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Research Article

HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE KAPILI-JAMUNA VALLEY OF ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

The Kapili-Jamuna Valley is situated in the present districts of Nagaon, Marigaon and Hojai in Central Assam and is formed by the rivers Kapili, Jamuna and their tributaries. The presence of these rivers has made the region very fertile, attracting human habitation from remote pasts. The *Sri Rajamalastates* that in early times the kingdom of *Trivega* was located in the fertile tracts of the Kapili-Jamuna and Kalang Valley. The Allahabad pillar inscription of Samudra Gupta, datable to 4th century C.E, mentions Devaka (Doboka of the Kapili-Jamuna Valley) along with the kingdom of Kamarupa whose rulers paid nominal allegiance to the Gupta monarch. But by the second quarter of the fifth century C.E, sources would indicate that the kingdom of Devaka had broken off from the Gupta suzerainty. Again, in course of time, by sixth century C.E the Kapili-Jamuna valley was incorporated in the kingdom of Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa. In spite of the dearth of literary and epigraphic sources in constructing the history of the region, the abundance of material remains in the form of temple ruins and sculptures throughout the valley would indicate the presence of a flourishing kingdom, whose rulers patronized temple building activities and different artistic traditions. The region's history, illuminated mainly through archaeology forms an important chapter in the history of Assam and thus needs to be carefully assessed

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INTRODUCTION

The Kapili-Jamuna valley of Assam is located on the south bank of the mighty Brahmaputra river in the present districts of Nagaon and Marigaon in Central Assam. The valley is formed by the rivers Kapili, Jamuna and their tributaries. Study indicates that the Kapili River has its origin in the North Cachar Hills (modern Dima Haso region). It flows along the boundary of Cachar and the Khasi and Jaintia Hill before flowing into the plains of Nagaon District from the West, where it meets the Kalang River near Jagiroad. Three other major rivers, namely the Doyang, the Barapani and the Killing join the Kapili at Doyangmukh, Chaparmukh and Amlighat, respectively. The Jamuna River had its origin in the Hills of Karbi Anglong from where it flows west, into the plains of Nagaon district to meet the Kapili at Jamunamukh. Before flowing into the Kapili the Jamuna is joined by several other rivers like Burhi Ganga, Akashi Ganga, Urdha Ganga, Hria, Dikharu and Hargati. The Kalang River is actually a channel of the mighty Brahmaputra. It flows out from the Brahmaputra at Hatimurha near Silghat to flow into the plains of Nagaon district and Marigaon district. It ultimately rejoins the Brahmaputra again at Kajolimukh in Kamrup district. According to Raj Mohan Nath, because of the presence of the

three rivers, Kapili, Kalang and Jamuna, the Kapili-Jamuna and Kalang Valley in ancient times was known as *Tri-Sruta* or *Tribega* (Nath: 1984:54). The presence of these rivers in this region has made the region very fertile and it can be contended that since remote past the Kapili-Jamuna valley is a major attraction for human habitation.

When looked into the history of the early period of Assam, it can be contended that besides the state of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa, there was also the presence of other political centres. Literary and archaeological sources indicate the existence of political centres such as, Kapili-Jamuna valley in Central Assam and Doyang Dhansiri valley in Eastern Assam, outside the jurisdiction of Pragjyotish-Kamarupa. Excavations of extensive archaeological remains in these areas indicate that these two valleys developed as seats of political authority. However, in course of time the Kapili-Jamuna Valley was assimilated in the Kamarupa kingdom, while the Dhansiri in the Kachari Kingdom.

