



Davaka : The Political Centre of Early Assam

Abstract: The origin of primitive nations in the Brahmaputra and Kapili-Jamuna river valleys is crucial for understanding the political and cultural past of Northeast India. Several scholars of the past concentrated solely on the prosperous kingdom of Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa. Nevertheless, numerous texts, inscriptions, and archaeological findings demonstrate that the other kingdoms also flourished during that time. Among them is, Davaka, known also as Kapili, *Kia-pi-li*, or Trivega in different documents. Davaka started to develop as a powerful kingdom from the very beginning of the Common Era and was eventually absorbed in Kamarupa in the sixth century CE. The paper is aimed at analyzing the development of Davaka as a kingdom, as well as investigating its political, economic, administrative, religious, and social features, such as settlement patterns, administrative system, agriculture, and trade. The paper also examines the biggest archaeological sites such as Rajbari-Jogijan, Gachtal, and Devasthan, as well as Visayamatya which was a part of Davaka. The territory of Davaka has also been related to a number of historical regions, such as Upper Myanmar and South China. As a result, Davaka must not necessarily be viewed as a trivial border state (*pratyanta*) but rather as an influential political and economic hub endowed with self-governing capability, agricultural setup, social variety with religion, and wider interconnections with other regions.

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1. Introduction

The study of the history of early state formation in Early Assam is concentrated on the Varman dynasty and the state of Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa. A number of historians consider North Bengal, Northern Bangladesh and the Brahmaputra Valley a single political unit ruled by a sovereign. However, if one is to take a closer look at the literary sources, inscriptions and archaeological evidence, it can be concluded that Early Assam had several independent states before and during the period of Kamarupa formation. Davaka is one of the important early states of Northeast India. The state was situated in the river valleys of the Kapili, Jamuna and Dhansiri and included the territories of present-day Nagaon, Morigaon, Karbi Anglong and parts of Cachar, Meghalaya and Tripura. Davaka was known by several other names in different historical sources. It is mentioned as Dobassai in the Geography by Claudius Ptolemy, Davaka in the Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta, Kia-pi-li in Chinese sources, and Trivega in the Sri Rajamala tradition. These names indicate that Davaka was an important political and



economic center of the area. The state acted as an independent political and economic force approximately from the second century CE till it became part of the Kamarupa kingdom under king Bhutivarman.

Objectives

- To trace the historical development and geographic range of Davaka.
- To study the political as well as administrative systems of Davaka
- To investigate the archaeological, economic and religious aspects of Davaka, including locations, trade routes, remain found during the archaeological excavation, art forms and religious practices.

2. Methodology

The research has been conducted using the historical and analytical method, relying solely on secondary sources of information related to early assam history.

Geographical location

The exact limits of the region of Davaka can be identified using textual examination and cartographic analysis, the first reference of which can be found in Ptolemy's *Geography* (appeared sometime around the 2nd century CE), in which the region is called Dobassai. Earlier European scholars like G.E. Gerini (in 1909) made an unsuccessful attempt to identify Dobassai, together with the Bapyrrhos and the Dobassa mountain ranges, which were located in the Upper Burma region and around the Salwin river and the Mekong river. In subsequent geographic studies it became evident that the identification made by Gerini (1909) could not be true, because the Bapyrrhos mountain range was described by that time as the place from where the Doans or Brahmaputra river originated, thus definitely associating it with the Himalayan-Assam geography. The studies of other scholars, like V.A. Smith (1924), R.S. Tripathi (1936), K.L.

Barua (1933), P.C. Sen (1937), and P.C. Choudhury (in 1959), made it possible to identify Dobassai and Davaka with the Nagaon area of Central Assam. The central region of Davaka was within the valleys of Kapili-Jamuna river systems. According to *Kalika Purana*, it is the place around hill of Kshovaka and among the river Divya-Yamuna (now Jamuna river in Nagaon) where temple of Goddess Raktadevi is located. The chronicler *Sri Rajamala* names it as Trivega or Trisruta, which is derived from three rivers which flow in Nagaon area, i.e. Kalang, Kapili and Yamuna. Philological studies suggest the river names have Bodo/Sino-Tibetan roots and prefixes like Di, Doi or Ti refer to water/river like in Toi-anga (big water) from which river Dhansiri is derived. The boundaries of the kingdom have changed a lot over the centuries. Northern Boundary extending to the southern side of Brahmaputra river, but the Kamarupa kingdom was to its north (near Tezpur/Sonitpur). Southern and Eastern Boundary included North Cachar hills, some parts of modern Meghalaya, Cachar district, Sylhet and was to northern Tripura. Western Boundary was near the eastern boundary of the ancient Kamarupa and formed a buffer area in between Kamarupa, Samatata (Bengal) and the hilly states of the region.

