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Political Status of Assam in The Gupta Age

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ABSTRACT

Gupta Age is considered as the golden age of ancient India. During the reign of famous Gupta king Samudragupta the ancient name of Assam Kamrupa kingdomappeared in its political map. Pushyavarman was the founder of Varman Dynasty of the Kamrupa kingdom. He was the contemporary of Gupta king Samudragupta. The Allahabad pillar Inscription bears testimony to the fact that Kamarupa, Samatata (south-eastern Bengal with its capital at Karmmanta or Bsd-Kamta,near Comilla), Devaka, Nepala and Kartripura were those five *Pratyanta* or frontier kingdoms whose kings submitted to the mighty Gupta emperor Samudragupta, acknowledged his over lordship. The seven generations of Kamarupa kings from Pusyavarman to Narayanavarman remained as subsidiary allies of the contemporary imperial Gupta from *circa* A.D 335 to 510. Only during the reign of last varman king BhaskarvarmanKamrupa kingdom raised to a height of glory.

Assam bearing the name Kamarupa historically appeared on the political map of ancient India in the Gupta age during the reign of Samudragupta (c.AD 335-80). The vicissitude of political fortunes was closely linked up with that of the Guptas during the period from c.AD 335 to 594.

The frequent attempts made by the imperial and Later Gupta monarchs to extend their political away the eastern Kingdoms of Kamarupa (then under the rule of Varman dynasty) and Bengal (northern and eastern) during the period under review resulted in the transformation of the political status of Kamarupa which can be substantiated with the help of contemporary epigraphic records and other evidences.Before we proceed further to throw light on the main theme here it will be worthwhile to discuss two very vital question (i) which Varman ruler of Kamarupa was the contemporary of Samudragupta ? And (ii) whether that was defeated by Samudragupta and his Kingdom was annexed to the Gupta empire?

R.G. Basak[1] and H.C. Ray[2] are of the opinion that Samudravarman (Pusyavarman's son) was the contemporary of Samudragupta, whereas, on the otherhand, R.G Bhandarkar[3]and K.N. Dikshit[4]hold that Balavarman (Pusyavaraman's grandson) was his contemporary. N.N. Vasu by placing Pusyavarman between *circa* A.D. 275 and 300 has tried to prove that Samudragupta inflicted defeat on Balavrman[5]. N.K.Bhattasali by placing Pusyavarman between circa A.D. 310 and 330 and his grandson Balavarman between circa A.D. 360 and 390 has also attempted to establish the contemporaneity of the latter with Samudragupta.[6] J.F. Fleet, while going a step further, has contended that Balauarman, on of the nine kings of Aryavarta as mentioned in the Allahabad pillar Inscription of Samudragupta and exteterminted by the latter. Was successor of Pusyavarman of Kamarupa.[7]

None of the above views is tenable because there is no evidence on the basis of which the contemporaneity of Samudragupta either with Samudravarman or Balavarman can be conclusively proved.

As a matter of fact, Pusyavarman was the contemporary or Samudragupta. He founded the Varman dynasty under Guptan aegis in "c. A.D. 355". This can be irrefutably proved with the help of evidence furnished in A Historical Atlas of South Asia[8]through cartographic illustration of subject. The fact brought to light here can also e supported by the statements of other scholars. D.C. Sircar has rightly pointed out that Pusyavarman, the contemporary of Samudragupta, accepted the Gupta hegemony maintaining the relation that of a vassal and on overlord.[9]It has been further observed by B.M. Barua that " Pusyvarman was the first Indo-Aryan ruler, who was set up by Samudragupta over the two territories of Kamarupa and Devaka (Devaka). Unified into a single kingdom".[10] But they have not substantiated their view points on the chronological ground. K.L. Barua has incidentally referred to the defeat of Pusyavarman at the hands of Samudragupta in above A.D. 380.[11] The correctness of the date in not beyind question. However, it will not be anachronistic to show Pusyavarman as a contemporary of Samudragupta on the basic of the evidence adduced above.

