constituting the army of Bhagadatta, who gallantly fought the Pandavas in the Mahabharata war.

Sanskrit literature from other parts of India is another important source for reconstructing the history of ancient Assam. The *Arthasastra* of Kautilya refers to many places of Kamarupa like Suvarnakundya, Paralauhitya, etc in connection with the economic products of Kamarupa. In *Raghuvamsa*, Kalidasa refers to both Pragjyotisha and Kamarupa as lying to the east of the Brahmaputra. The *Harshacharita* of Banabhatta provides information about the political and cultural history of the 7th century Kamarupa. Bilhana's *Vikramankadevacharita* refers to an invasion of Kamarupa by his patron Chalukya Vikramaditya VI (c.1076-1126). Sandhyakaranandi's *Ramacharita* describes the conquest of Kamarupa by Mayana, the general of Ramapala (c.1085-1130). Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* contains an account of the marriage between the Kamarupa princess Amritaprabha and Meghavahana, the king of Kashmir. It also mentions Lalityaditya's campaign as far as the Lauhitya.



LET US KNOW

Some other Sanskrit works along with their authors containing references to ancient Assam:

- The *Brihatsamhita* by Varahmihir
- The *Kavya-mimansa* and the *Karpuramanjuri* by Rajasekhara
- The *Abhidhanachintamani* by Kshemendra
- The *Kathasaritsagara* by Somadeva

The Buddhist or Jain literature does not have any definite mention of Assam. But in the *Nikayas* we find mention of *Lohicca* which is identified as Lauhitya in connection with two Brahmanas who came to the greater kingdom of Magadha. The Buddhist

literature of Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan associates ancient Assam with the *Mahaparinirvana* of the Buddha, which is said to have taken place at modern Hajo. But the tradition is yet to be corroborated by any historical evidence.

Although there was no pure historical literature in Assam in the ancient period, yet there were Chronicles having history of the land. Reference has been made to the *Kalika Purana*, *Yogini Tantra* and *Haragaurisamvada.* There is the *Haragaurivilasa* which gives the ancient geography of the land. The genealogy of the rulers of the Dimarua family is also found in the *Haragaurivilasa* and the *Bhuyar Puthi*. Besides, the old manuscripts written in Sanskrit and Assamese cover political and cultural subjects, and supply materials not found in other historical sources.

Foreign Literature: Foreign sources are also equally important like the indigenous sources. The foreigners who travelled from one country to another and left an account of political, social, religious and cultural aspects of the country which help us a lot to know about the history of the country.

Among the works of foreign literature, there is a reference to the land of the primitive Kirata people, probably including Assam in the Greek works of the early centuries of the Christian era. But it is difficult to identify the places and peoples mentioned in them. Herodotus mentions the Kalatiai along with Gangaridae and Prasioi of Assam. It is possible that due to their predominance, some part of Kamrupa was known as the land of Kalitas. Probably ancient Assam was known to them by other names or included in the kingdom of the Prasioi and the Gangaridae. 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. The accounts of Chang Kien of the 2nd century B.C.E. mention the existence of commercial and cultural contacts between ancient Assam and China from very early times. The accounts of the Shung Shu (c.420-479 C.E.) record the sending of two embassies from India to China, of which, one was sent by Yu-Chai of the Kapili valley. Yu-Chai is identified with King Kalyanavarman (c.420-440 C.E.) of the Varman dynasty ruling in ancient Assam. 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, who may have been a successor of Bhaskaravarman. The most important Chinese source was *Si-Yu-Ki* written by Chinese pilgrim Hiuen-Tsang, who visited India during the period 629-45 C.E. It gives us an account of Hiuen-Tsang's visit to Kamarupa and stay at the court of king Bhaskaravarman providing information of the political, social and religious life of the people of Assam. Another Chinese work *New History of the Tang Dynasty* gives us information about the relation between Kamarupa king Bhaskaravarman and the Chinese mission of 648 C.E. The Chinese sources in short are valuable for our period.

