

Archaeological Remains of the Kapili-Jamuna Valley of Assam

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The Kapili-Jamuna valley of Assam, situated in the modern districts of Nagaon, Marigaon and Hojai in Central Assam is rich in archaeological remains, especially, temple ruins and sculptures and has been a major seat of cultural development, attracting human habitations since distant past. Historically, the valley first finds mention in Allahabad Pillar inscription of Samudragupta datable to 4th century CE. This inscription refers to the Kingdom of Devaka (identified with the Doboka region of present Hojai district) along with the eastern frontier kingdoms, such as Kamarupa whose rulers paid allegiance to the reigning Gupta monarch. That the area served as an important political centre as well as a thriving cultural zone under the historical dynasties of early Assam, namely the Varmanas, the Salasthambas and the Palas may be proved by the rich remains found spreading throughout the valley. Almost all the major archaeological sites of the valley such as, Jogijan, Mikirati, Doboka, Sankhyadevi, Shivpur, Rajabari, Mahadeo-sal, Vasundhari, Kawai-Mari, Amtala, and Gach-Tal are located in close proximity to the rivers, the rivers facilitating the spread of different artistic traditions. Considering the historical and archaeological significance of the valley, a detailed documentation and an in-depth study of the remains is an utmost necessity which would evidently throw light into various aspects of the socio-economic as well cultural history of the region. The paper is an attempt in this direction.

Keywords: Sculpture, Temple Remain, Art, Culture, History

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 Morigaon and Hojai in Central Assam. The valley is formed by the rivers Kapili, Jamuna and their tributaries. Because of the presence of the three rivers, Kapili, Jamuna and Kalang, the Kapili-Jamuna valley in ancient times was known as *Tri-Sruta* or *Tribega* (Nath Nath: 54). The presence of these rivers has made the region very fertile and it may be contended that the valley has been an important centre of socio-cultural development since the ancient times. That the valley also developed as an important seat of political authority for the ruling dynasties of early Assam, namely the Varmanas, the Salasthambas and the Palas may be proved by the extensive archaeological remains that remain scattered throughout the region. Literary as well as archaeological evidences mention certain names, such as Davaka, Trivega and Kapili as the capital centres of the kingdom that developed in and around the Kapili valley region.

The Kapili Jamuna Valley first finds mention in the Allahabad Pillar inscription of the Gupta king Samudra Gupta, datable to 4th century CE, on palaeographic grounds. The inscription refers to the Kingdom of Devaka (identified with Doboka region of Hojai district in Assam) along with the kingdom of Kamarupa, Samatata, Kartipura and Nepala whose rulers paid allegiance to the Gupta monarch. In 428 CE when Emperor Kumuragupta was ruling in North India, a king of the Kapili is said to have sent an embassy to China (Nath 1937). Another emissary was sent in 466 CE. The *Shung-Shu* History of the first Sung dynasty of China records the name of the Kapili King as *Yueh-ai* meaning 'moon beloved' who sent an ambassador to China between 420-479 CE (Sarma 1981: 44). This seems to indicate that by the second quarter of the fifth century, the kingdom of Davaka had broken off from the Gupta yoke. By the first half of the sixth century CE, during the reign of the Varman ruler Bhutivarman, the Kapili-Jamuna valley was incorporated into the kingdom of Kamarupa and was perhaps turned into a *vishaya* or a district of Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa. The Barganga Rock Inscription stands evidence to this, which records the establishment of a religious institution build by Avaguna, the *vishayamatya* or district governor of king Bhutivarman (Sharma 1978: 4).

In spite of the dearth of literary sources in reconstructing the history of the Kapili-Jamuna valley, the abundance of archaeological remains, especially material ruins 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 the major archaeological sites of the valley 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, Mahadeosal, Vasundhari, Kawaimari, Amtala, Gachtal, Devasthan, and Gosajuri have material remains, in the form of temple ruins and sculptures datable to different phases of historical development which stand as reflection



Fig. 1: Gajasimha, 10th - 12th century CE, Rajbari
Archaeological Site, Hojai

of the region's past glory and also serving as important sources in reconstructing the history of the valley (Saikia 2018: 23354). A large number of evidences furnished by literature, epigraphs, sculptural motifs testify to the prevalence of worship of Brahmanical pantheons such as Vishnu (including the various *avatars* of Vishnu), Siva, Devi, Surya, Brahma, Ganesha, Yamuna, and Gaja-Lakshmi throughout the valley, thereby bringing into focus the religious history of the region. Images of various mythical figures such as *Kirrtimukha*, *Vyala*, *Chimera*, *Suparna* are abundantly found amongst the ruins of the Kapili valley.

The massive temple remains would indicate that the rulers of the region actively patronised temple building activities in and around the region of modern Nagaon, Morigaon and Hojai districts. Sculptures, both in terracotta and stone, mostly adorning the

Brahmanaical temples and the temple ruins of the region would act as primary sources in reconstructing the history of the region. The sculptures also offer a glance of the social life of the people of the area; scenes from daily life got depicted in the sculptures. Secular sculptures, such as that of dancing figurines, men in *yogasana* postures, figure in *sukhasana* posture, wearing a full tunic and dhoti, devotees, courting couples,



Fig. 2: Kirtimukha, 9th - 12th century CE, Rajbari
Archaeological Site, Hojai

men on horseback, and archers would evidently throw light on the socio-cultural history of the region. The depiction of floral motifs as well as various birds and animal figurines in the remains would point to the existence of the rich flora and fauna of the valley. Moreover, the a few epigraphic evidences would also help to draw insights into the socio-economic history of the region. The present paper is an attempt to document and study

the rich archaeological remains of the Kapili-Jamuna valley. The study is based primarily on field survey, supplemented by secondary literature.

