

ALONG THE BRAHMAPUTRA: BEGINNINGS OF HISTORY

*Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the award of the Degree of*

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

By

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Dedicated To My Parents



CERTIFICATE

Certified that the dissertation titled "**ALONG THE BRAHMAPUTRA: BEGINNINGS OF HISTORY**" submitted by **ALKA FRANCISCA MICHAEL**, in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the award of the degree of **MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY** is entirely her own work and has not been considered for the award of any other degree either at this or any other University.

We recommend that the dissertation may be forwarded to the examiners for further evaluation.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dilbagh Singh', is written over the printed name.

Prof. DILBAGH SINGH
(Chairperson)

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Himanshu Prabha Ray', is written over the printed name.

Dr. HIMANSHU PRABHA RAY
(Supervisor)

PREFACE

For writing this dissertation, I often feel that I was destined to work on the Brahmaputra Valley, because it was a long journey physically and emotionally that I travelled from my M.A. Seminar on Kaveripattinam to my present research topic on "Along the Brahmaputra".

For me writing the history of the Brahmaputra Valley was not a mere M. Phil dissertation, but many un-academic reasons exist which made even some monotonous tasks existing. My frequent visit to the valley and my journeys along the Brahmaputra from Srirampur to the eastern-most point at Sadiya are even more richer experiences, than just the writing of this dissertation. A 'by-product' I may say so of this dissertation and my field-trips has been to know the rich culture of Assam and to know its people with whom I am closely associated. The task of doing my research on the history of the Brahmaputra valley, became an even greater challenge, had I not got in touch with the history faculty at Dibrugarh University and also the esteemed Director R.D. Choudhary, of the National Museum, through whom I got a taste of the existing nations and perceptions on the region.

There are a number of persons to whom I wish to thank for making this dissertation possible.

My supervisor, Dr. Himanshu Prabha Ray, would be the first one to be mentioned for her patient guidance and excellent editorship also for tolerating the numerous delays and ambiguities that came along

The list of libraries seems to be endless, which provided me with much needed data and books and a congenial environment. Archaeological Survey of India, library, National Museum Library, American Institute of Indian Studies, Crafts Museum Library, Anthropological Survey of India Library, Gauhati University Library, Indian Council for Historical Research Library, Jawaharlal Nehru University Library.

My meeting with Dr. Dilip K. Medhi at Gauhati university was not only an enriching experience, but also the ideas that he expressed regarding my topic research and the encouragement that he gave.

The viewing of Sanjay Hazarika's slide show on the Brahmaputa an umpteen number of times, is closely related to my dissertation because it is there where the seeds of my dissertation lie.

Thanks to Amit, Atul and Manish, budding cartographers from C.S.R.D., for providing me with the beautifully done maps.

Ashok and Vikram, speeded up the writing of this dissertation by taking care of the typing work, which was done with utmost care and patience.

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Thanks to Sohaib, Sabby and Smita for being friends and for always providing assurance during trying periods of the writing of this dissertation.

I would to thank my grandmother, parents, my family members, Ajay, Mamta, Anil and Kritika for providing me with peaceful and lively moments I much needed and Akki and Arush for being a source of constant joy.

During my fieldwork I was honoured with great hospitality by Ma, Jomoni and Dada, I not only got a taste of good Assamese food, but also a peep into social customs.

Two years back when I was in the process of looking for and formulating a research topic, it was Biswajeet who suggested me to work on the region. He was not only of academic help to me, answering all petty queries, but also for his love and affection.

Aloka

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

A.N.E.I. The Archaeology of North East India.

E.I. Epigraphica Indica.

I.H.R. Indian Historical Review.

J.A.S.B. Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal.

J.M.B.R.A.S. Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society.

K.A.S. Kamarupa Anusanadhana Samiti.

S.E.A.I. A Social and Economic Atlas of India.

S.O.A.S. School of Oriental and African Studies.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

History deals with the past of a people or country and not with its present or future. It deals with what has been and not with what is or what ought to be. It records realities, actual events or accomplished facts and has nothing to do with ideals, with which are concerned subjects like ethics or pottery, art and literature. (Mookerji 1936:1)

The general perception of history that exists in minds of the people, adheres to the above statement. The present day historical scholarship of a region is moulded by the perceptions of the scholars. The areas along the river Brahmaputra are also viewed through such existing perceptions. Such existing myths can be barriers for future research and thus, an alternative can be provided by seeing the centrality of this region.

The Brahmaputra valley forms an integral part of what is known as the 'north-east' of India. The term 'north-east' is a misnomer in itself. The region is not uniform and homogenous as the term north-east denotes. It is divided politically into seven states known as the seven sister states. It is a very complex region which is a very state and region specific area; as it comprises of both the hills and the plains.

Since ancient times the name *Prāgjyotiṣa* is mentioned in the two great epics the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. The *Kalikā Purāṇa* refers

to the term *Lauhitya*.¹ The present day name, of the state comprising of the Brahmaputra valley and the adjoining areas falls within the political boundaries of the present day state of Assam. The name *Kāmarūpa* is referred to in medieval times, as referred to in Hiuen Tsiang's 7th century record. According to the *Yoginitantram*, the kingdom comprised the whole of Brahmaputra (*Lauhitya*) valley, together with Cooch Bihar and Rangpur. But apart from the valley it also incorporated the modern day political states of Manipur, Jaintia, Cachar, western Assam and parts of Mymensing and Sylhet. Thus, we see that Ancient Assam, known as Pragjyotisa during ancient times, occupied an area larger than that of the modern Assam state and extended westwards to the river Karatoya.

GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

“Along the Brahmaputra as the title denotes, is not an area that is defined by any political or linguistic or racial boundaries, but the extent of the region is defined by the River Brahmaputra. A detailed discussion of the River and its tributaries has been done in the second chapter on settlements, as the river has influenced the nature of settlements since pre-historic times. In this section some of the unique features of its

¹ *Lauhitya* is derived from the word *Lohit* which refers to the River Brahmaputra, and is of *Tai* origin, which was spoken by Ahoms, who entered the valley in the 13th century.

environment flora and fauna such as the geographical features, climatic conditions would be discussed, in order to highlight its uniqueness.²

The Brahmaputra-valley by the virtue of its position has access to China, Burma and Bangladesh. It is an intermediary region linking up with south-east Asia, and is not located, as seen at the end of the Ganga Valley. It is a situation which is archaeologically highly significant as seen in ch. 2. Where the valley shares its Neolithic tradition with South Eastern Asia.

Another unique feature of this region is that this is the wettest part in the world and is blanketed by a thick cover of vegetation. Such a situation also poses a problem towards the preservation of Archaeological artifacts as the actively humid climate and the acidic soil of this region are not at all favourable for the preservation of Archaeological artifacts, as both copper and Iron artifacts and the stone tools also experience a high amount of weathering in the acidic environment.

Further, this region is criss-crossed by innumerable rivers and streams and the Brahmaputra flows through this region from the east and curves down towards the west through Bangladesh and empties itself into

² Although I have tried to use a term without any political, linguistic, racial or religious connotations, yet the name Brahmaputra itself is Brahmanical in nature. In the *Kalika Purāna* the origin of the River Brahmaputra is accorded to the myth of Parsurama. According to the myth Parsurama a Ksatriya had killed his mother and repented for it. Parsurama approached *Visvamitra*, a great sage in order to revive his lost mother. *Visvamitra* advised him to get water from the *Brahmakunda* in order to wash off his sin. He brought two or three handfuls of water which formed the source of the River, which is an important pilgrimage centre of the Hindus.

the Bay of Bengal. Heavy precipitation and flood are two regular phenomena in this region which annually result in the deposition of thick alluvium in the plains, resulting in the burial of archaeological material.

Apart from having access with the bordering countries and traditions, the Brahmaputra valley since ancient times had access to forest products, and also to the hill regions of Manipur and Nagaland. This region is 30%-40% forest area.³ The soil is mainly alluvial, with small pockets of red loamy soil, laterite soil, red and yellow soils, terai soils, available in close proximity. The region is very fertile⁴ and is abundant in food production.

The Brahmaputra valley up till now has been looked at as an extension of the agrarian expansion from the Ganga valley. It has been seen as a peripheral area (as discussed in ch 4) relation to the core area vis a vis the Doab region.

The past scholarship over the years has developed various myths and perceptions that exist about the Brahmaputra valley, the region, the inhabitant and their culture.

³ The vegetation includes *Amaro, Sam, Jutuli, Borpat, Gomari, Kadam, Hollock, Uruvium*. The flora comprises of *Sia-Nahar, Dhuna, Tila, Champa Silikhi* and *Sal* found in Kamarupa and Goalpara districts. The riverine forests consist of the following varieties – *khair* and *sissoo* found on riverbanks. *Sumil, Koroo, Kadam, Odal, bajau, Sidha, Garaya arborea, Wwrightia tomomtoza*, bamboo and cane etc.. (Sant 1991: 18-19)

⁴ Compared with the rest of India, the average total nutrient consumption (N+P+K) is 4 kg/ha (S.E.A.I. 1987: 187) in the state of Assam, which is not only the lowest in the region but in the whole of India.

....Legends associate the beginnings of Aryanism in Assam with the establishment of *Naraka's* rule in that land of the Kirātas. These barbarians were known even to the Europeans as early as the first century A.D. (Sircar 1990:91).

My attempt is to look at the Brahmaputra valley, not as an extension of the Ganga-valley, but in centrality to the Deltaic region of Bangladesh and also South-East Asia. The site of Mahasthangarh (dated to the post-Mauryan Period) in present day Bangladesh, poses new questions, as to its link with the Brahmaputra valley, with which it is closely related. Scholars such as F.R. Allchin see it as the “Eastern expansion of urban influences” which is currently more or less confined to the Ganges-Brahmaputra plains. He sees Mahasthan⁵ as the eastern most earl city beyond the Ganges valley”.

This dissertation deals with a socio-cultural history of the Brahmaputra-valley, based on archaeological, anthropological and literary sources. The study of this region is based, on the River Brahmaputra as forming a common link flowing through the various issues addressed. This work examines the manner in which the river has moulded the history, and culture of the region through time.

⁵ The site of Mahasthan is located in the Bagura district of Bangladesh.

PAST SCHOLARSHIP

The region of the Brahmaputra valley has been of interest to scholars belonging to varied back-grounds. Since the colonial period, scholars have been involved in writing their accounts about this region. Apart from the ethnographic and general accounts, there exists the whole genre of data, that came about due to the antiquarian interest of the Britishers. The perceptions that exist in the present times has filtered down from colonial times and are even visible in the present day scholarship.

The **Missionary and Colonial accounts**⁶ are the first to have looked at the history of this region. In 1838, Captain Francis Jenkin wrote his diary account of Assam. The British records talk about the Assam-Burma route to China. General Jenkins also collected and forwarded to the Asiatic Society of Bengal the inscription of Vanamala and another recorded by dharmapata in the thirty –sixth year of his reign.

In 1837, M'cosh a surgeon by profession in his work *Topography of Assam* gives an extensive account of the Brahmaputra valley; as he defines the boundaries as “that extensive tract of country on either side of the Brahmaputra”. An appreciable work that he does is, that he spells out detailed routes from the valley to Bengal, Bhutan, Tibet, Burma and China.

⁶ There have been a number of works on Assam, they are enlisted below B.O.D. Granges, 1848 ‘Short Survey of the countries between Bengal and China...’, *JASB*; XVII.1, pp.132-37. J. Butter 1858 *Travel and adventures in the Province of Assam*. The empirical Gazetteer of India, vol.VI. 1908.

He traces the history of Assam from the 13th century onwards after the Ahom Invasion. The discussions vary from the flora and fauna to animal species, metals, political organization. Health-disorders, Revenue system and about the Hills tribes. His perceptions on the tribes as “Barbarians” and ‘criminals’ is discussed in detail in chapter 4.

