

Lesson 1

Ancient Kamrupa



Learning Outcomes:

- learn about the historical background of the ancient Kamrupa
- learn about the great rulers of Kamrupa
- learn broadly about the royal dynasties who ruled over ancient Kamrupa
- learn about the general environment consisting of administrative, political, socio-economic, religious systems etc. of that period
- know about the relationship between ancient Kamrupa and contemporary rulers of the other states of India

You have already read in your previous class about the formation of the ancient Kamrupa in the lesson titled “Pre Historic Assam” and have an idea about it. We can study about the history of Kamrupa from various historical resources like Puranas, Buddhist literature, tantric scriptures, the Allahabad Prashasti carved during the Gupta period along with the stone scriptures, bronze scriptures, pillar inscriptions, the ruins of temples spread all over Kamrupa, stone carvings etc.

The ancient Kamrupa was an exceptional center point of Indian traditions and cultures. Like other places of India, in Kamrupa also, the vedic traditions, Sanskrit language, architectures, structures and astronomy etc. were broadly known. We can assume that the ancient Kamrupa was a prosperous state of India from the various resources like the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, Arthashashtra, Puranas, stone inscriptions, bronze scriptures and archeological resources. In the *Kalika purana*, written in 10th century, it was mentioned that Kamrupa was located in the east of *Karatowa* river and its length was 100 *jujon* (450 miles) and breadth was 30 *jujon* (135 miles). According to this, the state was triangular in shape. The Kamakhya temple was located at the center of the ancient Kamrupa. According to the *Juginitantra* written in 16th century, the Kanchenjunga mountains were towards the north of Kamrupa and the meeting point of the Brahmaputra and Lakhya (Bangladesh) river in the south, the *Karatowa* river was in the west and the *Dikkor bhaxini* (Dikorai river) in the east. The Kamrupa was divided into four parts or *pith* in the above mentioned book. They were *Ratnapith*, *Kampith*, *Swarnapith* and *Saumarpith*.



Fig 1.1 Ulubari bronze plate inscription of Baladev Barman III

As per the above mentioned information, it is observed that the ancient *Pragjyotishpur* or Kamrupa was extended over to the present day Brahmaputra valley, Bhutan, north Bengal, north and east part of Bangladesh and to the Tibetan border towards the north.

The Great Rulers of Kamrupa:

It is mentioned in the oral literature that the first ruler of Kamrupa was *Mahirang Danab*. The historians have assumed that the capital of Mahirang Danab's kingdom was at the *Mairang* hill region near the Guwahati-Shillong road of present day. After his death, *Hatakasur*, *Sambarasur*, *Ratnasur*, *Ghatakasur* were the kings of Kamrupa chronologically. Later, *Narakasur* became the ruler of Kamrupa. It is known from the legends that almost 2500 kings of the dynasty established by Narak ruled over Kamrupa for a long period of time.

There are several legends about King Narak. Most of these legends claim that Lord Vishnu impregnated mother Earth in his '*Barah Avatar*' and that mother Earth gave birth to a child in the middle of '*Treta yuga*'. Since mother Earth is also known as '*bhumi*' the child Naraka was also known as '*Bhaumo*' and the dynasty that he established came to be known as '*Bhauma Naraka*'. A notable fact is that the kings of successive dynasties like Barman, Salstambha and Pal portrayed themselves as the descendants of the Bhauma Narak dynasty and that they were the direct descendants of Lord Vishnu.

Bhagadutta:

It is known from the resources that Naraka's son Bhagadutta sat on the throne of Kamrupa after his father's death. There is description of Bhagadutta's bravery in many chapters of the Mahabharata. According to the sayings, Bhagadutta's daughter, *Bhanumoti* was married to Duryodhan. It is also said that Guwahati's '*Digholi Pukhuri*' was dug by Bhagadutta during the time of his daughter's marriage. Due to this relationship, Bhagadutta fought along with the Kauravas in the war of the Mahabharata inspite of his friendship with the Pandavas. It can be assumed that Bhagadutta was one of the famous and brave kings of India from the contribution that he made towards the war of the Mahabharata

After Bhagadutta, many renowned kings ruled Kamrupa. Bajradutta, Banroja and king Bhisamak were among few of them who received popularity.