Art, Architecture and Sculptures of the Kapili-Jamuna Valley

With the evolution of Indian religious beliefs and the subsequent personification of deities, the temple as an abode of deity was materialised. Along with this development, a new craft in the form of temple building activities began and spread throughout the subcontinent, receiving royal patronage to a great extent. Temples grew in size from small places of worship to significant, monumental structures, built in almost all the regions of the Indian subcontinent (Thapar 2002: 474). A look into the development of temple building activities in early India would show how throughout the ages temples came to be perceived as a statement of political power or as great repository of wealth.

Temples in India are known by various names, the more popular being *vimana*, *prasada*, *devalaya*, *devakulam*, *devasthanana*, *mandira*, *vihara* etc. A temple may be either an isolated structure or a part of a large complex. Before erection of religious structures using permanent material such as, dressed stones and bricks came into being, rock cut architecture, evidently constituted the commonly practised



Fig. 3: Dvarasakha, 9th - 12th century CE, Akasiganga, Karbi Anglong district



Fig. 4: Terracotta plaques on temple plinth, 9th-12th century CE, Na-Nath, Hojai district

art form in ancient India. Considerably, the pre-Gupta epoch have some evidences of erection of structures religious in nature. However, due to the perishable nature of the building materials, most of such ruins are in extreme fragmentary state. It is only from the Gupta period (4th - 5th century CE) that there ushered a new epoch of temple architecture that saw the use of permanent materials in constructing religious edifices. The period that followed there



Fig. 5: Boar on a terracotta plaque, 9th-12th century CE, Raj Mohan Nath Archaeological Park, Hojai

in the Himalayan valleys etc. According to canonical norms, a Hindu temple is built on a high base-platform (*adhithana*) and should have a tower structure (superstructure) so as to imitate mount *Meru*, *Mandara* and *Kailasha*. However, there are different views regarding the evolution of temple architecture in India; some suggest that the shape and style of the superstructure or the towering part of the temple over the shrine has been taken from Buddhist *stupa*, whereas some emphasise that these are influenced by the shape of chariots and *rathas*, which prevailed in the Vedic period (Longhurst 1979, Sundaram 1974). According to Kramrisch (1946: 22-26), the *vastupurusamandala* or the plan of a Hindu temple had its origin in the *vedic* sacrificial alter. Also, the concept of the sanctum or

the *garbhagriha* of the temple is considered to have been borrowed from the prehistoric dolmen. During the early years of its conception, the flat slab roof over the temple evidently indicates the rock-cut cave as its prototype. It is during its mature phase at the time of the Guptas, structural parts of the temple, such as the *garbhagriha*, *sikhara* and *jagati* gradually seemed to appear.

after saw a radical increase in temple building activities, all across the Indian subcontinent, with different regions developing a particular style of temple architecture.

Based on geography, culture and various distinctive architectural elements, temples in India are generally classified into three broad categories, the *Nagara* or the northern style, the *Dravidian* or the southern style and the *Vesara* or hybrid style that is seen mostly in Deccan areas. In addition to these forms, many regional variations can be seen in temple architecture of India, such as that of the temples of eastern India, particularly Bengal and some



Fig. 6: Dvarapala, 6th century CE, Barganga, Karbi Anglong



Fig. 7: Barganga Rock Inscription, 6th century CE, Barganga, Karbi Anglong

Temple building activities in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam, mostly under royal patronage, started from 5th-6th century CE, gaining momentum and reaching its peak of excellence in 8th-9th century CE. Such building activities continued till 12th-13th century CE, when it was obstructed for a brief period of time due to foreign invasions causing economic and political instability which more or less lead to cessation of art and craft activities due to lack of royal patronage.

Again, with the coming of the Ahoms, Assam witnessed full scale development in building activities, both secular and religious architecture. The first epigraphic evidence regarding the construction of a religious institution in Assam is the Umachal rock inscription of Surendravarman (identified with King Mahendrarvarman of the Varman dynasty), assigned to 5th century CE, which records the establishment of a rock cut shrine to *Balabhadrasvamin* (Sircar 2007: 101). However, archaeology in Assam speaks of several megalithic remains such as *menhir*, *dolmen* and several other stone monuments of immense significance



Fig. 8: Divine figures on an architectural component of a temple, 9th-12th century CE, Mikirati Archaeological Site, Hojai

which symbolise the prevalence of fertility cult and ancestor worship. As scholars assert, these megaliths stand as a link between primitive religion with ancestor worship, fertility cult and phallic worship on one hand and *saiva-sakta* religion on the other hand.

The temples of the pre-Ahom period in Assam are basically constructed following the *nagara* type of temple architecture with certain regional variations infused into them. Remnants of the structural remains of such temples would indicate that almost all the temples have a *garbhagriha* circumscribed by a *pradaksinapatha*, *antarala* or vestibule, a pillared hall or *mandapa*, a *mukhamandapa* or *ardhamandapa*. The superstructures over the temple shrine of these pre-Ahom temples are mostly of *sikhara* or the *rekha deul* type in their elevation. A visit to the pre-Ahom sites would indicate that basically, a temple in Assam seem to have only one inner chamber or the *garbhagriha* where the main deity is enshrined, or it may be a composite edifice with a few separate structures joined together cardinally (Sarma 1988: 7). That the temples of early Assam have similarities with the architectural type of Orissa, Central India as well as Pala-Sena art of Bengal and Western Chalukyan influence may

be evidenced by the various structural remains that lie scattered in the various archaeological sites of the region. In the words of Pradip Sarma (1988: 150), '*while the existence of features like pista, domical ceiling, etc. show its central Indian leaning, elephant caryatids and some other designs, show the influence of the Deccan style of temples*'. As regard the materials, the temples of pre-Ahom Assam are mostly constructed with stone and bricks, with terracotta plaques being embellished upon the brick structures.