M’cosh in a later work in 1860-61. ‘On the various lines of overland communication between India and China. London vol.5, he refers to no less than five roads leading from Sadiya the frontier station of the Brahmaputra valley into Tibet or China.

Other works by scholars, such as Cantlie (1960) and Thomson (1948) have made an attempt to study the culture of the Assam Valley. These works have accomplished the task of not only looking at the finer details of culture existing in the valley in the present day but also present data on the socio-economic structure of the region.

ANTIQUARIAN INTEREST

The Pioneer work on the stone Age culture of the region, was done by Sir John Lubbock⁷ since 1867. He was followed by some British scholars and administrators like J.H. Hutton,⁸ J.P. Mills and others. They not only explored and studied the materials of the pre-historic culture but

⁷ *Athanaeum*, no.206, June 22, 1867.

⁸ J. H. Hutton 1929, Assam Megaliths. *Antiquity*, 3. Hutton In this paper he has wrongly interpreted, old temple ruins pillar as Megaliths.

also the megaliths.⁹ Later, Sir Edward Gait, published a report on the progress of Historical Research in Assam in 1897. Further, he published a book entitled *A History of Assam* incorporating an account of the history and culture of this area. This book does not give a sufficient idea about the history of the region prior to the 12th century A.D. i.e. of the pre-Ahom period.

POLITICAL HISTORY

It was in 1912, that the Assam research society was established for looking at its early history . Apart from E.A. Gait's work published in 1933, B.K. Barua contributed through his work *A Cultural History of Assam*, of which only the first part dealing with the early period was published in 1951. P.C. Chaudhary's dissertation entitled *The History of Civilization of the People of Assam to the Twelfth century A.D.* (published in 1959) is a comprehensive account dealing with both the political and cultural aspects of the region.

K.L. Barua in his work *Studies in The Early History of Assam*, 1974, attempts a chronological account of the kingdom of Pragjyotisa or *Kamarupa* from the earliest times till the death of the *koch* king Naranarayan towards the end of the sixteenth century. He calls it the history of *Kamarupa* during the pre-Ahom period. He talks in terms of

⁹ D.Roy 1963. 'The Megalithic culture of the Khasis', *Anthropos*, 58 Studies the Megalithic culture in the light of the Khasi cremation ceremonies.

“the Aryan wave that extended to *Kamarupa* directly from *Videha* and *Magadha* long before lower Bengal became either habitable or fit for Aryan occupation *Kamarupa* was therefore Aryanised long before Central and lower Bengal”.

He includes Northern Bengal of the present day under *Kamarupa* and that the “Bengalis of North Bengal, were *Kamarupis* some centuries back”. He also presents a chronological list of inscriptions and kings. His work reflects the imprints of the colonial writings. He presents arguments given by colonial writers in his work.

Another work, which I could mention along with K. L. Barua, is N.N. Basu’s ‘*Social History of Kamarupa (1922)*’ which is in three volumes. He has tried to piece together a history of this period from the records of several well known *kayastha* families of *Kamarupa*. His attempt has been to prove the Bengali origin of the *kayastha Bhuyans* of Assam.

Based on ancient literary texts, P.K. Bhattacharya (1965) in his paper briefly catalogues the various texts such as the *Aitareya Brahmana*, *Manusamhita*, Buddhist *vinaya* text and the Mahabharata on what they have to say about the Brahmaputra valley.

Dimbeshwar Neog in his book *Introduction to Assam*, (1947) does a similar but rather detailed work about “each phase of the activities of the people of Assam from the pre-historic times till the modern days”. He

elaborates on the references of *Kamarupa* in literary texts and relates it to the present day modern day trends. He traces in a chronological order and goes on to complex questions related to 'races' that inhabited the region.

As discussed in the section on antiquarian interest there has been a considerable amount of **archaeological work**, that has been carried out in the region. Since 1857, onwards there have been reports of finds of Neolithic tools in Assam by Lubbock and E.H. Steel and Lt. Barron, who have reported Neolithic stone tool finds not only from the valley but also from the adjoining Naga hills.

The recent (post-independence) trend in archaeological explorations and excavations that have been carried out in the region is the emergence of various anthropologists carrying out this task. Since pre-historic archaeology became an important segment in the Department of Anthropology at Gauhati and Dibrugarh universities, there have been several surveys conducted by anthropologists in the region, which give us a preliminary data about the material culture and there have been various works that have been published by these anthropologists, documenting such data and using it for ethnographic accounts. The problem that such an interaction poses, which could have been otherwise fruitful, has been discussed in the second chapter.

Several scholars have worked on the pre-historic culture of Assam, It was A.H. Dani in 1960, who was the pioneer in publishing the results of the researches in the form of a book. The book is not just limited to the valley, but also present day Bangladesh, West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, which gives a clear archaeological comparison with south-east Asia, in terms of tool specimens and other material culture. He has attempted to put together in one place, materials scattered in various museums and journals in order to make a systematic survey of the 'confused mass of unrelated material'. He provides a provisional classification which may serve as a guide to future excavators and explorers.

The excavation at the stone-age site of Daojali Hading in the North Cachar Hills district in 1962-63, brought to light evidence of a Neolithic habitation site. S.N. Rao during 1967-73, excavated a Neolithic site at Sarutaru in Assam. He brings out the results of this excavation in his paper in 1977. He discusses about the pottery and the stone industry at the site and combines its with ethnographic studies of the Khasis and Mikirs, by drawing analogies with their culture.

Recent works by scholars based on the archaeological finds and settlements, is a step ahead from of the preliminary task of collecting and cataloguing data.

Reba Ray's work, *Ancient settlement patterns of Eastern India* (1987) is perhaps the first attempt to reconstruct the pre-historic settlement patterns of eastern India. It is an attempt at presenting a systematized and comprehensive study of the pre-historic finds of North Eastern India representing cultures which appear to be different from those of other parts of eastern India. Study of eastern India comprises of Bihar West Bengal and the North Eastern states Including Assam. She throw light on the pre-historic settlements in India in their progress from Paleolithic period to the Neolithic period. She sees the emergence of settlements against the geographical and geological background of the present day states of West Bengal, Bihar and the seven states of North-Eastern India. The Palaeolithic settlement patterns that emerges in Eastern India, is one where the majority of the sites so far discovered were probably places of temporary habitation some of these sites, appear to have been kiln – sites.

She argues that there was migration of the Neolithic people from South East Asia via Burma on linguistic grounds. It has been inferred that the Austro-Asiatic Language Speakers have been the bearers of the Neolithic culture. Accordingly, it has been presumed that the Neolithic culture settlements of North East India are to be affiliated to those of South East Asia. It has also been presumed that the Neolithic cultural complex, was perhaps introduced in India by the Austro-Asiatic Language speakers.

She points out to the fact that there are striking similarities in artifacts found in this region with Burma and South East Asia.

Along with the study of settlement of prehistoric men an attempt has been made to co-relate the archaeological data with the ethnographical materials for the purpose of reconstructing the pre-historic settlements in the light of the results of the ethnographic study of the tribes. For instance, the kind of agricultural and living patterns followed by present day tribes.

Another important work, on pre-historic archaeology is that of Urmila Sant, *Neolithic settlement Pattern of Eastern India* (1991). Her work discusses in great detail the finds as well as the pattern of the life in the pre-historic times but many a times being based on ethnographic studies.

There has been very little work done on the **historical archaeology** of the region. R.D. Choudhary, and conducted an extensive study on the 'Archaeology of the Brahmaputra valley (pre-Ahom period) on which he submitted his doctoral thesis in 1970. His work can be considered a pioneering one, where he has dealt mainly with icons and not with other branches of archaeology of the Brahmaputra valley.

Nishipada Deva Choudhary's work, *Historical Archaeology of Central Assam* published in 1985, incorporates the results of an exploration carried out of the region of Central Assam. His field-work has brought to

light some important new materials in the form of pottery, structural remains and sculptures. He has also attempted a comparative study of archaeological remains of Central Assam with those of other parts of the country.

The icons that he discusses are mainly of Hindu gods and goddesses. He has also catalogued the various archaeological finds of coins, inscriptions etc. of this region, but the treatment of Neolithic tools, pottery and Megalithic monuments requires a different approach from the one followed.

Dilip Chakrabarti's *Ancient Bangladesh*, 1992 comes out as a unique contrast here, when one is talking of the River Brahmaputra, but since my attempt is to look at the relationship between the Brahmaputra valley and Mahasthangarh, which is located in present day Bangladesh, I thought it would be appropriate to discuss the work here. His work is a study of the archaeological sources found in the pre-historic Palaeolithic sites in the Lahmai Mainamati region uphill to the emergence of early historical settlements in the region such as *Pundravardhana* or *Mahasthangarh* and even Wari bateshwar. He views Mahasthan as the easternmost expansion of the Mauryan empire' thus negating the centrality of this region.

With archaeology, I may also mention, the role of *Inscriptions*, their translations and cataloguing which has been the major task of scholars. Sir Edward Gait's *History of Assam* (1905), is important as it was the first to utilize inscriptions in writing the history of this region. The pre-Ahom Inscriptions ranging from the 5th to the 13th centuries, form the basis for the construction of the history of this period. The inscriptions were translated by P.N. Bhattacharya in 1938 into Bengali. It was only in 1979, that the *Inscriptions of Ancient Assam* by M.M. Sharma and D. Sarma's *Kamarupasasnavali* in 1981, were published carrying the English translations of these texts.

Nayanjot Lahiri's work *Pre-Ahom Assam* 1991, attempts to understand the early history of Kamarupa and some of the emerging patterns in the lines of the people of that region between the fifth and thirteenth centuries A.D. on the basis of epigraphic sources. Her work consists of not only a study of the distribution language and paleography of the inscriptions but also takes a look at the political, social and economic dimensions of life in *Kamarupa* as revealed in the inscriptions. Her work, which looks at this region as an expansion of the Ganga Valley as she sees the spread of agriculture and habitation in the region as a result of Brahmin Migration. The language of the epigraphs being Sanskrit clearly reflects their Brahmanical origin. This poses a great number of problems as this region has been under habitation and cultivation since pre-historic times.

Her book, although begins from the 5th century A.D. and is based on epigraphs, does not see the earlier antecedents of the culture and society that existed in the 5th century A.D. Her work, though pioneering in studying various aspects such as the crops' and plants that grow in the region, the urban centres etc. in the region, yet it is unable to do away with issues such as the position of the Brahmins.

As far as the history of this region is concerned there has been a great emphasis by scholars in attempting to trace the **routes** across the political frontiers. The location of the Brahmaputra valley is such, that there is a continuous movement of goods and people from one place to the other as archaeological data and ancient texts refer to. Right from the colonial writers such as M'cosh, who discusses the five routes from the Brahmaputra valley into Tibet or China proper. They are the pass of the Dihang (i) The (ii) Mishmi route, (iii) The Phungan pass to Munchue and China (iv) the route by Manipur to the Irawadi and (v) the patkai pass to Bhamo on the Irrawadi.

Granges, in 1838, does a short survey of the countries between Bengal and China, showing the great commercial and political importance of the Burmese town of Bhamo, in the upper Irrawady and the practicality of a direct overland trade between Calcutta and China.

The most important and easiest route is over the Patkai range to the upper districts of Burma and then China. Movement of goods takes place here even till modern times, especially for timber trade. There are numerous passes and ways known as *Duars*, that still exist between Assam and Bhutan.

K.K. Moha (1979) in his paper 'literary references to Chinese pottery in India' chalks out a route through which this luxury item was brought to India. D.K. Chakrabarti and Nayanjot Lahiri in their combined paper, 'The Assam – Burma route to China' attempt to study routes based on Chinese sources, British records and Greek texts such as the *periplus*. They present an early historic trade route between the mid gangetic valley and south China, through Assam and North Burma. Since there is no documented history of the region till the fifth century A.D., when the Local inscriptions first appeared the routes are mainly during the post 5th century A.D.

