

Assam, Pragjyotisa and Kamarupa

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Ancient Assam, known as Pragjyotisa or Kamarupa, occupied an area larger than that of the modern state of Assam, and extended westwards to the river Karatoya. The area of the undivided state of Assam (before it was split up into a number of states in recent times) lay between latitudes $28^{\circ}18'$ and 24° North and longitudes $89^{\circ}46'$ and $97^{\circ}4'$ East'. It comprised an area of about 54,000 square miles, including 24,283 sq. miles of the plain of the Brahmaputra valley and 19,500 sq. miles of southern and northern hill tracts. It is bordered on the north by the sub-Himalayan ranges of Bhutan, Aka, Dafala, Miri, Abar and Mishmi which are the names derived from those of the people inhabiting them. Its eastern boundary is formed by the Assam range of the Himalayas known as Patkai, on the south-east by the Naga hills on the Burmese border, on the south by the Mizoram hills touching the borders of Burma, on the south-west by the Hill Tippera and Mymensingh of Bangladesh. The western border is formed by the Garo Hills and the river Sonkosha dividing it from Bengal. This was the natural geographical spread of Assam through its political border changed, from time to time with its fluctuating political fortunes. All this region was covered by the un-partitioned state of Assam as well as the North-Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA) which is now constituted by the truncated states of Arunachal, Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland as well as Manipur (to some extent). The whole of this region, which forms the north-eastern part of India now is situated roughly between 22° and $29^{\circ}28'$ N latitudes and $89^{\circ}40'$ and $97^{\circ}22'$ E longitudes.

Assam:

The name of Assam is of recent origin. It was not found in ancient sources either literary or inscriptional, dating earlier than the 16th century AD. This name for the first time was referred to by Abul Fazl, a great scholarly patronage of the Mughal emperor Akbar in his book *Ain-i-Akbari* as *Asham*.¹ The name is also referred to by Ami Ahmad Razi, another chronicler of the same period, in his *Haft Iqlim*.² The name *Asam* is also met with in the *Padshahnama*, a chronicle of the time of the Mughal emperor, Shahjahan by his courtier Abdul Hamid Lauhori and in the *Alamgirnama*, a chronicle of the region of emperor Aurangzeb by Muhammad Kazim,³ and in the form *Asem* in the travelogue of Tavernier.⁴ The mediaeval Muslim writers are also familiar with the name Kamrup which is the nomenclature encountered in all the earlier Persian chronicles. In so far as the Assamese literature is concerned, the name is first met with in the *Guru Charita* of Daityari Thakur of the 16th or early 17th cen. AD, which signified the Ahom people, Suryakhari Daivajna in his *Darang-rajya-Vamsavali* uses it as the name of both the Ahoms as well as the upper Assam valley.⁵

The name of Assam is an anglicised form of the earlier Indian (or Assamese) formation *Asama* which owes its origin to the Tai or Shan people of Siamese-Chinese branch of the Sino-Tibetan extraction called Ahoms, who immigrated to the upper Brahmaputra valley by way of North Burma through the course of the river Noa-Dihing and started on their career as the rulers of this region during 13th cen. AD. They first entered the region in AD 1228 under the leadership of Chaolung Sue-Ka-pha, a Tai prince of Mueng Mao.⁶ Though they came as invaders and established their rule over the region about 600 years upto A D 1838, they made this region their home and patronised and adopted its lifestyle, religion and culture.⁷

There are also different opinions about the origin of this name. The Ahoms were a tribe belonging to the Siamese Shan race and called themselves Tai. In fact, the Tai did not call themselves Ahoms. According to Ahom tradition, when they invaded the region, the local people called them *asama* (unparalleled or peerless) because of their super fighting abilities, and this name was later given to the region conquered by them.⁸