The temples of the Kapili valley of Central Assam are stylistically similar to the *Nagara* style of temple architecture with *triratha* or *pancaratha* ground plan. The *garbhagriha* of the temples are mostly on a square plan and are on a lower level. Remnants of *mandapa* and *ardhamandapa* are noticed at Nanath, Devasthan, Barganga, and Gachtal. The temples of this region bear close resemblance to the Orissan style of temple architecture. Sculptural remains which mostly adorn the temples would indicate the presence of the *gajasimha* motif, a motif typical to the Orissan temples. Such motif is found at the archaeological sites such as, Changchowki, Buda Gosaitan, Badaganga,



Fig. 9: Vaishnavi, 10th-12th century CE, Mikirati Archaeological Site, Hojai

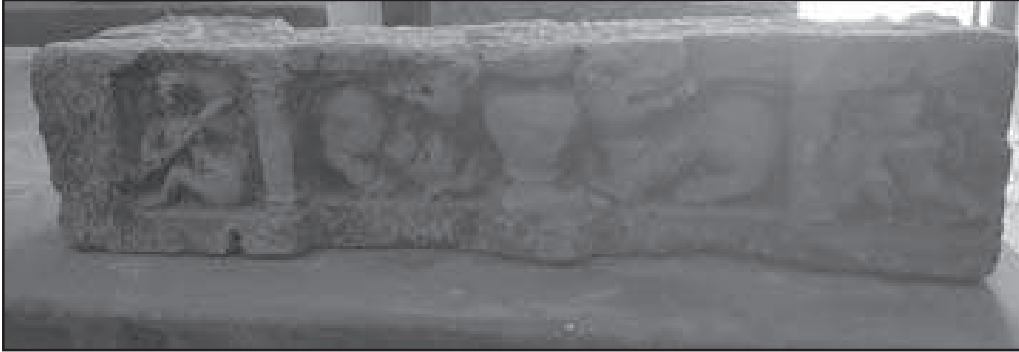


Fig. 10: Vase with lion motif, 10th-12th century CE, Mikirati Archaeological Site, Hojai

Rajbari and other places of the valley (Fig. 1). The numerous sculptures of the region bear close similarity with the rich artistic traditions of the Guptas, Pala-Senas and Orissan art style. Architectural feature, such as the use of *pista* or *jagati*, which is a raised surface or a platform upon which temples are built, a feature common to the Khajuraho group of temples may be seen in the edifices of the Rajbari temples at Jogijan in the Kapili valley. The usage of such features speaks of central Indian influence in the artistic activity of the valley (Sarma 1988: 157). The Pala art or the Eastern Indian School of Medieval Sculpture which flourished in eastern India under the Pala-Sena rulers (8th

century - 12th century CE) of Bengal had a great influence upon the sculptural art of the Kapili valley. For instance, one of the door jambs of the Gachtal ruins (10th - 11th centuries CE) at Dabaka in present Hojai district has carvings such as flowers, creepers with birds and animals as well as twisted serpents which indicate influence of the Pala School (Ramachandran 1984: 32). Also, the *kirtimukha* and flying *vidyadharas* that appeared at the apex of the



Fig. 11: Garbhagriha of a temple with Uma-Mahesvara image, 10th-12th century CE, Rajbari Archaeological site, Hojai

stele of a majority of the sculptural pieces of the divinities which are depicted with heavy ornamentation speak of the influence of the Pala art. The *kirtimukha* also appeared on arcs of circular stone blocks forming part of the *gandi* of the temple that lay around the site complexes (Fig. 2). A number of architectural stones, such as pillars, capitals, perforated

windows, *amalakas*, door lintels, sills, jambs, pedestals, moulded architraves etc., that lie scattered amongst the Akasiganga ruins have striking similarity with Chalukyan art style (Fig. 3). Again, explorations at Gosain-juri have brought into light a door lintel carved with *yavanika* design and a round gneiss piece, reminiscent of the moon-stones of South India and Ceylon (Ramachandran 1984: 30). The temple remains of the Kapili region are also stylistically quite similar with the remains of the other sites of the Brahmaputra valley.



Fig. 12: Amalaka, 10th-12th century CE, Gachtal, Hojai

The earliest structural remains of the Kapili-Jamuna valley are the Jogijan group of brick temples, known as Na-Nath, datable to 7th - 8th century CE on stylistic grounds. As the name suggests, originally, there must have been nine temples the site. At present, only eight remains. The temples are divided in symmetrical plan facing each other in two lines with a passage in between the rows. Remnants of brick *garbagrihas* and *mandapas*, columns as well as door sills and door jambs are noticed at the site. The *garbhagriha* of these temples houses a Siva *linga* and a *yonipitha* each. Above the *adhithana*, in two of the temples, more than two hundred terracotta plaques are found adorning the temple plinths. Such plaques have a variety of representation, such as human figurines, divine



Fig. 13: Ceiling slab with lotus, 10th-12th century CE, Gachtal, Hojai

and secular, animals, birds, floral motifs, and grotesque creatures (Fig. 4 - 5). All these are carved to decorate the brick walls of the temple, many of which display characteristics of folk art. According to scholars such as P.C. Sarma (1983), the simplicity of the temple plan and the existence of decorative carving on the outer walls of temples at Na-Nath are reminiscent of artistic



Fig. 14: Vishnu, 10th-12th century CE,
Gachtal, Hojai

development of temple architecture during the Gupta period and the post-Gupta period. Here, at Na-Nath, evidence of a purely local style of sculpture could be discerned. In fact, it is only at Na-Nath group of temples of the Kapili valley that one finds remains of brick structures with terracotta plaques in situ, laying horizontally on the outer face of the walls. Some of these terracotta plaques exhibit similarities with those recovered from Goalpara in western Assam and also with Paharpur in Bangladesh. Looking into the measurements, it may be noticed that those from Paharpur area are slightly larger in size than the Na-Nath plaques which are rectangular in shape. Also, the Na-Nath plaques unlike the plaques from Da-Parbatiya, Bhaitbari and Mayong do not display row of lotus petals at the top and bottom border (Das 2012-13: 92). While some of the terracotta plaques are finely executed, some are crudely stylised, thereby indicating the wide variety of artists, some expertise and some amateur, probably children. As N.P. Choudhury (1985:

198) expresses, terracotta constituted, as it does even now, the common and popular medium of artistic expression of the people. But terracotta unlike stone is often destroyed by the action of natural elements like rain, growth of vegetation, and acting as barrier in the course of preservation. The brick temples of Na-Nath used stone doorways fixed on the entrances to the *garbhagriha* and *mandapa* (Choudhury 1998: 114). Presently, only the plinths of the temples stand intact.

