

Inscriptions of Ancient Kamrupa and their Role in Reconstructing Its History

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Abstract:

No authentic history of ancient period can be written without the help of epigraphs. We have the Barganga epigraph of King Bhuti Varmana, the Dubi and the Nidhanpur grants and the three Nalanda clay seals of Bhaskara Varmana, Hayunthal grant and the Tezpur Rock Inscription of Harjara Varman, the Tezpur grant and Parvatiya plates of King Vanamala Varmadeva, the Nowgong grant and the Uttarbarbil plates of King Balavarman III etc. for the reconstruction of the ancient history of Kamrupa. The Bargaon and the Sualkuchi grants of Ratnapala, the Gauhati and the Guakuchi grants of Indrapala, the Gachtal inscription of Gopala and the Khonamukhi, the Subhankarapataka, and the Puspabhadra grants of Dharmapala, are very important documents. The Kamauli grant of Vaidyadeva, the Kanai Varasi Bowa Rock Inscription of North Gauhati are some other important inscriptions to re-write the ancient history of Kamrupa.

Keywords: Plate, Grant, Ancient, Records, Epigraph

Introduction:

The kingdom of Kamrupa (presently known as Assam) lies in the eastern part of India. It is termed as the gateway to north-east India. The history of Kamrupa roughly covers the period from the earliest known times to the commencement of the Ahom Rule. Several royal dynasties ruled Kamrupa during this period, the Varmans, the Salastambhas, the Palas and many more. Among these dynasties, some left a good number of inscriptions which are mostly important for the study of the period.

Writing history requires reliable sources. Literary sources can never give us complete idea unless they are supplemented by archaeological sources. Archaeological resources, especially the inscriptions are considered to be the backbone of the study of ancient history. It offers us a scientific explanation of the past. Inscriptions have proved to be of the highest value as materials for the reconstruction of ancient Kamrupa. Because they cannot be easily tampered with and do not easily get damage as they are engraved in stone or metal. The location of the inscriptions gives an idea of the extent of the empire. These inscriptions also throw a good amount of light on the political, social, commercial and cultural relations of the concerned area.

Objectives:

The objective of this writing is to find out the major inscriptions of ancient Kamrupa and explain the importance of those inscriptions of ancient Kamrupa which greatly helped in re-writing the history of the region.

Methodology:

This paper is prepared basing on secondary data which are collected from various books.

Review of Literature:

A number of books are reviewed to prepare this writing. “The Comprehensive History of Assam”, Vol.-1 by H. K. Barpujari gives an account of the inscriptions of ancient Kamrupa. “A Comprehensive History of Assam” by S. L. Baruah, provides an analytical and comprehensive account of ancient inscriptions of Kamrupa. “Assam Buranji” by Dr. Dambarudhar Nath is also reviewed. “Axomor Itihas” written by Dr. T C Bhagawati, Dr. Ramani Barman & Gopesh Kumar Sarma is reviewed to prepare this paper. “Axomor Itisas” written by Dr. Nirod Barua & Dr. Surajit Baruah is also been taken into count to prepare this writing.

Inscription:

Inscriptions are something written or engraved upon stone or metal. The study and interpretation of ancient inscriptions is called epigraphy. Inscriptions help us in determining the chronology of the concerned ruling dynasties; record their gifts of lands, their accomplishments and achievements and their relations with contemporary powers. The importance of the epigraphic source for the reconstruction of the history of ancient Kamrupa cannot be overestimated since the activities of large number of kings are known from inscriptions.

Analysis:

No genuine history of ancient Kamrupa can be written without the epigraphic evidences, which to a large extent are found accurate and reliable. Inscriptions of early Kamrupa are generally found engraved and not written. They are engraved on metal plates, usually copper, on stone tablets, on rocks, on pillars and outer parts of caves, temples and other buildings, and also impressed on clay seals¹. Their language is Sanskrit and scripts Devanagiri and north Indian Brahmi. Some of them are composed entirely in verse, some entirely in prose and still others in prose and verse mixed. Most of them bear no date, whereas two are dated in the Gupta era and three in the Saka era.²

A total of about thirty nine inscriptions belonging to the early period upto 1232 A.D. have so far been discovered³. P.N. Bhattacharyya in the Kamrup Sasanavali edited more than twenty of them. Some other scholars are also engaged in deciphering and editing the inscriptions of ancient and early medieval Assam, mention may be made of Dr. D.C. Sircar, Dr. P.C. Choudhury and Dr. M.M. Sarma.

