

# **The Emergence of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa: Unveiling Its Ancient Foundations**

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## **Abstract**

*The formation of the state (kingdom) of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa, in ancient Assam is certainly an outstanding event of the history of the land. Needless to say, the occurrence had political as well as socio-economic importance from the ancient date till today. All succeeding events of both medieval and present-day Assam history are related to this great ancient happening. This very Kingdom has had introduced us to the vital notion of State for the first time. The issue becomes very interesting when focus is put on the geographical location of Assam; because Assam is the hub of the very sensitive North –East India. The land has remained the last important station of Aryan culture in India and we cannot negate the importance of this ancient State in the history of Assam. A sincere study clearly shows that ancient Assam underwent the processes of State-formation twice, one under the famous mythical figure Narakasura and the other, under King Pushyavarman in the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The intervening period between the existence of the mythological kingdom and the rise of Pushyavarman should also be taken into account. This period didn't witness the establishment of a strong State in ancient Assam but the region remained economically active. This economic activeness of the land definitely played a part in the formation of a State in due course of time. The rise of a feudal Assam was of course, the legitimate outcome of the whole process.*

## **Key words:**

*Assam, Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa, Narakasura, Pushyavarman, State-formation*

## **Introduction**

The study of state formation in India, like in other parts of the world, has always been a fascinating subject. This process integrates key aspects of human society—political, social, and economic. In the Indian context, it becomes even more intriguing due to the simultaneous processes of cultural assimilation and economic interaction. The transition from a stateless society to organised state systems occurred in the mid-first millennium B.C. in the Gangetic valley, marking a shift from the

tribal Rig Vedic society to the structured kingdoms of the Later Vedic period(Thapar, 1995, p.4). Notably, the process of Aryanisation, with its economic and cultural dimensions, progressed alongside state formation.

Assam, home to numerous diverse ethnic groups, offers a remarkable setting for studying this phenomenon. The emergence of the Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa state not only established stronger connections between the region and mainland India but also allowed Assam to retain its distinct regional identity. This unique balance contributed to the development of Assam's rich and diverse socio-cultural heritage.

It is a well-established fact in Assam's history that the region was known as both Pragjyotisha and Kamarupa in ancient times. Assam also possesses a rich mythological heritage. As Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa, it gained widespread recognition as a formidable state ruled by the *Danavas* and *Asuras*. According to mythology, Narakasura is credited with founding the legendary Kingdom of Pragjyotisha by defeating a local chief named Ghatakasura. His rule not only established a powerful kingdom with a robust economic foundation but also initiated the process of Aryanisation in the region. This very process played a crucial role in shaping the formation of the Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa state.

During the historical period, beginning with the reign of Pushyavarman in the mid-4th century CE, Kamarupa saw the emergence of three significant dynasties—the Varmans (ruling from 4<sup>th</sup> century to mid-7<sup>th</sup> century CE), the Salastambhas (ruling between 8<sup>th</sup> century to second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE), and the Palas(who ruled from second half of 10<sup>th</sup> century to mid- 12<sup>th</sup> century CE). Pushyavarman is believed to have laid the foundation of a strong kingdom in ancient Assam by subjugating various tribal groups under their respective chiefs (Hazarika, p.161). The common factors contributing to state formation, such as population pressure, warfare or external threats, advancements in production leading to economic surplus, and religious legitimisation of power, are evident in the establishment of Kamarupa under Pushyavarman (Hazarika, pp.69-74).

Between the mythological era and the rise of Pushyavarman, there seems to have been a transitional period in which a strong political entity did not exist. However, economic activities in the region continued to flourish, indirectly contributing to the eventual process of state formation.

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Interestingly, these state-building processes also paved the way for the emergence of feudalism in ancient Assam. This crucial political and socio-economic transformation significantly influenced the broader course of Assam's history.

