UNIT 3: GEOGRAPHICAL OUTLINE OF ASSAM HISTORY

UNIT STRUCTURE

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3.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- describe the mountain routes and climate of ancient Assam
- discuss the extent of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa.

3.2 INTRODUCTION

As you have already learnt about the different sources of ancient Assam in your first unit of this course, and on the basis of these sources of ancient Assam, in this unit we shall discuss the origin of the name Assam, differnet mountain routes, climate of ancient Assam and the extent of Pragjyotisha- Kamarupa.

3.3 GEOGRAPHICAL OUTLINE OF ANCIENT ASSAM

3.3.1 Assam- Origin of the Name

Assam is known by different names in the Epics, Puranas and early literature. It is mentioned as Pragjyotisha in the Epics, the

Ramayana and the *Mahabharata*. Several theories are put forward regarding the origin of the name Pragjyotisha. According to one theory, a branch of people called *Chao- Theius* of China migrated to India at a very early period. In India, they came to be known as the *Zuhthis* and one of their centres was known as *Prag-Zuhthis*. But this theory is not supported by sufficient evidence. According to another theory, the name Pragajyotisha originates from an Austric phrase *Pgar-Juh*, meaning a region of extensive hills. Another theory associates the name with the astronomical importance of the country. The *Kalika Purana* mentions that the creator Brahma made the first calculation of the stars in Pragjyotisha. In his "A History of Assam", E. A. Gait says that 'Prag' means former or Eastern and 'Jyotisa', meaning a star, astrology, shining. Therefore, Pragajyotisha may be taken to mean the "City of Eastern Astrology" derived from Prag-Jyotisa. Early literature and inscriptions often refer both to the land and its capital city as Pragjyotishapura.

Ancient Assam is known for the first time as Kamarupa in the *Allahabad Pillar Inscription* of Samudragupta (4th century C.E.) and in the early Puranas. Hiuen Tsang who visited Kamarupa in the first half of the 7th century C.E. referred to it as Kamolupo. It is also opined that the word Kamarupa has been derived from an Austric formation like *Kamru* or *Kamrut*. Banikanta Kakati in *The Mother Goddess Kamakhya* states that the word symbolises a new cult, namely the worship of the mother goddess Kamakhya. He also states that the word Kamakhya too was derived from an Austric formation such as *Kamoi* (demon) in old Khmer, *Kamoit* (devil) in Cham, *Kamet* (corpse) in Khasi, *Komui* (grave) in Santali.

The word Kamarupa may have been a Sanskritisation of a non-Sanskrit word. Persian works like the *Tabaquat-i-Nasiri* and the *Riaz-ul-Salatin*, as well as the 19th century Assamese chronicle the *Haragaurisamvada* even refer to this land as *Kamru* or *Kamrud*. The territory is called *Asham* in the *Ain-i-Akbari* and *Asam* in the *Padshahnama*. The origin of the name Assam is uncertain. According

to Bani kanta Kakati, *Asama* may be a later Sanskritisation of an earlier form *Acham*. In the Tai language *Cham* refers to the Tai-Shan people and *Acham* meant those who were not Tai or Shan. These groups entered the Brahmaputra Valley in the beginning of the 13th century C.E. There is another suggestion which states that the word Assam is derived from a Bodo formation like *Ho-Chom* which means low land.

Local legends claim that it was in Assam that the Indian cupid Kamadeva who was reduced to ashes by the Lord Siva regained his *rupa* or form. Hence it was renamed as Kamarupa. The island of Umananda at Guwahati in the midst of the Brahmaputra is referred to as *Bhasmachal* in early literature and is said to be formed of the ashes or *bhasma* of the ill-fated Kamadeva.