Some major inscriptions of ancient Kamrupa:**Nidhanpur Copper Plate Inscription:**

The Nidhanpur Copper Plate Inscription is an important historical artefact that provides insights into the political and social conditions of ancient Kamrupa. The Nidhanpur Copper Plate Inscription was originally issued by Bhuti Varmana and later re-issued by Bhaskar Varman because the original record had been burnt in a conflagration.⁴ It is one of the most celebrated epigraphic records of ancient

¹ Baruah S L, A Comprehensive History of Assam, p-30

² Bhagawati TC & others, Axomor Itihas, p-23

³ Barua Dr. Nirod & Baruah Dr. Surajit, Axomor Itisas, p-10

⁴ Barpujari, H. K., The Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol-I, p-50

Kamrupa. It was found at Nidhanpur in Sylhet (now in Bangladesh). Its Language and Script were Sanskrit, Eastern variety of Gupta Brahmi script. Nidhanpur Copper Plate Inscription contents land grants to Brahmins, gives valuable information about social, religious, and administrative life during the reign of King Bhaskara Varman. It is found in this inscription that King Bhuti Varmana had granted land to 208 Brahmins.⁵ The Importance of this inscription lies in the fact that it mentions Bhaskara Varman's genealogy and his association with Harshavardhana.

Nalanda Clay Seals:

Nalanda Clay Seals found in Patna, Bihar of Kumar Bhaskar Varmana may have been carried by the bearers of Bhaskar Varman's letters to the head of the Nalanda Monastery in connection with Hiuen Tsang's Visit to Kamrupa.⁶

Dubi Copper Plate Inscription:

The Dubi Copper Plate is one of the earliest copper-plate inscriptions of ancient Kamrupa, offering deep insights into land grants, royal administration, genealogy, script evolution, and political organization in Bhaskara Varman's Kamarupa. It was originally issued by Bhuti Varmana and later re-issued by his descendant Bhaskar Varmana.⁷ They are keys to understanding early medieval Northeast Indian history. It is a vital early-7th-century epigraphic record from King Bhaskara Varman of Kamarupa. It was discovered in around 1950 near the Parihareswara Shiva temple in Dubi village, Pathsala, in the newly created district of Bajali. Its Language and Script is Sanskrit, Gupta script. It gives the information regarding the land grants to the Brahmins. It also tells us about the chronology of the Varman dynasty.

Guwahati (Basistha) Rock Inscription:

Another very important ancient inscription found in ancient Kamrupa is Guwahati (Basistha) Rock Inscription. It was issued by King Harjara Varman. It is found at Basistha, near Guwahati. It contains the information regarding religious donation and construction of a temple. It reflects temple-building and patronage of Brahmanical religion.

Tezpur Rock Inscription:

The Tezpur rock inscription, also known as the Parbatiya Rock Inscription, is a significant historical artefact from ancient Kamrupa, specifically dating back to the 9th century AD. It was discovered in Parbatiya village near Tezpur and is known for its copper plate format and content related to Maharajadhiraja Parameswara Parama Bhattaraka Harjara Varmana.⁸ It contains religious and royal deeds. This inscription informs about the dynastic claims and patronage of religious activities. The Koiborta's were mentioned in this inscription.⁹

Bargaon and Sualkuchi Copper Plate Inscriptions:

The Bargaon and Sualkuchi copper plate inscriptions are significant epigraphic records from the Pala dy

⁵ Barua Dr. Nirod & Baruah Dr, Surajit, Axomor Itisas, p-37

⁶ Barpujari, H. K., The Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol-I, p-50

⁷ Ibid, p-49

⁸ Barpujari, H. K., The Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol-I, p-50

⁹ Barua Dr. Nirod & Baruah Dr, Surajit, Axomor Itisas, p-38

nasty of Kamrupa, specifically from the reign of King Ratnapala. These inscriptions, written in Sanskrit using the Nagari script, provide valuable insights into the political, social, and economic conditions of the region during the 11th century. They document land grants issued by Ratnapala to two Brahmins named Birdatta and Kamdev.¹⁰ It also mentions that King Ratnapala was residing in the capital city of Durjaya at the time. It also provides clues about administrative divisions and governance.