Our lives are deeply connected with the state, just as the state is shaped by its people. The inhabitants of the Brahmaputra Valley have historically organised themselves into a distinct nation, setting themselves apart politically, socially, and culturally. Although the people of this valley began identifying as the 'Assamese' nation primarily during the medieval period under Ahom rule, the foundation for this development was undoubtedly laid in the preceding era—the period under study. A close examination of the rule of the three powerful dynasties—the Varmans, Salastambhas, and Palas—strongly supports this assertion.

As already stated, during the historical period, beginning in the mid-4th century A.D., a state first emerged in Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa under Pushyavarman. The Varman dynasty, established by him, produced several significant rulers, among whom Bhaskaravarman stands out. He formed a strong alliance with Emperor Harshavardhana of Kannauj, together defeating Sashanka, the ruler of Gauda. This significant partnership is well documented in *Harsha Charita*, written by Banabhatta (Cowell & Thomas, 1897, pp.211,217,218). Furthermore, Bhaskaravarman was accorded great honour in the religious assemblies held at Kannauj and Prayag under Emperor Harsha's patronage. The renowned Chinese traveller Xuanzang, who visited both Harsha and Bhaskaravarman, also testified to this close association (Beal, 1914, pp.177,188).

The subsequent dynasties—the Salastambhas and the Palas—continued to uphold Kamarupa's political stature in Indian history. From the time of Pushyavarman, these rulers maintained strong connections with the main Indian land mass. Despite their probable Mongoloid origins (Hazarika, pp.154-155), they actively promoted the processes of Aryanisation and Sanskritisation in the region. While these processes may not have been the sole driving forces behind state formation in Kamarupa, they undoubtedly played a crucial role in strengthening the state by aligning it with the broader Indian political and cultural framework.

From this analysis, it becomes evident that studying this period offers valuable insights into the uniqueness of Assam's history. A deeper exploration of this topic helps uncover many significant aspects of Assam's ancient past, making a substantial contribution to the reconstruction of the

province's historical narrative.

## **Materials and methods**

This article is based on a qualitative research approach, utilizing original records such as inscriptions and other relevant literary sources related to ancient Assam. It is important to note that these sources, both archaeological and literary, have already been meticulously examined and analyzed by esteemed scholars. The present study aims to extract valuable data specifically linked to the process of state formation in Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa. Each piece of information has been carefully scrutinized, and inferences have been drawn, with efforts made to corroborate them with tangible evidence wherever possible. Additionally, ethno-archaeological studies have played a crucial role in shaping several conclusions presented in this research.

## **Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa Before Naraka**

For the pre-Naraka period, much of our knowledge relies on scattered references in ancient Indian and foreign literary sources. The pre- and proto-historic phases of Assam were marked by the movement of various races into the region and the concurrent development of diverse cultures. This is evident from the discovery of numerous neolithic artifacts, such as stone celts, across Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland, Darrang, Cachar, and Upper Assam (Choudhury, 1959, p.59-60).

Scholars like Hutton, Mills, and S.K. Chatterjee have identified Negrito and Australoid influences among several tribal communities of Assam and its surrounding hill regions (Das, 1990, pp.12-16). However, the Northeast, including the Brahmaputra Valley, has been primarily inhabited by Mongoloid tribes, who arrived through different migration routes over time and speak Tibeto-Burman languages. In ancient Indian literature, they are referred to as *Kiratas*, while the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* mentions them as *Kirrhadae* (Choudhury, 1959,p.31). Additionally, other significant racial groups found in Assam include the Mediterraneans, Indo-Scythians, and Indo-Aryans(Choudhury,1959, p.31)

Among these, the arrival of the Indo-Aryans holds particular cultural significance, as they played a dominant role in shaping the plains of Assam. Renowned historian S.K. Chatterjee has proposed 700 B.C. (or even earlier) as the approximate period of Aryan settlement in North Bihar (Das, 1990,

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p.23). Given the geographical proximity between this region and Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa, it is reasonable to assume that Aryans may have entered Assam around the same time (Hazarika, p.3).