According to S.K. Chatterji, 'the original form of the word in old Burmese was *Rham* or *Hyam* which became in middle Burmese (after A D 1050) *Yam* and *Hyam*, and then in different languages *Aham*, *Ahom*, *Cyam*, *Am*, *Syam*, *Siam*, *Syam*, *Asama*, *Asam*, *Shan* etc.⁹ B.K. Kakati thinks that this tradition is later and that *Asama* may represent a later Sanskritisation of the earlier form *Acham* which may mean 'unconquered.' or 'undefeated' for, in the Ahom or Tai dialect, *Cham* means 'to defeat' and with the Assamese prefix *a* (in the negative sense) it would get a negative meaning.¹⁰ According to another view, the name (*Asam*) is traceable to Bodo word *Ha-Com* meaning low or level country.¹¹ Grierson has pointed out that *Shan* is the Burmese corruption of the original Siamese word *Sham*. The name *Shan* or *Sham* or *Ashan* was the basis of the modern name Assam.¹²

The name of Assam is of recent origin. The word is an Anglicised form of the Assamese word *Assam*. The word is derived from *asama*, in the sense of 'uneven', as distinguished from *samatala*. But the term could not be traced out prior to the Ahom occupation. E.A. Gait suggests that the word is derived from the present designation of the Ahoms. (*A History of Assam*, P. 431, *Appendix-G*). The word '*Asama*' first given to the Sans (Ahoms), was later on applied to the country. S.K. Chatterji also opines that the Ahoms, a Shan tribe, who came to Assam in AD 1228, gave the name '*Aham*' or '*Asam*' to this province. (*The place of Assam in the History and Civilization of India*, P. 10).

All the views referred to above are purely speculative and there is no definite conclusion about the origin of the name Assam except the peoples' name viz. Ahom, or some topographical features of the region. In some dialects, the sibilant changes into *h*, and it is possible conversely for *h* to get transformed into *S*, and so the name *Asama* may have been derived from the Ahom people. The current form of the name with duplication of the sibilant

(Assam) is only an anglicised form of the original *Asama*. The Tais never use the name Ahom for themselves and continue the nomenclature of Tai.

The regional names in the North-East are sometimes found based on some topographical features, and the name *Samatala* (country comprising even coastline) met with in the Allahabad Pillar inscription of the Gupta emperor Samudragupta and other later sources is an example in point. The original form of the name was *Asama* (*Asom*) which denoted an 'uneven' or 'rough' land and it has nothing to do with the Ahom people who might have derived their own name from it. This is just a conjecture. The name is not found in any early works.

Pragjyotisa:

In the earlier inscriptions and literature, the region mentioned as Pragjyotisa or Kamarupa. The former name was more ancient and popular than the latter¹³ and continued in use till a very late date, particularly in the epigraphs of the rulers of this region, who felt pride in styling themselves as *Pragjyotisesvara* or *Pragjyotisadhipati*, 'lord of Pragjyotisa'. It comprised a larger area than the other name and included not only Assam but also some of the hilly regions on the north-east and also a considerable portions of Bengal. According to F.E. Pargiter the early kingdom of Pragjyotisa comprises not only a major portion of Assam but also the Jalpaiguri, Coochbehar, Rangpur, Bogra, Mymensingh, Dhaka and Tippera districts and some part of the Pabna district of Bengal (now in Bangladesh) as well as the eastern part of Nepal.¹⁴ According to him, Pragjyotisa comprised the whole of North Bengal proper.¹⁵ Some historians go even beyond it and hold that its western boundary was formed by the river Kosi and that the Purnea district of Bihar formed a part of this kingdom.¹⁶ It's capital was called Pragjyotisapura.

As for the origin of the name is concerned, the *Kalikapurana*, dated about 10th century AD, asserts that formerly staying here god Brahma created the stars, in consequence of which the city came to be designated as Pragjyotisapura.¹⁷ Some scholars supported it on the basis of presence of the Navagraha temple on the hill called Chitrachala in Guwahati for which the name of Pragjyotisapura came to be used.¹⁸ They also invite our attention to a number of Assamese manuscripts on astrology and astronomy and the prevalence of the solar and fire worship in early Assam and the Bihu festival associated with fire worship and fertility rites and the astronomical significance of the region.¹⁹ Others reject this tradition and propose to connect it with the topographical features like its situation in a hilly region which is, most probably, denoted by an Austric formation such as *Pagarjuh* (*jo*) *tich(chachh)* denoting a region of extensive high hills which may have later been Sanskritised as Pragjyotisa.²⁰ Some others connect the name with the Chinese immigrants and feel that the Chao Zuthis migrating to India were called Zuthis and those coming to Assam came to be known as Prag Zuthis (eastern Zuthis) who provided the basis for the Sanskrit name Pragjyotisa.²¹ It is not unlikely, however, that the region got this name because of the earlier

