

Unearthing Rajbari: An Interdisciplinary Study of the Pratapgarh Palace Ruins and Medieval Statehood in Patharkandi, Assam

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Abstract

The political history of frontier polities along the medieval Bengal-Northeast India border presents a unique historiographical challenge. Most political histories of such frontier polities are largely constructed from vernacular chronicles and local memories, while epigraphic and archaeological evidence, where available, relates to earlier and long discontinued administrative layers. The Pratapgarh Kingdom, located in modern Patharkandi, Sribhumi/Karimganj district, Assam (and where the seat is in ruins and locally called Rajbari), illustrates such frontier polities. The political history of this Kingdom, from the thirteenth-century foundation legend, to the secession of Malik Pratap from Tripura in 1489, the brief zenith of Sultan Bazid, and the annexation of this Kingdom by the Kachari Kingdom, in the 18th century, relies almost exclusively on the early 20th-century chronicles of Achyut Charan Choudhury, in addition to colonial gazetteers and regional historiography. The only independent material evidence from the region, the 6th and 7th century copper-plate land grants by the Varman dynasty to Brahmin donees, pre-dates this chronicle by almost six centuries, and therefore cannot be related to it in a continuous manner. This paper will analyze the interplay of chronicles, administrative, and epigraphic sources in the case of Pratapgarh, and will argue that Rajbari, situated on the border, and named consistently in texts, but never been the subject of archaeological study, is a live case example of the limitations of borderland state-formation.

Keywords: Barak Valley; medieval Assam; Patharkandi; Pratapgarh Kingdom; Rajbari; Sribhumi or Karimganj

1. Introduction

Southern Assam's Barak Valley has rivers that dominate the local geography and have historically facilitated trade and transport. This region has been home to small kingdoms and chiefdoms from the 13th to the 18th century. One of these was the Kingdom of Pratapgarh. Chiefdoms rose and fell between the 13th and 18th century, and the Pratapgarh Kingdom is one of the better known chiefdoms in the Karimganj district. Most of what we know of this chiefdom is due to the work of Srihattai historian Achyut Charan Choudhury in the 19th and 20th centuries. While this text is one of the chief sources on the subject, it does not provide concrete evidence of Pratapgarh. The political structure and activities of Pratapgarh have not been verified or supported by other works, archaeological or otherwise, and the local chronicles contain a significant amount of bias, which will be addressed in the course of the analysis.

There are two objectives for this paper. The first is to bring together published and archival sources including chronicles, colonial administrative gazetteers, and subsequent scholarly works on the Barak

Valley, and provide a connected account of the political history of Pratapgarh from its hypothesized beginnings in the thirteenth century to the end of the domain in the eighteenth century. The second objective is to provide a preliminary account of the fort (popularly known as Rajbari) located in the vicinity of Patharkandi, which is referred to in most of the available literature as the capital of the kingdom. To the best of my knowledge, Rajbari has not been the subject of detailed archaeological studies. This paper therefore will be reserved in its statements on the remains. It will distinguish between statements based on texts and oral histories and those that require on site verification. It will also not deal with unverified architectural and locational information.

Figure 1. Pratapgarh Chronology: A Discontinuous Chronological Framework, c. 6th century – 1750s CE