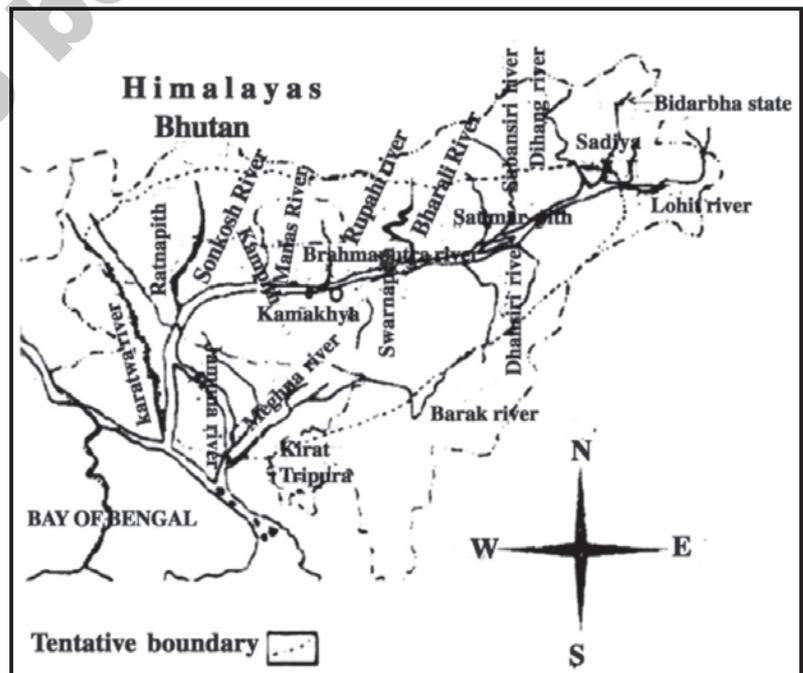


Fig. 1.2 Map of ancient Kamrupa

The Barman Dynasty:

During 350-380 AD approximately, *Pushya Barman* started a new era in Kamrup. The dynasty established by him is known as the Barman dynasty. *Pushya Barman* was contemporary of the Gupta king, Samudra Gupta. His name is mentioned in the bronze scriptures of Nidhanpur of Bangladesh as a person of various qualities. The kings of this dynasty established by *Pushya Barman* were successful to rule over Kamrupa for almost 300 years.

After the death of *Pushya Barman*, his son *Samudra Barman* ruled approximately between the period from 380-405 AD. *Samudra Barman* was a skillful ruler and his wife *Duttadevi* was an intelligent lady.

After *Samudra Barman*, *Bala Barman* 1 ruled Kamrupa from approximately 405-420 AD. According to many historians, a pleasant relationship between Kamrupa and Kashmir was developed during his rule. It is mentioned in the famous book named *Rajtarangini* written by *Kalhan* that *Meghbahan*, the king of Kashmir came to the *swayambar* (marriage ceremony) of Princess *Amritprabha* of Kamrupa and accepted her marriage proposal in the presence of many other kings. From the description of this marriage, it can be assumed that along with other states of India, Kamrupa was also known as a powerful state.

Kalyan Barman, *Mahendra Barman*, *Bhuti Barman* also known as *Mahabhut Barman*, *Chandramukh Barman* and *Bhaskar Barman* were the rulers of Kamrupa after *Bala Barman*. It is to be noted that *Bhaskar Barman* was unmarried that is why he was also known as '*Kumar Raja*'. He ruled Kamrupa for a long period of time. His rule was one of the most glorious episode in the history of ancient Kamrupa. *Bhaskar Barman*'s ascension to the throne in 594 AD created a new era known as '*Bhaskarabda*' or '*Kamrupi year*'. Amongst several significant events during his rule, two of the most striking incidents are his cordial relationship with the valiant king of north India, Harsha Vardhan and the Kamrupa visit of Chinese traveler Hiuen Tsang.

The Salstambha Dynasty:

There was an immense political crisis in Kamrupa after the death of Kumar Bhaskar Barman in 650 A.D. (approx) as he was unmarried. A leader named Salstambha took advantage of this crisis and usurped the throne of Kamrup which created a new royal dynasty. This dynasty is remembered in history as the Salstambha dynasty.