Sunrise here as compared to the other regions of India, *Prag* meaning before or earlier and *jyotisa* referring to the most important astronomical phenomenon, viz. Sun. Alternatively, *Prag* may be taken in the sense of 'east' and the name may denote the 'land of eastern sunrise' or the 'eastern land of sunrise'.

Kamarupa:

The name Kamarupa occurs for the first time in the Allahabad Pillar Inscription of the Gupta emperor Samudragupta of 4th century AD, which mentions its king as one of the rulers of the border states of his empire *pratyantarpati*.²² In case of Kalidasa, poet and dramatist, is placed in the 1st cen. B.C. as averred by tradition, the antiquity of the name may go back a few centuries earlier. Describing Raghu's *digvijaya*, he states that on his crossing the river Lauhitya (Brahmaputra) the lord of Pragjyotisa (*Pragjyotisevara*) trembled with fear, being unable to resist his armies and he (*Kamaupesvara* 'the lord of Kamarupa') presented him with numerous elephants and placed a golden stool on the shadow of his feet.²³ It will be obvious from a perusal of these stanzas that Kalidasa has referred to the names Pragjyotisa and Kamarupa as synonymous.²⁴ Sanskrit lexicographers, including Yadava Prakasa (*Vaijayanti*), Hemachandra (*Abhidhana Cintamani*, p.381) and Purushottama (*Trikandasesa*, p.93), also treat the two names as of an identical connotation.²⁵ The name Kamarupa appears in varied contexts in, inter alia, the *Markandeya Purana*, the *Garuda Purana*, the *Dasa-Kumara-charita* of Dandin, the *Kavyamimamsa* and *Karpuramanjari* of Rajasekhara, the *Vikrama kadeva-charita* of the Kashmiri poet Bilhana, the *Rama-charita* of Sandhyakaranandin and *Rajataranginii* of Kalhana, in so far as the other literary sources are concerned, sometimes along with Pragjyotisa. The Chinese traveler Yuan Chwang of the 7th cen. AD and the Arabic writer Abu Raihan ibn Muhammad, better known as Al-beruni, also speaks of Kamarupa and the former supplies a very valuable piece of information of historical nature. Apart from the Allahabad Pillar inscription of Samudragupta which records the oldest epigraphical reference, the name Kamarupa is met with in others, such as grant of the Ganga king Avantivarman, the Paschimbhag grant of Bhojavarman, the Deopara inscription of the Sena King Vijayasena and the Madhainagar grant of the last Sena king Lakshmana Sena.²⁶ It is interesting to note that the name Kamarupa became more popular than the older name Pragjyotisa in other regions, but in Assam the name Pragjyotisa was much more popular and almost all the kings of Assam mentioned themselves as *Pragjyotisesvara* or *Pragjyotisadhipati* in their own epigraphical records. It is only in some late inscriptions and some later texts like the *Kalikapurana*, the *Yoginitantra* and the *Hara-Gauri-Samvada* that the name Kamarupa together with connected myths is met with. These works give a rather inflated extent of the area included in Kamarupa. The *Yoginitantra* (XI, 16-18) for instance, defines its limits as follows:-

From the Kancena mountain in Nepal to the confluence of the Brahmaputra with Laksa (Lakhya), and from the river Karatoya to the abode (*pitha*) of Dikkaravasini. Thus its northern boundary is formed by the mount Kancana (Kanjagiri) in Nepal and the western boundary by the river Karatoya and eastern boundary by the abode of Dikkaravasini, popularly called the goddess kecaikhati (i.e. eater of raw-flesh.). Again the southern boundary is marked by the confluence of the Brahmaputra with the river Laksa (Lakhya). *Yogini-Tantras*'s reference to the river Diksu (identified with the modern river Dikhow is Sibsagar Dist. of Assam) seems to imply the eastern boundary in the southern region of the Brahmaputra, the *Dikkarevasini-pitha* marking the eastern point in the northern region.