The early Persian works like the *Tabaquat-i-Nasiri* and the *Riaz-ul-Salatin* have referred to this land as *Kamru* or *Kamrud*. The territory is called *Asham* or *Asam* in the later Persian works like *Ain-i-Akbari* and the *Padshahnama*. In the *Fathiya-i-Ibbriyah*, the term *Asham* or *Asam* occurs. Tavernier took it as *Asam*. When the term was used in Persian sources, it referred to the people of the Ahom kingdom only and not the territory of modern Assam. Assam is apparently the English form of *Asam*.

3.3.2 Mountain Routes

Assam may be broadly divided into two physical units' namely, the North-Eastern and the Central hill tracts and the Valleys of the Brahmaputra and Barak. The Eastern Himalayas lies in the North of Assam. The different parts of the sub Himalayan region are named after the semi Mongoloid tribes who inhabit these hills viz: the *Bhutias*, *Akas*, *Dafalas*, Mishings, *Adis*, *Mishimis*, etc. Assam was linked to the neighbouring countries by several routes. The Patkai hill was a natural boundary between Assam and Myanmar. Assam-Myanmar routes in the East that runs through Cachar-Manipur helped the migration of the racial elements from South-East Asia. The Patkai

hills route was followed by the Ahoms and other Tibeto-Burman migrants from the North- East. The hill passes of Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan were also probably used by certain waves of the Tibeto-Burmans. The frequent routes in the West were the Valleys of the Brahmaputra and the Ganges. This is the route through which the Aryan speakers penetrated into Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa.



LET US KNOW

The physical divisions led to the emergence in Assam of two distinct ethnic groups namely, the dwellers of hills and those of the plains. However there had been a frequent intercourse between the people of the hills and the plains. The hill men by and large depended on the plains for their foods and other necessities and the plainsmen provided them their requirements. Thus, they ensured friendly relations with their neighbouring hill tribes.

3.3.3 Climate

Lack of materials makes it difficult to reconstruct the climatic condition of ancient Assam. There is no literary evidence nor any extensive excavation made so far in Assam to arrive at some tentative conclusion. We come to know only from Hiuen Tsang that in the 7th century A.D., the country was low and damp. The Muslim chronicler Shihabuddin Talish who accompanied Mir Jumla in his expedition to Assam in 1662 informs that it used to rain in Assam for eight months in the year. Even the four months of the winter were not free from rain. Extreme humidity and excessive rainfall are the peculiarities of the climate of Assam. Assam is covered with evergreen forests. References from Hiuen-Tsang and the evidence from the local inscriptions indicate a climate and soil suitable for growing rice, jackfruit, coconut, sugarcane, mango, cane, bamboo, and bay leafs.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following questions:

Q.1: Who authored the book 'The Mother Goddess Kamakhya'?

.....

Q.2: Padshahnama called the territory of Kamarupa as (fill in the blank)

.....

Q.3: ..... was the natural boundary between Assam and Myanmar.

3.3.4 Extent of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa

The modern state of Assam is only a part of the extensive kingdom of Pragjyotisha or Kamarupa of ancient times. Political boundaries of the kingdom fluctuated from time to time but there is no doubt that it's Northern and South-Western limits extended much beyond the modern state of Assam.

➢ **Pauranic Account**

A good number of ancient scriptures have defined the boundaries of ancient Assam. According to most of the Puranas, Kamarupa extended up to the river Karatoya in the West and included Manipur, Jayantia, Cachar, parts of Maimensing, Sylhet, Rangpur and portions of Nepal and Bhutan. The *Kalika Purana* of 9th century A.D. has mentioned Karatoya as its Western boundary. It also mentions that the kingdom of Kamarupa was triangular in shape, 100 *yojanas* in length and 30 *yojanas* in breadth and Devi Dikkaravasini existed towards its Eastern boundary. The river Swetaganga was said to have existed bordering the shrine of Dikkaravasini, identified with her excavated shrine at Sadiya.