The Hayunthal inscription:

The Hayunthal inscription, also known as the Hayunthal Grant, is a copper plate inscription from King Harjara Varman of the Salastambha dynasty, who ruled over ancient Kamrupa in the 9th century AD. The inscription, though fragmentary, provides valuable insights into the dynasty's history and administration. It mentions King Harjara Varman and provides a lineage of rulers from Salastamba to Vanamala. The inscription is one of the few reliable sources for understanding the Salastambha dynasty's history, alongside the Nowgong grant of Balavarman.

The Umachal Rock Inscription:

The Umachal Rock Inscription is one of the earliest epigraphic records found in Kamrupa, located on the Umachal hill near Guwahati. It dates back to the 5th century AD and is written in Sanskrit using Brahmi script¹¹. The inscription indicates that the cave (or temple) dedicated to Lord Balabhadra was constructed by Maharajadhiraja Sri Surendra Varman.

Barganga Rock inscription:

Barganga Rock inscription is the earliest known dated inscriptions of ancient Kamrupa.¹² Barganga Rock inscription of the time of Bhuti Varman is found by the side of the river Barganga of Nowgong district. The language of the inscription is Sanskrit prose. This inscription was incised during the reign of King Bhuti Varman. Gupta Era was used in this inscription.¹³

The Uttarbarbil Copper Plate:

The Uttarbarbil copper plate of Bala Varman III is a set of three copper plates. It was discovered at the Uttarbarbil village of the Howraghat area. The time of the copper plate was the last quarter of the 9th century A.D. The charter of the Uttarbarbil plates was of 5th year of the rule of Bala Varman III. The first 25 verse of Nowgong Copper plates and Uttarbarbil grants are identical.

The Bargaon Copper Plate:

The Bargaon copper plate grant of Ratnapala consists of three copper plates. It has been recovered from Bargaon mauza of Tezpur. The time of the copper plate grant is 1035 A.D. The language of the grant is Sanskrit. It is known from the copper plate that Ratnapala was the son of Brahmapala and Kuladev. After the death of Brahmapala, Ratnapala became the king. Ratnapala used to reside in the befittingly named

¹⁰ Nath Dr. Dambarudhar, Axom Buranji, p-62

¹¹ Ibid, p-22

¹² Baruah S L, A Comprehensive History of Assam, p-31

¹³ Nath Dr. Dambarudhar, Axom Buranji, p-40

city of Durjaya in the kingdom called Pragjyotisa (Kamrupa). It is mentioned in this inscription that there were 21 kings in the Salastambha dynasty.¹⁴

The Gachtal Copper Plate:

The Gachtal copper plate of Gopala Varman was discovered at village Gachtal near Dabaka of the Nowgong district. By this grant King Gopala Varman, the son and successor of King Indrapala of Kamarupa donated a plot of land. The time of the inscription was 1080 AD.

Kamauli copper plate grant of Vaidyadeva:

It was found in the village Kaumuli of Varanasi. Arthur Venis, who was a famous Sanskrit scholar of Benaras, has fixed the date of the inscription as 1142 AD. The grant consists of three copper plates and a seal with this grant two villages called Santipataka and Mandara situated in the 'Bada' Visaya of the Pragjyotisa bhukti of the Kamrupa mandala has been donated to a Brahman named Sridhar¹⁵ by Maharadhiraja Parameswara Parama Bhattaraka Sri Vaidyadeva who governed from a place called Hamsakonci in the fourth year of his rule. It is also known from the inscription that Vaidyadeva was earlier a minister of King Kumarapala of Gauda. Vaidyadeva was appointed ruler by the lord of Gauda in place of king Tingyadeva in the Eastern land after hearing the hostility of Tingyadeva. The Kamauli plate records the victory of Mayana, the general of Gauda ruler Ramapala over the king of Kamrupa and Vaidyadeva's conquest of western part of the kingdom of Kamrupa.¹⁶

Conclusion:

Thus it is found from the above discussion that without these epigraphic evidences we cannot re-write the authentic history of ancient Kamrupa. These inscriptions to a large extent are found accurate and reliable. We can learn the history of ancient Kamrupa from tradition, literature, numismatics, archaeology or any other sources, but it is the inscriptions which regulate everything that we can learn from other sources. No doubt these inscriptions may contain some legendary elements and some amount of poetical exaggeration about the patron kings may be there, yet their historical importance can never be neglected. These inscriptions are invaluable property which should be preserved well for later generations to use in their works.

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¹⁴ Ibid, p-53

¹⁵, Ibid, p-68

¹⁶ Baruah S L, A Comprehensive History of Assam, p-31