Amongst the various kings of the Salstambha Dynasty, the ruling period of King *Harsha Dev* was a glorious episode of ancient Kamrupa. During his rule, Kamrupa led multiple successful military marches in places like Gauda, Bengal, Orissa, Kaushal, Bihar etc.

The Pal Dynasty:

The throne of Kamrupa was empty once again when the last king of Salstambha dynasty, *Tyagsingha* died childless. In lieu of the situation, the visionary ministers and officials nominated *Brahma Pal* as the next king. This dynasty was named as Pal dynasty later

Brahma Pal. The kings of this dynasty looked after all the royal matters of Kamrupa for almost 150 years. Since the beginning of the Pal dynasty in the 10th century AD (approx), *Ratna Pal* was the best amongst all the rulers. He was a strong warrior, a noble man and a man with bright personality and other adorable qualities. It is mentioned in the bronze scriptures of Guwahati that he lived his life following Vedic traditions as well as being a devout follower of Lord Shiva. It is mentioned in the bronze tablets that *Ratna Pal* established a city named *Durjjoy* and shifted the capital there. The historians have assumed that *Durjjoy* city included the areas like *Pan Bazar*, *Ambari*, *Uzan Bazar* near the Brahmaputra river of present day Guwahati. Many rich merchants, intellectuals, poets and religious leaders lived in the city.

The Next Rulers of Kamrupa:

The last king of Pal dynasty, *Joy Pal* died approximately in 1142 AD. After him, there is no definite information about the history of Pal dynasty in Kamrupa. Many kings ruled over Kamrupa after the decline of the Pal dynasty. The reign of *Vaidyadev*, *Rayeri Dev*, *Udaykarna*, *Ballav Dev*, *Prithu* and *Sandhya* are some of the significant ones.

The Administrative System of Ancient Kamrupa:

As our country has been divided into states, districts, sub-divisions, *panchayats*, village etc. for convenience to rule, Kamrupa was also divided into *bhukti*, *mandal*, *bixoy*, *pur*, *gram* etc. In some of the stone inscriptions it was found that the north bank of the Brahmaputra River was named as *North-Kuladesh* and the south bank was named as *South-Kuladesh*.

There was a system of monarchism in ancient Kamrupa. The rulers portrayed themselves as a part of god. For example: the plates discovered in *Dubi* of Bajali district describes *Pushya Barman*, the founder of Barman dynasty as the second image of Vishnu and *Narayan Barman* as Chakrapani. In order to oppress the general public with their power they bestowed upon themselves with titles such as '*Parambhattarak*', '*Maharajadhiraj*', '*Param Parameshwar*' etc.

The coronation ceremony of the kings were observed with much pomp and gaiety following Vedic traditions. Vassal kings, priests, nobilities and kings of other states were invited to these ceremonies. The bronze tablets hold evidence that the kings of Kamrupa were compared with the Hindu gods *Indra*, *Hara*, *Vishnu*, *Varun*, *Agni*, *Kubera* and the queens with goddesses like *Aditi*, *Lakshmi* etc.



Fig 1.3. Umachal stone inscription before 1100 Century

The ministers and court assembly were an integral part of the administrative system of Kamrupa. The ministers and the high ranking royal officials were given the titles like '*Amatya*', '*Sachib*', '*Mantri*', '*Mahapratihar*' etc. The chief of the army was known as '*Senadhakhya*' and his subordinates were given the titles like '*Senapati*', '*Nayak*', '*Ranok*' etc.

Activity: Prepare a list of the portfolios under the present Assam Govt. and a list of the ministers who are in-charge of these portfolios.

The Kamrupa army showed immense expertise in battles. Minhaz Siraz hailed the soldiers of Kamrupa as ingenious fighters. Several forts were constructed for defense. The Kamrupa army consisted of cavalry, naval fleet, elephant fleet and infantry. It was documented in Hieun Tsang's narrative notes that *Bhaskar Barman* had a powerful army consisting of thirty thousand fleets of ship and a fleet of twenty thousand elephants. Several temples were constructed during the reign of *Bhaskar Barman*. In these times, the state of Kamrupa earned acclaim as a significant educational center.

