

CHAPTER - I

Historical Geography, Land and People of Assam

The Assam is situated between 28°18' and 24° north longitudes 89.86° and 96° east longitudes. Assam is presently bounded by Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh in the north, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Manipur in the east, Mizoram and Tripura in the south-east, Meghalaya and Bangladesh in the south, and West Bengal and Bangladesh in the west. It is surrounded on three sides by hills and mountains. The rivers Brahmaputra and Barak, in the north and south respectively, carve out deep valleys that represent the major part of the state. Assam is surrounded by seven Indian states and two foreign countries. There are only a few Indian states which have such a strategic location. The state has an area of 78,438 km² representing 2.39 percent of the Indian landmass and a population of 22,414,322 (1991) accounting for 2.64 percent of the total population of the country.

The modern state of Assam is divided into two river valleys viz., the Brahmaputra valley and the Barak valley. The Brahmaputra valley comprises of throughout its length from Sadiya in the north-east to Dhubri in the west, and by its tributaries on both sides of its bank. The Brahmaputra valley may be divided into three different regions - the Uttarakula, the Dakshinakula and the Majuli to the north of modern Sivsagar, formed by the Brahmaputra valley. Geographically, the land may conveniently be divided into two parts- the plain and the hills.¹ The plains comprised of modern Goalpara, Kāmarūpa, Darrang, Nagaon, Sivsagar, Lakhimpur, Sylhet and Manipur; the hills consist of the Garo, Khasi-Jaintia, Cachar and Mikir Hills, Naga and Lushai (Mizo) Hills, and of the frontier tracts of Balipara and Sadiya. Geographically, if not culturally, the present NEFA regions form a compact area with the other regions of the state.²

In various literary sources Assam has been described with different names. Assam in the early period was known as Prāgjyotisa. In the Epics viz. *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata*, Assam is described as Prāgjyotisa. In the *Purānas* also the country was known as Prāgjyotisa. It is often mentioned that Prāgjyotisa was a famous kingdom in the early times. Kalidasa uses both Prāgjyotisa and Kāmarūpa alternatively.³ According to the description mentioned in *Mahābhārata*, Prāgjyotisa included not

only the whole Assam but whole of North Bengal proper.⁴ According to *Raghuvamsa*, it lies beyond the Brahmaputra (III. 81), but Kalidasa was uncertain about the exact geography.⁵

The name Prāgjyotisa is commonly associated with Lauhitya, Kāmarūpa, and Kāmākhyā. It occurs both in the literature and epigraphs. It is associated with the rulers from Naraka-Bhagadatta. It is difficult to ascertain the origin of the word. “It stood for both city and the country. The name appears to be a Sanskritisation of some non-Aryan formation.”⁶ The people of China called *Chao Theius* who came to India, were known as *Zuthis* and occupied three important centres. Among the three the branch which came to Assam was called Prāg *Zuthis* which was subsequently changed into Prāgjyotisa.⁷

According to some scholars the name ‘Prāgjyotisa’ has some astronomical relevance. The antiquity of the name Prāgjyotisa cannot be traced earlier than the Śāṅkhyayana Grhyasamgraha, according to which, this is a sacred country associated with solar cult.⁸ The interpretation of the name as a place of ‘eastern astrology’ is also justified by a number of references to its association with the solar cult and the planetary worship.⁹ According to the *Kālikā Purāna*, Brahma made the first calculation of the stars in Prāgjyotisa. It signifies the importance of the study of astrology and astronomy in the province in ancient times. A number of Assamese manuscripts associated with the subjects also confirmed this.

The archaeological remains and the existing temples at Navagraha in Guwahati and on the Suryya Hills in Goalpara also indicate the prevalence of the solar cult in ancient Assam. In this context, Sir Edward Gait says, “Prag” means former and “Jyotisa” refers to a star, astrology or “shining” for which he holds that the word Pragjyotishpur means “the city of eastern Astrology.”¹⁰

It has been said in the *Kālikā Purāna* that immediately after Naraka of Mithila became king and was placed in charge of the goddess Kāmākhyā, the name of the land was changed from Prāgjyotisa to Kāmarūpa. The term Kāmarūpa (Kāmākhyā) symbolized a new cult and in exaltation of it, the land itself was re-christened.¹¹ It has also been said in the same Purana that the land Prāgjyotisa was formerly reserved by *Sambhu* for his own domain: thus suggesting that before the introduction of the novel cult of Kāmākhyā, with association of magic and incantation, the religion of the land

was Śaivism. The Puranic legends indicate that the name Kāmarūpa is associated with Kamadeva, the god of love. It is here that Kama was sent by the gods to put an end to Śiva's mourning after the death of his consort and to awaken in him again the passion of creation.¹² He was burnt to ashes by the angry glance of the great god, but later recovered his original form (rupa), hence the name became Kāmarūpa. It was during the medieval period that Kāmarūpa developed into a centre of Tantric worship for which it was considered to be a sacred place centering round the Kāmākhyā *pītha* which was abode of the Goddess Kāmākhyā.¹³

