
UNIT 8 SOCIETY, ECONOMY, POLITY AND CULTURE: EAST AND NORTH-EAST INDIA¹

Structure

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8.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will learn about:

- the polities which were ruling in Bengal and Assam in the early medieval period;
- the nature of economy, society and polity under the Palas of Bengal and during the early medieval period in Assam; and
- cultural achievements in the early medieval period.

8.1 INTRODUCTION

The early medieval period in east and north-east India, like the rest of the subcontinent, was marked by the rise of small kingdoms, some of which took an active part in the politics of north India. The chief political power was that of the Palas in Bengal. Their kingdom roughly covered the areas of Bihar and Bengal, with an occasional control over Assam. Some rulers of this dynasty were involved in the infamous tripartite struggle over Kannauj, thus at times extending their control over north India. Their rule lasted from 750 CE-1156 CE, after which they were replaced by the Senas. For a brief period, in the ninth century they lost power which they regained again in the 10th century. The dynasty is known for its patronage to art and education with the great universities of Nalanda, Vikramshila, Odantpuri and others flourishing under their reign. Their artwork, in form of paintings and sculpture, deeply influenced the arts in Tibet, Nepal and Southeast Asia.

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For north-eastern India, we have comparatively more data for Assam. Its ancient name was Kamrupa or Pragjyotisha. The chief sources for reconstructing the history are the inscriptions issued by the different rulers and *Kalika Purana*, a text roughly dated to the 10th century CE. At the start of this period, it seems that the region was under the control of the Palas. However, their rule ended sometime in the ninth century, and the region saw a succession of two dynasties – Salambas and Palas of Assam.

8.2 POLITY

To reconstruct the elements of Pala polity we generally rely on the numerous inscriptions issued by the various rulers of this dynasty. These generally deal with donations of land to religious institutions and persons – brahmanas, Shaiva temples and Buddhist monasteries. However, only a few inscriptions have the relevant information for understanding their administrative apparatus. Some of the important ones are: Khalimpur Copper Plate Inscription issued by Dharmapala (775-810 CE) in the 32nd regnal year after his victory at Kannauj; Badal pillar inscription issued during the reign of king Narayanapala (861-917 CE); and Kamauli Copper Plate Inscription issued during the reign of Kumarapala (1126-1128 CE).

While their rule was monarchical in nature, it seems that the first ruler of this dynasty Gopala (750-775 CE) was elected by his people. According to the Khalimpur inscription, the region was plunged into chaos after the successive attacks by Yashovarman of Kannauj, Lalitaditya of Kashmir and Harsha of Kamarupa. In order to end the *matsyanyaya* or the law of the jungle people had elected Gopala as their ruler. However, his successors generally followed the principles of hereditary succession. The rulers adopted high sounding titles like *maharajadhiraja*, *parameshvara*, *parama-bhattaraka* etc. The king was perhaps assisted by *mantrins* and *sachivas*. The Badal pillar inscription indicates that the position of the ministers was hereditary. From the limited references in the inscriptions, we understand that their administrative machinery in many ways resembled those of the Guptas. The kingdom was divided into provinces called *bhuktis* which were governed by *uparikas*. Within the *bhuktis* were *vishayas* or districts, and *gramikas* or villages governed respectively by *vishyapati*, and *gramika* (Majumdar, 1980). Another official who served at the *vishayas* was *adhikarana* who dealt with the land-grants. It is possible that an intermediate unit consisting of 10 villages managed by *dasa-gramika* existed between the province and village. There is also mention of officials like *rajaputra*, *rajan*, *rajanyaka*, *rajanaka*, and *ranaka* in the inscriptions who may have been defeated rulers and vassals in the kingdom. A particular feature of their polity was the absence of any fixed capital. Thus, several places on the banks of river Ganga like Pataliputra, Mudgagiri, Ramavati, Vataparvataka, Vilasapura or Haradhama, Sahasaganda, Kancanapura, and Kapilavaska served as their capitals (R. S. Sharma, 2009).