Thus the land of Kamarupa was extended from the mount Kancana (Kanjagiri) of Nepal in the north to the confluence of the Brahmaputra with the Laksa or Lakhya in the south, and the river Karatoya in the west to the *Dikkaravasini-pitha* (Diksu) in the east. The *Kalikapurana* also agrees to the same. The *Kalikapurana* states that the land is triangular in shape while in extent it was 100 *yojanas* in length and 30 *yojanas* in breadth.

This is the greatest possible extent of Kamarupa, though it differed from time to time. Originally the name was applied to the area around the city of Guwahati including the temple of Kamakhya; however, afterwards as a result of the policy of territorial aggrandisement of its rulers, fresh territories were annexed and its geographical limits got expanded considerably.

The puranic legends account for the origin of the name by associating it with Kamadeva, the Indian cupid and god Siva. It is believed that Kamadeva was sent by the gods with the object of arousing god Siva sensually and resulting procreative activity when the latter was averse to the worldly life because of his mourning at the sad demise of his spouse Sati. The former was reduced to ashes by his angry third eye. But later, by Siva's grace, he recovered his original form (*rupa*). The scene of this episode is laid here, and this is said to have given the country the name under reference. The popularity of Goddess Kamakhya and the associated tantric ritual throughout the country naturally contributed to its renown and overshadowed the earlier name Pragjyota.

Most of the scholars are not willing to admit this traditional origin of the name. S.K. Chatterji prefers to treat these names as of a Bodo extraction and as representing a tribal name prior to their becoming associated with localities. He feels that the prefix *Kam* or *Kam* forms an element occurring in the name of the westernmost tribe of the Bodos, viz. the Koches (modern Konch, Koch, from an earlier *Kawaomcha* or *Kamoch*, Sanskritised into *Kamobja* in the 10th cy. A.D. ²⁷ B.K. Kakati treats this name as of an Austric origin as also the names Kamata and Kamila (present Kamilla in Bangladesh). He connects it with Austric words like *Kamru* and *Kamrut*, the Santali names of a minor deity. Kakati further suggests that the word 'Kamarupa' is the combination of two Austric words (*Kamaru+Pa*)= '*Kamaru*'

is the name of god and 'pa' means mountain'. It means mountain of the god names Kamaru.

²⁸ According to Ajay Mitra Shastri, it is no doubt true that several feminine cults and fertility rites developed as well as primitive, must have contributed to the formation and growth of the Kamakhya cult as finalized, as is the case with several other Indian cults. It is quite likely that some primitive goddesses were merged into and identified with some goddess, and the same merger and equations must have marked the religious beliefs and practices in question. It was a common process in ancient India and continues to this day. ²⁹

Some writers place Pragjyotisa and Kamarupa in regions other than in Assam. R.C. Majumdar places Pragjyotisa in Orissa and adds that a certain Patoladeva, a Sahi ruler of Gilgit, claims in an inscription from Hatum, his descent from the Bhauma dynasty, and on the basis of this, he asserts that there was a Pragjyotisa kingdom in the North-western India, and that the name of the dynasty along with the place name was later carried to Assam. ³⁰ K.V. Athavale thinks that Naraka and his successors ruled at Pragjyotisa in Kathiawad and it was Vajradatta who went to Assam. He locates Pragjyotisa near Raivataka hills, and holds that Vajradatta carried the name of the place and the dynasty to Kamrupa. ³¹ B.C. Law, on the basis of the *Ramayana* (Chap-42) Kiskindhyakanda and the *Brahmanda Purana* (27) holds that there was a Pragjyotisa on the bank of the river Vetravati or Betwa. ³² B.M. Barua locates Pragjyotisa in the eastern Punjab. ³³ These writers believe that the *Mahabharata* locates Pragjyotisa in the west or north. The Kiskindhyakanda (Chap 42) locates Pragjyotisa on the Varaha mountain where Naraka is said to have taken his abode. The Varaha mountain where Pragjyotisa is placed, is situated in Assam. According to P. Bhattacharya, Bhagadatta's kingdom extended to Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet and the frontiers of China.