However according to some scholars Prāgjyotisa, Kāmarūpa and Kāmākhyā are the three geographical names given to the kingdom. B.K. Kakati, suggested that the word Prāgjyotisa is a Sanskritisation of Austric group of words like Pau(=hill)+ger(=hill)+jo(=high)+tic(=long)=“(land of)high and long mountains”,¹⁴ and Kāmarūpa and Kāmākhyā he sought to connect with an Austric basic word meaning ‘a grave , a corpse ‘,the place names being connected with the legend found in the Purana of Sati's dead body being cut up and a part of it falling in Kāmākhyā hill in Kāmarūpa.¹⁵

The name of the kingdom was converted to Kāmarūpa probably during the early centuries of the Christian era, but Prāgjyotisa remains as the name of the capital city of the kingdom of Kāmarūpa. References to Kāmarūpa as kingdom are almost in all of the epigraphs. The earliest epigraphical document mentioning Kāmarūpa is the Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta, wherein the name of Kāmarūpa has been mentioned as one of the frontier states, outside the limits of the Gupta Empire.¹⁶ Yuan Chwang also mentioned Kāmarūpa as ka-mo-lu-po.¹⁷ The traditional origin of the Kāmarūpa as given in the *Kālikā Purāna*, which relates the story of Kamadeva's revival after being burnt by Śiva, may be explained in the light of the prevalence of the Aryan culture or Aryanisation of Assam. This may suggest that the Aryans who by this time colonized Assam might have overthrown the non-Aryan culture and tradition and started the new era of civilization and cultures. Along with the Aryanisation of Assam, the name of the region is given as Kāmarūpa, keeping the name of the capital city as Prāgjyotispura, the name of the old kingdom. The Puranic legendary accounts, which have slight value, might have been explained in this way.¹⁸ As Kamadeva, was born again in this area, the name of Prāgjyotisa was retained only

in the name of the capital, and the kingdom was renamed as Kāmarūpa. Prāgjyotisa remained the capital throughout the long period of the early history of Assam.¹⁹

Some scholars tried to locate the kingdom of Prāgjyotisa or Kāmarūpa outside Assam. For this they depend on the *Mahabharata* as it locates Prāgjyotisa in the north or in the west. But the evidence of the *Mahabharata* itself confusing and flexible.²⁰ For example, the Sabha parva of the *Mahabharata* describes Bhima's campaign in the north and his fight with Bhagadatta of Prāgjyotisa. However, the same parva and the *Aswamedha parva* mention Bhima's campaign in the Lauhitya in the east. Thus, the location of the same place has been mis-recorded in the epic.²¹

In the *Ramayana*²², Prāgjyotisa is said to have been situated on the Varaha Mountain in the sea. "The Varaha Mountain where Prāgjyotisa is placed, suggests a hilly region".²³ This probably means that Assam was situated between the Himalayas and the Bay of Bengal. Similarly, as P.C. Choudhury says, "depending on the basis of the information given by Periplus and Ptolemy, that at the beginning of the first and second century CE the south-western boundary of Prāgjyotisa Kāmarūpa touched the sea, the western boundary of Prāgjyotisa might have extended beyond the river Karatoya and the eastern boundary extended upto the Sadiya region."²⁴

Prāgjyotisa was possibly a name by which the writers of Pre-Buddhist literature known. It is difficult to determine the extent of the kingdom either of Naraka of the age of Janaka or of his successors. The literary evidence proved that when Prāgjyotisa was a flourishing kingdom, most parts of South-east Bengal were under the Lohita sea, and the Bengal Delta was just beginning to form.²⁵

It is mentioned above the non-Aryan origin of the name Prāgjyotisa and its association is with astronomy. The words Kāmarūpa and Kāmākhyā also suggest an Austric or Alpine origin. Kāmākhyā is probably derived from an Austric formation, such as Kamoi (demon) in old Khmer; Kamoit (devil) in Cham; Kamet (corpse) in Khasi; Komui (grave) or Komouch (corpse) in Santhali. It may be a substitution of the word like Komouch, meaning grave or dead.²⁶ Both the word Kāmarūpa and Kāmākhyā are closely associated in literature. According to B.K. Kakati, the name symbolizes a new cult, and in exaltation of it the land was re-christened. The name itself indicates that the cult is of Austric origin.²⁷