Assam on the other hand, while initially under the rule of the Palas, became independent under Harjavarman of Salamba dynasty. This dynasty ruled the region from 800 CE to 1000 CE. An insight into the their polity is gained from copper plate and rock inscriptions issued by three rulers of the dynasty – Harjaravarman,

Vanamala Varmadeva and Balavarman III (M. M. Sharma, 1978). From these inscriptions, we know that the rulers took imperial titles like *Parameshvara*, *Paramabhattaraka*, and *Maharajadhiraja*. The Hayunthal copper plate inscription of Harjaravarman describes an *abhisheka* (water sprinkling) ceremony during his coronation by merchants and princes. Some high officials are mentioned in the inscriptions like *Mahapratihara*, *Mahasainyapati*, *Brahmanadhikara* and others. Some more insight is gained from the two copper plate inscriptions of Balavarman III – Parbatiya and Nowgong copper plate. From these inscriptions, we come to know that the kingdom was sub-divided into *mandalas* and *vishyas*. An official at the level of *vishaya*, *vishya-karnika* is mentioned in the Nowgong copper plate. In the same copper plate there is also the mention of *rajani*, *rajaputra*, *ranaka* and others who might have been vassals. The last ruler of the dynasty Tyagasimha died without an heir, and this ended the dynasty. After this, a new dynasty Palas of Assam came to power. It is claimed in their inscriptions that the first ruler of the dynasty Brahmapala I was elected by his people, a claim quite reminiscent of the election of Gopala. He made Durjaya as his new capital. It has been identified with Guwahati. The most famous ruler of this dynasty was Ratnapala who ruled for more than 26 years. The dynasty remained in power perhaps till the early 13th century.

Regarding the nature of the east Indian state, scholars have advocated different models to analyse them. For instance in the case of Assam, scholars like J.B Bhattacharya have argued the state to be a stable entity with little change in its apparatus since 4th century CE (Sharma, 2014). Assam was a monarchical state, very similar to the contemporary polities in the Gangetic plains and had remained unchanged during the early medieval.

A study of Pala inscriptions has led R. S. Sharma to argue that the Pala state represented feudalization of polity which is reflected in the several land grants given from the time of Dharmapala. The terms of these grants – given mostly to the brahmanas, Shaiva temples, and Buddhist monasteries – significantly eroded the authority of the state. They gave donees the authority to collect taxes and also impose fines on the inhabitants. These grants also gave them freedom from any royal interference (R. S. Sharma, 2009). In the 9th and the 10th century, there was further feudalization of power as such grants were also made to the officials. The rulers took such imperial titles such as – *paramabhattaraka*, *parameshvara* and *maharajadhiraja*. The vassals adorned themselves with feudal titles like *rajas*, *rajaputras*, *rankas*, *rajarajankas*, *mahasamantas* and others. Perhaps a similar argument could also be made for Assam, where brahmanas had been receiving land grants since the 4th century CE. However, scholars like B.D. Chattopadhyaya have seen the land grants as part of the process of integration rather than feudalization. Land grants were the instrument by which the state polity expanded into the former tribal areas. According to him, the post-Gupta period was characterised by the transition from a pre-state society to monarchy in the hilly areas. The means that this transition was accomplished through the brahmanas who gave legitimacy to the new monarchies, and thus were patronized by the local ruling family. They would settle in new areas and appropriate a popular local tribal cult or deity and identify it with a Brahmanical deity. This process, in Assam is visible in the legend of Naraka, from which all the royal dynasties of

Assam traced their descent. Naraka in the early Sanskrit texts like *Arthashastra* and the Epics is mostly seen as a malevolent figure, a *danava*. But by the 9th and 10th century his legend is completely transformed in the *Kalika Purana* and the inscriptions, which declare him to an ideal ruler with an ancestry going back to Ikshvakus (Chattopadhyaya, 2018).

8.3 ECONOMY

Land grants in this period have been seen as instruments of important social and economic change. In economy, it has been thought that these grants led to significant expansion of agriculture. The Palas were under the control of the fertile eastern Ganga plains which were well suited for the cultivation of rice. The importance of agriculture can be gauged from composition of texts like *Krishiparashara* which details the agricultural operations. Further insights into the rural life are glimpsed from inscriptions which talk of the presence of a variety of trees – coconut, jackfruit, mango, betel nuts and others. Similarly for Assam, we know that the Brahmaputra valley was a focal point for rice cultivation. In order to further encourage agriculture king Harjaravarman in the 9th century had built embankments (Thapar, 2004).