The Kapili-Jamuna Valley first finds mention in the Allahabad Pillar inscription of the Gupta king Samudra Gupta, datable to 4th century C.E. The inscription refers to the Kingdom of Devaka (identified with Doboka region in the Kapili-Jamuna valley) along with the kingdom of Kamarupa whose rulers paid

allegiance to the Gupta monarch. In 428 C.E. when Emperor Kumuragupta was ruling in North India, a king of the Kapili Valley is said to have sent an embassy to China (Nath: 1984:55). This seems to indicate that by the second quarter of the fifth century, the kingdom of Devaka had broken off from the Gupta yoke. The Sri Rajamala, providing a genealogy of the kings of the Tripura Kingdom up to the middle of the fourteenth century, states that in early times the Kingdom of Trivega was located in the fertile tracts of Kapili-Jamuna and Kallang valley. According to this text, Druhu, one of the ancestors of the Tripura Kings (according to Puranic lore Drhyu was the son of Yayati by Sarmishtha) constructed a city in the Trivega region with its capital on the banks of the Kapili River. Thus in the Sri Rajamala, while retailing the history of the kings of Tripura the myth of a Puranic origin is fabricated by the Head Priest Durlabhendra in the court of the Kachari king Dharma Manikya (Das: 2016:185). After Druhu, this text states that sixteen kings ruled over the Trivega Kingdom, the last two being Tripur and Triluchan. According to Sri-Rajamala, the eldest son of Triluchan, Drikpati married the daughter of the king of Hedemba and later on succeeded to the throne of his father-in-law. As a result, Drikpati's younger brother Dakshin succeeded Triluchan on the throne of Trivega. However, Drikpati laid his claims to his paternal throne and compelled Dakshin and his brothers to migrate to Cachar where they said to have founded a new capital at Khalangma on the banks of the river Varavakra (Barak) (Das: 2016:185). However it must be contended that there is no reliable historical evidence to corroborate the account of Sri Rajamala. And as asserted by J.B Bhattacharjee, Rajamalashould be assessed as a source of history of the 'Itihasa-Purana' tradition and also its source value should be viewed by researchers in the context of the evolution of its present form in which it is available.

Sources attest that by the first half of the sixth century C.E., the KapiliJamuna Valley was incorporated into the kingdom of Kamarupa during the reign of the Varman ruler Bhutivarman. According to R.M Nath, when Mahabhuti-Varma (same as Bhutivman) was perturbed at the threat of invasion from the West, the king of Dovoka tried his last to regain his lost territory and set up a revolution in the east (Nath: 1948:37). However he was defeated, his kingdom got annexed and was placed in charge of an officer, Avaguna. The Barganga Rock Inscription located in Doboka records the establishment of a religious institution build by Avaguna. . Since then there appears not much reference to this region in historical records. Records of the Salasthamba and Pala dynasties which succeeded the Varman dynasty respectively portray copper plate inscriptions granting land to the Brahmanas in the Kapili-Jamuna valley region. In course of time, the valley witnessed the coming of the Jaintias, the Kacharis, the Bara-Bhuyans and the Ahoms. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Burmese invasion of Assam along with the horrifying *kala-azar* is said to have depopulated the region around Doboka (Nath: 1984:55). Presently the area consists of a mixed population and a varied culture.

In spite of the dearth of literary sources in reconstructing the history of the Kapili-Jamuna valley, the abundance of material remains in the form of temple ruins, stone and terracotta sculptures throughout the valley indicate the presence of a flourishing kingdom in the region. The valley has innumerable

big tanks and ruins of hundreds of stone and brick structures lying all over the entire region. A visit to the region would show that almost all major archaeological sites are located in close proximity to the rivers, and it can be contended that the rivers facilitated the spread of different artistic traditions. Archaeological sites such as Jogijan, Mikirati, Doboka, Sankhyadevi, Shivpur, Rajabari, Mahadeo-sal, Vasundhari, Kawai-Mari, Amtala, Gach-Tal etc have material remains, in the form of temple ruins and sculptures (both stone and terracotta) datable to different phases of historical development which stand as reflection of the region's past glory and also serving as important sources in reconstructing the history of the valley. It is proposed to study the history of the valley based upon the archaeological sources. This paper is based primarily on field survey, supplemented by literature.

