2. A Brief History of Assam

2.1. Introduction

The history of Assam has passed several stages of development to reach to its present state. Prior to the 12th century AD., there was lack of historical documents and other records on Assam; hence historians had to rely on different sources to construct the history of Assam. References about this region were found in the Puranas, Sanskrit literature, Buddhist literature and accounts of foreign travellers. Archaeological sources like monuments, numismatics, epigraphy and pottery have also contributed to our understanding of the history and culture of Assam till the 13th century AD.

2.1.1. Prehistoric Period

There is lack of evidence of prehistoric archaeological evidence of human settlement in Assam. No human bones or skulls of prehistoric period have been discovered yet. This has been explained as a result of the climatic and ecology of the region. The climate and soil of Northeast India have not supported the preservation of human bones here unlike in other places of India. But never the less, studies on prehistory of this region yields a few result which indicate that some form of human settlements during Neolithic period were present in the region covering different areas of Assam. Hasan (1981) writes that the Neolithic Cultures of Assam falls into six distinct zones: namely Cachar Hills Zone, Sadiya Frontiers, Naga Hills Zone, Khasi Hills Zone, Garo Hills Zone, and Brahmaputra Valley Zone. Regarding the discovery of Neolithic tools and implements in the Brahmaputra valley, it has been written that the materials available for study are few and far between. Save for two “celts” from Dibrugarh and Sibsagar, all other tools come from the chance discovery of Mr. W. Penny in Tezpur district. (Dani. A.H, 1981, pp. 45-46). Similarly, M., Hazarika. (2006) surmises that although no evidence of rice agriculture has been found in the low land valley
cultivation, but on the basis of circumstantial evidences like migration, linguistic features, and archaeological evidences of stone tools and pottery, early agriculture in the low land areas were also present in northeast India. So from studies on the prehistory of Assam it can be ascertained that the culture of Assam precedes historical period.

2.1.2. Ancient Period

The earliest mention of a ruler of Kamarupa was named as Mahirang Danav. He was succeeded by his descendents who were known as Hatakasura Danav, Sambar Asur and Ratna Asur. They were followed by a chief, named as Ghatak who was the ruler of the Kiratas. He was slain by Narak Asur who was a powerful ruler of Kamarupa. According to legends, he was born of Vishnu and Prthivi, the Earth Goddess. There are a number of legends associated with Narkasur. He was brought up by King Janak of Videha or North Bihar. He made Pragjyotishpur his capital city. He was a worshipper of Vishnu and was much favoured by this God. It was Vishnu who taught him to worship the Goddess Kamakhya. Earlier, he was very pious and god fearing, but later, after coming under the influence of BanAsur, the king of Sonitpur, he became arrogant and irreligious. He even asked Goddess Kamakhya to be his wife. The Goddess accepted his proposal on the condition that he constructs a temple on the Nilachal hill along with a tank and a road to the temple within a night. Narakasur was almost able to accomplish this task, but the Goddess caused a cock to crow, claiming that morning had arrived, and as such she refused to marry him. Narakasur was enraged and killed the cock. With this act, Narakasur lost the goodwill of the Goddess. He also didnot allow Basistha Muni to go to worship Kamakhya, as a result of which he was cursed by the sage. Narakasur’s end came when Vishnu in the incarnation of Krishna slained him. His son Bhagadatta ascended the throne after his death. The name of Bhagadatta is frequently mentioned in the Mahabharata. He was also a powerful ruler like his father. He is credited to have fought along with the Kauravas in the battle of Kurukshtera against the Pandavas. The kingdom of Pragjyotishpur under him was attacked by Arjun, the Pandava prince. He was finally defeated by the intervention of Krishna. Narak Asur descendents continued to rule
for nineteen generations. The last kings of this dynasty were Subahu and Suparna. Some other traditional rulers included Debesvar who was ruling Kamrup in the commencement of the Saka era. There is also a mention of a Kshatriya ruler by the name of Dharma Pal. He made his capital west of Gauhati. He was followed by several rulers ending with Ram Chandra. This period of early Assam history prior to 7th century A.D. was obscure. Some semblance of authenticity could be deciphered after Hieun Tsang; the Chinese traveler who visited Kamarupa left an account of his visit to this kingdom. During his visit, Assam was under the rule of the Varman dynasty and the king during that time was Bhaskar Varman. Bhaskar Varman was the eleventh in descent in the genealogy of the Varman dynasty. The reign of Bhaskarvarman is an epoch making period in the history of Assam and has placed the name of Kamarupa as a frontier state in the map of India. With his death, the Varman dynasty came to an end.

There is reference about the Dynasty of Sala Stambha whose last ruler was by the name of Sri Harsha. The dynasty of Pralamba assumed power at around 800 A.D. There were around twenty rulers from this dynasty. By 1000 A.D., the Pal dynasty came into focus with the rule of Brahma Pal. Several rulers from this dynasty ruled till the 11th century. By 1100 A.D., there again developed a reign of confusion in the kingdom of Kamrupa with no definite ruler. The kingdom of Kamarupa disintegrated, resulting in the emergence of many petty chiefs at different places.