Prāgjyotisa or Kāmarūpa occupied an area larger than that of the modern Assam State, and extended westwards to the river, Karatoya. According to the *Yoginītantram*²⁸, the kingdom comprised the whole of Brahmaputra (Lauhitya) valley, together with Rangpur and Coach Bihar. The kingdom included Manipur, Jaintia, Cachar, West Assam and parts of of Mymensing and Sylhet. As recorded by Hiuen Tsang, the Chinese pilgrim who visited Kāmarūpa during Bhaskara Varmana's time, the country was more than a myriad *li* or 1667 miles in circuit.²⁹

According to the *Yoginītantram*³⁰, the country was divided into four parts or *pīthas* - *Kamapitha*, from the Karatoya river to the Sankosh river; *Ratnapitha*, from the Sankosh to the Rupahi rivers; *Suvarnapitha* from the Rupahi to the Bharali rivers, and *Saumarapitha*, from the Bharali to the Dikrang rivers. *Kālikā Purāna*,³¹ mentions that Kāmarūpa is to the east of the Karatoya river. *Yoginī Tantra* states that the country lying to the east of Karatoya as far Dikkaravasini is called Kāmarūpa. It is triangular in shape (*trikonakaram*), and a hundred *yojnas* in length, spreading over an area of thirty *Yojnas* (*trimsadyojanavistiram dirghena satayojanam*).³² The *Vishnu Purāna* also stated that the country extended around the temple of Kāmarūpa (which was the centre of Kāmarūpa) in all directions for 100 *yojana*.

Regarding the boundary of Kāmarūpa *Yoginī Tantra* states thus:-

*Nepālasya kāñcanādrim brahmaputrasya saṅgamam
Karatoyām samārabhya yāvad dikkaravāsīnīm
Uttarasyām kāñjagirih karatoyā tu paścime
tīrthasreṣṭhā dikṣunadī purvasyām girikanyake
dakṣiṇe brahmaputrasya lāksāyah saṅgamāvadhi
kāmarūpa iti khyātaḥ sarvaśāstreṣu niścitaḥ*³³

However *Haragaurisamvada*, a later Sanskrit work divides Kāmarūpa into four *pithas* with clearly marked river boundaries; viz 1)*Ratnapitha*, between the Karatoya and Suvarnakosa, 2)*Kamapitha*, between the Karatoya and Suvarnapitha, and the Kapili, 3)*Svarnapitha* between the Puspika and the Bhairabi, 4)*Saumarapitha* between the Bhairabi and the Dikrang river.³⁴

The boundary of Kāmarūpa is marked by the river Karatoya in the west and the Lalita-Kanta in the east. This region is said to have been under the spiritual domination of Kāmākhyā. East of it lay the tract called Saumara. The *Yoginī Tantra* includes Saumara also within the boundary of Kāmarūpa. According to it, Kāmarūpa included the tract lying between the Karatoya river on the west and the Dikrang on the east, the mountains of Kancana and Girikanyaka on the north and the confluences of the Brahmaputra and Lakshmi rivers on the South; that is to say, it included roughly the Brahmaputra valley, the Bhutan, Rangpur and Koch Bihar.³⁵

It is mentioned in the *Yoginī Tantra* that boundaries of Kāmarūpa extended to the temple of *Dikkaravasini* from Karatoya. Kanjagiri lies on the north and Karatoya on the west. River Dikkaravasini is on the eastern side of Girikanyaka and according to the *Kālikā Purāna* there are four *pithas* of India (viz. Odra; Jalsaila; Purāna Pitha and Kāmarūpa), the *Yoginī Tantra*³⁶ refers to nine great Pithas (viz. Bhadra Pitha; Jalandhara; Purāna Pitha; Kāmarūpa; Kolavapura; Bihara; Mahendra; Srihatta; Odra). The *Kālika Purāna* considers the whole of Kāmarūpa to be one *pitha* but the *Yoginī Tantra* splits it up into nine *pithas*, viz. 1) Punyaka, 2) Madhya *pitha*, 3) Nila *pitha*, 4) Saumara, 5) Hayatamra, 6) Sivatalapa, 7) Varahi, 8) Kolapitha, 9) Sripitha. The geographical boundaries of these divisions are not clear in the cases of Punykhyā, Nilapitha and Sauamara.