Material Remains of the Kapili-Jamuna Valley

Sources act as the base depending on which history can be constructed and reconstructed. Traditionally sources have been divided into two categories, literary and archaeological. However this division is not absolute. All ancient remains of the past, including written manuscripts are material in nature. Also, archaeological sources, such as inscriptions, coins, seals, which have writings inscribed on them, are treated by the historians to be both literary and archaeological sources. Thus sources, be it literary, archaeological or oral testimonies, depends upon the usage of the historian. A study of the material remains would indicate that the erection of temples, palaces and forts in Central Assam may be traced back to the Gupta period. Both literary and archaeological sources would show that the reigning kings of the region patronized temple building activities, the temples mostly dedicated to Siva, Vishnu, Surya, Devi and other deities. Sculptures excavated in the region mostly adorned the temples, serving as the decorative parts of the temples, namely walls, ceilings, pediment, doorway, lintel etc. The Kapili-Jamuna Valley of Central Assam is rich in material remains. Excavations in the valley have brought to light extensive material remains, datable to the period from 4th century C.E. onwards. Remains of massive temples and sculptures throughout the valley stand mute testimony to the fact that in remote past, especially during the period 4th to 12th century C.E. there was a flourishing kingdom in the area with a rich artistic tradition. Inscriptions on rock and copper plates of the Varman and Salastambha dynasties of early Assam were also found in this area. The temples of the Kapili valley are stylistically similar to the *Nagara* style of temple architecture of Orissa. The sculptures of the valley, adorning mostly the Brahmanical temples and whose ruins lie scattered all over the region are influenced by the art of the Guptas, Pala-Sena and Orissan style. Studies would suggest that local stylistic features were also adopted by the sculptors. The temple ruins and sculptures of the Kapili Valley also show close affinity with that of Brahmaputra Valley.

The earliest structural remains of the Kapili valley are the Jogijan group of brick temples, known as Nanath., datable to 8th century on stylistic grounds. Originally there were nine temples (hence the name Nanath), now only eight remains. The temples are probably dedicated to Shiva, as *sivalingas* can be found standing intact amongst the temple ruins. In two of these, all round the plinth embedded in the masonry and brick structures, more than two hundred terracotta plaques are found,

depicting divine figures, animals and secular scenes, many of which display characteristics of folk art (Das: 2016:184). Evidence of a purely local style of sculpture is found in the Nanath group of temples. In fact it is only at Nanath in the Kapili valley that one finds remains of brick structures with terracotta plaques in situ. According to N.P Choudhury, terracotta sculptures constituted, as it does even now, the common and popular medium of artistic expression of the people (Choudhury: 1985:198). But terracotta unlike stone is often destroyed by the action of natural elements like rain, growth of vegetation etc, and acting as barrier in the course of preservation. The temples at Nanath although brick built, used stone doorways, the *dvaras* being fixed on the entrances to the *mandapa* and *gabhagriha* of the temples (Choudhury: 1998:114). Unfortunately, in the present times this precious temple site has lost its superstructure, only the plinth of the temples stand intact.