Trade was also important for these two kingdoms. Assam was connected with Tibet and China through trade routes. Similarly, the Palas controlled the ports on the Bay of Bengal with access to Southeast Asia and China. These ports were also connected to inner riverine routes on the Ganges and Brahmaputra. Regarding the goods which were traded the Arabic texts speak highly of textiles and swords from the Palas kingdom (Chakravarti, 2020). The state of Assam, on the other hand was known for its good black aloe timber. Its other important products were bamboo, cane, silk cotton trees which were used for feeding silk worms. It also had rich gold deposits on the banks of Brahmaputra. It possibly imported horses from Tibet (Ghosh, 2010).

8.4 SOCIETY

The sources for understanding the society of Bengal in this period are *Brahmavaivrate Purana* and *Brihadharma Purana*. According to R.S Sharma, the society reflected in these texts differed significantly from that of north India. The *varna* society here only consisted of two castes: brahmanas and sudras. The existence of kshatriyas and vaishyas is not reflected in the texts. Sudras were more in number, and formed main ranks of the peasantry and artisansal class. A significant number of them were tribals. The *Brahmavaivrate Purana* divides the sudras into three categories – *uttama* or high ones included *ambastha* or physician, *gandhika* or perfumer, *vanik* or trader, *modaka* or confectioner, *malakara* or garland maker. These were also known as *sat* sudras or the ones who could offer water to the brahmanas. The *Madhyama* sudras or the middle category included *svarnakara* or gold smith, *abhira* or tribal, *jailka* or fishermen, *rajaka* or washerman and others. And low-born or *antyaja* consisted of groups like *chandala*, and *charmakara*. A study of land grants also indicates the growing complexity with the emergence of brahmana sub-castes. In these grants, the brahmanas are identified by their branch of Vedic learning, gotra, and the village they belonged to. In Bengal, almost 56 sub-castes of brahmanas are mentioned. The ranks of brahmanas not

just included priests from north India, but also priests of non-Aryan tribes who were given Arya *gotras* (R. S. Sharma, 2003).

Important insights into the nature of society of Assam can be gained from the inscriptional data of Assam. According to Nayanjot Lahiri (1990), unlike other kingdoms, brahmanas were granted land in areas with a long tradition of agricultural practice. These lands were cultivated by a number of tribes like Mikirs, Khasis, Kukis and Kacharis. The contact with brahmanas led to the assimilation of these groups into the traditional Hindu fold. The ranks of peasantry swelled with the inclusion of other professions like boatmen, weavers and potters who took to agriculture as there were not enough demand for their profession. Besides this the inscriptions also mention the presence of other middle caste groups like *Kayasthas*, *Lekhakas*, *Daivajnas*, and *Vaidyas*. These according to (Baruah, 2016) may have been more like occupations and officers, and it is only in the later period that these became castes.

8.5 CULTURE

A great contribution to cultural life in the east was made by Pala dynasty. The dynasty is celebrated as a great patron of art and literature, some of which also influenced the artwork in Southeast Asia, Nepal, and Tibet. Their most significant legacy is sculptural art – depicting Hindu and Buddhist themes – in metal and stone. The stone sculpture was mostly made of schist or phyllite stone, with colour ranging from greyish to grey-black. In the Buddhist images, most images depict the Buddha and important events of his life. The most common scene depicted is his victory over Mara just before his Enlightenment. A very significant departure from the previous schools is the ornamentation of the Buddha image. The Buddha is now depicted wearing a crown and a necklace, which signifies his spiritual achievements ((Huntington & Huntington, 1989). The Hindu images become more common from the 11th century CE. A significant number depict saint (*rishi*) Agastya, whose worship had also become popular in Nepal and Southeast Asia. Other than Agastya, the Pala sculptures also depict the Sun god, Surya. The images in metal are mostly made of copper or its alloy; although, some of gold and silver images also exist. They either depict Bodhisattvas or the Hindu gods like Vishnu. These images are distinguished by their intricate ornamentation which was a great technical achievement.