From the above discussion it appears that the Kingdom of Prāgjyotisa-Kāmarūpa was larger than the contemporary other kingdoms and present day Assam. It includes the Brahmaputra valley, Bhutan, Rangpur, Koch Bihar and the adjoining areas. Hence *Yoginī Tantra*³⁷ states thus:

It imśad yojanavistīrnam dīrghēṇa śatayojanam |
Kāmarūpam vijānīhi trikoṅārāmūrttamam ||
Īśāṇe caiva kedāro vāyavyām gaiśanaḥ |
dakṣiṇe samgame devī Lākṣyā Brahmaretasah ||

The disintegration of the extensive Kāmarūpa kingdom started in the early part of the twelve century with the decline of the Pala dynasty. As a result, a number of independent or semi-independent kingdoms of feudatory rulers emerged. A class of revenue officers who became powerful in the eastern part of Kāmarūpa declared

themselves as Bhuyans and behaved like kings. However, the western part of the ancient Kāmarūpa continued its name. Many kings tried to establish their rule there but ultimately the Bhuyans subjugated all of them. In 1228 CE a group of Tai-Shan people entered into the South-eastern part of the Brahmaputra valley and they established their kingdom at Charaideo in 1253 CE. They came to be known as the Ahoms. They ruled Assam for six hundred years. During their rule, the boundary of Assam shifted continuously. It continued to change even after the British colonists occupied the land in 1826 CE. The contraction continued even after India achieved independence. With the formation and reorganization of states, the present state of Assam now occupies a small area of 78,523 square kilometers only.

The modern state of Assam is only a part of the former kingdom of Prāgjyotisa – Kāmarūpa and the name Assam is of recent origin. The boundaries of this kingdom continuously changed from time to time. Once the northern and the south-western boundaries of the kingdom of Prāgjyotisa or Kāmarūpa extended much beyond the boundary of modern Assam. The word Assam is an Anglicised form of the Assamese word ‘Assam’. The word is derived from *asama*, in the sense of ‘uneven’ as distinguished from *Samanta*.³⁸ But the term could not be traced out prior to the Ahom occupation. Edward Gait suggests that the word is derived from the present designation of the Ahoms.³⁹ The tradition of the Ahoms, themselves is that the present name is derived from Asama in the sense of “unequaled” or “Peerless.” It is said that this term was applied to the Ahoms by the local tribes when they invaded the valley.⁴⁰

According to Grieson,⁴¹ Shan is Burmese corruption of Sham which has been confirmed by the Chinese Scholars who researched the tribes of Myanmar and South West China and affirm that the Tai people are known to the tribes of this region (Daerys, Wa, Maru, Balung, Achng and Lashi) as Sam or variants like San, Sien, Siam etc.⁴²

Banikanta Kakati suggests that “Asama”, “peerless”, may be a latter-day Sanskritisation of an earlier form, “Achām”.⁴³ In Tāi “Cham” means, “to be defeated”. With the Assamese prefix ā, Āsām would mean “undefeated”, “conquerors”. If this is its origin, from the people the name was subsequently applied to the country.⁴⁴

In *Ain-I-Akbari*, the territory is called “Ashām”.⁴⁴ In the *Padshahnamah* it is mentioned as “Asam” and same was used by Francis Hamilton in his “*Accounts of Assam*” which was compiled during 1807-8.⁴⁵ Assam is same as “Asam” in English. In another version it is suggested that “The name (Āsām)”, “is most probably traceable to (the Boro) Ha-com the low or level country”.⁴⁶ This version indicate that the boro people used this word to the land. Thus, it is probable that the word “Asam” is non-Aryan in origin.

The early Persian works *Tabaquat-i-Nasiri* and *Riyaz-us-Salatin* used the word Kamru or Kamrud for this land.⁴⁷ *Fathiyah-i-Ibriyah* used the word Asham.⁴⁸ Tavernier used it as *Asem*.⁴⁹ “When this term was applied to the people in Persian sources, it meant the Ahoms only. It is also to be noted that the word Ahom is nowhere to be found in the Tai-Ahom literature. It is therefore, appears reasonable to conclude that the word Assam was a later development, occurring after the coming of the Tai-Shans. It reflected a new regional awareness of the north-east resulting from its political unity achieved under the Ahom rule.”⁵⁰