Haraprasad Ray (1991) in his paper, 'The Identity of *Huang Chih*: An Ancient kingdom in contact within Han China'. He traces routes from a different perspective, on the basis of Chinese Sources. He addresses the question of the identification of *Huang Chih*, whether it is the same as Kanchipuram or it is a kingdom in the Ganga delt or if it was not in India at all.

He bases his argument on various Chinese texts, especially the Han *Shu* written by Pan Ku (AD 32-92). In his paper there are references to names of various places, to routes, and to inward and outward terminal points. Apart from tracing the routes he talks about the voyages undertaken, over land and by ships, the personnel involved, the innumerable articles of exchange such as silk, silver and ivory and also of the various mid-way stations.

As an outcome of the survey of the routes and items of exchange, this region emerges as a well frequented region, since the early historical period, where a number of voyages were undertaken, along with the movement of commodities.

B.N. Mukharjee's fairly recent work, based on a wide plethora of sources, which discusses the routes and commodities of exchange, can be seen as the first one to appear in the form of a book. It is an outcome of a series of lectures delivered by Dr. B.N. Mukharjee at Imphal under the auspices of the North East Indian History Association.

B.N. Mukharjee in his monograph *External Trade of Early North – Eastern India*, (1992) has attempted to trace links of communication between the North East' and China along with the rest of the sub-continued. His work is distinct from the earlier works, as so far no attempt had been made to write the history of commerce, including external trade

of the early North-East. A few scholars like E. A. Gait and K.L. Barua have touched upon the commercial activities in course of dealing with the economic history of Assam, during the Ancient Period.

His work which claims to be entirely based on the studies of Ancient sources such as the *Arthasāstra*, *periplus*, Chinese accounts of *Fa-Hsien* and *Hsien-Tsiang*, but he incorporates even Medieval sources such as the *Tabāqat-I-Nasiri*.

He does give an account of the economic products, crafts and industries articles of export and import, the Mechanism of trade, and the role played by the state in external trade have been looked at in some detail.

ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNTS

The works of ethnographers forms a substantial part of the literature that is available on the region. The works of scholars, ascribe to the stereotype of this region being inhabited by 'wild' and 'Barbaric' tribes. These writings have formed the basis of future research in the region.

It was in M'cosh's account, way back in 1837, that the tribes were referred to as thieves and murderers. However, the theoretical framework for the study of the races has been provided by Risley, in 1915, by dividing the population of India into seven races. S.C. Dutt's, *Wild Tribes of India*

first published in 1884, although written by an Indian scholar prescribes to such a format.

Works by authors such as B.A. Saletore (1951): *Tribes of Indian History*, in which the inhabitants belonging to this region have been referred to as 'foresters', 'barbarians' and 'mountaineers'. This reflects how misunderstood and wrongly perceived the region is. The post-independence period did not witness any remarkable changes from the existing scholarship. Works of modern day Anthropologists on the region such as B.M. Das, (1987) in his work talks about the linguistic and racial composition of the people. There have been other studies based on the study of tribes in the region, such as D.G. Danda's book *Among the Dimasas of Assam*, which is based on an ethnographic study of the Dimasa tribe (1978) and T. Bhattacharjee's *Sociology of the Karbis* (1986).

To sum up, the valley of the Brahmapura has been of interest to administrators, ethnographers, archaeologists, anthropologists and epigraphists, since colonial times. On the one hand these various works have viewed the region from the Ganga valley. The upland areas continue to be studied in isolation from the plain settlers, without forming a link between these two crucial zones. On the other hand this area is viewed as the "north-East" of India, in isolation and not as a transit point between south-East Asia, the Ganga Valley and the Deltaic region.

This work attempts to follow a different approach which studies the emergence of settlements since pre-historic times till the early historical period, and sees this region as crucial in forming links with south-east Asia, not only archaeologically, but also in terms of exchange and cultural interaction.



Another point that I wish to clarify here, which is recurring in the entire dissertation is the usage of a much wider chronological data frame on the account of the paucity of dated archaeological and written accounts, which enables flexibility to draw upon sources from a later date and to discuss a variety of issues. The later sources have been used corroboratively in order to cover up and fill up the gaps created in the available data.

The chronology of this dissertation can be categorised into two. One is the core-chronology, which covers the period from 5th century B.C. to the 5th century A.D. This time span has been selected, in order to highlight the history of this region before the coming of land-grants in the 5th century A.D. in the region. The broader chronology, differs as a wide variety of later date sources have been incorporated, from the pre-historic archaeological finds to the nineteenth century British accounts. There can be no evolutionary pattern such as pre-history to early history which can be followed in this region. We find that hunter-gathers, co-exist with the state

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level societies in the region uptill the 19th century. Such a pattern differs from the rest of the sub-continent. Rather than the chronology, it is the use of geographical factors, such as the river Brahmaputra, which has been used to form a link between the various issues in this work.

The River Brahmaputra forms a link between cultures and people as it provides a readymade 'highway' for exchange of culture and commodities. The river crosses all political boundaries and flows through Tibet, parts of India and also through parts of present day Bangladesh, thereafter it flows into the Bay of Bengal. A river flows through time, but it is the people who come and settle near the river. The river provides food, both in the form of agricultural product and fish to the people who settle near it.

Chapter two, on River and settlements, sees the close connection of the River Brahmaputra leading to the emergence of settlements on its banks or tributaries since 2000 B.C. Neolithic sites are located along the river from its upper course at Dilbrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Nowgaon, Tezpur and down to its lower course at Gauhati and Goalpara. The section on rice cultivation is in contrast to the views expressed by scholars, on the basis of land-grants that there is an expansion of settlements from the Ganga-valley to this region in the 5th century A.D. The Brahmaputra valley is pre-dominantly a rice cultivating area, till today. It geographically forms

a part of the South-East Asian block, to which the origin of rice cultivation can be associated.

Chapter three, on River and exchange, the focus is on the site of Mahasthangarh or Pundranagar, known since the third or second century B.C. The Brahmaputra valley, by virtue of its geographical position could maintain contacts with Burma, Tibet, Bhutan and China; some of these connections may have been of pre-historic origin. A section on the present day textiles is incorporated in order to highlight its significance.

Chapter four, The 'River and Inhabitants' is a chapter portraying the dichotomy in the perceptions, of the region from the ancient texts to the latter day colonial accounts.

In this dissertation^o conclusion has not been incorporated towards the end, instead an **epilogue** has been written in order to express a few limitations of this work and also to chalk out further plans for research.

CHAPTER – II

RIVER AND THE SETTLEMENT

INTRODUCTION:

The historiography of the Brahmaputra valley, reveals, various perceptions that have been formed over the years, moulded by various scholars. The kind of frame-work that emerges, is one of an uninhabited region, that took to a settled life only during the early historical period. This region which is rich, both archaeologically and anthropologically, has been a source of delight for the archaeologists and anthropologists who have been excavating in this region. Since the colonial period, archaeologists and anthropologists have been working to trace the history of the Brahmaputra valley. Although this region (along the Brahmaputra) has been a rich source of archaeological and anthropological research, the Indian as well as colonial historiography has been unable to cut across the rigid paradigm of ‘perception’ in history writings.

This chapter traces the history of settlements in the region and examines the extent to which the river provided a lifeline. It spells out the vast geographical dimension of the river and its close connection with the pre-historic settlements. One of the issues that it raises is the interaction between archaeologists and anthropologists, especially in the context of the Brahmaputra valley, where excavations in most cases have been carried out

by anthropologists. The environmental context of the sites and the available material culture emphasises the riverine character of the settlements. This region has been archaeologically linked with South East Asia. But are there any deep-rooted connections which we have overlooked due to political boundaries. An attempt has been made to compare the geography of the Brahmaputra valley and Southeast Asia to establish that there are similarities in both the regions which have influenced the Neolithic phase, which is evident from their material culture and available raw material. What is the basis of the economy of this region? To what extent is it dependent on the environment, or the availability of raw-materials in the region. Finally, an attempt has been made to study the impact on this region by the domestication of a number of food plants, especially rice.

The river Brahmaputra forms a common link through the settlements that are located on its banks. This is also true of its tributaries, which spread from its confluence, through the river valley and up till where the river merges into the Bay of Bengal. A documentation of the various find spots of pre-historic sites, their location and finds has been done in an (table 2.1) and has not been repeated in the text of this chapter. In order to see the link between these and the river it is important to analyse these within a geographical dimension.

THE RIVER & ITS COURSES

The Brahmaputra valley occupies an area of about 56,274, sq. k.m. The river in its upper-course is known as the Tsang-Po in Tibet. When the river enters Arunachal Pradesh in the Siang division it is known as the River Dihang. In Arunachal Pradesh three rivers combine, Dibang, Dihang and Lohit to form the river Brahmaputra, when it enters Assam. When this river enters Bangladesh, it is known as the River Jamuna and later when it merges with the Ganga, it is known as the River Padma, from where the Deltaic region begins. (Sant 1991; 18-19). The navigability aspect of the river has not been discussed here, but has been incorporated in the chapter on exchange, as it is more relevant there.

The river is characterised by a number of tributaries, which are about thirty-five in number. A distinction can be drawn among those tributaries which flow on the right bank as compared to those on the left bank. The left bank or the south Bank comprises of the Lohit, Dihang, Nao-Dihing, Burhi-Dihang, Disong, Dikhori, Jhanji, Dhanisiri, Kapili, Digaru, Kulsi, Singra, Jiniram, Dudhnai and the Krishnai. The right bank or the north bank tributaries are the Subansiri, Bharalu, Dhansiri, Barnadi, Pagladia, Manas and the Sankosh. (Sharma 1996:13) Many of the tributaries, like the main river itself, have carved out magnificent gorges,

on the south bank, where we see a greater existence of pre-historic settlements.

The river flows between sandy banks and forms a number of divergent channels which later rejoin the main stream of the Brahmaputra, thus leading to heavy silt formation in the river. (Sharma 1996: 12).

The pre-historic settlements on the river, such as at Tezpur, Guwahati and Goalpara, are located on the out-crop of resistant rocks and as such are less vulnerable to the havoc of floods. (Sharma 1996:12) The hills on both sides act as a natural barrier between the plains and the river, which helps in controlling the flood. These settlements may also have been crossing points along the river since early times and continue even till the present day. These sites, display, habitation till the modern times and form the main cities in the valley, as also important trading centres.

In 1785, Rennel observed that the River Brahmaputra which flowed through Mymensingh, district and joined the Meghna near Bhairavbazar till about 200 years ago, now flows 40 miles westwards (Chakrabarti 1992:3). Moreover, the Tista flowed southward, through Dinajpur and joined the Ganga which now has a south-easterly course and discharges its water into the Brahmaputra. Old maps of Bengal show that hardly 250 years ago the river Brahmaputra which now flows to the west of Dacca and of the elevated piece of ground to its north, known as the Madhupur jungle, then

flowed a great many miles to the east of these localities. This change appears to have been accomplished suddenly, in the course of a few years (Wadia 1966:393).

The Brahmaputra must also have sent distributory channels toward the Ganga in the earlier centuries. A map prepared by James Rennell shows such a channel, the Jenai linking the Brahmaputra with the lower Atrai in the south of the Sirajganj area (Chakrabarti 1992:3). The river Karatoya was once a major river, but it seems that it has got broken up into a number of channels, one of which flows into the River Atrai, and constitutes its main source with another one flowing past Mahasthangarh in Bagura district of present day Bangladesh (Chakrabarti 1992: 19).

By crossing all geographical, geological and cultural barrier along its 2900 km long course, the river has been the highway since pre historic times for its habitants, by providing natural vegetation, water and fish.

Thus, we see that the river Brahmaputra forms a geographical link between the uplands of the Tibetan and Arunachal Pradesh with the lower, Deltaic belt. Archaeologically, a study can be made of sites and find spots which are either located on the River Brahmaputra or its tributaries, since pre-historic times. The river has provided the basic infrastructure for human settlement, in the form of water and food, such as agricultural products and fish to the people. Before I proceed on to the discussion on

the archaeological sites and finds, the issue of the interaction between the anthropologists and archaeologists needs to be addressed as it poses various problem in research in the region.

ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE PROBLEM OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

It was the colonial archaeologists, who were the pioneers in carry out archaeological explorations in the region. This included the collection of antiquities by Lubbock, since 1867 (Sharma 1991:45). The recent (post-independence) archaeological explorations and excavations that have been carried out has been done by anthropologists, in order to collect data to study the material culture of the tribes in the region. The excavation on the stone-age site of Daojali Hading in the North Cachar Hills district in 1962-63 brought to light evidence of a neolithic habitation site (Guha 1991:XVI). Pre historic archaeology is also an important segment in the department of Anthropology at Gauhati and Dibrugarh universities. The survey conducted by anthropologists in the region gives a preliminary data about the material culture and there have been various works that have been published by these anthropologists, documenting such data and using it for ethnographic accounts. Archaeologists such as V.N. Misra, and Prof. H.D. Sankalia, have offered their comments on the dating of these pre-historic cultures.

The interaction between the archaeologists and anthropologists that has been taking place, could have been more fruitful especially for the Brahmaputra valley and its adjoining areas, owing to its richness. Anthropology and archaeology which are two related fields, where anthropology includes physical (or biological) anthropology, cultural or social anthropology, linguistics and it also overlaps with archaeology (Clifford 1990: 4). Whereas, in India, archaeological concerns are limited to collecting, cataloguing and presenting archaeological data. Though the two fields have divergent concerns, yet they can complement one another. The aim of research in the region has only laid emphasis on tracing continuities between the material artefacts excavated and the present day practices. Another alternative present before scholars could have been to pay greater attention to social complexities, ritual practices and exchange networks.

CHRONOLOGY AND PATTERN

Regarding the dating of the settlements in this region most of the archaeological collections in Eastern India are from the surface and therefore cannot be dated. H.D. Sankalia and T.C. Sharma have proposed 5000 B.C. for the Early Neolithic Phase and 2000 B.C. (Barpujari 1991:36) for the late Neolithic phase of North – Eastern India. The absolute dating of North Eastern Indian neolithic culture is considered within the time-

range from 2000 B.C. to 1200 B.C. These dates have been derived from archaeological data from Spirit Cave, Non Nok Tha and Ban Kao in Thailand, due to the non-availability of dates in the Brahmaputra valley (Sant 1991:214). There is no evolutionary pattern such as pre-history to early-history which can be followed in this region we find that hunter gatherers co-exist with the state level societies in the region, uptill the 19th century, forming a mosaic of settlement pattern (Lahiri 1992: 157) a pattern very different from the Ganga Valley.

The link between the river Brahmaputra and human settlements can be established as, settlement pattern refers to the manner in which human settlements are arranged over the landscape in relation to the physiography and the environment (Ray: 1987; 3). The Neolithic sites, on the fringes of the Shillong Plateau such as Loharghat, Teteliya, Sonapur and the site of Biswanath right at the centre of the Brahmaputra valley, have drawn its main subsistence from the river. The settlement pattern that emerges in the region has been deeply influenced by the natural environment. The settlement patterns are determined by the cultural needs and are a crucial point for the functional interpretation of archaeological culture (Ray 1981:2).

The various sites and find spots of neoliths tabulated (in table 2.1) have been demarcated into two categories, i.e. sites on the upper and lower

courses of the river. Goalpara, onwards, there is a decrease in the gradient of the river leading to a higher quantity of silt deposition. The sites on the lower course of the river are situated in the present day Bangladesh in the Lalmai Mainamati as can be seen in Appendix B.

The sites, on the Garo, Khasi, Mizoram, Mushi, Naga and Abor hills have not been incorporated in the earlier discussion of the pre-historic settlement not due to the non-availability of archaeological data (as seen in Appendix A) for the region but due to the fact that the location of these settlements do not geographically form a part of the Brahmaputra Basin. The settlements that have been incorporated for discussion are those which are located in close proximity to the river Brahmaputra. The settlements in Kamrup Pairang, Goalpara, Sibsagar, are located in the valley and have revealed Neolithic finds. The places discussed are either in the form of Neolithic settlements or find spots of stray findings. As the collection of pre-historic antiquities from various parts of the region, consists of only one phase of Neolithic period i.e. the late Neolithic in the region which is characterised by the availability of ground and polished stone tools, shouldered, Celts and chord marked Pottery. (Sharma 1991: 54-55.)

A marked distinction can be drawn between the physiography of the north and south banks of the river Brahmaputra. In the north, the innumerable tributaries running down from the Himalayas reach abruptly

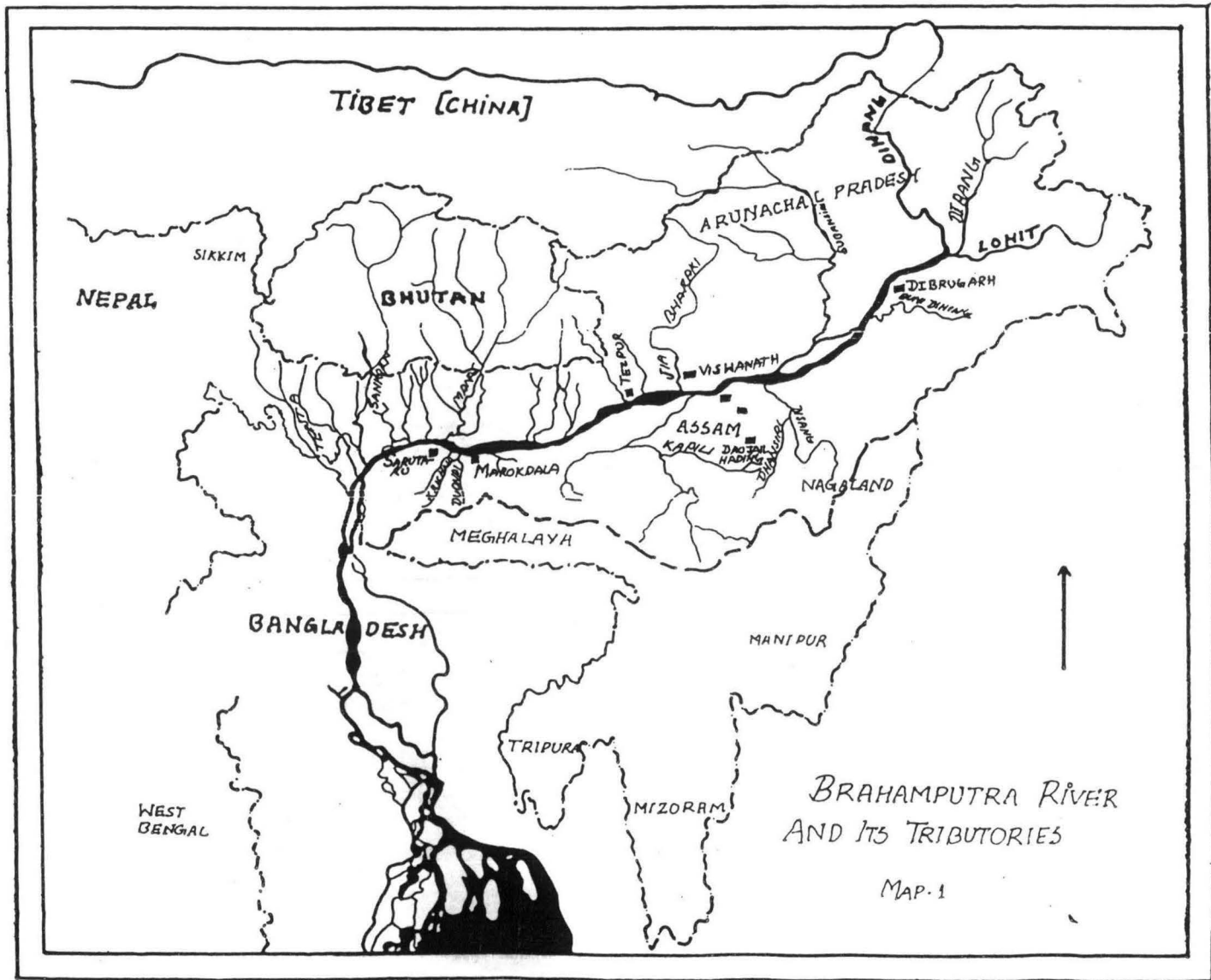
to the main valley and form a series of alluvial fans, which join and obstruct the course of the tributaries near the foothills. As a result, the tributaries branch out in different channels till they form permanent courses rather down stream in a southerly direction (Sharma 1991:11). There have been only two places on the northern bank, that have revealed Neolithic finds of shale and sand-stone in Lakhimpur district and stone, tools from Tezpur, in Sonitpur District (see table 2.1). The northern bank, being a huge marshy tract, that has been formed as a result of meandering courses does not provide sufficient hospitable conditions for habitation as the tarai or semi-tarai conditions that are formed where water trickles down resulting in wet soil and dense forest cover (Sharma 1991:11).

The southern part of the valley is less wide and uneven and the tributaries in the south-east are considerably larger, thus leading to a greater possibility of human settlement. Thus, we see the formation of gorges and lesser silt formation from the Siwalik mountain range, due to its low gradient. The sites and find-spots at Dibrugarh, Kamrup (partly), north Cachar hill district and Goalpara are located on the south Bank of the river.

PREHISTORIC SETTLEMENTS ALONG THE BRAHMAPUTRA

Since the colonial period archaeological sites have been excavated in areas along and beyond the Brahmaputra. Among them (in the upper

PRE-HISTORIC SITES ALONG THE BRAHMAPUTRA AND ITS TRIBUTORIES



BRAHMAPUTRA RIVER
AND ITS TRIBUTORIES

MAP-1

reaches) Lahowal, Naharkatiya, Barkhamtigaon in Dibrugarh District, have been explored. Bishwanath in Sonitpur district is located on the middle course of the river. Rani, Loharghat, Teteliya, Kamakhya hills, Saranya hills, Sonapur, Sarutaru, Marakdola in Kamrup district Goalpara in present Goal Para district are situated along the river Brahmaputra. Daojali Harding is in present day north Cachar hill district of Assam which is situated at a distant of about 1.5 kms. near the river Lanting, which is a tributary of the Barak river in southern Assam.

The various sites are situated within the valley, which is about 80-90 kms in width. The excavated sites are mainly found within the circumference of 25-30 sq. km. along the river. Secondly all these sites are found in the foot hills along the river which is not only near to the source of water but which also provides protection from natural hazards such as flood, rain, heat, wind, etc. and also from wild animals. Thirdly, if we look at the location of these sites we find that all these sites along the river are situated in well protected locations such as they are surrounded on three sides by hills and one side by the river covering an area of 5-10 sq. km. Among them are Guwahati, Goalpara, Biswanath, etc. (for detail see table 2.1).