State Formation and Political Chronology

The state formation in Davaka was presumably determined by the evolution from simple tribal societies to more advanced forms of social organization through the transition to the state system. According to the theory proposed by Henri J. M. Claessen & Peter Skalník, the first states emerged from tribes through the separation of a ruling class, development of territorial cohesion, administrative organization, taxation, and reinforcement of the political power through religion (Claessen & Skalník, 1978).



The Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta, dated back to the 5th century AD contains quite an informative passage concerning the political history of Davaka. Davaka is listed alongside Samatata, Kamarupa, Nepal, and Karttripura as the *pratyanta nripatibhih*, implying that they were vassal kingdoms paying taxes (*sarva-kara-dana*), accepting the authority of the Gupta emperor (*ajna-karana*) and publicly expressing their loyalty. Thus, it is possible to conclude that in the 4th century AD, Davaka was a distinct kingdom separated from Kamarupa. The Chinese Imperial Annals, particularly the records of the First Sung Dynasty (420–479 CE), provide another important source for understanding the history of the Kapili region. These records mention diplomatic missions sent from the kingdom of *Kia-pi-li* (Kapili) to the Chinese court in 428 CE and 466 CE. The missions were associated with King Yueh-Ai, whose name has been translated as “Moon-beloved.” The Chinese records describe the capital *Ch’a-po-ho-lo* as being situated on the bank of the river *Ka-pi-li* and state that the city had a circuit of about 70 li, or approximately 10–12 miles (16 km). Scholars such as G. E. Gerini and P. C. Choudhury identified *Yueh-Ai* with a ruler of the Kapili valley and considered this evidence of active diplomatic relations in the region during the 5th century CE (Gerini, 1909; Choudhury, 1959).

The *Sri Rajamala* chronological narrative is another valuable source of information concerning the political history of the Kapili region. It provides knowledge about the sixteen successive kings ruling over the country before it was conquered by another kingdom. According to the *Rajamala* tradition, the first ruler, Patradanna, waged a successful war with the Kiratas of the Kirata-Bhumi and ruled over the Kapili valley with Trivega for his capital. His successor, Pramath, extended the territory of the kingdom, and his son Kalinda and grandson Mitrari added Kapili to it. However,

it seems that under the rule of Mitrari, the kingdom was split between the ruler and Chief Minister Sujit who ruled over the Sundarbans region. Thus, *Rajamala* lists a series of kings ruling over the Kapili region, beginning with Patradanna and ending with Kalinda, Mitrari, Baribarha, and others. The narrative tells that under the rule of Karmmuka, Kalanga, Bhishan, Bhanumitra, and Chitrane-na, the army of the country was greatly reinforced. These rulers are believed to have implemented the policy of territorial expansion and strengthened the military potential of the kingdom. The *Sri Rajamala* narrative describes the process of institutional consolidation within the kingdom in detail. King Chitraratha is believed to have introduced the permanent regularities in the administrative practices of the kingdom and performed the *yajna* sacrificing ritual. He is also reported to have enforced the system of organized taxation which allowed providing sufficient revenues for the maintenance of the army and the state apparatus. The further development of the kingdom seems to have been determined by the activities of King Daitya who increased the power of the kingdom and promoted territorial expansion. However, the ruler is said to have resigned from the throne and to have handed over his son Tripur to exercise the power. It is likely that kings of Kapili used to practice the principle of succession to the throne, which allowed for the continuous rule of kings of one dynasty for many generations. The kingdom became significantly fragmented following the death of Trilochan. His two sons, Drikpati and Dakshin, fought for the throne but eventually Drikpati killed Dakshin. The latter is reported to have migrated to the Cachar region while his son built a new capital at Khalagma on the Barak River. It is likely that the succession struggles knew great impact on the territorial development of the kingdom.

The monarchical power in the kingdom of Davaka was legitimized by the concept of dynastic succession. The rulers of Davaka



claimed their ancestry from Druhyo, the third son of Yayati, the lunar king. The chieftains and rulers traced their genealogy back to Druhyo and claimed that they belonged to the royal dynasty established by Yayati. Thus, this belief system provided ample religious legitimation for the power of the king as well as his social dominance over the people subject to his rule. In addition to the ancestral claims, the narrative gives a detailed description of the personality cult of the king. The rulers were supposed to be courageous warriors and statesmen. For instance, King Kalinda was brave and clever, King Karmmuka was courageous, King Kalanga was an expert in martial arts, and so on. Thus, the rulers of Kapili were expected to possess outstanding qualities for which the people admired the king.

The image of the ruler of Kapili was greatly enhanced by his religious practices and social life. The king was believed to perform all the sacred duties prescribed by the Vedas, such as the yajna sacrifice. He also had a retinue of priests called Purohitas to whom he distributed gifts. In addition, the ruler lived according to the principles of the Vanaprastha order, the stage of life when a man retired from public life.