Assam is a land of heterogeneous cultures. People of different races entered into Assam and settled here. Assam received waves after waves of immigrants from pre-historic time onwards. Austric, Negritos, Indonesian, Alpine-Aryan, Tibeto-Burman and the “Aryans—all migrated to this land in different times, and out of their mutual inter-fusion there evolved the Assamese culture, while imbibing from the main stream of Indian culture, maintained some of the distinct characteristics of its own. Assam is the main gateway to India through which the Mongoloid Indo-Chinese Tibeto-Burmans made their way.”⁵¹ S.K. Chatterjee thus says, “Assam has thus to meet all the tribal movements from the East, involving the advent into India of the Tibeto-Chinese speaking Mongoloids, and it was in Assam primarily that this great element in the formation of the Indian people became largely Indianised—particularly in the Brahmaputra valley. Assam with Nepal helped very largely in the absorption of this Kirata element in the formation of the North-Indian (Hindu) people. This can be looked upon as Assam’s great contribution to the synthesis of cultures and fusion of races that took place in India, a synthesis which had started in pre-historic times, when two distinct races found that they were to reside together in the same country-

the Austric and the Mongoloid, the Dravidian and the Austric, and the Dravidian and the Mongoloid.”⁵²

The earliest inhabitants of Assam were probably of Austric stock. They are called “Proto-Australoid” because they have been migrated from the Australian and some other parts of the Pacific Ocean to the Asiatic main land. They spoke Monkhmer language. ⁵³

Linguistic evidences, name of some places and the popular customs of the province also indicate that the earliest inhabitants of Assam were speakers of the Indo-Chinese language of the Mon-Khmer family which has been characterized by Schimdt as the Austric family of languages. The date when the Austric speakers began to filter into Assam is not known, but it must have been several hundred years BCE and certainly long anterior to the advent of the Aryans from the west.⁵⁴ Khasis and Syntengs are identified as Australoid strain. The Khasi language is also an Austric language. In their physical make-up the Khasis, Australoid element is discernible but Mongoloid elements predominate. The various Bodo tribes also exhibit certain amount of Australoid strain. The Australoid probably came before the Mongoloids. ⁵⁵

The next important element in the composition of the Assamese people is the Mongoloid element represented by the Tibeto Burman tribes and castes in Assam. They probably entered Assam after the Austric speaking Mon-Khmer people. Linguistically these Mongoloid people belong to the Sino- Tibetan family of languages.⁵⁶ In course of time some of the tribes belonging to this stock accepted Assamese, an Indo-Aryan speech, but a few others still retain their own languages or dialects. Mongolians had entered into Assam from the north and the north-east. The larger group of the Mongoloid people came from China and Tibet; some, however, had entered through Burma. ⁵⁷

Kiratas were identified as the Mongoloid people. The *Mahabharata*⁵⁸ refers to the army of Bhagadatta composed of Cina and Kirata soldiers who glittered like gold; *tasya cinaih kirataisca kancanairiva samvrtam babhau balam*. Bhagadatta who probably a Kshatriya king participated in the Kuruksetra war with an army, composed of Kiratas, Mlecchas and Chinas. Because he commanded a non-Aryan army, he has often been called in the great epic as mlecchadhinatha.⁵⁹ He has been frequently praised as a friend of Indra, wise, religious, devoted to the virtues behaving a

Kshatriya, heroic and just. Had he been a non-Aryan king so many virtues would not have been applied to him. But it must be admitted that his subjects were mostly non-Aryans and that is why he is called mlecchanamadhipah. The term used viz; Kirata, Mleccha, Cina and Sagarnupavasina by the epic probably the Nisada people, the Chinese and the dwellers of the sea coast of the Bay of Bengal.⁶⁰

Kirata is a name applied for the people who live in the caves (*guha*) of mountains as it appears clearly from the dedication of the Kirata to the caves in the *Vajasaneyi Samhita* and from the reference in the *Atharvaveda* to a Kirata girl (Kairatika).⁶¹ Puranas describe Kiratas as the cave dwellers, foresters, mountaineers, barbarians; through their appellation they are understood as inhabitants of the mountains of eastern India. One author put this as “ in the early christian era the ‘Kiratas’ were known as a group of people whose original home was in the Himalayan slopes and in the mountains of the east in Assam particularly. ⁶² While in another Purana, they are described as shepherds living on hills to the north of Bengal. Perhaps they were the same people called cirrhadoe as described by the Periplus and Ptolemy. According to the description of *Mahabharata* Kiratas are placed around the Brahmaputra. “According to *Kālikā Purāna*, the original inhabitants of this land were the Kiratas with shaven heads and yellow skins.”⁶³

The ‘Kiratas’ belonged to the great Bodo group of the Tibeto-Chinese family. They belonged to Tibeto- Burman linguistic sub-family and ethnically were part of Mongoloid stock.⁶⁴ The Bodos, Kacharis, Chutias, Karbis, Deoris and Mishings of present day belong to this stock. They were considered as early settlers of Assam.⁶⁵