TABLE 2.1
PRE-HISTORIC SITES/FIND-SPOTS IN
THE BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY

Name of the site	Location	Finds	Material	Remarks & Reference
Sarutaru	Kamrup district 25 k.m. South East of Guwahati.	Ground stone cells - Brown Buff & grey ware	Slate	Zhumming, slash and Burn cultivation, food producing. (Ray 1987: 295)
Marakdola	Kamrup	Shouldered axes p-wheel made pottery of fine Kaolin clay p-cord impressions from the shoulder to the base. Teracotta-flat and triangular form that resembles a stone axe.		1 m thickness, dated to the early centuries of the Christian era. (Medhi 134: 1991)
Daojali Hading	N. Cachar hill distt. River Lanting 1.5 k.m. E of the site provides water to the hill tribes	Facetted tools round butt axe, axe with broad cutting edge splayed axe, shouldered tool & ring stones, cord-marked Pottery.	Dolerite, gneiss, fossil wood.	The finds are the oldest in the region, wild animal Bones indication of Hunter-gatherer economy. ceramic c-14 dating 2000 B.c. 1200 B.C. (KAS 1984:47)
Bishwanath	Darrang district near Tezpur. Situation in the centre of the Brahmaputra valley.	Celts, grooved hammer stones, simple hammer stones, celt, grinding hammer stones.	Slate, gneiss, Posphorite, Volcanic ash.	(Ray 1987: 293)
Lahowal Naharkatiya Barkhamati – gaon	In district Dibrugarh eastern most distt of the Brahmaputra Valley	Flat celts, tanged celts, log back type of celts, quadrangular axes. Chisels, miniature celts, hog back type of celts.	Shale, sandstone jadeite	Saw-edge technique for the first time in India. (Ray 1987:293).
Goalpara	Goalpara	Tanged celts, flat celts, adzes, rectangular broad axes.	Igneous rocks	Similar tools China suggest a relationship with Neolithic culture of North West. China (Ray 1987:294).
Rani Loharghat Teteliya Kamakhya hills. Saranya hills. Linnat Sonapur	Kamrup distt. The sites are located in the southern fringes of the Shillong plateau	Tanged or shouldered celts, flat celts, small celts, quadrangular axe adze and chisel	Shale & mudstone phyllite	(Ray 1987: 294)

Archaeological sites and finds spots have also been excavated beyond the Brahmaputra valley in present day Bangladesh and Garo hills in the state of Meghalaya (for details see Appendix A and B).

To sum up, the river Brahmaputra links various archaeological sites, along its banks forming a linking point to connect these settlements. The various sites which were excavated till the 90's generally fall within the river basin, give us an illustration of the links between the various settlements as the river has always formed a common mode for its inhabitants since pre-historic times.

THE MATERIAL CULTURE - ALONG THE BRAHMAPUTRA

Finding of archaeological material to define a culture in pre historic context is the emphasis of an archaeologist. As told earlier, colonial archaeologist, who had excavated the various sites in North East India from 1867, had only emphasised on the collection of material found in the surface finds. From the archaeological found in the various sites along the Brahmaputra it is evident that there was a fairly systematised a pattern of life among the inhabitants. From the excavated material it is clear that there were various types of occupation and crafts being practised among the prehistoric dwellers, such as plant domestication, tool making, pottery making, etc.

Pottery has been found in various sites in areas along and beyond the Brahmaputra valley. In the valley Pottery has been discovered at the

sites of Kamakhya hills, Sarutaru, Marakdola and Daojali Hading. The Pottery at Kamakhya hills display grey and brown ware. While Pottery at Marakdola is wheel made Pottery which is made from fine Clay. (Medhi 1991: 134). Pottery found in various sites is described as neolithic Pottery. It can be categorised into four types vis-à-vis cordmarked, incised, stamped and Plain fine red ware (Medhi 1992: 237). There have been over 600 sherds discovered, out of which 595 were of cord impressed variety, 19 of stamped dull variety and 11 of brick red variety. (Sharma 1996:90). Was it each site manufacturing its own Pottery or what do these similarities indicate. The excavation at the site of Daojali Hading, has revealed the presence of pebbles and by products of fossil wood (Medhi 1992: 240). It was also found in the Lalmai hill excavation site in present Bangladesh (Chakrabarty 1992: 31) and in Burma (Gazetteer of Burma: 42). (for details see appendix A and B)

At the site of Bishwanath, in Sonitpur District of Middle Assam where grinding and hammer stones were found (Ray 1987: 293). While at Daojali Hading, there have been surface finds of grinding stone, Muller, rubbers, pestles which are associated with the Neolithic. Although there is no archaeological evidence for the presence of cereals such as corn, millets, rice etc., yet the presence of the above artefacts suggests the dependence on a food-growing or food-gathering economy. The grinding stone may have been used for grinding cereals (Medhi 1992:267) which may belong to the domesticated or wild variety.

At the same time, the presence of wild-animal bones, indicates that their material culture was supplemented by hunting and gathering (Sant 1991: 83). There is evidence of small and slender, bones which appear to be bones of small beings like birds. Some of these bones appear to have been partially trimmed and pointed and may have been used as needles, arrow heads or borers which were found in Daojali Hading as seen in table 2.1 (Medhi 1992 268). There is evidence of burnt tortoise shell, which indicates the presence of fishing, which is one of the essential and available food that could be tapped by the inhabitants of these settlements from the main river and its tributaries.

The evidence of a hoe from the site of Daojali hading give us some kind evidence for the presence of cultivation of grains (Sant 1991: 83). The various sites along the Brahmaputra, like Marakdola, Lahowal, Naharkatiya, Barkhamati gaon, Goalpara, Rani, Loharghat, Teteliya, Kamakhya hills, Saranya hills, Linnat, Sonapur and Daojali hading (Medhi, 134, 1991), have revealed stone axes made out of a variety of materials such as sand stone, slate, dolomite, gneiss, Volcanic ash, shale, Jadeite, igneous rock, phyllite etc. may have been important for cutting trees, in order to clear the forest for habitation in the region.

Regarding the geological availability of raw-material for the existing stone-tools, an understanding of the geological background of the region is essential. The formation of hills in the region is highly developed

and consists of a thick series of quartzites, slate and schistose with masses of granite intrusions and basic interbedded traps. (Wadia 1966: 104). The raw-materials that were used in the manufacture of tools were mostly locally available. The site of Daojali Hading reveals, the use of ordinary stone such as sandstone celts, edge ground tools, grinding stones and querns, slate celts, chisels, axes, Dolerite adzes and quartzite mullers. (Lahiri 1992:240) The only raw-material of semi precious stone, is that of Jadeite, which is not locally available and was probably brought from Burma, as is evident from the site of Daojali Hading, (Lahiri 1992:240) and also at the sites of Lahowal, Naharkatia and Barkhamtigaon, (Ray 1987: 293) in Dibrugarh district, on the upper course of the river. The surface finds from Lakhimpur district too reveal the presence of Jadeite and green stone (Sharma 1996: 88) which indicates that the raw-material was drawn from non-local sources and there was movement, in between settlements, in order to fulfil requirements

THE SOUTH-EAST ASIAN PICTURE

On the question of links between South East Asian sites and those of the Brahmaputra valley, before I discuss the similarities on archaeological grounds, common characteristics and contacts between the two cannot be denied. There also seems to exist, a geographical (monsoon area), and socio-cultural relationships between the two, as the valley region devoid of

political boundaries, does form a part of South East Asia. Though recently scholars are attempting to break away from the traditional Indo-centric or Sino-centric history of South-East Asia, in order to write its own distinct history, yet common characteristics and cultural contacts between the two cannot be denied. South-East Asia is a very important region as it stands at the cross-roads, where the most diverse cultures come into contact with each other and mix with each other (Wright: 1966: V-vi). The river Brahmaputra and its surrounding valley has been regarded as a crucial area because of its location as the gate-way to Eastern Asia (Sharma 1996: 151).

The finds of stone - implements¹ from the region such as the faceted and the splayed axe also the shouldered Celts such as those discovered at the site of Daojali Hading (K.A.S 1984: 47) have affinities with East and South-East Asia. The stone tools types and corded pottery connects these Neolithic cultures to Yangshao, Langshanoid of China and Hoabinhian of Thailand, thus dating it to the Early Holocene (see table 2.2) (Agrawal 1982: 106). Since the first discoveries of such types of stone-tools were made in the province of Hoa binh in Vietnam where there are particularly a

¹ The period is characterised by (Proto-neolithic) tools, that are polished on the cutting-edge, signifies through its stratigraphy, the transition between the palaeolithic industries. There is evidence of a mixture of two cultures; a surviving palaeolithic and another which had learnt the technique of polishing tools. Such late palaeolithic finds have been discovered in the Vietnamese provinces of Hoa-binh, Ninh,-binh and Ha-nam, Quang binh, Siam, Luang Peabang Site in Laos. The Shape of the tools follows the natural form of the pebbles from which they are made and they seem to be first attempts. The upper layer of the Hoabinhian bears the name of Bacsonian, after Bac-son where, the in the limestone abundant province, there are sites containing finds of this culture. The characteristic tool of the Bacsonian culture is the short-axe, made by splitting a bi-facial tool and polishing it at the cutting edge on one side only. The 'shouldered-axe' is the most common tool; found in Indo-China, which may have been made there or may have been brought there, from southern China or North-East India, where many examples have been found. (Coedes 1962: 12-15).

large number of sites, the name Hoabinhian was given to this culture (Wright 1962: 12). There is also a similarity in stone-tool finds from various caves excavated in Java, which have revealed quadrangular adzes, round axes and stone arrow heads (Hoojer 1969: 12-13).

TABLE 2.2
RECENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES
IN PENINSULAR MALAYSIA

Site	Finds	Reference
Kedah	Hoabinhian Stone tools,	(<i>JMBRAS</i> 1987: 30)
Gua Besar, Kanjung Wang Dalam, Baling, Kelanton,	Cord-marked and sand tempered pottery. Hoabinhian bifacially flaked pebble tools, unfinished Neolithic Adze.	(<i>JMBRAS</i> 1987: 35)
Gua Kelawar Sungia Siput.	Cord Marked Pottery Hoabinhian stone implements. Paintings of elephants. A faded drawing of a boat with 3 men on board, holding a rudder	(<i>JMBRAS</i> 1991, 86)
Kuala Kelumpang Selinsing	Mound of shell heaps shell ornaments bracelets, metal objects, stones and stone implements. Wooden object believed to be part of a boat, beads of glass and stone, food remains mainly comprising of shells.	(<i>JMBRAS</i> 1991: 87)
Joore Sungai, Renandi, Kota Tinggi	Pottery plain bodied with cord marked bottoms.	(<i>JMBRAS</i> 1991: 92)
Kamangkuala, Sin Bubit selambau	2 pieces of planks which are part of the rib of a riverine boat, were left on the bank of the river. Wooden rice pounding base.	(<i>JMBRAS</i> 1993: 70)
Palong - gunung senyum	Cord marked pottery sherds and food remains. Shells such as <i>Brutia costulla</i> in large quantity.	(<i>JMBRAS</i> 1993: 75).
Kelantan Gua Madu, (Ulu Kelantan Distt.)	Stone implements of varied sizes and shapes, especially the Hoabinhian, type tools, 20 stone, implements, pebbles with battered	(<i>JMBRAS</i> 1993: 75)
Gua tok cu Pulau	Neolithic stone adz shell remains	(<i>JMBRAS</i> 1993: 77)
Gua Batacinin,	Hoabinhian type stone tools and pottery sherds, numerous shells	(<i>JMBRAS</i> 1993: 79)
Gua Cha, Sungai Nenggeri	Hoabrinhian type stone tools, at the back of the shelter	(<i>JMBRAS</i> 1993: 81)

There is a possibility of the existence of contacts, since pre-historic times between India and South-East Asia, which could be established on the basis of archaeological finds but also due to the spread of similar types of fundamental beliefs and important rites throughout this region, known as the 'monsoon area of Asia', due to the heavy rainfall it receives, creating similar climatic conditions. Since the environment plays an important role, in the formation of culture, we see a similarity in the plant foods, such as rice, bananas etc. (Bellwood 1992: 55)

On the plane of material culture probably irrigated rice - cultivation, involving a certain level of social organisation existed along with the domestication of the ox and buffalo, a basic knowledge of metals, some navigation skills and the burial of the dead in jars and dolmens. (Wright 1962: 26). Even the use of bamboo hats, by farmers, known as *japi* in the valley is a common characteristic. In South-East Asia and India there has been the emphasis on the practice of various rituals associated with the dead and fertility.

To sum up, the prehistoric investigations in the region have focused on the archaeological significance of this region that emerges as one which was practising crafts such as Pottery and tool making, and also having connections with South east Asia. The river Brahmaputra acted as a means

of sustenance since prehistoric times, which provided the background for the emergence of domestication of a number of plants.