At Barganga remains of a pre-Ahom temple with a rock inscription, belonging to 6th century CE on palaeographic grounds have been found. The temple at Barganga consisted of a *garbhagriha*, *mandapa* and an *ardhamandapa*. The *garbhagriha* was of sandstone while the *mandapa* and *ardhamandapa* were brick built structures (Choudhury 1985: 153). Architectural remains include door lintels with the common motif of lions and vase at the centre and flanked by dancing scenes, lintel with Ganesha on the *lalatabimba*, *dvarasakhas* with foliage carvings, figurines playing musical instruments, figurines with serpents, canopy stone with carvings of *astadala*, images of bull carved on stone, Uma-Maheswara carved on a block of stone and Vishnu on a pedestal. A stone pedestal probably Vaishnavite in character consist of five images, Vishnu in the centre, flanked by Lakshmi and Saraswati and Jaya and Bijaya on the sides of Lakshmi and Saraswati respectively; the bottom of the pedestal contains four images, two on each ends with

folded hands (Nath 1937). Beside the temple complex, there are two huge blocks of stone with figurines of *dvarapala* carved in each blocks. The *dvarapalas* holds a battle axe each and wears a dhoti (Fig. 6). R.M. Nath notices a figure of 'Hanuman', engraved on the left rock (Nath 1937: 43). Facing inside of the left rock, the inscription of Bhutivarman has been found which records the establishment of an *asrama* or a religious institution by the king (Fig. 7). This perhaps is the first recorded evidence of the development of a religious institution in the south bank of the Brahmaputra River.

At Mikirati, a village about 1 km from Doboka town in the present Hojai district of Assam, at least nine mounds of ruins of pre-Ahom temples are noticed, containing evidence of brick structures. These mounds are arranged in three rows. The central one consists of brick structures and a pedestal of grey sandstones. The *garbhagriha* of which the upper portion has been quite extensively damaged has in its four corners a *laghustambha*, each extending outwards. Towards the north-west, remains exhibit the existence of a stone temple having Shaivite characteristics (Choudhury 1985: 149). A huge Shiva-linga with the *yonipitha* is noticed under a big tree with two big blocks of stone on the sides. Other architectural pieces found at the site includes door lintels, fragments of *amalakas* (some with sockets for clamps), fragments of *caitya*



Fig. 15: Uma-Maheswara, 9th-12th century CE, Devasthan, Karbi Anglong



Fig. 16: Uma-Maheswara in a door lintel, 9th-12th century CE, Devasthan, Karbi Anglong

windows, pillar-capitals, pillar bases, pedestals of the *sarbotobhadra* type and a number of stone blocks with floral and foliage decorations. According to R.M. Nath, the ruins at Mikirati perhaps belonged to seven temples just like that of Gossainjuri of the Kapili valley (Nath 1937). In the years 2005-06, the Directorate of Archaeology, Assam excavated one of the brick mounds which evidently disclosed the brick built plinth of a temple with a *pranala*, datable to c. 8th- 9th century CE.



Fig. 17: Kartikeya, 9th-12th century CE, Devasthan, Karbi Anglong

However, the other brick mounds are yet to be unearthed; eventually, these would considerably reveal many new facets of the history of the place if explored in the near future.

A good number of sculptures serving mostly as decorative elements of the different parts of temple such as the walls, ceilings, pediment, doorway, and lintel are found at the site of Mikirati. Two busts/torsos in grey sandstone, one of female (now preserved in the Assam State Museum) and the other male which can be assigned to a period not later than c. 6th century CE on stylistic considerations are noticed at the site of Mikirati. Evidently, such sculptural pieces speak of the influence of the Gupta art style in the artistic activities of the Kapili valley region. Again, a frieze of four elephant heads and another depicting small human figurine found at Mikirati, stylistically exhibit similarities with the Classical (Gupta) art style (Dutta 1990: 45). Amongst the various depictions, the images of several divine and semi-divine figures abound the sculpture of the region.

The divine figurines would include images of Uma-Maheswara, Mahakali, Vishnu, Surya, Vaisnavi, Agni, *Grahas* or planetary deities and Ganesha (Fig. 8 - 9). The images of flying *vidyadharas* or heavenly musicians can be seen beautifully depicted on blocks of stone. Some stone blocks displayed at the site museum also depict *ganas* or pot-bellied dwarf figurines in the act of lifting some heavy weight over their shoulders; such sculptural piece perhaps formed part of the temple base or pillars. In addition to such religious sculptures, a number of secular pieces are also noticed at the site. Mention may be made of a devotee sitting with joined palms, a female playing musical instrument, a seated female figurine etc. A number of the sculptures from Mikirati also depict various floral and faunal elements. Animals such as elephant, horse, bull, lion etc. are seen inscribed on stone which were perhaps part of the architectural components of the temples. A number of door sills displayed at the site museum depict a common motif - a vase in the centre with two lions on both the sides (Fig. 10). Such motifs also appear in other archaeological sites such as that of Akasiganga in the Kapili valley. Acts of bestiality, such as a man copulating a bull may also be noticed in some stone pieces. Images of

mythical creatures such as *kirtimukha* or the 'glory face' abound the region, both as sacred symbol as well as decorative element. Such *kirtimukha* figures appear on blocks of stone which formed part of the temple superstructure as well as temple base. Amongst the floral elements the most commonly depicted are lotus petals, known as *viswapadma* on circular blocks of stone which formed part of



Fig. 18: Door lintel with *sikhara* motif, 9th-12th century CE, Devasthan, Karbi Anglong

the ceiling of the temple complexes. Full bloomed lotus also appeared on the *lalatabimba* of the door lintel. Some stone pieces bear carvings such as foliage and various creepers.