In Assam Mongoloid tribes elements are noticed among the tribes of the present-day Assam. The Bodos, the Rajvamshis, the Mishings, the Chutiyas, the Rabhas, the Dimachas, the Karbis (Mikir) and the Shan tribes including the Ahoms, and many other numerically smaller communities are basically Mongoloid in origin.⁶⁶ Caucasoids came in next to the Mongoloids in different waves or batches. Anthropologists have noticed strains of three Caucasoid types in the ‘Indid’ Assamese, represented by upper-caste Hindus and Muslims.⁶⁷

Therefore, it appears that Assam had received waves of immigration of various people from places, time by time from different passages. There were immigration of the Brahmanas, the Kayasthas and the Kalitas from Madhyadesa (Kanyakubja),

Mithila, North Bengal and Northern India. Another major group of Assamese population is the Assamese Muslims who came from Gaur (Goria) and elsewhere in Northern India.⁶⁸

In the Thirteenth century CE, the Ahoms, Tai-group of people came into Assam through the Patkai range. Their subsequent expansions northwards, eastwards and southwards were restricted by the mountainous rim-the north-eastern hills and by the innumerable population sub-groups who inhabited them. In other words, there was distinct compartmentalization of the various territories in the region. The logical westward expansion was gradual. This culminated in controlling of the Brahmaputra valley by the end of the 16th century. Thus, the Ahoms were frequently subjugated to invasions from the Ganga delta.⁶⁹ The Aryan population came to this area during this period. The socio-religious customs were significantly moderated by the habits and manners of their non-Aryan neighbours. The culture of Assam has developed in a manner which makes the intimacy and contact of both Aryan and Non-Aryan people.⁷⁰

The Muslim settlement in Assam can be traced back to 1206 C E when the Turks were defeated in Kāmarūpa. From 1206 CE to late 17th century CE, these people came to Assam successively and settled in Brahmaputra valley. Other communities who entered Assam in the medieval period were the Khamti, Phakeal, and Naras.⁷¹ During Sankardeva's time several Bengali and Oriya people entered into Assam. During the time of Koch king Naranarayana people migrated from Koch Behar to Assam. In this way waves of migration took place in Assam at different times. Aryans were the last to migrate to this land. Probably they entered into the Brahmaputra valley in the later Vedic period.⁷²

Assam is diverse in physical features and the major physiographical components are the senile plateau of Karbi Anglong, representing a part of Penninsular India, North Cachar Hills which display the most youthful and highly differentiated relief features and Brahmaputra and Barak plains present aggradational surfaces. The geological formations and the forces of nature are mainly responsible for the formation of different relief features of Assam.⁷³

People of Assam mainly depended on agriculture since ancient times. Cultivation of rice, wheat, sugarcane and various fruits are the main occupation. Earlier *Jhuming*

system of cultivation was done by the people of Assam, but later on the system of cultivation improved.⁷⁴ Various agricultural products along with vegetables and fruits were produced. The major part of cultivated land was devoted to growing rice. Since early times, rice was even to-day the chief food in Assam. There were three types of rice cultivated according to season and nature of the soil. They were- sali, bao, ahu.⁷⁵ There is no any information about the amount of rice production. Besides growing rice, the cultivation of various fruits was prominent in Assam. Even in the early inscriptions reference is made about various fruits. “Of the fruit trees grown over fields and orchards the epigraphs mention Kantaphala (Indrapala, 11; Dharmapala 1) (jackfruit), Āmra (mango),(Balavarman; Indrapala 11), Jambu (Balavarman) (eugeniajambolana), Sripkala, (Balavarman) Dumbari (Balavarman) (Fig tree), Sakhotaka (Indrapala 1, Ratnapala 1) (the walnut tree) badari (jujube tree), Lakuca⁷⁶ or amalaka, a kind of bread fruit tree, amla, betasa⁷⁷ (gamboze tree) and various kinds of citron trees.”⁷⁸ Hence the people of Assam were mainly based on agriculture. Besides cultivation of rice, they cultivated various seasonal crops along with vegetables and fruits since the early time till today.