Furthermore, Dr. T.C. Sharma has dated the emergence of the Iron Age in the Brahmaputra Valley to between 800 and 500 B.C. This phase, closely linked to state formation in India, is represented archaeologically by Painted Grey Ware and Black and Red Polished Ware (Sankalia & Sharma, 1990, p.37). Due to a lack of substantial evidence, however, it remains difficult to determine whether a preceding Copper-Bronze Age existed in the region(Sankalia & Sharma, 1990, p.36).

All available sources suggest that Naraka emerged in Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa during the pre-Buddhist era. Scholars generally consider 700 B.C. as the period when the first wave of Aryan influence reached the Brahmaputra Valley. It is believed that Naraka played a key role in systematically promoting Aryanisation or Sanskritisation under royal patronage.

By examining the rich megalithic traditions of Northeast India along with ethnographic sources, it becomes evident that the early inhabitants, who were primarily rudimentary agriculturists, followed two fundamental ways of life—community living and strong kinship bonds. The megalithic structures of the region are closely linked to beliefs and practices such as ancestor worship, the concept of the soul, fertility rituals, feasts of merit, and social prestige(Choudhury, 1959, pp.62-97). Moreover, similarities observed among the megaliths of different ethnic groups suggest significant cultural interaction and intermingling(Choudhury, 1959, pp.67-69). Within this framework, clan-based settlements gradually emerged, as the megalithic people found security in collective ownership and shared interests. Over time, multiple clans came together to form tribes, each of which was led by a chief. Eventually, the position of the tribal chief became hereditary.

The challenging terrain of Northeast India contributed to the isolation of hill tribes, leading to the preservation of their traditional way of life until the arrival of the British. In contrast, the fertile lands of the Brahmaputra Valley provided a more favourable environment for settlement and attracted migrants from both the eastern and western directions. As a result, waves of Indo-Aryan migration from the west began spontaneously and continued over the years.

At this point in history, the legendary Narakasura, believed to be the first king of Assam, arrived in the region. According to tradition, he ascended to the throne of Pragjyotisha after defeating

Ghatakasura, a descendant of Mahiranga Danava, the earliest known ruler of this land. Thus, Naraka serves as the bridge between the indigenous traditions of Assam and the incoming Aryan settlements, facilitating their cultural integration in ancient times.

## **Kingdom of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa: Its Emergence and Narakasura**

Naraka is a significant figure in Indian *epics*, as he is mentioned in both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Several *Puranas*, along with the local *Kalikapurana* and *Harivamsa*, provide detailed narratives about his life. Interestingly, several sites in Assam still bear connections to Naraka, his allies, and his successors. The Narakasur Hill, the *Mekhela Ujuwa* staircase leading to the Kamakhya Temple on the Nilachal Hill, and the Dighalipukhuri in the heart of Guwahati city are associated with Naraka and his son Bhagadatta, a renowned warrior in the *Mahabharata*. Similarly, the Mahabhairav Temple, the ruins near Tezpur Court, the Agnigarh Hill ruins, the ancient tanks in and around Tezpur, and Bhalukpong at the foothills of Arunachal Pradesh are linked to Banasura, Naraka's ally and the non-Aryan ruler of Sonitapura.

The *Kishkindha Kanda* of the *Ramayana* (Chapter 42) mentions Naraka and the city of Pragjyotishapura, although it incorrectly describes its location near the western sea, a claim scholars consider misleading (Hazarika, p.34). The *Mahabharata* also refers to Naraka in the *Tirtha-yatra-parva* (*Vana Parva*, Chapter 142) and *Udyoga-parva* (Chapter 48, Verses 80-85). The latter describes Naraka, also called *Bhauma* (son of Bhumi, the Earth), as the ruler of a fortress named Pragjyotisha. He is said to have stolen the earrings of Aditi, the mother of the gods, and was invincible against any deity until Krishna intervened. Krishna ultimately defeated Naraka and his general Mura, recovered Aditi's earrings, and freed thousands of captive women. While the *Mahabharata* does not mention Naraka's divine birth, the *Kalikapurana* and local inscriptions claim that he was born from Lord Vishnu's Boar (*Varaha*) incarnation and the Earth Goddess, Bhumi (*Prithvi*) (Sharma, 1978, pp.0.1-0.10)