At Rajabari, extensive architectural remains of some stone temples may be seen. At least, ruins of nine pre-Ahom temples have been found at the site. Out of these, three temples had been built of bricks whereas the doorframes, pillar bases and columns are made of stone. One of the *garbhagriha* of the temples upon which modern structures have been raised, houses a *yonipitha* and a beautiful image of Uma-Maheswara, belonging to 9th-10th century CE (Fig. 11). Remnants of temple *mandapa* may also be noticed at the site. Arcs of circular stone blocks forming part of the *gandi* of the temple lay scattered around the site complex. Such blocks have the depictions of the *kirtimukha* motif. The *Manasara* states that the *kirtimukha* should be placed on the front portion of the doorway (*mukha-bhadra*) and even on the *sikhara* (as cited in Krishna Kumari 2015: 16). According to Kramrisch (1946: 322), the *kirtimukha* or the 'face of glory' figures prominently on the largest *Gavaksa* of *Nagara* temples, called *Sukanasa*, the antefix of the open arch of the *Sikhara*. Quite similarly, at Rajabari in the Kapili valley region the *kirtimukha* motif can be seen carved on the temple superstructures that lie scattered around the archaeological sites. Almost all the *kirtimukha* depicts three strings of *rudrakshamala* emerging from its mouth. The *kirtimukha* motif is seen on four sides of the circular stone and the *rudrakshamala* continue down to the stone below it, i.e. to the lower tier. The site museum at Rajabari has numerous stone relics forming part of the temple complexes, such as, door jambs, lintels, pillars, bases etc., carved with images of miniature temples, Ganesha, *Gajasimha*, *dvarapalas*, and various floral and foliage decorations etc.

Gachtal in Hojai district contains ruins of at least two Siva temples belonging to 10-11th century CE. While, Ramachandran (1984: 32) in his report on the Gachtal ruins suggests that the site contains traces of at least two Shiva temples, each perhaps consisting of a sanctum (*garbagriha*), an antechamber (*parvakaksha*) and a *mandapa*, Sarma (1988: 61), on the other hand suggests that the site contained three temples. Scholars such as Dutta (2012: 70) also suggest the existence of at least two or more temples at this site which could be ascertained on the basis of the four pieces of *amalaka* lying at the site. According to Nath (1937: 33), the site of Gachtal consist three mounds and the three mounds constitute a composite structure, the northern being the temple proper or the *Manikut* (*garbagriha*), the middle one is the *Deoriaghar* or *mandapa* and the southern is the *natmandir*. Architectural components would indicate the existence of a *garbagriha* and *mandapa* with at least four doorways, door sills, pillar bases mostly of *sarbotobhadra* type, segmental *amalakas*, pillar capitals and ceiling slabs bearing lotus design or *visvapadma* type, door lintel, and door jambs (Fig. 12 - 13). Sculptural pieces would include images of worshippers, Ganesha, Vishnu, Shiva standing with rosary on the right and trident in the left hands or seated in *yogasana* posture having four hands, an unidentified deity adorned with *kantha hara* and *kundalas*, *dvarapala* or doorkeeper holding *sula* and *pasa*, figures holding *kamandalu* (water-pot) water vases flanked by *vyalas*, pillars surrounded by elephants, flowers, foliage, birds, animals, coiled serpents, vases etc (Fig. 14). While flowers, creepers with animals, birds, insects and twisted serpents on the door jambs are reminiscent of Pala artistic traditions of Bengal, on the other hand, representation of motifs such as vases flanked by lions and foliage flanked by elephants recall late Gupta influence (Ramachandran 1937: 32). From the existing ruins it may be surmised that the temple structure was similar to the north Indian *rekha deul* type with *triratha* or *pancaratha* for their ground plan (Sarma 1988: 61). The entire structures were supposed to be of granite or soft sandstone with no traces of bricks. A land grant charter of the Pala ruler, Gopalavarman has been recovered from the Gachtal area. A stone inscription datable to c.1200-1300 CE has also been found at this site. The site records the existence of two large historical tanks. Excavations conducted by the Directorate of Archaeology during 2011 revealed a number of architectural components such as *amalaka*, beams and other fragments of the stone temples (Dutta 2012: 69-71).

Devasthan has at least nine mounds containing remains of some Pre-Ahom temples. Both stone and bricks were used in the construction of the temples. One exposed brick mound has been found with a Shiva *linga* and *yonipitha* and another with a *garbhagriha*. Another Shiva *linga* in schist stone is placed not on the *yonipitham* but on a stone pedestal (Nath 1938: 36). Structural components would include door lintels, door jambs, pillars, various sculptural pieces, and coiled serpents. A stone image of Uma-Maheswara, of which the upper portion has been badly mutilated, is noticed at the site (Fig. 15). Another image of Uma-Maheswara depicting Siva embracing his consort also comes from a door lintel from Devasthan (Fig. 16). An image of *ardhanarisvara*, considered to be a rare specimen in Assam is to be noticed at the centre of a lintel of a ruined temple at Devasthan (Nath 1938: 35-36). The left half of the image represents Siva with his