CULTIVATION OF RICE

The shift from the Palaeolithic to the Neolithic age for a community is determined by the domestication of plants and animals and the introduction of a settled life style. How and when the domestication of plants and animals occurred in the Brahmaputra valley in the light of archaeological evidence poses many questions in front of the historians. As seen in an earlier section on the material culture unearthed, in the Brahmaputra valley, such as the finds of querns, mullers, grinders and pestles from the various sites, it is evident that domestication of plants of and animals occurred.

One of the ways that the region has been looked at, is that of being inhabited and brought under cultivation as an outcome of agrarian expansion from the Ganga valley eastwards, for instance Nayanjot Lahiri's work (1991) who viewed this region as being settled after the 5th century A.D. with the coming in of Land grants and brahmin settlements. The inscriptions which are mainly from the 5th to 13th century are in the form of land grants have made numerous references to the term *dhānya* meaning rice. The donated piece of land mentioned in the epigraphs had to be

agriculturally viable as the land was measured in terms of the rice yield. For instance Devadana a brahmin received a plot of land in the 11th century A.D. from Indrapala which was capable of yielding 2,000 units of paddy. This appears to be a unique feature in the Brahmaputra valley.

This view is also supported by R.S. Sharma in his work (1983) that the middle Ganga basin came into historical lime light with the increased use and better knowledge of iron technology and of rice transplantation in the middle of the first millennium B.C. His work refers to the cultivation of crops in the Ganga valley, since the early vedic period. He argues that the cultivation of rice in western U.P. might be explained by the fact that in ancient times this area had a heavier rainfall and much water logging. Rice was also significant in the later vedic phase as it was used in vedic rituals.

On examining the agricultural past and the abundance of food plants especially rice (see table 2.3) and a number of other herbs and spices in the region a different picture emerges altogether. This section attempts to see the significance of rice cultivation in the region in order to change such an existing perception. Since, there have been no archaeological attempts to discover rice, there is no substantial archaeological evidence for the cereal but it does question the various issues addressed by archaeology and anthropology today.

TABLE 2.3

PROMINENT ECONOMIC PLANTS NATIVELY CULTIVATED AND RELATED WILD TYPES IN NORTH EAST INDIA:

1. **Cereals**
 - Rice
 - Coix
 - *Digitaria*
2. **Legumes**
 - Rice bean
3. **Tuborous and Rhizomatous plants**
 - *Colocasia*
 - *Alocasia*
 - *Dioscorea*
 - *Moghania*
 - *Circuma*
 - *Zingiber* (ginger)
 - *Alpina*
4. **Other vegetables**
 - egg plant
 - *Solanum* (wild)
 - *Momordica dioca*
 - *Momordica* (wild)
 - *Trichosanthes Dioica*
5. **Fruits**
 - Citrus
 - Mango
 - Muser
6. **Others**
 - *Saccharum*
 - Jute
 - Tea
 - Tree cotton
 - Pepper

SIGNIFICANCE OF RICE

A survey based on cropping patterns and production has revealed that rice, is the most extensively cultivated crop in the world, and forms a

part of the staple diet of a vast majority of the world's population. If seen according to the total area under cultivation, China is the largest producer, in the world, whereas Indonesia is the highest in terms of per hectare production. India produces nearly 21 percent of the world's production of this cereal. Other important rice producing countries are Bangladesh, Japan, Indonesia, Thailand and Burma. A survey of the global scene points out towards a South East Asian geographical zone, as a prime area of rice cultivation.

In India, rice occupies the largest land-area under cultivation, which is about 30% of the total area used for all food grains. Although rice is cultivated in various parts of India but it is the eastern parts which share a higher concentration, viz. Assam, West-Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh (Randhawa 1980: 262). A vast population are engaged in rice production than any other cereal, and out of 100 million hectares under rice cultivation, more than 90 per cent are in southern and eastern Asia. (Glover 1985: 265).

Among the variety of food plants available, rice vies with wheat in importance as a human food. Among the cereals, rice has the unique ability of tolerating continuous flooding and is often the sole crop for subsistence farmers in lone-lying monsoonal regions.² As seen by a geographers and

² The plant structure are semi aquatic, and chance transport air from the shoot to the root zone, enabling the macro-organisms associated with the rhizosphere to biologically fix nitrogen. As a result subsistence farmers are able to reap some harvest without fertilisation. (Chang 1989: 408)

botanist there is a reasonable possibility to assume that rice was one of the earliest plants to be cultivated or domesticated by food gatherers in both tropical and warm temperate regions, where standing water or intermittent flooding occurs during the growing season (Chang; 1985; 408).

FROM WILD VARIETIES TO DOMESTICATION

The genus *oryza* (Latin) consists of 20 wild species (both diploid and tetraploid forms) and two cultigens, the *Asia O. Sativa L.* and the *African O. Graberina Steud.*³ (Chang; 1989; 408). The pre conditions that have been spelt out by geographers and botanists over-laps with the environmental conditions of the Brahmaputra valley and its adjoining areas where there is evidence for the beginnings of rice cultivation during the Neolithic period.

Since domestication, refers to the genetic and accompanying morphological changes by which a plant becomes more suited to the conditions of a man-made habitat (as in the case of rice), and less suited to those of a natural environment. These genetic changes occurred through the intense selective pressure on wild stands of rice of man's collecting practices, harvesting, string, hushing, winnowing and setting aside a seed store for future planting. These husbandry practices operated to select

³ The geographic distribution of the 22 species, in the genus supports a hypothesis that the original home of *oryza* was the gondwana super continent which began to fractures in the early cretaceous period. The main plates rifted apart to form south America, Australia, Antarctica, South and mainland South-East Asia, Madagascar, and the major Islands of Oceania. (Chang 1989; 409)

certain characters present or rare, among the variable wild stands of rice of which perhaps the most important was a non-shattering spikelet base. At maturity, the spikelets of wild cereals become brittle and at the slightest disturbance, avoiding capture by a predator often aiding their distribution.

Systematic collection of wild cereals by early man would have selected for plants with less from usually brittle spikelets and this is of course, one characteristic of domesticated⁴ as opposed to wild rice.

There seems to be a general agreement among scholars that the domesticated species of rice (*Oryza Sativa* in Asia and *Oryza Glaberrina* in Africa) evolved⁵ out of wild perennial species separately at two different places in the two of Asia and Africa. (Glover 1979: 265).

⁴ Larger grains more securely fostered in their husks.

- More grains per panicle.
- Many characteristics of the stems, roots and leaves which he outside present consideration, because they are unlikely to survive for the archaeologist.
- The differences in collecting and processing habits would have resulted in the selection of different characters from wild rice.
- Collection of grain when it is immature.
- Harvesting by stripping into a basket in place of cutting with a sickle, and the use of a tool such as the Javanese finger knife to cut individual plants rather than a sickle to cut bunches pulled together.

⁵ A common path-way of evolution for the two cultigens has been suggested which is as follows: a common progenitor originating in Gondwana land - wild perennial species - wild annual species - annual cultivated species. Continuous inter-crossing, and cultivated annual species has led to a great diversity of reed-races, especially in the Asian section *Sativa Ghose*. The Asian need race is now pre-dominantly infused, with *O. Sativa* genes in sites near cultivated fields. The co-existence of three or 4 types at a site has greatly impaired scientific analysis of natural populations. Typical specimens of the wild perennial and wild annual forms are now rarely found in nature and the ancestral species of the two cultigens should be treated as conceptual of the past (Chang 1989: 409).

THE CRADLE OF RICE CULTIVATION

That the cradle of rice cultivation was the Brahmaputra valley is supported by various interdisciplinary studies. For the origin of rice cultivation in prehistoric times, the Brahmaputra valley may have been the most appropriate place due to congenial climatic conditions and rich soil content since the first ice age period. The river, which is older than the valley in evolutionary trends provides a favourable condition for rice cultivation. The river has increased the fertility of the land through heavy silt deposition enriching the fertility of the land making it fit for cultivation.

Various agriculturists, geographers and botanists have argued on the basis of the climate, the availability of the wild varieties of grain, the area of cultivation, and the technological evidence such as stone tools like grinders etc. for the presence of rice cultivation during neolithic times in the Brahmaputra valley. The existing view of various scholars that the origin of rice occurred in the North Western provinces in present day Pakistan is based on archaeological evidence scholars such as N.I. vavilov see this region where all these archaeological evidence have been found as being totally unsuitable for rice cultivation.

NI Vavilov, on the basis of phytogeographic plant bleeding emphasised that the Indian centre of origin of cultivated plants, especially

rice is in Assam and Burma which excluded North western India. Punjab and the Ganga Valley. Vavilov after selecting 117 species of plant varieties, argues that India is undoubtedly the birth place of plants such as rice, sugarcane, a large number of legumes and many tropical fruit plants, including the mango and numerous citrus fruits (e.g. the orange, lemon, some species of tangerine etc.). Assam is referred to in particular for its most remarkable citrus plants.⁶ Thus, the picture that emerges is one where the Brahmaputra valley and its adjoining areas are viewed as being very fertile and also the most appropriate regions for the domestication of a number of plants. The early geographers such as Vavilov refer to the Brahmaputra valley and its adjoining areas, while discussing the issue of the introduction of rice domestication in the region

Dr. T.T. Chang⁷, bases his arguments mainly on a knowledge of the biogeography of rice and botanical genetics, he accepts the intermediate stage of wild annual varieties. He limits the area of domesticated rice to a broad belt between 20⁰ and 23⁰ N, stretching from the central Ganga valley to the South-China sea, and suggests that North Eastern India was the most likely place for the first cultivation of rice, during the neolithic period.

⁶ As quoted by N. I. Vavilov in G.R. Sharma, et al., 1980, *Beginnings of Agriculture*, p.22.

⁷ Dr. T.T. Chang, is an agricultural geneticist at the International Rice Research Institute in the Philippines. He believed that the development of the main regional variations, rice, Indica, Japonica and Japonica took place as man extended the plants natural climatic range north into temperate China & Japan and South through the equatorial zone into Indonesia. All recent writers seem to accept the notion that the first rices seem to be domesticated were Marshy, water-loving varieties and that the development of hill-rice was secondary.

On the question of the dating of the origin of rice domestication, several problems arise due to the lack of sufficient scientific studies in an ethnobotanical sense. Yet, it can be concluded on the basis of the comparative historical data with Southeast Asia and as suggested by scholars such as T.T. Chang and other ethnobotanists, on the basis of the origin of rice and the neolithic culture in Southeast Asia that it probably originated between 12000-10000 B.C. (for details see Chang: 1989).

Since there have been no archaeological attempts in the Brahmaputra valley to look for the evidence for the domestication of rice grain, the absence of archaeological evidence does not indicate the absence of cultivation. The earliest archaeological evidence unearthed from the other parts of the subcontinent such as in the Ganga valley for the oldest rice remains are from the sites of Koldihwa in Mahagara (U.P.) and at the site of Chirand which could be dated to 6500 and 4000 B.C. respectively. .present dates available for the site of Daojali Hading in the valley, which reveals the presence of cultivation date back to the 2000-1200 B.C.

On the question of the spread of rice domestication T.T. Chaing and other botanists have concluded that from the Assam/Meghalaya/Kwang Heng zone of distribution, perennial varieties of rice migrated to the southern parts during prehistoric times with the help of the inhabitants environment and through other natural modes of plant seed migration.

It is clearly visible in the Brahmaputra valley till today that today the annual crops from the ancestral perennial variety never evolved anywhere in the world except in the Brahmaputra valley. Ethnobotanists agreed that it is possible only when there were some kind of wild varieties available. It has also been proved by the agricultural scientists that these annual crops are genetically roots of original perennial ancestral variety.