According to the *Kalikapurana* (cited in Baruah, 2015, pp.78-82), Naraka was adopted by King Janaka of Videha. At the age of sixteen, he left Videha in search of fortune, travelled to Pragjyotisha, defeated the *Danava* ruler Ghatakasura, and established his own rule over the region between the Karatoya and Lalitakanta rivers. He is also said to have driven the *Kiratas* as far as the seacoast. After ascending the throne, Naraka married Princess Maya of Vidarbha. His *Kesavapana* ceremony,

a rite of passage, was performed by Gautama, the priest of Janaka, according to Vedic rituals. Initially, Naraka was a devout follower of Vishnu and Goddess Kamakhya, but under the influence of Banasura, the ruler of Sonitapura (modern Tezpur of Assam), he committed several misdeeds. These included attempting to marry Goddess Kamakhya and stealing Aditi's earrings and Varuna's divine umbrella. Eventually, Krishna arrived from Dvaraka, waged war against Naraka, and killed him. After his death, Krishna installed Naraka's son, Bhagadatta, as the ruler of Pragjyotisha.

The legend of Naraka clearly suggests that he had an obscure background but possessed remarkable talent and ambition. He was not originally from Pragjyotisha, yet through sheer determination and military prowess, he seized power and established himself as its ruler. Naraka played a key role in the Aryanisation of the region by facilitating the settlement of *dvija* (twice-born) people in Pragjyotisha. As a strategic leader, he implemented several measures to consolidate his rule. These included driving the indigenous *Kiratas* towards the seacoast while simultaneously appointing capable local figures to crucial administrative positions—Hayagriva served as his Commander-in-Chief, while Mura was entrusted with the defence of the capital. Additionally, Naraka secured political alliances through marriage, notably with rulers from Sonitapura and Vidarbha, fortified his capital, and maintained a well-equipped army, as mentioned in the *Vishnu Purana*.

Taking all these factors into account, it can be inferred that Naraka was either an Aryan or an Aryanised figure from Mithila or Eastern Bihar who initiated both the processes of state formation and Aryanisation in this region. His influence left a lasting mark on the collective memory of the local people. One of the most striking aspects of Naraka's legacy is that all three major early historical dynasties of Assam—the Varmans, the Salastambhas, and the Palas—traced their lineage to Naraka and his successors Bhagadatta and Vajradatta. This is evidenced in various copperplate charters and inscriptions, including the Dubi and Nidhanpur copperplate grants, the Dubi and Nalanda seals of the Varman king Bhaskaravarman, the grants of Salastambha rulers Vanamalavarman and Balavarman III, the Bargaon grant of Ratnapala, the Guwahati copperplate grant of Indrapala, and several other grants associated with Pala rulers such as Dharmapala and Gopalavarmadeva (Hazarika, p.33).

While the formation of this early state under Naraka remains largely mythical, it is impossible to dismiss the historical significance of the *Bhaumas* entirely. At the same time, this legendary state

formation serves as a precursor to the more historically documented establishment of a kingdom under Pushyavarman in the mid-4th century A.D.