Some excavated material remains of the Kapili Valley



An Umalingana image over stepped pedestal



A kirtimukha motif



A structural component with patterns



A door sill with kalpavrksha motif



The plinth of a brick temple



Plan of a temple



A bull



Siva in *abhanga* pose flanked by two female attendants



Vishnu sitting, Lakshmi and Saraswati standing

Terracotta Sculptures



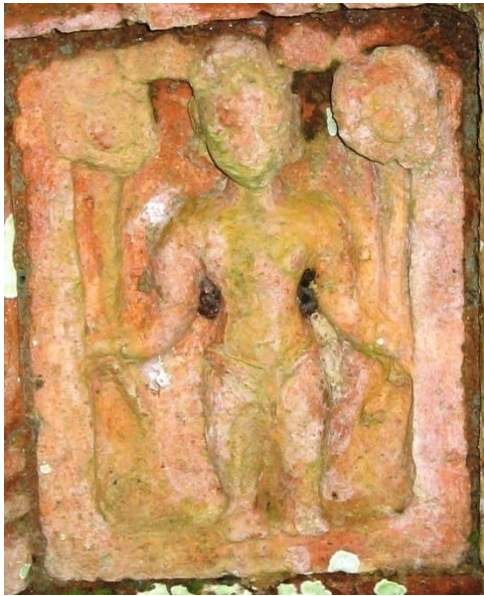
Conch blower



Man carrying two children



Gajalakshmi



Surya



Lion attacking deer



Acanthus



Chimera

Another archaeological site of the Kapili valley containing ancient ruins is Akasiganga. A vast number of stones, including pillars, capitals, perforated windows, *amalakas*, door lintels, door jambs, pedestals, moulded architraves etc, lie scattered in this site. The sculptures and carved stone found in this site show that it contained at least two temples from the 10-12th century C.E. (Sarma: 1940:82). Among the carvings on the slabs and panels, a note worthy one is that of Siva as Sulapani in abhanga pose flanked by two attendants, one holding *chamara* and the other with hands in *anjali-mudra*, standing with bent leg on the back of an elephant (Choudhury: 1985:173). Presently, Akasiganga contains two Siva temples (modern in nature), both of which enshrine a *sivalinga* each. Again, Doboka of the Kapili valley is very rich in material remains. Though most of these ruins appear to be of the post Gupta period, systematic exploration of the area may expose materials having Gupta heritage (Sarma: 1988:16). Amongst the excavated ruins, a female torso and a male figure is note worthy. Jogijan of the Kapili valley is rich in architectural remains. Recently, a mutilated image of Tripura Bhairavi, a Shakta goddess and an extremely rare icon has been restored by the Directorate of Archaeology and State Museum, Guwahati. Other archaeological sites of Kapili valley housing temple ruins are Gosajuri, Mikirati, BasundhariParvat, Nabhanga, Changsaki, Devasthan, Gachtal, Silghat, Kawaimari, Sibpur, Kachocila, Boha, Burha-Burhi, Kachosila, Mahadeosal, Sitajakhala. Almost all the temples of the valley are adorned by sculptures, depicting Brahmanical deities like Vishnu, Surya, Ganesa, Chamunda and also *Sivalingasthat* adhere to canonical norms, thereby revealing the religious affinity of the rulers as well as common masses. Massive *kirttimukhas*, adorning the Siva temples (they adorn at the apex of the stele of Saivite sculptures, flanked by vidyadharas) have also been discovered throughout the valley. According to Paromita Das, massive stone *Kirttimukha*, similar in size to those found in the Golaghat district of Assam, but stylistically different have been found (Das: 2016:187). A study of the sculptures would indicate that the rulers of the Kapili-Jamuna valley mainly patronized Saivism, though the worship of Vishnu and Surya were also known. Saivism also constituted the popular religion of the common masses. A study of the inscriptions of the rulers of early Assam would indicate that in almost all the land grants, the presiding ruler paid homage to different forms of Siva although they claim descent from the boar incarnation of

Vishnu, father of Naraka. Siva was worshipped mostly in aniconic form as evident from the numerous lingas found amongst the temple ruins. Images of Uma-mahesvara are also found in large number (Badaganga near Howraghat, Mikirati near Doboka, Rajabari (Jugijan), Doboka (Choudhury: 1985:211). Vishnu sculptures excavated throughout the valley would show that Vishnu was also revered. Saktism can also be said to be prevalent in the valley as depicted by the sculptures (an image of *Simhahini* Durga is noticed on a rock of VasundharPahar, Nagaon, stone image of Camunda at kenduguri). Other divinities would include Ganesa (Boha hill at Burha-Burhi in Mayong), Gajalakshmi, river goddess Yamuna (ruins of Sankhyadevi, Nagaon district), miniature figures of Brahma (Kawaimari), Manasa (silghat, Nagaon), Karttikya (Devasthana) (Barpujari: 2007:464).