The Land and Revenue System of Ancient Kamrupa:

The complete land area of the state was under the king. In various circumstances, the king used to donate lands to Brahmins, religious establishments etc. Majority of all the stone and bronze plates discovered until now state the fact of such donations. These donated lands were known as '*Devottar*', '*Brahmottar*', '*Dharmottar*', '*Agrahaar*' etc. Land revenue was the primary source of the state's income. Taxes were collected in the form of cash or other materials. The donated lands were exempted from these taxes.

Let us know:

Devottar land: The land donated in the name of gods were known as *Devottar* land.

Brahmottar land: The land donated in the name of Brahmins were known as *Brahmottar* land.

Dharmottar land: The land donated in the name of temples were known as *Dharmottar* land.

Agrahaar land: The villages donated to the Brahmins were known as *Agrahaar* land.

(All of the above mentioned lands were exempted from paying taxes.)

The Social System of Ancient Kamrupa:

The ancient Kamrupa society was a mixture of various ethno-linguistic groups like Austric, Dravid, Tibeto-Burmese, Alpine etc. Unlike other places in India, the caste hierarchy system was not strictly followed in ancient Kamrupa. The socio-political lifestyle of ancient Kamrupa was enriched by people with different occupations like '*Baron*', '*Lekhak*', '*Vaidya*', '*Doiboigya*', '*Kumbhokar*', '*Koibortto*', '*Tantabyo*' (*Tati*), '*Nouki*' etc. However, similar to various states in India, the Brahmins were given a high position in the society in Kamrupa as well. The kings of Kamrupa donated lands, villages etc. to Brahmins. The society of ancient Kamrupa was considerate.

Let us know:

According to ancient Hindu scriptures, people's nature and their ability decided their profession. This system was known as '*Barnashram*' or caste hierarchy. According to *barnashram*, there were four basic castes- *Brahman, Kshatriya, Baishya* and *Sudra*.

Family was the smallest unit of the society. Joint families were more common during those days than nuclear families. Hiuen Tsang, in his book '*Si-Yu-Ki*' mentioned that the people of those regions were calm and composed as well as honest.

Let us know :

The Kumar Bhaskar Barma University of Sanskrit and Archaeological study established in 2011 in present day Nalbari district is named after the best king of the Barman dynasty, King *Bhaskar Barman*.

The Economic System of Ancient Kamrupa:

Agriculture was the primary source of livelihood of the people of Ancient Kamrupa since ancient times. The hilly regions practised the '*Jhum*' method of agriculture. Another ancient industry of Kamrupa was the production of gold and jewellery made of gold. Gold was found in almost all major rivers of Kamrupa namely *Subansiri, Dikhow, Borgang, Bhoroli* etc. It is mentioned in Kautilya's '*Arthashastra*' that gold was found in Kamrupa's '*Subarna Kunda*'. The historians cite that the iron used to manufacture weapons for battles was mined from the hilly areas of Kamrupa. An ample amount of cotton clothes were also manufactured in ancient Kamrupa. Various natural ingredients like *laa, neel, haldi* etc. were used to colour these clothes. The people of ancient Kamrupa also used to wear dresses made of '*Paat-Muga*' and '*Eri*'. Kamrupa had a good business and social relationship with other states of India from ancient times. There are mentions of such trades with Gujarat, Kashmir and other states in India in historical documents. Kamrupa also exported various commodities like ivory, rhino horns, leather, a variety of scented woods, *laa, gold, bay leaf* etc.

The Language, Literature and Educational System of Ancient Kamrupa:

In ancient Kamrupa, education was mostly imparted in '*gurugriha*', Sanskrit tols and village schools. The rulers of Kamrupa endorsed the spread of education and provided royal aid for the same. The kings like Sthita Barman, Bhaskar Barman were themselves well-learned individuals. In addition to the four Vedas, the educational centers also imparted knowledge on Ayurveda, Dhanurveda, Tantra, Vedanga, History, Puranas etc. Astronomy, Vateria, Music, Dance etc. were also given equal importance.

Sanskrit was the most prevalent language in ancient Kamrupa. From the resources found in bronze plates, it can be deduced that Sanskrit was both used by the common people as well as the language for the administration of the royal activities. In addition to Sanskrit, the Tibeto-Burmese languages and old Assamese languages were given equal importance in ancient Kamrupa. It can be deduced from the language, sentence structure, poetic expressions, rhyming words etc. found in the scriptures that the people of ancient Kamrupa were highly educated.