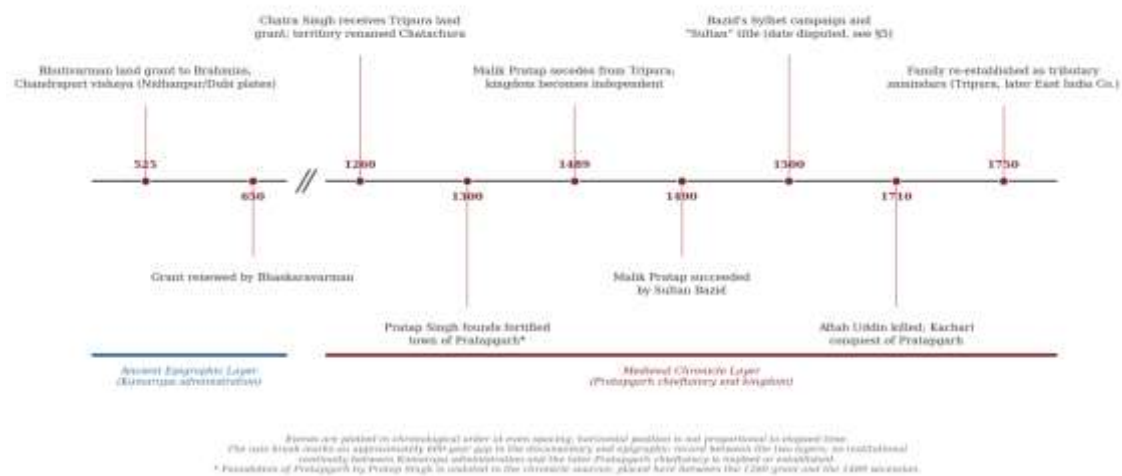


Figure 1. Pratapgarh chronology, presented as a discontinuous framework: an ancient epigraphic layer (6th–7th century Varman land grants) separated by an approximately 600-year documentary gap from the medieval chronicle layer (13th–18th century) discussed in Sections 2–6. No institutional continuity between the two layers is implied. Dates marked as disputed in the text are not shown as fixed points.

2. The Barak Valley as a Political Frontier

For much of the medieval period, the lands that were to later become Pratapgarh, were on the edge of three larger areas of power. As for the north and the west, the Bengal Sultanate reached into Srihatta with the fourteenth century conquest related to the Sufi missionary, Shah Jalal. The southern king, the Kingdom of Tripura, claimed the hill tracts, while the north-eastern region was the influence of the Kachari Kingdom of Maibong, ruling over the upper Barak basin (Bhattacharjee 1994; Tarafdar 1999). The smaller hill country chiefdoms, including Pratapgarh, survived by balancing tribute and alliance among the three larger dominant powers (Bhattacharjee 1982).

This part of the valley's earliest attested settlements are Brahmanical rather than tribal. The Dubi and Nidhanpur copper-plate grants of the Kamarupa kings Bhutivarman and Bhaskaravarman, which date to the late fifth to early sixth centuries CE and the early seventh century, respectively, record the settlement of over 200 Brahmin donees in the Chandrapuri vishaya of the Srihatta mandala. This vishaya is associated by many scholars with a major part of the undivided Barak Valley (See Sen 2013, 84–86; Sharma 1978). Hence, the Varman-dynasty land grant is the earliest document providing evidence for the settlement of the Srihatta–Barak region. This is in sharp contrast to the earliest records of the Kuki presence in the region, which appears at least six centuries later in the mid-thirteenth century (Nath 1948, 81). It must also be emphasized that the settlement of Brahmanical donees through the grant of land provides evidence for

a specific royal patronage and settlement. It also provides no evidence for a settlement or subsistence pattern that implies a demographic majority of Brahmanical donees, nor does the absence of written evidence for early Kuki or Khasi settlement imply that they were not present — they simply do not appear in the records.

This undocumented research from the Kuki and Khasi suggests that land tenure was based on customary and oral traditions. This practice did not produce a permanent written record while Brahmadeya land grants did. There, we find that the precedence given to Brahmanical land occupation should be taken to mean the precedence was just given to record keeping. There is no reason to assume that they occupied the land first.

3. Origins: From Sonai Kachanpur to Pratapgarh (c. 1260–1489 CE)

Choudhury's chronicle states that the area of Pratapgarh was once called Sonai Kachanpur and later on renamed to Chatachura when a Magadhan prince, Chatra Singh, was given that land by the Maharaja of Tripura in 1260 CE (Choudhury 2000, 303; Nath 1948, 81). Chatra Singh's principality was in the hilly, forested region of the Adam Ail and adjoining ranges (Nath 1948, 81; Clothey 1982, 126). It is said that his successor, Kanak Singh, established a capital at Kanakpur and that Kanak Singh's son, Pratap Singh, built a fortified settlement and named the settlement Pratapgarh (Nath 1948, 81, 119).