vahana, nandi while the other half represents his consort who is depicted with full breast and having lion as her *vahana*. Above them are two *vidyadharas* flying on the top. On the top panel one can notice a sculptural depiction of Gaja-Lakshmi with elephants on both sides pouring water from the pitchers held on their raised trunks. Towards the right side there is a four handed image of Vishnu and Ganesha. On the left there is Lakshmi and Ganesha. Another notable image is that of Kartikeya sitting on his *vahana*, peacock (Fig. 17). Stylistically the image may belong to 10th century CE. Two pairs of vertical stone door frames with snake and foliage decorations, have carvings of two *dvarapalas* on the bottom holding swords and clubs in their hands. It resembles exactly with the *dvarapalas* of the Bamuni hills, Tezpur (Nath 1938: 35). A lintel adorned with miniature temple designs i.e. *rekha sikharas* with *amalakas* may be noticed (Fig. 18). A door frame lying against in one of the mounds consists of a figure of Ganesha as *latabimba* in its lintel. On stylistic consideration, it may be asserted that the temples of Devasthan were built during 9th -12th century CE. Other archaeological sites of Kapili valley containing rich remains are Doboka, Gosajuri, Basundhari Parvat, Nabhanga, Silghat, Amtala, Silghat, Kawaimari, Sibpur, Kachocila, Boha, Burha-Burhi, Kachosila, Dighalipani, Hatisung-Gedavari, Kathiatoli, Bahapahar, Bhoiparbat, Tarabasa, Jakkhalabandha, and Chanaka.

Epigraphic Evidences: A Study of the Inscriptions of the Kapili-Jamuna Valley

A number of epigraphic evidences from the Kapili-Jamuna valley act as primary sources in reconstructing the history of the valley, especially giving useful insights into the economic history of the region. The first inscriptional evidence so far discovered in the Kapili valley region is the Barganga rock inscription of Bhutivarman, belonging to 6th century CE (Sharma 1978: 5-9). The inscription formally recorded the annexation of the Davaka kingdom in the Kapili valley region into the Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa Kingdom. Henceforth, it was converted into a *vishaya* under the political suzerainty of Pragjyotisapura. During the Salasthamba dynasty, with the capital city located at Hadappesvara or Harappesvara, identified with present Tezpur region, a number of land grants have been made in the south bank of the river Brahmaputra. Land grant charters such as Kuruvabahi Copper Plate Inscription of Harjaravarmadeva, Dighaligaon (Kaliabar) Copper Plate Inscription of Vanamalavarmadeva and Fragmentary Copper Plate Inscription of Sri Jivaraja stand evidence to such grants. The Nowgong Copper Plate Inscription of Balavarman III and the Gachtal Copper Plate Inscription of Gopalavarman indicates that the Pala rulers also granted lands in the Kapili valley region. The rent free holdings granted to the Brahmanas by the ruling class indicate that the Brahmanas enjoyed a privileged position in the society. Such grants accorded fiscal, administrative as well as judicial privileges to the Brahmins. That the Brahmins were educated and proficient in Vedic hymns is discerned by epigraphic evidences such as the Uttarbarbil (Howraghat) plates as well as the Nagaon copper plate inscription of Balavarman III. In the Uttarbarbil plates recovered from Kapili valley area, Balavarman III grants land to the Brahman

Syamadeva who belongs to Upamanyu *gotra*. Praising the learned skills of the Brahman, the inscription refers to him as ‘a scholar of Vedic lores, sweet in conversation, widely reputed, giver of wealth and a great performer of penances’ (Sharma 1978: 136-137). Similarly, the Nagaon copper plates of the same ruler records the grant of a land to a Brahman named Srutidhara who was a pious scholar, skilled in sacred recitation and had mastered the *Vedasand* (Sharma 1978: 148). The Brahmins because of their superior position in the caste hierarchy enjoyed socio-religious privileges; this when combined with the fiscal and judicial privileges on account of large scale land grants, evidently delivered to them an illustrious position in the land holding hierarchy. The granting of such rent-free lands or *agrahara* grants to the Brahmins perhaps contributed to the rise and growth of temples or religious institutions in the regions under the political ambit of the rulers. Considerably, grants of land to the Brahmins in areas containing non-Brahma settlement helped in spreading the Brahmanical culture, besides increasing agriculture output. Moreover, such interactions between the Brahman and non-Brahman population, which arose as a result of ever increasing Brahmana settlements in the peripheral areas provided a congenial soil for the growth and development of Sakti cult and Tantric religion. Evidently, a good number of sculptures of female deities such as Uma, Chamunda, Mahishasurmardini, Tripura Bhairavi etc are noticed at the various archaeological sites of the Kapil-Jamunai valley.

Most of the Inscriptions of Kapili valley are issued by the rulers of the Salasthamba and Pala dynasties and are helpful in tracing their genealogy. One such example is the Dighaligaon Copper Plates of Vanamalavarmadeva which helped in removing many doubts and settling a number of controversies in regard to the history of the family of Salastambha (Chutia 1986-87: 42). The Hayunthal Copper Plates (9th century CE) of Harjaravarman discovered in the then undivided Nagaon district have for the first time a reference to a *Mleccha* (outcaste/non-aryan) dynasty, of which the first known king was Salasthamba (Sharma 1978: 93). The Salasthamba dynasty, though they were called *mleccha*, trace their descent from the Bhauma Naraka family (as indicated by the inscriptions of Vanamalavarman and Balavarman) and it is recorded in the Hayunthal plates that the descendants of some predecessor of Salastambha were to be called *mlecchas* because of some curse (Sharma 1978: 93). Here, reference may be made to a recent discovery of a copper fragmentary plate inscription from Palasini in Nagaon District (Chutia 1989-90: 106-112). The inscription refers to a land grant by a king named Maharajadhiraja Sri Jivaraja to a brahmana from Kamarupa. Regarding the identity of the king Sri Jivaraja, Dharmeshar Chutia suggest that both Sri Jivaraja and Sri Jivara of the Sankar Narayana Stone Image Inscription (Deopani) and Krishna Durga Stone Image Inscription (Kasomaripathar of Golaghat district) are the same king belonging to the Salasthamba dynasty of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa and that the Barpathar-Duburoni region and the Davaka region formed a single cultural unit (Chutia 1989-90: 109-110). Thus, Chutia asserts that the whole of south-eastern region of Assam was once under the rule of the Davaka kingdom, a kingdom which was mentioned in the Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta (Chutia 1989-90: 110). Also, according to Chutia, *Upparipatana*, mentioned