Like Pragjyotisa, there are some other countries named Kamarupa in certain other regions. The *Siva*, *Vayu* and *Brahmanda Puranas* show awareness of a country of this name in the Sahya mountain and of the *Kamarupi-raksasas* on the Devakuta mountain. The *Padma Purana* (*Patala Khanda-v*) states the Kamakhya Devi was the presiding deity of Ahicchatra, and the poet Muka Kavi Sarvabhauma composed three works in honour of Kamakhya of Kancipura. ³⁴ The *Siva Purana* mentions that in Sahyadri there was a country of Kamarupa. ³⁵ These reference indicate that it was the fame of the original Kamrupa-Kamakhya that carried the name to other lands.

The close associated of Pragjyotisa with Lauhitya and Kamarupa-Kamakhya in epigraphs as well as literature prove their existence in the same regions (Assam).

Kamarupa finds mention for the first time in the Allahabad Pillar inscription of Samudragupta. ³⁶ The next references occur in the Belava grant of Bhojavarman, ³⁷ the Silimpur grant of Prahasa, ³⁸ Deopara inscription of Vijayasena, ³⁹ Madhainagar grant of Lakshmana Sena ⁴⁰ and the Kamauli grant of Vaidyadeva. ⁴¹ In the contemporary inscriptions, Lauhitya finds mention in the Mandasor grant of Yosodharman and the Apsad epigraphs of

Adityasena, ⁴³ while Pragjyotisa is mentioned only once in the Bhagalpur grant of Narayanapala. ⁴⁴

From the above discussions, we may conclude that the original name of the state of Assam was known as Pragjyotisa and afterwards Pragjyotisa was converted to Kamarupa and thus the kingdom came to be known as Kamarupa. The rulers of Kamarupa still applied the epithet that *Pragjyotisesvara* or *Pragjyotisadhipati* found in their epigraphs. Almost all the kings of Kamarupa styled themselves as *Pragjyotisesvara* or *Pragjyotisadhipati* in their own epigraphical records. By the 13th century AD, the kingdom of Kamarupa was split up into several petty chieftainships. In 1228 AD., under the leadership of Sue-ka-pha, a Tai prince of Mueng Mao invaded Assam and established their rule in upper Brahmaputra region. They extended their territory towards west and ruled over the region for about 600 years.

The name Assam is of recent origin. From 16th century AD, the upper Assam valley, which was occupied by the Ahoms was known as *Asham*, *Asem Asama* etc. to mean the Ahom people as well as their territory. The name Assam is an anglicised form of the earlier Indian formation *Asama*. Whether the name of the state should remain as Assam, Asam or Asom is a controversial question. As all the earlier anglicised formation of the place names in India are now converted to their original name such as Calcutta-Kolkata, Bombay-Mumbai, Madras-Chennai, Poona-Pune and so on. The anglicised name Assam is also being changed and substituted by the name “Asom” by a cabinet resolution of the present government which has by and large been welcomed by the people of Assam.