Another branch of the tradition links the later ruling line to a Persian-descended noble called Mirza Malik Muhammad Turani, who is said to have settled in the area in the late fourteenth century after a stint in Delhi. (Choudhury 2000, 304). It was Turani's establishment, according to local legend, that was contributed to by his marriage to the Khasi chief, Pura Raja, after a quarrel (Choudhury 2000, 305). By the end of the fifteenth century, Turani's descendant Malik Pratap owned the former lands and palace of Pratap Singh at Patharkandi after having married into the family that then possessed those lands. (Choudhury 2000, 304–305). Historians largely agree that there is no need to take this genealogy at face value, and that the figures "Pratap Singh" and "Malik Pratap" should be viewed as one and the same, in the spirit of oral tradition. This paper will not consider that argument. It is a known tendency in the oral traditions of this region's frontiers to fuse a pre-Islamic and a post-Islamic, or a later, differently-titled founding figure. The combining of different ruling families or different religious practices into one ruling family is one of the oral traditions in this region, and clearly a more structured presentation of the history would show the gaps which this tradition has fused. (Choudhury 1996). While it is not possible to say what has actually happened in this case, it should be assumed that the Pratap Singh – Malik Pratap succession being one and the same, is likely the case.

4. The Founding of an Independent State: Malik Pratap, 1489

According to chronicle tradition, the date of the first formal establishment of an independent political entity is 1489 AD, during the time when the Tripura Maharaja Pratap Manikya was engaged in a succession conflict with his elder brother Dhanya Manikya. Exploiting the distraction caused in the Tripura court, Malik Pratap took the opportunity to sever the Patharkandi area from Tripura's jurisdiction and proclaimed himself an independent ruler (Choudhury 2000, 306; Chaudhury 1979). He later on provided military assistance to Pratap Manikya and as a gesture of thanks, the Maharaja acknowledged the Pratapgarh state and conferred Malik Pratap with the title of Raja and arranged the marriage of his daughter to Malik Pratap's grandson, Bazid (Choudhury 2000, 307; Durlabhendra, Sukheshwar and Baneshwar 1999, 60). This part of the narrative is based on the Sri Rajmala, the Tripura court chronicle,

which must be used with a lot of caution. It was compiled and edited in the course of several centuries by the successive court poets, and later sections are regarded by historians of the region as having been written to provide retrospective justification to the court, especially in regard to the relations of Tripura with smaller, nominally vassal, borderland states such as Pratapgarh (Durlabhendra, Sukheshwar and Baneshwar 1999). The account of the Pratapgarh state in the succession conflict will thus be regarded as the version of the court, as opposed to verified facts.

Malik Pratap died soon after the 1490 assassination of Pratap Manikya by his own generals, and was succeeded by Bazid (Choudhury 2000, 307).

5. Zenith under Sultan Bazid

Bazid's leadership of the kingdom is recognized for both territorial and political supremacy. He is also recognized for driving back the invasion of the Kachari Kingdom of Maibong. In doing so, he took on the title "Sultan." This title places the ruler of Pratapgarh on the same level as the Sultan of Bengal (Choudhury 2000, 308). The capital, under Bazid, grew to become a regional trade center. This growth was connected to the forts and outposts trade centers. Later writing noted the local stonework of the period was distinct and ornate in floral designs (Sinha, Chacko, and Aier 1993, 41; Choudhury 2000, 306). This statement relies only on the secondary writing, as the author of this text does not have a museum catalog, a record from a private collection, or a site inventory listing stone fragments of floral designs from Pratapgarh. Therefore, do not assume that the materials have been formally housed and are available to be inspected.