## **The Transitional Era Between the Legendary *Bhaumas* and the Emergence of Pushyavarman (Mid-4th Century C.E.)**

Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa does not appear among the renowned *Sixteen Mahajanapadas* mentioned in Buddhist literature. However, as early as the 4th century B.C., Greek writers referenced the people and regions of Assam, and later, Classical writers of the 1st and 2nd centuries CE followed suit. Dr. P.C. Choudhury compiled a list of terms that can be linked to various ethnic groups of Northeast India, as well as to specific locations in Assam, including the mighty Brahmaputra River (Choudhury, 1959, pp.30-33). Ptolemy's mention of the land of 'Seres,' known for its silk-rich forests, is also believed to be a reference to Assam (Choudhury, 1959, p.34). Significantly, Kautilya's *Arthashastra* (Book II, Chapter XI) refers to this region as Lauhitya. Additionally, the discovery of Roman pottery from the 1st century A.D. at the Ambari excavation site in Guwahati suggests the increasing prominence of the region in trade—both within the Indian subcontinent and in the highly lucrative Sino-Roman trade of the early Christian era. The absence of the names *Pragjyotisha* or *Kamarupa* in these foreign accounts may indicate that a kingdom by that name had yet to be firmly established, or that the region held little political significance at the time. Conversely, the frequent references to *Pragjyotisha* in Brahmanical texts from the early Christian era suggest that the area was gaining importance (Hazarika, p.61). However, due to a lack of substantial sources, it remains difficult to trace a definitive timeline for the state-formation process during this period.

During the reign of Emperor Chandragupta Maurya, his primary focus was expelling the *Yavanas* (Greeks) from India. Later, Emperor Ashoka's only major military conquest was Kalinga, and his successors proved to be weak rulers. Within fifty years of Ashoka's death, the once-mighty Mauryan Empire collapsed. Given this situation, it is reasonable to assume that Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa remained a relatively isolated territory during this time. The region likely lacked a powerful ruler who could attract political attention from the western parts of the subcontinent. It is also plausible that after the fall of the legendary *Bhaumas*, various indigenous tribes, under their respective chieftains, established their own independent domains across different parts of the region.

The post-Mauryan dynasties of northern India, such as the Sungas and Kanvas, were preoccupied

with defending their rapidly shrinking territories due to the rise of independent states and foreign invasions by groups like the *Yavanas*, Sakas, and Pahlavas. The foreign rulers who controlled northern India for the next two centuries were primarily concerned with consolidating their power and had little interest in expanding into Northeast India. The Kushanas, too, did not appear to have extended their influence into the region. Furthermore, between the decline of the Kushanas and the rise of the Gupta Empire, no powerful political entity emerged in northern India capable of unifying the Indian subcontinent.

## **Kingdom of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa: Its Formation under Pushyavarman (mid-4<sup>th</sup> century CE)**

With the establishment of the Varman dynasty in Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa by Pushyavarman in the mid-4th century CE, Assam's recorded history truly begins, maintaining an unbroken continuity from that point onwards. The Dubi and Nidhanpur copperplate inscriptions recognise Pushyavarman as the illustrious founder of the dynasty. His kingdom, referred to as *Kamarupa*, is listed among the frontier states—alongside Samatata, Davaka, Nepala, and Kartripura—in the Allahabad Pillar Prasasti of the Gupta emperor Samudragupta.

However, these sources do not provide any information regarding Pushyavarman's origins, his ancestral homeland, or the circumstances surrounding his rise to power in Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa. They also remain silent on the exact time of his accession, the means through which he consolidated his rule, or the level of political awareness among the people of his kingdom at the time.

Pushyavarman is honoured with the title *Maharajadhiraja* or "King of Kings" in the records of Bhaskaravarman, signifying his elevated status. It is also evident that Kamarupa functioned as an allied state of the Gupta Empire rather than being a direct part of it. This is explicitly supported by the Allahabad Pillar Prashasti, which states: "*Samatata-Davaka-Kamarupa-Nepala-Karttripuradipratyantantripatihih.....sarvakaradanajnakarana*", confirming that these frontier states remained politically distinct (Hazarika, p.67).