Other forms of arts and crafts were also believed to have developed in ancient Kamrupa. This can be specially seen in the archaeological findings from different places of Kamrupa. The statues and others figures found in digs showed the intricate craftsmanship of the artists.

The Women of Ancient Kamrupa:

A lot can be known about the women of ancient Kamrupa from the bronze plate. The queens of Kamrupa were highly praised in these writings. They were intelligents and religious. Specially, *Duttadevi*, wife of *Samudra Barman*, *Ratna Devi*, wife of *Bol Barman*, *Vijanayawati*, wife of *Bhuti Barman* were few significant names.

In the bronze plate of *Banamala Barman*, the mention of '*Devadashi*' custom and construction of temples of '*Hetukasolin*' by the king in the place of '*Devadashi*' can be found. The prevalence of '*Devadashi*' custom proves the practice of dance and music among the women of a particular section. Besides, the statues carved in the walls of the old temples are seen in the form of dancing and playing various instruments. Probably, the women of this period were extremely talented in these skills.

The Religious Traditions of Ancient Kamrupa:

Similar to the Vedic era, many people of ancient Kamrupa offered their prayers to the various elements of nature. They also considered trees, rocks, hills, rivers etc. as their deities. Since the society was based on agriculture, several religious ceremonies were celebrated around agriculture. They considered earth as their mother since it was the land that provided them with trees, fruits, berries as well as a livelihood.

Shaivaite religion was prevalent in Kamrupa since ancient times. It is mentioned in the *Kalika Purana* that there were 15 centres in ancient Kamrupa for the prayers of Shiva. Ancient Kamrupa was one of the main centres for Shakti puja. Traditionally, Kamrupa was recognized as the main centre of Shakti puja. The temple of goddess *Kamakhya* is the first of such centres. The *Shaktism* is said to have evolved from the reverence and respect bestowed by the Indian male towards the feminine society since the eras long bygone. Few noted goddess of Shakti religion are '*Durga*', '*Kali*', '*Kalika*', '*Uma*', '*Kamakhya*', '*Tara*', '*Sondi*', '*Chamundi*' etc.

In addition to Shiva and Shakti, Vishnu was also worshipped in ancient Kamrupa. Even Buddhism got some attraction in ancient Kamrupa. It has also been seen in ancient literature as well as the ruins of architectural monuments that the Sun was also prayed in ancient Kamrupa.

Bakhtiar Khilji's Kamrup Attack:

You have already learned in class VII about the Indian invasion by the Turkish-Afgan and their gradual expansion in the country. The first Turkey Sultan of India, Sultan Qutubuddin Aibak expanded his sultanate in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Bengal etc. with the help of his general, Bakhtiar Khilji.

In due course of time, general Bakhtiar Khilji planned to attack the Kamrupa kingdom. Prithu was the ruler when Bakhtiar Khilji attacked Kamrupa. Prithu ruled Kamrupa from 1185-1228 AD. He was an apt administrator as well as a valiant fighter. He thwarted the attack successfully that came from the west of the Kamrupa kingdom. The strong army of Bakhtiar Khilji which consisted of 12000 cavalry was humilietly defeated by Prithu's well-planned defence tactics and the bravery of the soldiers of Kamrupa. The documentation of this significant win can be seen in the stone inscription found in '*Kanai Borohi Bud*' at present day North Guwahati. It is also mentioned in the book '*Tabaqat-e-Nasiri*' by Minhaz Siraz.

After his humiliating defeat in Kamrupa, Bakhtiar Khilji fled to Bengal, but was eventually killed there by a person named Ali Mardan Khilji.

Have you ever been to North Guwahati? In various places of North Guwahati and Tezpur, stone inscription, bronze plates as well as pillar inscriptions can be found about Kamrupa kingdom. All of these inscriptions bear significant facts about the past. However, due to lack of maintenance and broken or lost pieces during excavation, it is difficult to draw information. The ruins found in various archaeological sites provide us with an idea of the golden history of Kamrupa kingdom. A few such places that could be mentioned are '*Madan Kamdev temple*', '*Doh Porbotia doorway*', '*Bamuni Pahar*' in Tezpur, Goalpara's '*Paglatek*', '*Ambari*' in Guwahati, '*Gostol*' in Dabaka. The preservation of such treasures is our duty. The Department of Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) is taking steps to rightly preserve these places associated with the history of Kamrupa. Experts state that there are still a lot of resources to be discovered, analysed and studied upon about the ancient state of Kamrupa. You should also be aware about these in the future.