The *Yogini Tantra* of 12th century C.E. (with addition up to 17th century A.D.) states that Kamarupa was divided into *Ratnapitha*,

Bhadrapitha, *Saumarpitha* and *Kamapitha*. It states in brief that the four boundaries of Kamarupa are Karatoya (West), Dikshu river (East), Kanjagiri (North) and the Laksa river (South) respectively. As for the geometric shape of Kamarupa, *Yogini Tantra* also refers to it as triangular in shape and also gives the same measurement to the kingdom of Kamarupa as stated in the *Kalika Purana* with slight variation in its expression only. The *Haragaurisamvada* also divides Kamarupa into four *pithas* marked by river boundaries. It states that *Ratnapitha* was between the river Karatoya and the Swarnakosha, *Kamapitha* was between the Swarnakosha and the Kapila, *Swarnapitha* was between the river Puspika and Bhairavi, and *Saumarpitha* was in between the river Bhairavi and the Dikrang.

- **Ramayana and Mahabharata**

The references in the Epics indicate that the country stretched as far as the sea and that it was partly a hilly country. The *Ramayana* locates the city of Pragjyotisha on a gold-crested mountain called Varaha which stood on the fathomless Varunalaya. The *Mahabharata* calls Bhagadatta, the king of Pragajyotisha as *Sailalaya* (dwelling among the mountain), *Parvatapati* (lord of the mountain) *Purvasagaravasi* (inhabitant of the Eastern sea) and refers to his troops as consisting of the Chinas, the Kiratas and the dwellers of the sea coast. The Varaha mountain was the Assam range. The sea was the Lauhitya (Lohit) Sagara. The Kiratas meant the Mongoloid people and the Chinas probably meant the Bhutanese and the Tibetans.

- **Accounts of Hiuen-Tsang**

Hiuen-Tsang, the eminent Chinese scholar visited Assam during the reign of king Bhaskaravarman in 638 C.E. He states that the kingdom was more than a myriad *li* or 1667 miles in circuit. He travelled from Pun-Na=Fa-Tan-Na (Pundravardhana) on the east more than 900 *li* or 150 miles then crossed a river Ka-lo-tu (Karatoya). In his records, he mentioned that to the East of Kamarupa, the country is a series of hills and hillocks without any principal city and one can reach the South-West barbarians (of China). He also

describes Kamarupa as being 1600 *li* to the West of upper Burma beyond the black mountains. It was situated in Eastern India, 600 li to the South-East of Pundravardhana with river Ka-lo-tu between the two countries. Thus, it appears that the kingdom of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa covered the major portion of Eastern India.



ACTIVITY – 3.1

Locate the rivers and hills in the map of ancient Assam.

a. Patkai b. Barak c. Karatoya



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following questions:

Q.4: Into how many divisions Kamarupa was divided according to Haragourisamvada?

.....

Q.5: Huen Tsang visited Assam in .....(fill in the blank)



3.5 FURTHER READING

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

2) Choudhury, P.C.: *The History of Civilization of the People of Assam to the 12th century* C.E.



3.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Dr. Bani Kanta Kakati

Ans to Q No 2: Asam

Ans to Q No 3: Patkai hill

Ans to Q No 4: Four

Ans to Q No 5: 638 C.E.



3.7 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Very Short Questions (Answer each and every question within 50 Words)

Q 1: What does *Klika Purana* speak about the name *Pragjyotisa?*

Q 2: Name the earliest Inscription that mentions about Kamarupa.

Q 3: Ain-i-Akbari called the territory of Kamarupa as.....(fill in the blank)

Q 4: What was the western boundary of ancient Assam?

B) Short Questions (Answer each and every question within 150 words)

Q 1: Write briefly about the account of Hiuen Tsang on ancient Assam.

Q 2: What did the epics speak about the extent of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa?

Q 3: What did Mir Jumla speak about the climate of Assam?

C) Long Questions (Answer each and every question in between 300-500 words)

Q 1: Discuss the lorigin of the name 'Assam'.

Q 2: Discuss the mountain ranges and climate of ancient Assam.

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