2.1.3. Medieval Period

During the early part of the thirteenth century, Kamrupa came into close contact with Muslims when Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khilji after conquering Bengal in 1204, proceeded eastwards into Assam while on his way to Tibet. Over the next five centuries several Muslim invasions took place in Assam. In 1220 Ghiyasuddin Bahadur Shah is said to have advanced as far as Sadiya. After thirty six years, Ikhtiyar uddin Yuzbak Tughril Khan invaded Kamrup. In 1337 Muhammad Shah invaded the country. In the meantime, in 1228, there emerged in eastern Assam a powerful dynasty called the Ahom dynasty which ruled Assam till the advent of the
British in Assam in 1826. The Ahoms belonged to the Tai or Shan section of the Siamese – Chinese branch of the Sino-Tibetans. They arrived in Assam through North Burma, along the Noa Dihing River. During their six hundred years rule, they were able to consolidate their power by bringing the different rulers or chiefs under their dominion. They came into contact with different communities like the Moran, Matak, Borahis, the Nagas, Manipuris, Jaintias, Miris, Kacharis, Chutiyas and Koch. When the Ahoms were consolidating their position in Assam, they came into conflict with the ruling Kachari, Chutiya and Jaintia kingdoms. The Chutiyas were in power in northeastern Assam and parts of Arunachal Pradesh. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries they ruled the districts of Lakhimpur, parts of Dibrugarh and Tinsukia. The Kacharis ruled from the Dikhow river to central and southern Assam. The Kachari kingdom at one time included a wide stretch of territories represented by the present districts of Nagaon, Sibsagar, parts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar. In the western part of Assam the Khan or Khen Dynasty established the Kamata kingdom during the fifteenth century. Another powerful dynasty was the Koch dynasty which has left large impact on the society and culture of Assam. This dynasty established sovereignty in 1510 AD when Biswa Singha laid the foundation of this dynasty. The Koch kingdom in Western Assam and present North Bengal was at its zenith in the early reign of King Naranarayana. By seventeenth century the kingdom lost its power and had to cede political hegemony in favour of the Ahoms. By using diplomacy as well as force the Ahom rulers were able to become masters of the entire Brahmaputra valley.

The Ahoms came into conflict with the Mughals several times. In 1682, during the reign of Gadadhar Singha, the Ahoms recovered Western Assam from the Mughals which was earlier ceded to them. The river Manaha was recognized as the boundary between the Mughal and Ahom dominions. The boundary of the Ahom during that period consisted of Brahmaputra valley, excluding Goalpara. It was bounded on the north by the Bhutan hills, on the west by the Manaha River, and the Habraghat Pargana, on the south by the Naga, Khasi, Mikir and Garo hills and on the east by the Mismi, Singphou and Khamti ranges. The boundaries of Assam of this period remained fixed and unaltered till the occupation of the British in 1826.
2.1.4. Modern Period

With the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, the fate of Assam passed into the hands of the British. Now began a history in Assam which was a series of annexation and secessions. The British annexed Cachar in 1832 and Jaintia Hills in 1835. In 1874, Assam became a separate province with Shillong as its capital. Sylhet was merged with East Bengal on partition of India. It saw further reduction of its area when Dewangiri in North Kamrupa was ceded to Bhutan in 1951. States of Meghalaya, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram got their own separate states. Today Assam has an area of 78,438 sq. kms. It consists of thirty two districts and is credited to be the most populous state in the entire Northeast India.

Thus, a sketchy picture of the emergence of Assam history from ancient times becomes precise over the centuries.

2.2. Origin of the Name of Assam

The ancient name of Assam was Pragjyotisha. Its antiquity can be established from the fact that it has been mentioned in the two great epics- The Mahabharata and the Ramayana and also in the Puranas. Regarding the name ‘Prajyotisha’ or ‘Prajyotishpura’, Gait (1992, reprint) writes that Prag means ‘former’ or ‘eastern’ and Jyotisha ‘a star’, astrology, shining. Pragjyotishpur may, therefore, be taken to mean the ‘City of Eastern Astrology’. Since ancient times the rulers fixed the boundaries of their kingdoms on the basis of natural features like rivers, hills, forest, etc. Rivers acted as natural boundaries between two principalities in a majority of cases. According to the Yogintantra, the boundary of the country during ancient times, comprised the whole of the Brahmaputra (Lauhitya) Valley, Rangpur and Cooch Behar. It also included Manipur, Jaintia, Cachar, West Assam and parts of Mymensingh and Sylhet. (Choudhury.N.D., 1985, pp.xxvii) . Today the country was divided into four portions, viz., Kampith from the river Karotoya to the Sankosh, Ratnapith from the river Sankosh to the
Rupahi, Suvarnapith from the river Rupahi to the Bharali and Saumarpith from the river Bharali to the Dikrang.

The other name of ancient Assam was Kamarupa. This name is regarded as younger than the name Pragjyotisha. References of Kamarupa are found in literature as well as in many epigraphs. Kamarupa has been mentioned in the two great epics- The Mahabharata and the Ramayana and also in the Puranas and Tantras. The mythology regarding the origin of the name Kamarupa tells us the story of Sati who died due to the discourtesy shown to her husband by her father Daksha. Overcame by grief, Siva carried her dead body and wandered throughout the world. In order to put a stop to this, Vishnu used his discus to cut the body into pieces, which then fell into different places. One such piece fell down on Nilachal hills near Gauhati and the place was henceforth held sacred as Kamakhya. But Siva’s penance did not stop, so the Gods sent Kamdev, the cupid to break his penance by making him fall in love. Kamdev succeeded in his mission, but Siva enraged at this result, burnt Kamdev to ashes. Kamdev eventually regained his original form here and from then onward the country came to be known as Kamarupa (Where Kama regained his Rupa or form).

The name Assam is of recent origin. There are several opinions to the origin of the name Assam. The name ‘Aham’ or ‘Asom’ was probably given by the Ahoms who came to Assam in 1228 A.D. It may also have been derived from ‘Ha-cham’ which in Boro language means the low or level country. Its present name is an anglicized form of the name ‘Asom’.

There are also some other names of Assam. The Ahom called Assam as Moun-dun-shoun-kham meaning the ‘land of golden gardens’. In the olden days Assam was also known as Vaisali to the Burmese and the tribes living beyond the Patkai ranges.

1.4 for the purpose of collection of data for this study, only a few places were visited.