The writings of the Muslim scholars are important for the geography of Assam. Among the Arabic and Persian works the earliest one to mention about Kamarupa was a book written by the Arab merchant Sulaiman in 851 C.E. but completed by Abu Zayd in 916 C.E. Another work was Hudud-ul-Alam composed by the unknown author in 982 C.E. Alberuni's Arabic work entitled *Tarikhul-Hind* written about 1030 C.E. mentions that Kamrupa lies to the east of Kannauj. The Persian work *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* of Minhajuddin Siraj gives information about Muhammad-i- Bakhtiyar's expedition against Tibet through Kamarupa and the destruction of the major part of his army in Assam near Guwahati.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Fill in the blanks:

Q.1: Yogini Tantra mentions about Koch King ……..……

Q.2: The genealogy of the rulers of the Dimarua family is found in ……. and …… .

Q.3: Among the Chinese works …….. was most important.

1.3.2 Archaeological Sources

Like the literary sources, the Archaeological remains too are an important source for reconstructing the history of ancient Assam. Archaeological sources can be studied under three heads, namely:

1. Inscriptions or Epigraphy
2. Coins or Numismatics
3. Material Remains

1. Inscriptions

Inscriptions are writings engraved on copper plates and rocks and impressed on clay seals. The king issued inscriptions for different purposes such as donation of lands, to commemorate achievements along with ideals and also to record diplomatic relations with contemporary powers. 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. They give us lots of information regarding the political, social, administrative, diplomatic relations and religious conditions of a particular period. They also provide information about the power, policies and achievements of the king and other officials.

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.

They are also impressed on clay seals. Their language is Sanskrit *and the scripts are Devanagari and north Indian Brahmi. They are composed in verse or* prose or a mixture of the two. Most of them bear no date, and only a single inscription is dated in the Gupta era and three in the Saka era.

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 C.E. Most of these inscriptions are copper plate grants in which the genealogy of the king, who issued the charter, is found in accordance with an old practice. Among this the *Umachal Rock Inscription*, *Barganga Rock Inscription*, *Doobi Copper Plates*, *Nidhanpur Copper Plates* and *Nalanda Clay Seals* provide information about the Varman dynasty. For the history of the Salastambhas, we have the *Tezpur Rock Inscription*, *Hayungthal Copper Plate*, *Tezpur Copper Plate*, *Parbatiya Copper Plates*, *Howraghat Copper Plates*, *Nagaon Copper Plates* and *Ulubari Copper Plates*. The history of the Pala dynasty can be known from the *Caratbari Copper Plates*, *Bargaon Copper Plates*, *Soalkuchi Copper Plates*, *Guwahati Copper Plates*, *Guakuchi Copper Plates*, *Gachtal Copper Plates*, *Khonamukh Copper Plates*, *Subhankarapataka Copper Plates* and *Pushpabhadra Copper Plates*.

Apart from these dynastic inscriptions, there are some other local inscriptions providing information about ancient Assam. The *Kamauli grant* of Vaidyadeva (c.1126-1140C.E.) 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 C.E.) give the names of three kings who were probably the successors of Vaidyadeva. The *Kanai Barasi Bowa Rock Inscription* dated 1205 C.E. 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 refers to the conflict between Mahasenagupta and Susthitavarman (c.585-593 C.E.), the king of Kamarupa. The *Pasupati Temple Inscription* at Kathmandu gives information about Nepal king Jayadeva Parachakrakama, who married Rajyamati, the daughter of king Harshadeva of Bhagadatta's family. The *Bhagalpur grant* of Narayanapala of Gauda refers to diplomatic relations between Pragjyotisha, Gauda and Orissa during the reign of Devapala. The *Belava grant* of Bhojavarman records a conflict between Jatavarman of Bengal and a ruler of Kamarupa. The *Silimpur Stone Inscription* of a Brahmana named Prahasa records that the Kamarupa king Jayapala offered 900 gold coins equal to his own body weight to the Brahmana along with other gifts.