The sculptures offer a glance of the social life of the people of the area. Scenes from daily life got depicted in the sculptures. The human figurines depicted in the sculptures display a great variety. According to scholars the facial features and physiognomic type of most of the sculptures, particularly the human figures of Na-Nath is Mongoloid. Bodies are generally muscular, short and the male figures are seen to wear a knee length *dhoti*. A door sill from Baraganga depicts dancing figures, thereby indicating that music and dance were an integral part of the society. On both sides of the sill, there are four panels each divided by pilasters; all the panels are occupied by music parties, from the right, the first and the second playing a cymbal, the third a dancing female figure, the fourth a male playing a drum, on the left, the first and the second being broken, the third depicting a male playing drum and the fourth, also a male playing a cymbal (Choudhury: 1985:189). Sculptures also give an idea about the kind of dressing prevalent in a society. A human figure from Gachtal is shown seated in *sukhasana* posture, wearing a full tunic and dhoti, the waist covered by a piece of cloth and a small turban on his head. Scholars compare the dress worn with the present day Assamese dress. Another sculpture of the Kapili valley (from Na-Nath) appear to be that of a female standing with her long hair hanging down, as if she is drying it after washing (Das: 2012-13:93). Another depicts a 'strong' man playing with his children. PradipSarma interprets it as a figure of Hanumana carrying Rama and Lakshmana (Das: 2012-13:93). The clay sculptures from Na-Nath depict a human figure subjugating two trees and another a baby sucking the breast of a stout female. R.D Choudhury identifies this as the demoness *sputana*, in the gospel of Krsna and the subjugation of two trees as representing Krsna's *Arjunabhanjana* episode (Choudhury: 1998:77). Sculptures of human figurines in the form of *Yogasana* postures are also found. A terracotta plaque, representing a male human figurine, seated on *asana* in *yogasana* posture, has come from Na-Nath; the right hand is shown raised, holding an indistinct object, while the left hand is placed on his left thigh. Sculptures also portray men on horseback, warriors, an archer, seated and standing human figurines, both wearing crowns (terracotta plaque from Jugijan), female figures, a devotee with joined palms, courting couples and pot-bellied men.

Sculptures depicting animals, adorning the walls, ceilings, pillars, door frame, etc of the temple are numerous. Depiction of animals and birds like elephants, lions, bulls, horses, deer, pig, tiger, geese, peacock etc are quite common. This gives an

idea about the flora and fauna of the valley. Sculptures depicting a lion on an elephant, *gajasimha* motif are also commonly found in the ruins of Kapili valley. In addition to the independent representation of these various animals and birds, many are also sculpted with different deities, they acting as the deities' *vahanas*. Amongst the mythical figures, the depiction of *kirttimukha* (meaning glory face) is the most common. Scholars assert that the depiction of *kirttimukha* in the remains of Central Assam occurs either on the front pediment or throughout the walls and on the pillars and their shafts. According to Paromita Das, many of the terracotta plaques of Na-Nath depict mythical creatures and chimeras like the *vyala*, *suparna*, a mermaid with lotus stalk, and the *kirttimukha*, one with a string course of *rudrakshamala*, a sculptural motif seen not only in the stone sculptures but also in the massive stone components that formed part of the temple (Das: 2012-13:94). Another composite figure, a hybrid form of human being and snake, or human being and fish; the upper portion is human and the lower portion is of snake or fish is depicted in the door jambs of Da-Parbatia, the lintels from Sankhya Devi temple and Chang-choki (Kawaimari) (Choudhury: 1985:195). At the site of Na-Nath, a courting deer couple is depicted on a pillar; male deer seated upon the back of the female deer, in the act of coition. Some scholars interpret this to be a depiction of the seer and his wife who had assumed the form of a deer couple and been killed by Pandu in the *Mahabharata*. Sculptures in the shape of ornamental designs and decorative motif are also being found scattered throughout the region.