The Pala period was also known for its paintings but only a few of the samples have come down to us. Some murals have been located at Nalanda, but most of these survive in the extant palm leaf manuscripts dealing with Buddhism. Like the sculptures, the paintings mainly depict the scenes from the life of the Buddha. These miniatures painting could be placed anywhere in the manuscript: beginning, middle or the end. Most common colours used were red, yellow, blue, green, black, and white; with black used for creating outlines. The look of the figures were more animated than their sculptural counterparts (Huntington & Huntington, 1989). Their painting style was greatly copied, with samples discovered in Kashmir and Ladakh, and outside India in Myanmar, Nepal and Tibet.

Beside artwork, the Palas were also patrons of learning and education. The great Nalanda university flourished under their reign, and was popular among foreign

monks for the study of linguistics, grammar, and monastic rules (T. Sen, 2003). Many foreign rulers had also built monasteries at Nalanda to facilitate the stay of monks. Thus, a Nalanda copper plate issued by King Devapala, records a donation of five villages by the king Srivijayan, ruler of Java, Sumatara and Malaysia for the upkeep of a monastery built by the latter. Similarly, a Chinese Buddhist monk Jiye reported the presence of several Chinese monasteries (*Hansi*) in Nalanda, which were mainly rented out to foreign students. The Pala rulers are also credited with the opening of several other universities and monasteries: Odantapuri, Vikramshila, Somapura and others.

Sanskrit continued to be the cultivated language of the court, and several important literary and technical works were composed during their rule. In law, Jimutavahana composed a treatise called *Dayabhaga* which even now is influential in Bengal and Assam; In medicine, *Rug-vinischaya*, a treatise on ailments was written by Madhava; Surpala listed the medicinal plants in *Sabda pradipa*, and Chakrapanidutt authored commentaries on the works of Charaka and Susruta (S. N. Sen, 1999). In Kavya, we have *Ramacarita* written by the court poet Sandhyakaranandi with a unique dual narrative of telling us the story of Rama, as well as his patron Ramapala. On the other hand, the great universities produced treatises on Tantric Buddhism. An important development in this period was the beginning of the composition of works in proto-Bengali. We have the composition of *Charyyapadas*, poems composed by the Buddhists.

In neighbouring Assam, after freeing the kingdom from Palas, the Salamba dynasty ruler Harjavarman built a new capital at Haruppeswara. He was a follower of Shaivism, and had built several Siva temples, the ruins of which are still visible in Tezpur. While the rulers here patronized Sanskrit, it was in this period that we also see the beginning of literature in Assamese – *Bihu Geet*, a set of poems and, *Dakabanita* a collection of wise sayings (Dikshit & Dikshit, 2013, pp. 26–27).

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) Discuss the polity, economy and society of Assam and Bengal in the early medieval period.

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- 2) What were the cultural achievements of Palas and Assam kings of the early medieval period.

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8.6 SUMMARY

This Unit familiarised you with the early medieval period in Assam and Bengal.

The Palas were the most important kingdom that ruled in this period in Bengal. In Assam too, several small kingdoms rose one after another. Both the regions were marked by the expansion of agriculture due to the practise of land grants. The officials and *samantas* mentioned in the inscriptions and copper plate charters indicate the practice of sub-infeudation as is clear from their titles. The Palas are known for their contribution to culture. Many images in metal and stone along with paintings, seats of education and learning were established by them. Assam was not too far behind. The rulers of Assam in this period encouraged the rise of vernacular languages such as Assamese and some noteworthy literature in regional languages was composed.

8.7 KEY WORDS

- Agastya** : a Vedic sage of Hinduism. He is credited with the writing of a number of texts which are included in the various *Puranas*.
- Tantric** : a religion based on the Sanskrit texts called the *Tantras*, *Samhitas*, and *Agamas*. It includes a broad range of “magical beliefs and practices” such as Yoga and Shaktism.
- Kamarupa** : ancient name of Assam.

8.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) See Sections 8.2, 8.3, 8.4
- 2) See Section 8.5

8.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

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