The soils of Assam were very fertile which attracted the people from the hills to come down for cultivation purpose. This provided an opportunity for the admixture of racial elements. Waddel has pointed out that the fertility of the soil “seems always to have attracted the more powerful tribes from the mountains”.⁷⁹ The soils of Assam may be generally divided into four groups viz. alluvial soils are extensively distributed over the Brahmaputra and Barak plain. Because of alluvium left by the rivers after leaving the hills and flowing through the plains these soils receive high fertility. In general soils of Assam are rich in contents of nitrogen and organic matter. The alluvial soils of the Brahmaputra and Barak valley are highly fertile and suitable for raising cereals, oilseeds, pulses and plantation crops. These soils are very responsive to manuring and irrigation⁸⁰

It is difficult to reconstruct the climatic condition of ancient Assam due to scarcity of source materials. Only from the accounts of Hiuen- Tsang it is known that the country was “low and damp”⁸¹ From the accounts of Shihabuddin Talish, the Muslim chronicler who accompanied Mirjumla in his expedition to Assam in 1662 CE, it is known that “It rains (in Assam) for eight months in the year, and even the four months of winter are not free from rain”.⁸² Presently the state of Assam lies in the

regime of monsoon climate of the sub-tropical belt. It enjoys heavy summer rainfall, winter drought, high humidity and relatively low temperature during a year. The state shows marked spatial variation in the climatic pattern because of its location and physiography, the seasonal change in the pressure condition over the Bay of Bengal and the north-western Indian landmass, the tropical oceanic air masses of south-west monsoon, flow of local mountain and valley winds and presence of water bodies and rivers.⁸³

Assam is a treasure house of mineral resources since early times. The economically viable mineral resources including energy resources are described below. In the ancient time references have been found about many mineral resources found in varying proportions. Coal is one of the important mineral resources belonging to the “energy group”. Assam is well blessed by nature in respect of oil and natural gas, which is termed as “liquid gold”. Presently in Assam, the refineries located at Digboi, Guwahati and Bongaigaon are in operation. The Digboi refinery is the oldest refinery in India.⁸⁶

Limestone is another important mineral resource of Assam. Limestone deposits of Assam are located in Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills district. Dillai Parbat, Kailajan, Sainilanchu, Shilvetta of Karbi Anglong district and Umrangsu and Garampani region in North Cachar Hills district are the areas where limestone deposits are located. Many limestone beds are interbedded with coal-bearing sandstones. Based on these deposits, numerous projects for cement manufacturing and lime came into existence.⁸⁷

Assam is a land with various industries. Numerous products especially silk clothes are produced in the silk industries of Assam. Since ancient time’s reference is made about three types of silk- *pat*, *muga* and *eri* or *endi* produced abundantly in Assam. Sualkuchi, a village in the Kamrup district is the famous place for the production of silk cloth.⁸⁸ There is evidence of extensive manufacture of clothes, and of the cottage industries. Handloom industry in Assam occupied an important place in every Assamese household. Other indigenous cottage industries are the cane, bamboo and palm leaf play important role in the economy of Assam. A kind of hat called *japi* (to get protection from rain and sunshine in the field by the farmers) is made from palm leaves.⁸⁹ Gold washing and manufacture of jewellery is another important industry in

Assam since the early period. In many rivers of Assam⁹⁰ gold was found in abundance which led to the growth of gold washing and manufacturing industry. The river *Lauhitya* carried down the golden dust from the Kailasa Mountain, which bear golden boulders. In the *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, it is mentioned that numerous idols of both gold and silver, a huge image of beaten gold weighing two or three thousand mounds stood in a temple in Kāmarūpa.⁹¹

Earthquake is a frequent occurrence in this region since ancient times. It is under pressure of earthquakes that many structural monuments collapsed and disintegrate in course of time. Therefore it is not surprising that the ancient monuments of pre-Ahom period are not left to us in its original form. From the kings to the serfs i.e., all classes of people built houses made of perishable material such as grass, bamboo and timber etc. so that in time of earthquake they don't have to injure from a shock.⁹²

Assam is drained mainly on the north by the Brahmaputra river system and on the south by the Barak river system. The Brahmaputra river system is very much extensive and is rightly interpreted as the life-line of Assam having great impact on the topography, economy and culture of the state.⁹³ One of the important factors in the history of Assam is the river system. The number and magnitude of river in Assam probably exceed that of any other country in the world of equal extent.⁹⁴

Brahmaputra is the principal river system of Assam since early period. The mighty Brahmaputra has been also known in the literatures as Lauhita and people of Assam called it as Luit. The origin and nature of Brahmaputra have been described in the *Kālikā Purāna*.⁹⁵ About 72 per cent of the total geographical area is drained by the mighty Brahmaputra and its innumerable tributaries.⁹⁶

There are sixty two rivers that flowing into river Brahmaputra. Among them 37 are from the north and 24 from the south. In the North bank, main rivers are- Jaidol, Subansiri, Manas, Buri-Ai, Champamati, and Sankosh. In the South bank, main rivers are – Noa-Dihing, Dibru, Buri Dihing, Disang, Dikhou, Bhogdoi, Janjhi, Dhansiri, Kapili, Dudhnoi, Krishnoi, Jihari, and Jinjiram.⁹⁷