Further, we do not find any historical basic to support the identification of Balavarman of the said inscription of Samudragupta with that of the Varman dynasty of Kamarupa. Because Balavarman was one of those nine kings ofAryavarta or the Gangetic plain who were exterminated by Samudragupta. It is to be noted Assam at that time was not a part of Aryavarta, but a frontier state. Kamarupa has been separately mentioned in his inscription as one of the five frontier subordinate states. Samudragupta also did not follow the policy of ruthless annexation towards Kamarupa as he did in case of the kingdoms of Aryavarta. Moreover there was a separate Varman family ruling over westenMalava, during this period. Thus , in all probability Balavarman of the inscription concerned did not belong to Kamarupa. This can confirm by the statements of H.C Raychoudhuri.[12]K.P.Jayaswal has identified Balavarman of the Allahabad pillar Inscription with Kalyanavarman of Pataliputra[13] whose exactitude is difficult to be ascertained. Nor is it corroborate by epigraphy or any other source.

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The Allahabad pillar Inscription bears testimony to the fact that Kamarupa, Samatata (south-eastern Bengal with its capital at Karmmanta or Bsd-Kamta,near Comilla), Devaka, Nepala and Kartripura were those five *Pratyanta* or frontier kingdoms whose kings submitted to the mighty Gupta emperor Samudragupta, acknowledged his over lordship. Gratified his imperious commands by paying all kinds of taxes and obeying his orders and then entered into a kind of subordinate alliance with him.[14]It goes without saying that the king of Kamarupa who entered into such an alliance was none other than Pusyavarman. Here it must be made clear that the Kingdom of Kamarupa was not annexed to the Gupta Empire nor was it governed by vassals of the Gupta emperor. It merely remained within the political spheres of influence of the Gupta rules for sometime maintaining its subordinate status. V.A Smith has correctly sated that "His (Samudragupta's) empire in the middle of the 4th century A.D. extended form Brahmaputra on the eastto the Yumuna and Chambal on the west and from the foot of the Himalayas on the north to the Narmada on the south. Beyond these wide limits the frontier kingdoms Kamarupa and the Gangetic delta (Samatata) were attached to the empire by bond of subordinate alliance".[15]M. Arokiaswamy's statement that the kingdom of Kamarupa formed part of the Maurya Empire during the time of Ashoka[16]is not supported by facts. Nor is there any authentic historical evidence to admit its annexation to the Gupta Empire.

There is no denying the fact that the seven generations of Kamarupa kings from Pusyavarman to Narayanavarman remained as subsidiary allies of the contemporary imperial Gupta from *circa* A.D 335 to 510. But the decline of the Gupta power in the middle of the sixth century A.D. provided an opportunity to Bhutivarman, a contemporary of Kumaragupta III(who is generally placed between *circa* A.D. 510 to 554) to refurbish the tarnished image of his family by conquering the territories ruled by Guptas and placing them under his political hegemony. He ultimately succeeded in occupying Pundravardhanabhukit or northern Bengal (which remained on integral part of the Gupta empire form circa A.D. 443 to 554). Southern and eastern Bengal (Samatata) and the neighbouring kingdoms sometime between circa A.D.545 and 554. In fact, it was he who for the first time by putting an end to the long political influence of the Guptas over Kamarupa raised its status from a subordinate state to an impendent kingdom. After breaking off the subordinate alliance with the Guptas he performed an Asvamedha sacrifice to assume an imperial status. [17] TheBarganga Rock inscription of bhutivarman also testifies to fact that he "*paramadaivata*" and parambhattaraka[18]" which exactly conforms to the Gupta tradition. The Dubi Copper plates of Bhaskaravarman (first quarter of the seventh century A.D.) explicitly mentions his victory over the paternal kingdom which received after getting crowned with victory, etc. [19]His conquest stemmed the tide of the rising power of the Guptas in north Bengal and struck a severe blow to the declining later Guptas.

After an interregnum of more than three decades Mahasena Gupta (Demodar Gupta's son) the most illustrious among the later Gupta rules of Magadha, invaded Kamarupa and attained glorious victory over Susthitavarman(father of bhaskaravarman) in a battle which was fought on the bank of the lauthiya or Brahmaputra sometime between circa A.D. 590 and 594 which can be confirmed by the Aphsad (Gaya district, Bihar) stone inscription ofAdityasena (circa A.D. 660-75), the son of Madhavagupta.[20] The political relations between theMagadhan Gupta and the Varmans of Kamarupa became strained. Mahasena Gupta strengthened his position and reoccupie the territories in north Bengal and thereby the Varman ruler concerned became his subordinate ally. The state of Kamarupa was once again reduced to a subordinate state. But Bhaskarvarman 9c. A.D. 594-650) in the early part of the seventh century by recapturing all the lost territories raised the kingdom of Kamarupa to a height of glory which needs no elaboration here as it does not fall within the purview of the treatment of the subject.

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