Activity:

Try to find out if there are any such places of historical/archaeological importance about ancient Kamrupa in your locality. If yes, visit those places and prepare a list of the items found there. (Take help from the experts.)

Let Us Remember:

- The state of Kamrupa is now extended over present day Brahmaputra valley, Bhutan, North Bengal, north and east part of Bangladesh and towards the north Tibetan border.
- The stone inscriptions and the bronze inscriptions are significant historical resources of Kamrupa.
- According to the legends, the first king of Kamrupa was Mahirang Danab.
- Almost 35 kings of Barman dynasty, Salstambha dynasty and Pal dynasty ruled Kamrupa.
- Bakhtiar Khilji was defeated in the hands of *Prithu*, the valiant king of Kamrupa.
- There was the system of monarchism in Kamrup. Here, the king was the most powerful one.
- For the convenience of the rule, the state was divided into '*bhukti*', '*bixoy*', '*pur*', '*gram*' etc.
- The land revenue was the only source of income for the state.
- The society of ancient Kamrupa consisted of various ethno-linguistic groups.
- Ancient Assamese languages were also used extensively in ancient Kamrupa along with Sanskrit language simultaneously.
- Agriculture was the primary source of livelihood for the people of ancient Kamrupa.
- The people of Kamrupa used ancient Assamese languages and scripts.
- Different products/ingredients were exported to foreign countries from Kamrupa.
- The women of ancient Kamrupa were not only intelligent and talented, but also religious.

- Shiva, Shakti, Vishnu religion and Buddhism was also prevalent in ancient Kamrupa along with the prayer to the Nature simultaneously.
- We should all be aware of the preservation of the historical resources of ancient Kamrupa.

Some Significant Stone Inscriptions of Ancient Kamrupa:

Name	Type	Ruler	Period	Place of discovery
Umachal	Stone inscription	Surendra Barman	5 th century	Nilachal Pahar, Guwahati
Nogajari Khonikor village	Stone inscription	-	5 th century	Khonikor village, Golaghat
Dubi	Bronze plate	Bhaskar Barman	7 th century	Dubi, Bajali
Nidhanpur	Bronze plate	Bhaskar Barman	7 th century	Nidhanpur, Bangladesh
Tezpur	Stone inscription	Harjara Barman	830 AD	Tezpur
Hayumthal	Bronze plate	Harjara Barman	9 th century	Hayunthal, Karbi pahar
Gostol	Bronze plate	Gopal Barman	1080 AD	Gostol, Nagaon
Komouli	Bronze plate	Vaidyadev	1142 AD	Komouli, Uttar Pradesh

Exercise:

- Answer briefly:
 - What is the name of Bhagadutta's daughter?
 - During whose reign did Chinese traveller Hieun Tsang visit Kamrupa?
 - Which king married Amritprabha, the Princess of Kamrupa?
 - Who was the best king of the Salstambha Dynasty?
 - Which king did thwart Bakhtiar Khilji's attack on Kamrupa?
- Find out the correct answer:
 - Pushya Barman/Bhaskar Barman established the Barman dynasty.
 - Si-Yu-Ki was Kautilya's/Hiuen Tsang's book.
 - The era began from the rule of Kumar Bhaskar Barman was known as Sakabda/Bhaskarabda.
 - There was a system of monarchism/democracy in ancient Kamrupa.
- Fill in the blanks:
 - The main _____ of ancient Kamrupa was _____.
 - _____ established Barman dynasty.
 - The best king of Pal dynasty was _____.
 - The king of Kamrupa received the _____ titles.
 - _____ was the main source of income for the state of Kamrupa.
- Write short notes on :
 - Bhaskar Barman,
 - The education system of ancient Kamrupa,
 - Bhagadutta,
 - Religion in ancient Kamrupa,
 - Devadashi custom.
- Describe the administrative system of ancient Kamrupa.
- Describe how the stone inscriptions help in gathering information and knowledge about ancient Kamrupa.
- Draw a map of present day Assam and mark the places where the capitals of Barman dynasty, Salstambha dynasty and Pal dynasty were situated. (take help from the teacher)