2. Coins

Numismatic evidence is one of the most reliable sources for the study of the early history of any land, especially when the coins help us in determining the chronology of a dynasty. But unfortunately very few coins of the early period have so far been discovered. This is no doubt about one of the reasons why we have faced a great difficulty in determining the chronology of the rulers of the period. There is hardly any dynasty in ancient India which did not issue coins of its own, and it is therefore, reasonable to suppose that the rulers of Kamarupa also minted coins of their own.

Among coins of pre-Ahom times found in Assam so far, there are certain gold issues of the type called *Imitation Gupta*, found in a hoard discovered at Paglatek, in the south bank of Brahmaputra. The same types of coins are also found in Bangladesh and Tripura

which gives information of Assam-Bengal trade relationship. Some Copper coins discovered in Dhulapadung Tea Estate near Tezpur are roughly round in shape and of varying weight. These coins have a blank reverse and a single letter 'Va', 'Ha' and 'Ba' on the obverse. It is probable that 'Va' indicates the name of Vanamalavarman and 'Ba' (Ba) Balavarman and 'Ha' indicates Harjaravarman. The *Silimpur Stone Inscription* of Prahasa records a *tulapurush* gift along with 900 gold coins of Jayapala, who is generally identified with the last member of the Pala line of kings of ancient Assam. However, the *Ambari stone Inscription* found at Guwahati issued at a later date records the name of Samudrapala.

3. Material Remains

The remains of the undated history of ancient Assam consist of neoliths, megaliths and pottery which help us in studying the pre-Aryan and non-Aryan elements in Assam. Old monuments in between the period 5th to the 12th Century C.E. 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 of 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.



ACTIVITY-1.1

Study an inscription located in your locality and write down a few lines about that inscription.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.4: Match the following:

KINGS	**INSCRIPTIONS**
a) Samudragupta	1) Pasupati Temple Inscription
b) Bhutivarman	2) Aphsad Inscription
c) Jayadeva	3) Allahabad Pillar Inscription
d) Adityasena	4) Barganga Rock Inscription

Q.5: Fill in the blanks:

a) Some …….. coins were discovered in Dhulapadung Tea Estate.

b) The remains of a gigantic ……. temple is found in Tezpur.



1.4 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have learnt-

- various literary sources of ancient Assam and their importance in reconstructing the history of ancient Assam.
- Literary sources are divided into two groups- indegeneous literary sources and foreign literary sources.
- different categories of archeological sources. These are- Inscriptions, Coins and other material remains. All these are of different importance to reconstruct the history of ancient Assam.



1.5 FURTHER READING

1) Barpujari, H. K. (2003): *The Comprehenhive History of Assam*, Volume-I, Publication Board, Assam, Guwahati

2) Chaudhury, P.C. (1966): *The History of Civilization of the People of Assam to the 12th century* C.E., 2nd edition, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies in Assam, Gauhati



1.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Visvasimha

Ans to Q No 2: Haragaurivilasa, Bhuyar Puthi

Ans to Q No 3: Si-Yu-Ki

Ans to Q No 4: a) 3, b) 4, c) 1, d) 2

Ans to Q No 5: a) Copper b) Sun



1.7 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) VERY SHORT QUESTIONS (Answer each question within 50 words)

Q 1: Who authored *Raghuvansam*?

Q 2: Mention oneTantric work of ancient Kamarupa.

Q 3: Who authored *Ntural history*?

Q 4: Who authored *Si-Yu-Ki* ?

B) SHORT QUESTIONS (Answer each question within 150 words)

Q 1: Briefly discuss the importance of Sanskrit literature in reconstructing the history of ancient Assam.

Q 2: Write a short note on Muslim literature of ancient Assam.

Q 3: How coins are important to reconstruct the history of ancient Assam?

C) LONG QUESTIONS: (Answer each question within 300-500 words)

Q 1: Discuss the importance of literary sources of ancient Assam.

Q 2: Analyse the importance of archeological sources in reconstructing the history of ancient Assam.

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