The Kapili-Jamuna valley formed an integral part of the kingdom of the Salastambhas and the Palas who succeeded the Varmanas. These rulers generally ruled not from Pragiyotisapura the ancestral capital of the Varmanas, but from Hadappesvara (Haruppesvara), identified with modern Tezpur on the north bank of the Brahmaputra, situated opposite of the Kapili valley, which is on the south Bank (Das: 2016:186). The Palas, later shifted the capital to Durjaya, identified with modern North Guwahati. Epigraphic evidence would indicate that the rulers patronized Brahmanical culture, *varnasramadharmas* and spread of Vedic learning. Land grants charters (rent free holdings) to Brahmanas by the ruling elite indicate that the Brahmanas enjoyed a privileged position in the society. Evidence would indicate that the rulers of early Assam patronized the division of society into four *varnas*, as such they are referred to as protector of *varnasramadharmas*. However, in course of time, many new castes and sub-castes evolved due to the development of new arts, crafts and profession and also due to the absorption of tribal elements into the Brahmanical fold. Here, in understanding the social structure, one must know that *varna* and caste are not conterminous; *varna* is etymologically associated with 'colour', consisting of the division of the society into four rigid groups, Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras, whereas caste is always numerous, being termed as *Jati*. In course of time, the ancient Assamese society was divided into- the Brahmanas and the Shudras which included the rest of the people in the society. The creation of agricultural settlements among the non-Brahmanas helped in spreading the Brahmanical culture as well as increasing agricultural output. Epigraphic evidence are reliable in tracing the genealogy of the rulers as well as gaining an idea about the education provided to the rulers and Brahmanas but are silent on the economic activities of the rest of the people.

That agriculture was the mainstay of the society can be inferred from epigraphic evidences. Dhanya (rice or paddy) was the staple crop. Inscription also throw light on the productive capacity of the granted lands, their boundaries and also various types of tress like the mango, jackfruit, blackberry, banyn, cane, bamboo, silk, cotton etc. Evidence also suggest that agricultural output was taxed in various forms like *kara*, *upakara* and *utkhetana*. Besides, the rent free holding was exempted from a number of taxes like *hastibandha*, *naukabandha*, *chauradharana*, etc. But whether such a great variety of taxes actually existed or the scribe was following a given format for recording a land grant is not actually known (Das: 2016:186). Epigraphic evidence also indicated that the rulers patronized temple building activities to a large extent. The Tezpur grant of Vanamala states that the King repaired the lofty temple dedicated to Siva, which had fallen down. In the Nagaon grant of Vanamala, mention is made of a row of palaces erected by the King, which had a large number of rooms decorated with carvings (Choudhury: 1985:165). Again, the Gachtal pillar inscription mentions that the King Visvasundaradeva ordered one Chandrakanta to repair a Siva temple which had been damaged by the Melecchas (Choudhury: 1985:165).

CONCLUSION

The numerous material remains of the Kapili valley would indicate that a great many people were employed as masons, stone-cutters, sculptors, brick- makers and potters as well as scribes, poets, dancers, engravers, copper smiths and the like. The materials for building the temples as well as for the sculptures were most probably brought from the Mikir route and North Cachar Hills by the river route, the rivers facilitating as means of communication. Good supply of timber was also available in Assam. According to *AtharvaVeda*, common houses were built of bamboo posts on raised up bamboo roof frames covered up with grass, the number of roofs being either two or four, "*catushpakshaochadh*" (as cited in Choudhury: 1985: 165). Probably, the two or four roofed thatched bulding must have had slanting or curved roofs in areas of Assam with a naturally heavy rainfall. The rulers patronized temple building activity to a great extent, thereby employing many of the subjects in temple building activities as well as in sculpting activities. Many of the people were also employed in administrative activities. Sculptures of the valley are both in stone and terracotta. Sculptures are mostly of divinities or religious in nature. However the valley has also revealed the presence of a few sculptures depicting scenes of social and domestic life of the people of the valley. The intensity and grandeur of the temple building activities would indicate a flourishing economy and a period of peace.

During the rules of the Salastambas and the Palas, the Kapili-Jamuna Valley acted as twin administrative centre. Even though the region has survived the atrocities of the hostile forces during the period of unrest resulting in cessation of temple building activities, but over the years, natural elements such as growth of vegetation due to humid climate and earthquake has immensely effected the regions temple architecture and sculptures. Efforts have been made by the archaeological department of Assam to conserve and preserve the monuments and material remains. However, such efforts will be efficiently fruitful if the people of the present era get to know about the majestic grandeur of the ancient art and architecture of the region, thereby collectively uniting in the efforts to preserve and conserve the remains. The regions surviving sculptures and temple ruins stand mute testimony to the region's past glory which is constituted as an important chapter in the art history of Assam.

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