At the same it has been observed by the anthropologist who are working in the Brahmaputra valley that the present day inhabitants still cultivate various kinds of wild varieties for domestic use only, such as *Bora* rice, *Komal* rice, *Joha* rice etc. These varieties are locally produced for domestic consumption and also for ritualistic purpose which is required for the harvest related rituals and festivals, such as *Bihu*. This signifies the fact that these plants have a social significance for the various communities, which were prevailing since early time.

Since the early societies were unable to progress from a hunting and gathering economy until environmental changes in many different localities, due to which seeds of annual grasses and legumes were available for cultivation. They could learn to sow and cultivate these palatable cereals and grain legumes, and they probably were obliged to cultivate them in certain areas, because of the scarcity of other staple cereals. This

forced them to settle near the source of water where settled cultivation began.

Thus, from the above discussion it is possible to come to a conclusion on the basis of the botanical environmental and comparative studies that the domestication of rice played a significant role in the Brahmaputra valley since prehistoric times. As told earlier it requires to reinforced that the origin of rice cultivation establishes a link between the river and the settlements during prehistoric times in the Brahmaputra valley. Scholars have perceived that settlement in the region began after the 5th century with the brahmin migration from the Ganga to the Brahmaputra valley, where it has been claimed that cultivation was initiated by them. It would be rather naive to accept that before the 5th century A.D. inhabitants along the Brahmaputra, whose staple diet is rice were not engaged in plant domestication. This fact has reinforced repeatedly through the study of the environmental condition and availability of a number of grass varieties of plants, in other words the natural richness of the region stays witness to this fact.

CHAPTER – III

RIVER AND EXCHANGE

INTRODUCTION

The pre historic investigations in the Brahmaputra valley have brought to light the many tools and artifacts from various settlements and the river Brahmaputra, emerges, as a link between these settlements, manifested in the movement of non-local raw-material. As we had seen in the earlier chapter, the river Brahmaputra formed a link between the prehistoric settlements manifested in the findings of raw material such as Jadeite, which was probably brought from Burma. The Brahmaputra valley has been strategically located, as it had access to various cultures, like Southeast Asia since prehistoric times.

This chapter, looks at the exchange activities in the region, which emerged due to the river acting as a link between various river, acting as a link between various prehistoric settlements in the valley and also beyond with Burma and Southeast Asia, which further expanded with the emergence of consumption centres, during the early historic period. All societies have to go in for exchange, as each person is not producing everything in society. Exchange is a social activity and it is not dependent on the level of economic development in a society.

A variety of sources have been incorporated for the study of exchange activities, in the Brahmaputra valley. Due to the non-availability of literary texts and archaeological data for the early historical period, this study incorporates, a number of later day sources such as the British accounts, in order to look at the routes and commodities of exchange, which have been spelt out clearly only after the nineteenth century.

The commodities and routes of exchange discussed in the ancient texts such as the *Arthasāstra* and the *Periplus*, do point out towards exchange activity, being carried out during the early Historical period. The absence of archaeological data, in the region has led to this region being seen, as lacking exchange and consumption. Thus, this study attempts to highlight the significance of the exchange activities in the region. A look at the present day economic activities and the development of the textile tradition markets and crafts help us to draw upon archaeological data.

The potential of the river Brahmaputra, seems to appear in the form of providing communication links and also as a re-source base, for economic activities such as fishing and irrigation. The river being navigable has led to the movement of goods from one settlement to the other. Since, pre-historic times, there is the development of settlements on the river bank, which archaeological evidence clearly supports. That there is continuity of settlement at these sites during the early historical period and even uptill present times, is evident from other archaeological finds of a later date, (see table 3.1) and through epigraphic finds and references.

An interesting geomorphological feature of the valley is the presence of a good number of isolated hillocks or manadnocks on both the banks of the river Brahmaputra, right from Tezpur and Mikir hills to as far west as Dhubri, detached from the Meghalaya plateau by the degradational work of the river. Big cities like Tezpur, Guwahati, Goalpara and Dhubri are situated on the banks of the Brahmaputra. Beyond Dhubri, the river sweeps south-wards round the water shed between the Brahmaputra in Assam and the Surma in Sylhet (Singh 1971: 303-38). The existence of geographical structures such as rocks and hillocks led to the emergence of centres well protected from natural disasters, such as flood, which became important centres of exchange and consumption in the region. Apart from the emergence of such consumption centres, that acted as nodal points in trade activity, there was the development of other ancillary trading centres or “emporiums” that emerged as a result of such an exchange network.

Mahasthangarh or Mahasthan, known since the third or second century B.C. (Gill 1999: 154) is strategically located at the confluence of the river Brahmaputra and Karatoya and can be seen as one such controlling point for the to and fro westward movement of goods, vis-a-vis the trans-oceanic goods coming from the Bay of Bengal and secondly, the over land routes. The eastern most controlling point or “emporiums ” (Granges 1948: 134) can be seen in the northern part of Burma, at Bhamo, as it could direct the eastward movement of goods, to and from China.

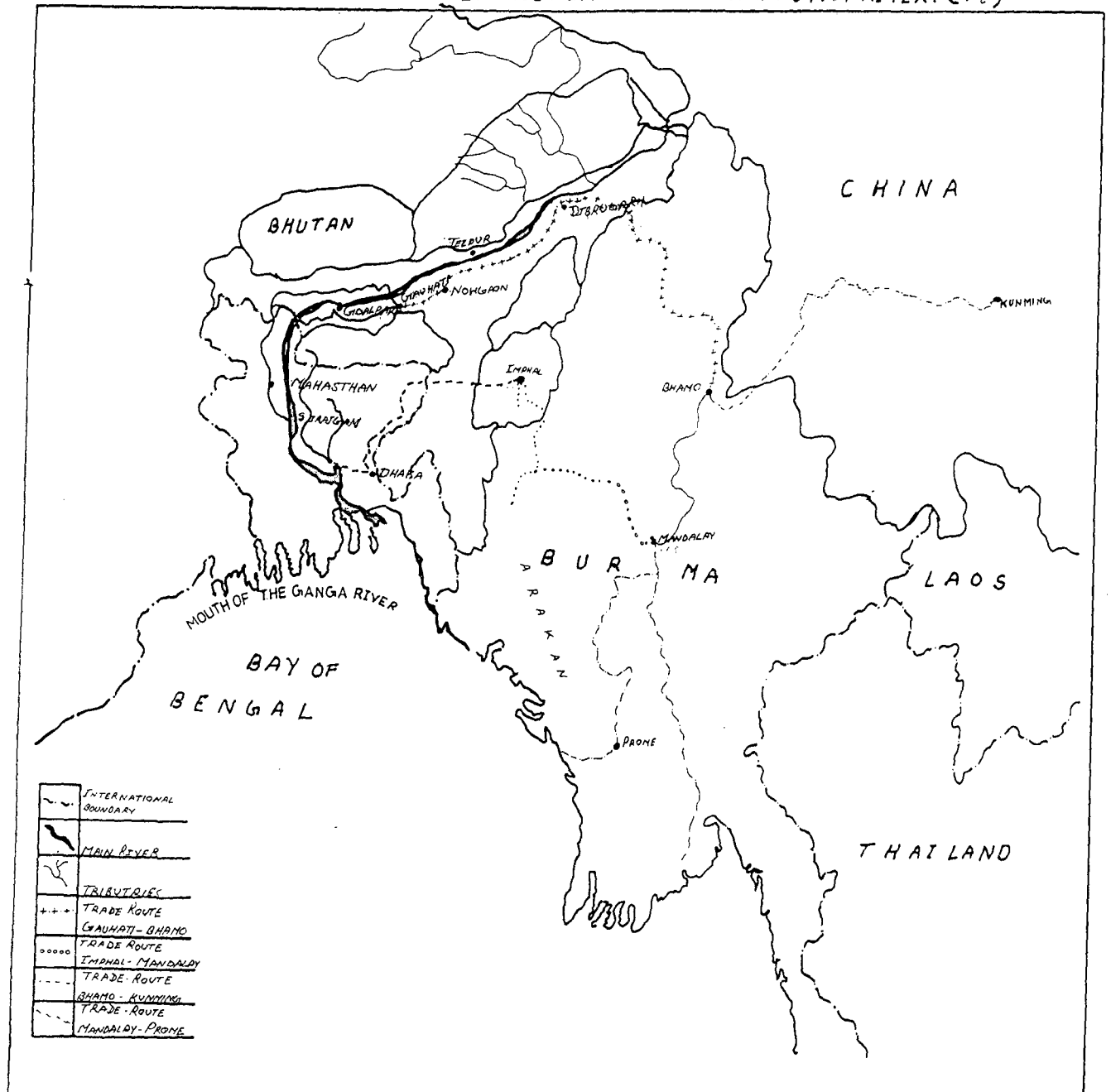
RIVERINE EXCHANGE

Talking of exchange, both overland and riverine, in the region, the River transport¹ is more convenient and less costly and sometimes safer and quicker than roads. Rich riverine traffic was carried along the river as heavy goods could be easily carried through it. The riverine posts were connected with present day trading centres on land such as Tezpur. Gauhati and Dhubri, and hence, the river established a co-ordinated means for facilitating easy and swift trade. (Acharya 1974:137). Looking at it from the Ganga-valley, we find that beyond Benaras the river Ganga and Brahmaputra have commercial significance, from Goalando (the confluence of the river Brahmaputra and Ganga) steamers sail upto Dibrugarh in Assam (Motichandra 1977: 12), Corroborated with the accounts of M'.Cosh, (1837:6) the interaction between the Brahmaputra – valley and Bengal which was both economic and social in nature, was entirely dependent on water.²

¹ The navigable inland water-ways covers a total length of about 3,261 km of which about 1,653 km are navigable by steamers and large country boats throughout the year and the rest is only navigable during the monsoon period. It is in the Tibetan plateau, that the river is navigable. When it enters the Siang division of Arunachal Pradesh, the gradient being very high, makes the river un-navigable. (Sant; 1991; 19). The river Brahmaputra is the main water-way with a length of about 720 kms. The partition has dealt a severe blow to the steamer navigation of the Brahmaputra. Formerly the bulk of the export and import trade of the region from Calcutta passed through this region (Singh 71: 331).

² “Down the River Brahmaputra via the Jennai, which meets the Brahmaputra at Jumalpore passes by the large town syragegunge. It soon meets the River Pubna for 2 or 3 days more till they come to the mouth of the Matabanga or the Jellingi, down either of which they drop to Calcutta” (M’cosh 1837: 8-9). It took Goalpara to Calcutta 25 to 35 days. Calcutta to Goalpara 80 or more days.

TRADE ROUTES AND TRADING CENTRES ALONG THE BRAHMAPUTRA RIVER. (1960)



LAND ROUTE

The over land –routes in the region, are dominantly directed towards four different destinations, as given in detail in the accounts of ((M’cosh 1837:9-11). These routes originating from the Brahmaputra valley extend towards, Bengal,³ Burma-China,⁴ Bhutan⁵ and Tibet.⁶

There is also a probability that the Assam - Burma⁷ route started from Pataliputra, passed by Champa (Bhagalpur), Kajangala (Rajmahal)

³ “Route from Bengal to Assam

- Mushidabad, Maldah, Dinajpore, Rungpore, Bagugah and Goalpora. (This is the line of the Caclutta dak, but it is almost impossible during the rains).
 - Dacca, Dumary, puwolae, Jumalpore, Singymary and Goalpora (impassable in the rains).
 - Sylhet, Chirra, Moplung, Nunpl our, ranney godown, Cannymook and gohati
 - Sylhet, Jayntia hills, Hautpultres, Nurtiung, and Nunclung and Jans and the River Kullung; about 20 miles from its functon with the Brahmaputra.
- M’Cosh; 1837; 10).

⁴ Route to Burma and China via an open road from upper Assam into Burma and thence into China, by which a considerable trade in Chinese and Burmese Manufactures is carried on.

- The line of trade is – Suddia, Bisa, Patkoye range, valley of Hoo Koong, town of moon – Koong (situated on a navigable branch of the Irrauaddy) namyong (M’cosh; 1837;11).