in Parbatiya Copper Plate Inscription of Vanamalavarmadeva is Upper Assam with headquarters at Davaka (as cited in Dutta 1997: 42). However, without any validation, it is problematic to assert Davaka as the headquarters Upparipattana. Moreover, Davaka is not mentioned as *Uparipatana* in the Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta but has been recognised as one of the kingdoms in the eastern frontier of the Guptas, paying allegiance to the Gupta monarch. Also, without any valid evidences, the identification of Sri Jivaraja is itself shrouded in mystery. Moreover, the archaeological provenance of the Doyang-Dhansiri valley is such majestic that on the basis of these evidences it may be perhaps presumed that this region had a separate line of kings having a well established political entity, and that Sri Jivara belonged to line of kings of the Dhansiri valley region, as indicated by the Sankar Narayana Stone Image Inscription and Krishna Durga Stone Image Inscription, ascribing to eight century C.E. on palaeographic lines. On the basis of such evidences, Dutta (1997: 40) identifies the region of *Uparipattana* with the Doyang Dhansiri valley with its commercial harbour (*pattana*) located at Alichiga Tengani which is well connected through Dhansiri with the fortified capital city of Duboroni.

Epigraphic evidences throw light on boundary specifications of donated land which would consequently help in understanding the landscape of rural settlements and composition of rural society. Although lands were basically donated to Brahmanas, yet their lands bordered on the lands of people who were non-Brahmanas, as their names suggest (Ghosh 2014: 217). Inscriptions give a fair idea of the various occupational groups such as weavers, fishermen, boatmen, potters etc., which formed a part of the rural terrain. The Nagaon copper plate inscription in verse 21 has reference to the Bhisaja, a professional class of physicians (Sharma 1978: 142-151). The Subhankarapataka grant of Dharmapala makes references to various such occupational groups. The charter contains a line *vijayasri-nau-bhukta* which has been translated by M.M. Sharma (1978: 248) as the land of the 'victory fortune navy'. Again, that wars were sometimes carried through rivers is evidenced by the Gachtal Copper Plate Charter of Gopalavarman where it is inscribed that Indrapala in a battle with the Vanga king Kalyanachandra took charge as the head of a cluster of boats thereby defeating him (Sharma 1978: 215). While scholars such as M.M. Sharma ascribe such instances to be a show of naval power of the kings of early Assam, Suchandra Ghosh (2014: 217) on the other hand, refutes such assertion. According to Ghosh, as Kamarupa is a land of rivers, streams and canals, rivers being the major means of communication, boatmen formed a significant part of the socio-economic landscape and there are many references to words with *nau* and *nauki*; mere presence of the expression *nau* does not necessarily refer to any navy or naval strength. The Subhankarapataka grant also has a reference to the occupational groups of weavers. While describing the boundary of the donated land, the charter mentions about the land of twenty four *tantras* or *caturvimsatitantranam* (*tantra* meaning handloom) forming one boundary (Sharma 1978: 248). Perhaps, it could mean a village of weavers, thereby indicating localisation of the craft. Again, the same charter has reference to the boundary of the land of *Orangitantras*. According to M.M. Sharma (1978: 254), these weavers perhaps originated from Orang, a place in the Darrang district and hence referred to as

Orangitantras. This group of weavers (*tantras*) might have been an ethnic group, expertise in weaving, who initially resided in areas that existed outside the urban/market centres, finally settling down in the *Dijina-vishaya*. If *Dijinna vishaya* is to be located somewhere in the present Nagaon district of Assam, then probably these weavers from *Orang* migrated to this region, i.e., they migrated from the north bank of the Brahmaputra to the south bank. Scholars claims this to be an example of mobility of occupational groups (Ghosh 2014: 218). Again, regarding the nature of landholding patterns, scholars such as Nayanjot Lahiri argues that since the donated plots of lands were already in settled areas, contributing revenues to the state, the rights of the already existing peasantry were unlikely to have been disturbed (Lahiri 1991: 98). Evidently, this is in sharp contrast to certain other areas of India in contemporary times such as Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra which gave the donee absolute control over land tenure as the donated lands were in waste areas or lands that had not been cultivated before.

That agriculture was the mainstay of the society which can be inferred from epigraphic evidences. *Dhanya* (rice or paddy) was the staple crop. Cultivation of rice was mostly done following the wet rice cultivation technique. Inscriptions record the existence of surplus agricultural production, one of the essential pre-requisite for an urban economy. Inscriptions throw light on the productive capacity of the granted lands, as well the names of various categories of land. Copper plate inscriptions such as the Kuruvavahi of Harjaravarman and Nagaon plates of Balavarman III mentions about the productive capacity of donated land, each yielding annually four thousand standard measures of *dhanya* or paddy. Again, the Gachtal copper plates record the grant of a plot of land yielding eight thousand units of paddy. Inscriptions indicate that most of the donated lands were perhaps measured only in terms of the amount of paddy cultivated, but not in terms of the productive capacity of any other crops. It is because of the fact that the region of Assam which experienced heavy rainfall and the availability of rivers and canals, evidently led people to practice extensive paddy cultivation than other crops such as wheat, barley, maize, pulses etc. Inscriptions also mention the existence of the different categories of land. The Nagaon copper plate inscription of Balavarman III has reference to homestead land, paddy fields, dry lands, ponds, grounds and mounds (Sharma 1978:147). The homestead land (*vastu*) is the habitational plots or places of residents of the cultivators. Inscription reveals that rice was grown on broad plains, dotted over with clumps of bamboo and fruit trees in which were located the house of the cultivators (Lahiri 1991: 93). The pasture lands might have been agricultural land, sometimes left fallow, yet again, alternatively, surrounded the cultivable fields. For instance, the Nagaon plates of Ballavarman III mention a cattle path to the east, leading away from the donated land (Sharma 1978: 142-151). The cultivable lands were located quite closer to the rivers. The paddy fields or cultivable land seem to be relatively closer to the rivers whereas the homestead land was in a comparatively drier piece of land, a little away from the river (Lahiri 1991: 95). Because of such riverine characteristics, *vrihadalis* or embankments were raised against river encroachments. In fact, *vrihadalis* and *kshetra alis* served as an important part of the rural landscape, sometimes serving as boundaries of donated land.