REFERENCES:

1. English Translation by H.S. Jarrel, Vol.II.p (L/T).131. The reference is to the *Rajah of Asham*. Abul Fazl, seems to distinguish the province from Kamrup, commonly called also *Kamrup* and *Kamta*. *Asham* is said to have bordered lower Tibet and *Khata*, which was also called Mahachin (Machin).
2. Mohammad Azhar Ansari in his *Geographical Glimpses of Medieval India*, Voll.II,p.23. He describes the country of Kuch as ‘located between eastern and northern part of Bengal’ and its borders are said to ‘touch China’ Its other border’ was Ghoraghat. From the borders of China that is called *Asham* (Asam) till the region of Kuch.
3. *JASB*, XLI, p.55; A M Shastri, *Ancient North-East India, Pragjyotisa*, p.3
4. *Travels in India*, I,p.16;II p.277
5. K.L. Barua, *SEHA*, pp.270-71
6. Ajay Mitra Shastri, *op.cit.*p.3; Puspadhar Gogoi, *Tai of North East India*

7. B, Bhattacharya has pointed out that the Vajrayana Sect of Buddhism and Bodhisattvas are called *asama* in the Buddhist text *Sadhanamala* and therefore, the region was known as Asama, as for the Kamrupa region happened to be a stronghold of Vajrayana, *I H Q*, III, p; A M Shastri, *of cit* p.3-4
8. E A Gait, *A History of Assam*, pp.245-46
9. *The Name Assam-Ahom* ' JASB, XXII, 1956, pp. 147-53; *Kirata-Jana-Kriti*, pp.101-2
10. B K Kakati, *AFD*, p.1-3; *Aspects of Early Assamese Literature*, p. 1-2; B.K. Barua, 'A Note on the word Assam', *JARS*,II, 1935, pp.103-4
11. A.M. Shastri, *op cit*; B.K. Barua, *C.H.A.*, pa.4
12. A G Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*. II, p.5; B K Barua, *op cit* p.1
13. The earliest references to Pragjyotisa occur in two epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*; M M Sharma, *IAA*, Intro. P-3
14. *Ancient Countries in Eastern India*, *JASB*, 187, 1897, p.106
15. *The Markandeya Purana*, Eng Tr. p. 328 *fn*
16. K.L. Barua, *EHK*, pp.2,5-6
17. *Kalikapurana*, XXXIX, 126; K.L. Barua opines the name, Pragjyotisa by the 'land of rising Sun.'
18. E.A. Gait, *A History of Assam*, p.15, He opines Pragjyotispura as 'City of Eastern Astrology'.
19. K L Barua, *EHK*, p.13; B.K. Barua, *CHA*, p.11 P.C. Choudhury, *H C P A*, p.29; Choudhury opines the Bihu festival is associated with solar cult & fertility rites.
20. B K Kakati, *The Mother Goddess Kamakahya*, p.6
21. R.M. Nath, *The Background of Assamese of Culture* p.4-5; P.C. Choudhury, *op. cit*, pp. 28-29
22. D. R. Bhandarkar, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings*, *CII*, III-p. 213
23. A.M. Shastri, *opcit*, p.7
24. *C H A*, I, p. 12
25. *IAA*, pp. 11-13, 15-18; M M Sharma has also given reference to Pragjyotisa
26. *Ibid*
27. *Origin and Development of Bengali Language*, I. p. 69; *Kirata-jana-kriti; The Indo-Mongoloids: their contribution to the History and Culture of India*, p-89
28. *The Mother Goddess Kamakhya*, p. 6-7; *Purani Kamarupar Dharmar Dhara*, p.10, *Assamese Its Formation and Development*.
29. *Ancient North-East India: Pragjyotish*, p.9
30. *Bharatiya Vidya*, VI, pp. III-12
31. *Ibid*, VIII, pp. 250-55
32. *I.C.*, III, pp. 731 *f*
33. *I. H. Q.* XXIII, pp.200 *f*
34. H P Sastri, *Notices n Sans MSS*, X, I, (Nos. 3268, 3291, 3295)
35. *Jnana Samhita*, 48 (Vangavasi Ed.)

36. Fleet, *CII*, pp. I *f*
37. *E.I.* XII, pp. 37-44
38. *E. I.* XIII, pp. 289*f*
39. *E. I.* I, pp. 305
40. *J A S B*, V (NS) pp.467*f*
41. *E.I.* II, pp. 347*f*
42. *C II*, III, pp. 142*f*
43. *Ibid*, pp.200*f*
44. *IA.*, XV, pp. 304*f*