3. Administrative System

The administrative system of Davaka is marked by a certain division of authority in favour of the king. His subordinates consisted of local functionaries who in their turn exercised considerable influence. The administrative system of Davaka can be divided into two categories: the central government and the local administration.

The central government consisted of the king who was the supreme administrative and judicial authority, holding absolute sovereign power necessary to maintain order through law and legitimate force. He was assisted by the council of ministers called Amatya Gana. Its members along with the rest of the king's officers held administrative powers. In

addition, in times of the king's absence, the senior officers could exercise greater control over the management of the state. For instance, the inscription narrates that the Chief Minister Sujit assumed administrative powers over the old kingdom of the Trivega for a certain time. The king should be elected for his ability to deliver justice throughout the territory ruled by him and to provide law and order with the help of the army. The army was the king's main tool of power; its support was essential for the survival and security of the kingdom. During the reign of Chitraratha, the tax system was reformed to make it more difficult for the people to get exploited. In particular, the agricultural population was relieved from unbearable tributes.

The administration provided the king with a permanent standing army for the defence of the kingdom and the expansion of his territorial power. In the inscriptions at Gachtal, there is a mention of the king's navy which patrolled the rivers including the Yamuna. In particular, the riverine forces played a significant role in withstanding the enemy attacks during the monsoon season.

The most important source of information about the local administration is the Barganga Rock inscription of Bhutivarman belonging to the 6th century AD. This inscription was found on the large boulder at the bank of the Barganga stream which was flowing behind the town of Davaka. Its content reflects the piety of Bhutivarman who was the king of Davaka. In particular, he donated some funds for the construction of a religious settlement (asrama) for the long-term stay of the ascetics. The inscription was examined by D.C. Sircar who identified the term "Visaymaatya" denoting the position of the officer responsible for the entire visaya. After incorporating Davaka into Kamarupa, it became the administrative district (visaya). Its capital was the town of Davaka where the officer called "Visayamatya" exercised his power. He was Avaguna, the



officer who was highly competent, well-informed and just in his decisions. He managed and controlled the land grants and religious endowments, being responsible for their maintenance

4. Archaeology and Material Culture

The survey in the Nagaon-Davaka region revealed the existence of a significant number of temple clusters, brick structures, rock-cut sculptures, and inscriptions that reflect the artistic development from early post-Gupta to Eastern Indian School of Medieval Art (EISMA) traditions.

The Barganga structural complex is dated back to the sixth century as one of the earliest architectural traditions in the region, represented by the ground-floor mandapa with natural sandstone blocks. Other components of this complex included the garbhagriha, ardhmandapa, and natamandapa, while the Vishvapadma design, dvarapalas, carvings of dancing groups, and rock sculpture of Uma-Mahesvara were discovered in the complex.

The Rajbari-Jogijan architectural complex is considered one of the best examples of central Assam's stone-temple building traditions and possesses two distinct phases of development. The first phase of development consisted of six temples uncovered within the complex, while the second phase included three temples built with granite blocks. Besides, the polished black basalt Sivalinga, masonry, and carved lintels with images of Ganesha, Kartikeya, and Tripura-Bhairava were found in the complex. An octagonal pillar discovered in this complex revealed the inscription of the king Vishvasundara, dated back to Saka 1157 (A.D. 1235).

Gachtal is located at four-kilometre west of Mikirati, while four excavated ruined stone temples present in this complex. The excavations revealed several door sills, ceiling slabs, pillars, amalasaras, and an octagonal pillar with inscriptions of 24 lines, recording

the military or defensive campaigns of the kingdom against the Yavana.

The Devasthan (Maudanga) complex is spread across 10 acres and possesses nine temple mounds arranged in two rows in a north-south direction to face each other. The excavations in this complex have revealed door jambs, lintels, and carved images of Uma-Mahesvara. The Kawaimari complex has one central temple mound with four smaller mounds at the four corners, which indicates the Panchayatana style of construction with a central Mandapa and four subsidiary shrines.

5. Art

The plastic arts or sculptural arts of Davaka present an evolution from the Classical Gupta to Medieval Indian traditions. The influence of the classical Gupta tradition is observed in the early stone sculptures representing torsos uncovered in Mikir-Ati and Barganga structural complex. This influence is characterized by the elongated form of the human body, natural poses, draped clothing, and simple decorative motifs. On the other hand, the medieval Indian paintings tradition is reflected in the later sculptures of the region, dated back to the 9th -12th centuries AD, which are made of basalt or dark gneiss and depict high-relief carving, kirttamukha head-dresses, stylized floral designs, river goddesses of Ganga and Yamuna, and dvarapala (door keepers) images.