Bazid's reach briefly extended into Srihatta itself: The death of the Bengal-appointed governor of Srihatta saw the flight of his two subordinates who embezzled state funds to Pratapgarh. Bazid sheltered them and, taking advantage of the ensuing chaos, occupied Srihatta (Choudhury 2000, 310; Kar 2008, 135). The envoy of the Sultan of Bengal, who was tasked with the job of getting Bazid to leave, was defeated. Bazid's son, Marhamat Khan, was noted in the chronicle for his participation in the battle (Choudhury 2000, 214, 310; Motahar 1999, 715). Bazid finally agreed to vacate Srihatta and the Sultan title in exchange of getting Pratapgarh free of the Sultan's control (Choudhury 2000, 310). The exact dates of this incident, as well as the identity of the Bengal Sultan, remain, to an extent, undetermined. Choudhury puts this under the reign of Alauddin Husain Shah in the late 15th century (Tarafdar 1999, 376). On the other hand, Subir Kar and B. C. Allen contend that this was during the reign of Hussain Shah Sharqi of Jaunpur and place this in 1464 (Kar 2008, 135; Allen 2013, 94). Syed Murtaza Ali placed both Malik Pratap and Bazid to over a century later, during the reign of the Mughal emperor Jahangir (Ali 1965, 69). This is a genuine, unresolved uncertainty of the sources, and not an oversight of this paper.

6. Decline and Absorption into the Kachari Kingdom

By the early 1700s, Aftab Uddin became Raja of Pratapgarh, following his great-grandfather Bazid. Aftab Uddin had issues with the rulers of the Kachari Kingdom, which led to war. Though Aftab's forces won that battle and killed the Kachari King, the Kachari Queen was successful in getting vengeance and defeating Aftab Uddin with a larger army. She also led the looting of the Pratapgarh palace, post which it was absorbed into the Kachari Kingdom. The Kachari Kingdom also could not sail through the loss of one of their conquests for long and, within a few years, the surviving royal family of Pratapgarh were reinstated as tributary zamindars of Tripura and, later on, of the East India Company due to the Permanent Settlement. (Choudhury 2000, 310-313; Bhattacharjee 2005, 176-177). The loss of ultimate political

power was the ruler's potential, just like losing sovereignty became social capital. Many descendants became prominent landholders and took the surname Choudhury. Many also crossed international borders to settle in Manipur, where they also attained noble status. (Choudhury 2000, 321; Nazir 2013, 90-92). Though the political status of the kingdom ceased to exist, the name continued after it as administrative units known as mahals, parganas, and mouzas during the Mughal, British, and post-Independence period of Indian administration. (Bhattacharjee 1991, 126; Mittal 1984, 73).

7. The Rajbari Site: Documented Remains and the Case for Excavation

Multiple sources and local lore agree that Rajbari is the seat of royalty for Pratapgarh. Rajbari is recorded in the chronicles and documents of later regional historiography and the administration, all of which place Rajbari near Patharkandi. They also reference the physical remains of royal residences, including dighis, graves, and ruins of forts (Choudhury 2000, 304-311; Bhattacharjee 1982). The capital Bazid mentions in particular has been described as having developed into an important regional trading center, associated with forts and outposts, and featuring stonework with floral decorations (Sinha, Chacko and Aier 1993, 41; Choudhury 2000, 306). This is the expected profile of an administrative and military center which is integrated into the Surma-Barak trade system.

The site lacks archaeological research rather than historical corroboration. To the best of the author's knowledge, no excavation reports published in peer-reviewed journals, or professional site surveys of Patharkandi Rajbari, currently exist. A clarification is warranted. The Rajbari discussed in this paper is not the same as the Rajbari Archaeological Site located at Jugijan in Hojai District, Assam, which contains at least nine Shiva temples, encased in a brick boundary wall dated by the State Directorate of Archaeology to the 9th through 12th centuries CE, and is designated as a protected monument with a site museum by the Government of Assam, Directorate of Archaeology. The two sites are hundreds of kilometers apart, and of course, several centuries apart. They also have completely distinct Religious and Architectural Traditions. "Rajbari" also is a generic term in the regional vernacular for "palace," so the name is not specific to one location. This paper will only focus on the related site of Patharkandi from the Pratapgarh Kingdom. The absence of archaeological research is an excellent opportunity for future research rather than a gap or lacuna which weakens the historical argument of this paper. The presence of a location with a great deal of research and a substantial amount of named ruling generations spanning three centuries is an ideal site for stratigraphic excavation.