Land grant charters provide useful information about the boundaries of the donated land. References to the surrounding water bodies and the names of different varieties of trees such as the mango, jackfruit, blackberry, banyan, cane, bamboo, silk, cotton, areca nuts, betel leaves, black aloe, cardamom, *hijjala*, *sriphala*, *sonaru*, *caraka*, and *varuna* etc. which is commonly found in this region. Hiuen Tsang's account and Bana's *Harsacharita* contain references to various agricultural and forest products of Kamarupa. That is the region of Kapili-Januna valley abounded in a variety of forests products can be gleaned from the epigraphic evidences. Perhaps, the expansion of the Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa kingdom towards east by annexing the Davaka kingdom was viable from the economic point of view so as to get an easy access of the rich forest and agricultural products. Such products are considered as essential items of trade. The Nagaon grant refers to Koppa, which may mean well lines or may refer to a tank or ponds which formed the boundary of the donated land (Sharma 1978: 142-151). This perhaps helped in irrigating the fields. Considerably, existence of such improved irrigational techniques as well as raising of embankments help extensively in agrarian expansion. Charters such as the Nagaon copper plate grant have reference to the betel and areca nut trees. Interestingly, in spite of areca nuts and betel leaves covering the floral landscape of early Assam, these remain conspicuous by their absence as boundary markers in the various copper plate grants (Ghosh 2014: 220). Inscriptions such as the Kaliabar copper plate inscription and Nagaon plates refer to the demarcation of the donated land in eight cardinal boundaries (Boruah 2007: 104, Sharma 1978: 142-151).

Inscriptions indicate 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* (entrapping of elephants), *naukabandha* (anchoring of boats), *chauradharana* (catching thieves and recovering stolen property), *dandapasa* (police tax), *utkhetana* (taxes payable on other accounts), *aupakarika* (taxes from temporary tenants) etc. The Nagaon copper plate inscription records that the donated plot of land is freed from all 'trouble makers' such as the *rajnis*, the *rajaputra*, the *ranaka*, the *rajvallabha*, the old female guard of the harem, the collectors of the *hastibandha* tax and the *naukabandha* tax, the officer-in-charge of the recovery of stolen property, the policeman, the inflictor of punishment, collector of taxes and duties from tenants and the *chhatravasa*, the royal umbrella bearer (Sharma 1978: 147). References to such varied number of taxes in the land grants indicated that the state perhaps imposed multiple taxes on its subjects. 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).

Along with surplus growth of agricultural production, the region also saw a remarkable growth in trade and communication networks. Presumably, the mighty river Brahmaputra, along with the Kalang and the Kapili facilitated active networks of trade in this zone. Scholars who have worked upon the ancient trading networks between China and Assam asserts that due to its geographic position, the Nagaon-Davaka area seemed to be more convenient for the itinerant persons engaged in trading and communication between ancient China and ancient Assam (Boruah 2007: 269). In fact, the traders of the region

might have played an important role in maintaining the trade relation between Assam and China. According to R.M. Nath, Oddiyana (Lanka town in the present district of Hojai) of Kapili valley was mentioned as one of the religious centres along with Kamakhya and Srihatta (Nath 1937: 48). This must have been most probably developed into an urban centre (in early India, most religious zones were conterminous with urban centres). Chapa-ho-lo, the capital city of the Kapili Kingdom as mentioned in the Chinese sources, might be another urban centre (Boruah 2007: 270). The discovery of a number of copper coins belonging to 9th century CE, bearing the letters, 'Va', 'Ha' from Patrabari village in Morigaon district of the Kapili-Jamuna valley also may point to the existence of active trading networks that connected Kapili valley with the neighbouring kingdoms. Remains of copper and terracotta coins are also noticed at Rajabari in Hojai district.

Conclusion

The Kapili-Jamuna valley is rich in archaeological remains, especially temple ruins and sculptures. The numerous remains of the valley would indicate wide-spread temple building activities in the region patronised by the ruling elite. That a great many people were employed as masons, stone-cutters, sculptors, brick-makers and potters, dancers, engravers, copper smiths and the like may be evidenced by these rich remains. A study of the remains would indicate that architectural as well as sculptural art of the Kapili valley region are influenced by the art of the Guptas, Pala-Senas as well as Central Indian Art styles. However, a closer examination would bring into focus some native cultural beliefs and expressions that got manifested in the artistic expressions of the region. Evidently, the valley served as an important socio-cultural centre well as a significant political zone especially from 4th to 12th century CE. The intensity and grandeur of the temple building activities would indicate a flourishing economy and a period of peace in the region. During the rule of the Salastambas and the Palas, the Kapili-Jamuna valley acted as twin administrative centres, i.e., at one Nagaon and the other at the modern Tezpur region. Even though the region has survived the atrocities of the hostile forces during the period of unrest resulting in cessation of temple building activities in other areas, such as the Guwahati region, but over the years, natural elements such as growth of vegetation due to humid climate and earthquake has immensely effected the temples and sculptures of this socio-cultural zone. Efforts have been made by the archaeological department of Assam to conserve and preserve the monuments and material remains. However, such efforts will be fruitful only 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.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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