6. Socio-Economic Condition

The early state formation of Davaka was advanced by agrarian society and favorable conditions for developing trade routes. While the former played the central role in facilitating state formation, the latter contributed to the kingdom's commercial prosperity by establishing trade links with distant countries. The Kapili, Jamuna, and Kalang rivers' fertile plains created favorable conditions for implementing the wet-rice cultivating system that resulted in surplus production. The ancient



records denote the cultivation of paddy, sugarcane, mustard, betel nut, timber, and cotton. The surplus production of farm products and raw materials enabled the society to dedicate a significant proportion of the population to non-agricultural occupations, such as administrators, stone masons, priests, and soldiers. The state promoted peasantization and Aryanization processes by granting land (agrahara) to the Brahmins, which allowed the latter to introduce advanced plough-based techniques to the tribal communities of Bodo, Karbi, and Kirata. As a result, the tribal members gradually integrated into the endogamous, varna -based society.

Davaka served as the commercial crossroads linking Northeast India to East and Southeast Asia through riverine and land routes. The Kapili and Kalang rivers enabled the transportation of goods to the main channel of the Brahmaputra, linking Davaka to Kamarupa and Bengal. The long-distance trade routes stretched from South China (Yunnan) through the Kapili valley, North Cachar, Manipur, and the Chindwin valley to Upper Burma (Bhamo). Another route extended from Assam to the southern Irrawaddy valley via the Arakan-Yoma highway through the Patkai. The ancient trade routes linked Assam to China, Myanmar, and Southeast Asian countries, playing a critical role in promoting commercial prosperity. Notably, the discovery of copper coins (Patrabari with inscribed "Va" and "Ha") reveals the existence of the barter system and money economy in the medieval period.

7. Religion

Davaka was a melting pot where Saivism, Saktism, Vaisnavism, and Tantric religions coexisted and interacted with each other, resulting in extensive cultural syncretism.

Saivism was the predominant cult in the region, which explains the existence of numerous Sivalingas found in the area. Other evidence of Saivism includes the monolithic shrines and

sculptures discovered in the territory of modern Nagaon district depicting Shiva in the Lalitasana, Uma-Mahesvara, and Nataraja. According to the Kalika Purana, the Raktadevi cult was popular in the region, with Kshovaha hill near the Yamuna river being a center of this cult. The remnants and manuscripts denote the worship of goddesses Durga, Mahasamardini, Chamunda, and Saraswati, which confirms the prevalence of Sakta beliefs in the region, dated back to the early medieval period. Besides, the remains of temples and terracotta images denote the existence of Vaisnavism in the region, which was popular among the local aristocracy and common people. The Surya or Solar cults also gained popularity in the region, as denoted by the Samapada-sthanaka or four-armed standing Vishnu sculptures, Dasavatara, and stone slabs with the image of the Sun God. The Kapili-Jamuna valley was a major centre of tantric Buddhism or Vajrayana-Sahajayana during the 8th -12th centuries AD, where the Nath-Siddha tradition was particularly popular. The medieval Assamese texts report that the region of modern southern Nagaon (Kadali, another name is Kadapali or Kadali-Mandala) was a famous tantric Buddhist centre that attracted such Indian mystics as Matsyendranath, Minanath, and Gorakshanath.

8. Annexation and Later History of Davaka

Davaka remained an independent frontier kingdom until the middle of the sixth century when it was annexed by the kingdom of Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa under Bhutivarman, who ruled over the region in the sixth century AD. Under his rule, the kingdom of Davaka was integrated into the larger territorial state as one of the administrative districts (visaya), with the royal officers (Visayamatya Avaguna) appointed to rule over it.

Although Davaka lost its status as an independent kingdom, it continued to serve as the centre of the kingdom both in an administrative and religious sense. In the 13th



century, the administrative control of Kamarupa was weakened, which led to the emergence of the Bhuyans and the Dimasa kingdoms. These smaller kingdoms gained control over the Kapili Valley and established their rule over this territory with the support of local chiefs.

9. Conclusion

The early state formation of Davaka is a prominent example of the political, economic, and cultural history of ancient Northeast India. Ancient texts, epigraphy, and extensive archaeological evidence document the rich historical development of this region that implemented the centralized monarchical state structure with a developed tax system and diplomatic service. The early medieval city of Davaka emerged as the pivotal urban centre at the crossroads of international trade routes. Its geographic location enabled it to establish commercial ties with Myanmar and South China while serving as an important cultural and religious center. The artistic development of this kingdom is documented by the wide range of artistic relics and temple sculptures that depict the synthesis of classical Gupta and medieval Tantric traditions and the ancient tribal motifs. The study of Davaka provides invaluable insights into the political, economic, and cultural history of ancient Assam and neighboring countries, as well as the early state formation processes beyond the main centers of power.

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