The site requires a detailed survey, most appropriately contracted by the State Directorate of Archaeology, Assam, or the Archaeological Survey of India, to complete its structural chronology, to clarify the descriptions of the defensive lines and the reservoirs in the texts, and to collect the material culture, like ceramics, coins, and fragments of architecture, that will support the political interpretation offered between Sections 3 and 6.

8. Oral Tradition and Local Memory

Outside of the recorded history, Pratapgarh can be found strongly in local oral history. In the accounts of Choudhury, a folk song remained with the villagers into the twentieth century. This song bemoans the abandonment of the royal palace and the overgrowth of jungle at the site due to the decline of the family (Choudhury 2000, 304-311). Choudhury provides the original Bengali lines in the account and has them translated, but the lines will not be provided here. Unfortunately, I do not have the original account to provide a legitimate translation, and a translation without context will distort the folk material. However,

I can outline the general idea based on the commentary of Choudhury. The lyrics are a call to come and mourn the abandoned palace and site. The lyrics also reflect the loss of the royal family's status. A well-researched translation of the lyrics along with transliteration will accompany the rest of the research as well as the consultation of a Srihattai-Bengali folklore expert since it can be a small research project on its own.

Local folklore regarding the site links it to certain practices of devotion. One example is the worship of the forest saint known as Sahija Badsah, among the both Hindu and Muslim communities of Sribhumi or the Karimganj district (Choudhury 1977, 62–63; Abbasi and Al Helal 1979, 64) These oral and devotional traditions, in themselves, form an invaluable part of the history to demonstrate how the memory of Pratapgarh has been kept alive, in conjunction with, or independent of, the documented history.

9. Heritage Management and Public Archaeology

Each site of this type in the Barak Valley has very recognizable challenges, such as the expansion of agriculture and tea fields, settlements, and issues related to the protection of unexcavated earthworks. Rajbari's case for protection, as this paper has tried to explain, rather than to assert, involves the protection of the site being referenced multiple times in the Chronicle, Colonial gazetteers and regional historiographies as the site of one of the three kingdoms that occupied the area for about three hundred years, for example to the south the Tripura Kingdom, to the west the Bengal Kingdom, and to the north the Kachari Kingdom, and the site is located in an area of epigraphic settlements from the 6th and 7th centuries, with the Varman land grants of the mentioned period (Section 2). There are very few documented sites in the Barak Valley and the Boundary Survey and Heritage Listing made by the Archaeological State Directorate of Assam is the needed first-step instrument to assist the site, which legally lacks any instrument in the published record. Depending on the outcome of the mentioned survey, Rajbari may also be considered for the Listing by the ASI in accordance with the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958, and this would give Central Government protection and a scope of work under the auspices of the ASI.

Any future public use of the site will need to be considered downstream of the primary protection and investigation works. This will include the installation of interpretive signs, site access, and educational use. A site cannot be opened to the public in the absence of a Historic England Listing and archaeological survey without risking damage to the site.

10. Conclusion

The study of the Pratapgarh Kingdom aids in understanding the medieval Bengal-Northeast frontier of borderland statehood to a limited degree. The small kingdom's political narrative describes its struggle for survival in the spaces between Tripura, the Bengal Sultanate, and the Kachari Kingdom. This is only interpretable from one very long and detailed vernacular chronicle tradition. This tradition was written centuries after the described events and was shaped by the court chronicles, notably the Sri Rajmala, of which it uses as a source. The only independent piece of material evidence from the region is the sixth and seventh century Varman land grants, which belong to a, much earlier, different administrative system, and cannot be interpreted as the starting point to the Pratapgarh Kingdom, and its six hundred year silence is part of what the evidence refers to. More generally, this case suggests that the small polities of the borderlands give a contrast of evidence, very detailed in chronicle and oral memory, yet very lacking in material evidence and epigraphy, and until now, completely unexamined from the archaeological

perspective. The professional survey of the Rajbari area of Pratapgarh would not merely document previously unrecorded details, but would give a chance to verify, for one well-documented case, how far the chronicle-based history of this frontier can be depended on in describing a physically situated medieval state.

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