“Some of these tributaries are huge rivers and carry huge amount of water. Among the large tributaries the Subansiri originates from the Trans-Himalayan belt, the Jiadol or Jia- Bharali, Manas and Sankosh originates in the Greater Himalayan part,

while the other tributaries have their origin in the Lesser Himalayan zone the Subansiri is the largest tributary of the Brahmaputra. Jia-Bharali is a very notorious river for flood and of changing courses. The upper part of the river is called Kameng in the Arunachal Himalayas. The Manas is a very large north bank tributary of the Brahmaputra River and its upperreach is known as Lhobrok or Kuruchu which rises on the north-western slope of the Kula-Kangri range. The Sankosh is the westernmost tributary of the Brahmaputra in Assam. It contains two branches, the western branch retains the original name i.e. Sankosh and the eastern branch is called the Godadhar noi. The south bank tributaries are relatively smaller than those of the north bank ones. The Dhansiri is the most meandering river in Assam.”⁹⁸

The Barak river system includes the major rivers Barak, Surma and Kushiya. The whole Surma basin is drained by this system.⁹⁹ The river Barak flows in a westerly and southerly course to Tiapaimuk in the south-western corner of Churachandrapur district of Manipur and from there it takes U-turn to the north which forms the Assam and Manipur boundary. After that it flows westward and reaches Kandigram in Karimganj district where the Barak River bifurcates into two branches-the Surma (north) and Kushiya (south) by entering Bangladesh.¹⁰⁰ The Barak receives a large number of small tributaries like the Jiri, Chiri, Madhura, Jatinga etc. flowing down from the southern slopes of the north Cachar hills and the Irang Makru and Tuivai etc.¹⁰¹ The Surma-Barak river system also receives important south flowing tributaries like the Jadukata, Umew-Umiam, Myngot Shella from the Meghalaya.¹⁰²

Assam was a land with dense forest and hills since early times. So it is natural to be the place of various wild animals. It is known from the age of *Mahabharata* to the present century that Assam is famous for elephant.¹⁰³ King Bhagadatta of Prāgjyotisa fought in the Kurukshetra war was sitting on the famous elephant Supratika.¹⁰⁴ From the seals of the king of ancient Assam it can be said that elephant was a popular animal at that time. The seals were contained an ambossed head of the elephant.¹⁰⁵ An illustrated prose work on elephant *Hastividyanaya* was written under the patronage of the Ahom king Siba Singha.¹⁰⁶ Besides elephant, there are various animals, birds and insects which got mentioned in the literatures of Assam indicate that these were found in Assam during that time and till today their species are common. Early Assamese literature gives description of animals, birds, fishes and insects which are mostly found in Assam. The *Yoginī Tantra* also mentioned both birds and animals

that to be avoided for sacrificial purpose to Goddess Kāmākhyā.¹⁰⁷ Madhava Kandali mentioned animals such as wild elephants, lions, buffaloes, boars, tigers, hyena, king cobras, pythons, insects, leeches, mongoose, big rats, ants and various dangerous birds capable of killing even an elephant.¹⁰⁸

From the above it can be surmised that Assam in the early period was a land with vast geographical features which was known by names like Prāgijyotisa and Kāmarūpā. Only in the later part with the coming of the Ahoms in the 13th century the name Assam became popular. Present Assam was only a part of earlier Pragjyotisa-Kāmarūpā. Assam being the vast land in the early period was consisted of many hills and forest, rivers. Brahmaputra as Lauhitya was the principal river as it is today. The soils of Assam were fertile and climate was cold. It was richer with various crystal streams. Thus, Assam “is a country of an almost terrifying prodigal Nature overgrown by rank and luxuriant jungle, beaten by rains-intersected by Numberless Rivers, pouring their torrents into the majestic Brahmaputra, and in the past racked by earthquakes and pillaged by elephants, rhinoceros, and equally savage man. It is aptly epitomized in the province’s motto arva, flumina, montes-cultivation, rivers and mountains.”¹⁰⁹ In the words of M’Cosh, “Its climate is cold, healthy and congenial; its numerous crystal streams abound in gold dust and masses of the solid metal; its mountains are pregnant with with precious stones and silver; its atmosphere is perfumed with tea, growing wild and luxuriantly; and its soil is so well adapted to all kinds of agricultural purposes that it might be converted into one continued garden of silk and cotton, of tea, coffee and sugar, over an extent of many hundred miles.”¹¹⁰ Assam received waves of migration of people at different times. People of different races such as Australoids, Mongoloids, Negritos, Caucasoids and many other entered Assam through different passes.

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