Furthermore, none of the existing records suggest that Pushyavarman was an outsider who sought to seize the throne of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa by force, nor do they indicate that he was a subordinate chief who aided the Gupta army in invading Kamarupa. Therefore, it is reasonable to infer that Pushyavarman was a native ruler who traced his lineage to the legendary *Asura* kings traditionally

associated with the region (Hazarika,p.68). Most significantly, he successfully preserved Kamarupa's sovereignty throughout his reign, resisting the expansive ambitions of the Gupta Empire. Given the Guptas' advanced understanding of governance, it can be presumed that Pushyavarman ruled as a fully sovereign monarch. In other words, the people of Kamarupa exhibited a level of political awareness comparable to that of other contemporary kingdoms. Additionally, it is likely that the inhabitants of these five so-called frontier states possessed a distinct sense of regional or national identity (Hazarika, p.70).

An analysis of the Varman dynasty's economic foundation reveals its resilience, enabling it to sustain the numerous battles fought during their reign. Scholars have rightly suggested that the Iron Age, marked by the expansion of wet-rice cultivation, had already taken root in ancient Assam well before the beginning of the Christian era. While it remains uncertain whether this agricultural practice originated locally or was introduced solely by migrants from North-Central India, it is reasonable to assume that the arrival of Aryan settlers significantly expanded the use of iron in the region.

As a result, concepts such as surplus production, labour organisation, private ownership, and social hierarchy became familiar to the people of Assam long before the emergence of the Varman dynasty (Hazarika, p.72). The process of Hinduisation further reinforced this stratified social order, while also legitimising the authority of the ruling class—a role largely undertaken by the Brahmanas in royal courts. Every ancient Assamese ruler actively promoted Sanskritisation and traced their divine lineage back to Naraka, the son of Lord Vishnu and Mother Earth, with Pushyavarman being the first to establish this tradition. Notably, most of the surviving copperplate inscriptions from this period are land grant records, predominantly issued by various kings in favour of Brahmana recipients.

## **Conclusion**

This analysis leads to several significant conclusions. Firstly, it identifies key factors that contributed to the process of state formation in ancient Assam. These include population growth, military conquests, increased agricultural production leading to concepts such as surplus and tribute, the legitimisation of monarchy by the priestly class, and the influence of established states.

Secondly, it brings to light several critical aspects, such as a fresh perspective on the historicity of

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the legendary *Bhaumas*, the general political conditions in Assam before and during their rule, the transitional phase between the so-called mythical Assam and the establishment of the Kamarupa state under Pushyavarman. This transitional period, in particular, appears to have been marked by notable economic activity. Furthermore, it reaffirms the native origin of Pushyavarman.

Thirdly, Pushyavarman's policy of Sanskritisation was continued by successive rulers of ancient Assam. This significantly contributed to the development of a Hinduised society in Assam, strengthening its political, economic, and cultural ties with mainland India. Ultimately, this process played a crucial role in integrating Assam into the broader Indian subcontinent.

Fourthly, the state formation process under Pushyavarman also laid the foundation for feudalism in ancient Assam, heavily influenced by the feudal system of the imperial Guptas. The copperplate inscriptions reveal that Brahmanas were granted tax-free lands. They also indicate the presence of independent peasant cultivators and tenant farmers, as land revenue was a primary source of state income. Additionally, taxes and duties were imposed on livestock grazing. The inscriptions also mention various state officials and rural elites, such as the *rajas*, *rajnees*, *ranakas*, *rajanyakas*, *rajaputras*, and *rajavallabhas*, who were members of the royal family and nobility. These figures owned land in the countryside and relied on tenant farmers for cultivation. The *rajas* likely served as petty chiefs, while the *samantas* and *mahasamantas* were feudal lords, likely representing the chieftains of various indigenous tribes in the region (Hazarika, p.78).

Thus, this study provides valuable insights into the reconstruction of ancient Assam's history, successfully revisiting historical sources and shedding new light on their interpretation.

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