⁵ Route to Bhutan: There are numerous passes into Bhutan along the frontier, some of which led direct to the capital. These passes one called Dwar.

Bijni- Dwar Now – Dwar

Busca - Dwar Char – Dwar

(M’Cosh 1837; 10).

⁶ Route to Tibet

Tibet is open to travellers on foot from the extreme east of Assam. The route runs across the Himalaya mountains parallel with the course of the river Brahmaputra. The route runs across mountains. The journey from Sadiya most advanced British post in India to Bhatto in Tibet, which pilgrims take 16 days to reach. Route – Sadiya, Kudgin, Hucque, Galoom, Mamanoo, Dullee, Omano, Hullee, sumlay, Hamay, Kum, day, Rhesha, Bhaloo (M’cosh 1837: 3).

⁷ One route is by the valley of the Brahmaputra and up to the Patkai range and then through it passes up to upper Burma.

The second route is through Manipur upto the Chindvin Valley (Gerini records that the Hindu travelers arrived into the country by the Manipur route from Assam). The third through Arakan upto the Irrawady valley.

and Pundravardhana (north Bengal), and proceeded up to Kamrupa in the Brahmaputra valley. From Assam to Burma there were three routes in early times, as they continued till the present times, (As seen in map).

A survey of the routes and the map, points out towards the strategic location of Bhamo, in present day northern Myanmar, where all these routes met near it and then proceeded towards Yunan - fu. Kunming, the chief city of south-China, till present times is an important trading centre. Thus, Bhamo, provided an important link with south –East Asia and China, both in terms of cultural and commercial links.⁸ (Acharya 1974: 140-141).

In order to highlight the viability and the possibility of these routes being undertaken for journey, here is an interesting incident that is being quoted below.

Buddhabhadra was an inhabitant of Kapilvastu. At the age of 30, after acquiring an intimate knowledge of Buddhism, he decided to travel along with his friend Sanghadatta. After staying in Kashmir for some-time he was chosen by the Buddhist sangha to undertake a journey to China – travelling with Tche-Yen, fellow traveller of Fa-hien, he reached China via the pamirs. It is also mentioned in his biography that he reached Tonkin, through Assam; to the upper valley of the Irrawady and Yunan. Whatever may be the case from Yunan he caught a ship for China. (420-422 A.D.)⁹ (Chandra 1977: 181).

⁸ From P.C. Bagchi, 1974, India and China as quoted in “The Trade-Routes and Means of Transport in Eastern India in Ancient times” by N.N. Acharya, *JUG* p.141.

⁹ As translated by Motichandra from P.C. Bagchi’s 1927, *Le Canon Bouddhique en China*, vol. I, Paus, pp.341-343.

From the above discussion and various modern day sources it is evident, that the Brahmaputra valley in the early historic period was not just a destination for traders but it was used as a transitional route from the present day Bengal to the present day Northern Myanmar and south China.

COMMODITIES OF EXCHANGE

Exchange and consumption, are centred around goods or commodities, that are either locally available or are procured from other regions. The nature of goods maybe, seen in terms of items for daily consumption, that are ordinary goods, as well as luxury items. The texts such as the *periplus* and the *Arthasāstra* enlist commodities, which are mainly luxury items, which were available in the Brahmaputra valley, and were also brought from surrounding regions, such as China, Burma, and Bhutan. The literary data available, on the commodities during the ancient period is far more abundant in contrast to the archaeological data, where an attempt will be made to supplement it with later records.

And examination of the *Arthasāstra* (ascribable, to the last quarter of the 4th to the first quarter of the 2nd century B.C. (Mukherjee 1992: 31) is worthwhile as it enlists precious goods, to be received in the treasury. The description of the commodities is as follows. “Aloe from Jonga is black, black-variegated or variegated with round spots. That sandalwood from

Jonga is red or red-black and smooth as so is that from *Tūrupa*".¹⁰ The text also refers to other items such as *Tailaparṇikā* (incense), incense and *Bhadrasriya* (camphor). There is also reference to *Patrorṇa* which in the literal sense means 'wool in the leaf' to a kind of silk, (Kangle 1965:120). There is a tradition of a wild variety of silk¹¹ known as *Mūga* or *Eri* Silk, which could be identified with *Patrorṇa*. *Bhadrasriya* (camphor) mentioned in the text is available till day, as it is procured from the root of the *dhuna* tree, which is found only in the valley.

The *Periplus*, a first century A.D. Greek text, records the availability of spices in the region. Spices such as cinnamon¹² and long pepper (Schoff 1995: 82,194). The availability of these commodities is further confirmed through its discussion on its products by Watts (1908) in his compendium of commercial products of India. Black pepper being

¹⁰ Taken from R.P.Kangle, translation, part III, p.116. Japa, Jonga & Turupa are identified with place names in Kamarupa.

¹¹ For a detailed discussion on silk, see the section on textile.

¹² *Cinnamomum Cassia* is the plant which in China is regarded as having the finest quality of *Cassia Lignea* – the true Cassia bark of the ancients. According to a sample test conducted, that the best qualities of Assam Cassia are the true *Cassia Lignea* of Commerce (Watts 1908: 310). Cinnamon and Cassia are the flower –tips, bark and wood of several varieties found in nature in India, Tibet, Burma and China. The *Periplus* refers to *kasia* from Hebrew *Kezia*, the modern Cassia. This meant usually, in Roman times, the wood split length wise, as distinguished from the flower tips and tender bark, which rolled up into small pipes and was called *kinnamomum* from Hebrew *Khomeh*. Since the later years of the 18th century, the best quality of cinnamon is still shipped from Canton, C. Cassia, native throughout Assam, Burma and China. It seems altogether possible that Cinnamon of the ancient Egyptian and Hebrew records of Herodotus and Pliny, reached the Mediterranean nations from no nearer place than Burma and perhaps through the straits of China itself. (Schoff 1995: 82).

found in a very high quantity in the present day state of Assam and South-East Asia.

TABLE 3.1
TEXTUAL REFERENCES TO ECONOMIC PRODUCTS

Name of the Product	<i>Arthaśāstra</i>	<i>Periplus</i>	Watts*	Warmington	Region of Availability
Cinnamon		√	√		Assam, Burma, China
Long Pepper		√	√		Nepal, Assam, Bengal
Malabathrum	(<i>Patroṛṇa</i>)	√	√		
Silk		√	√		
Musk-deer (<i>Moschus-Moschiferus</i>)					North-West China, Nepal, Assam
Lac-insect (<i>Tachandiahacca</i>)				√	Pegu, Siam, Assam
Aromatic wood: <i>agaru</i> (<i>Aquilava Agallochum</i> and <i>Amalaceansis</i>)					
Sandal-wood	√				Kamrupa
<i>Tailaparnikā</i>	√				
Incense	√				
<i>Bhadrasriā</i> (Camphor)	√		√		
Shells			√		

The region is also rich in terms of forest products both animal and plant as this region possesses a 30% to 40% forest cover area (S.E.A.I. 1987: 86-87). The animal products comprise of Muskdeer¹³

* Taken from Watt. G. Economic Products of India, 1968.

¹³ *Moschus Moschiferus* (Musk) is the contents of the abdominal gland which has a penetrating smell. There are 3 recognized in trade 3 chief brands, viz.,

- Russian Musk
- Assam Musk
- Tonquin or Chinese Musk (Watt, 1908; 785).

(*Moschus moschi ferus*), ivory, for ornaments and rhino-horn for medicinal purpose. Plant products are mainly timber, especially teak, which forms an essential raw material for boat –making, cane and bamboo products.

There were other products not luxury items, but for daily consumption, which may have been exchanged at the main trading points, such as at Dibrugarh, Guwahati, Tezpur, Goalpara and Dhubri. Daily articles etc. were required by the people living in adjoining areas, near such centres. (Khadria, 1991, 163-164).

ROLE OF EXCHANGE AND CONSUMPTION CENTRES

As an outcome of the exchange network that emerged there came about exchange centres that played a crucial role in the region. Such a development not only facilitated, the exchange and movement of goods, but also acted as controlling points in the network. It would be rather difficult to see the emergence of such centres in isolation as they are either seen as forming connections, with other centres, or as forming crucial points, vis-a-vis the exchange routes.

The most crucial centres that emerged during the early historical period, can be established on the basis of travelers accounts, belonging to the early and later periods and on the basis of present day accounts. Some of the exchange centres to be discussed in this section are **Mahasthangarh, Bhamo and Ambari**, in detail to some extent.

There is the existence of other exchange centres within the valley, which are distributed far apart from one-another in the midst of rural settlements and they act as nerve centres for the variety of essential functions of the surrounding region. All the urban settlements in the valley are invariably concentrated in close proximity of the river Brahmaputra, (see map) which has been seen as the carrier of commerce and culture (Singh 1971: 325). The position of the cities on the bank of the Brahmaputra, facilitated commercial intercourse of the valley with the neighbouring regions situated near and far around the river. The network of the river system of the Brahmaputra played a conspicuous role in contributing to the growth of all commercial enterprises, both within the valley and outside (Acharya 1974: 139).

An exchange relationship existed between the Brahmaputra valley and other areas, as the inhabitants of the valley, by virtue of their geographical position could maintain contacts with Northern India, Bhutan, Tibet, Burma, and China. Some of these connections were of prehistoric origin as we had seen in chapter II, where the finds of archaeological material indicate such links. As far as Pundranagara is concerned, communication with this region, crossing the karatoya, perhaps was not difficult (Gupta 1991: 281). There was a northerly land route from India to China through Assam, upper Burma and Yunan. Historical evidence shows it to have been in use as early as 128 B.C. (Hall 1968: 23). A land route

existed via Tirhut in North Bihar which also seems to have connected this region through the 'grand-route' as far as Bactria (Gupta 1991:281).

Mahasthangarh or Mahasthan: On the basis of archaeological and literary research at Mahasthan, more than half a century ago (1879-80) Cunningham identified the ancient city of Pundravardhana with Mahasthan at the confluence of the rivers Brahmaputra and Karatoya.¹⁴ His report of a town in Bihar and Bengal in 1879-80 is as follows:

The old fortified city of Mahasthan stands on the right or western bank of the Karatoya river, 7 miles to the north of Bograha (Bagura) In the maps its name is written as Mustangarh, which is only a corruption of Mahasthangarh which means simply the "chief-city" or "capital". Most of the names in Bengal are corrupted, as for instance the Karatoya River, which is here called Kartiya. Mahasthan is only the title of the city of the 'Metropolis' of this part of the country, but the people know no other name....

... Mahasthan is the recognized traditional capital, which is known to every body far and near". (A.S.I. report 1879-90: 104-110.)

There have been varied views, expressed on the location of Pundravardhana. There is also a possibility of identifying Pundravardhana with the village of Kandanan, the north-west of malda town, (Jha 1991:81) on the basis of archaeological findings and literary data.

Dilip Chakrabarti describes Mahasthangarh as a Mauryan administrative centre with a provincial governor called Sumatra and also a

¹⁴ Karatoya is an important tributary of the River Brahmaputra. Mahasthan is located on the confluence of these two rivers.

prosperous city. A prosperous city could not have come into existence on the bank of the Karatoya without an antecedent cultural development. (Chakrabarti 1992:63). At Mahasthan, no architectural structure from the 3rd century BC. has so far been discovered in the excavated parts of ancient Pundranagara. On the contrary geological data would seem to suggest that the first settlement at the site dates to the post-Mauryan period. (Gill, 1991:156).

The earliest epigraphic source available to us, for evidence of settlement at Mahasthan is not of a mere rudimentary life-style, but gives the sense of being in an advanced stage of administrative control. The text is translated as follows:

To *galadana* (*galārdana*) of the *samvāṅgīyas*... (was granted) by order. The *Mahāmātra* from the highly auspicious Pundranagara will cause it to be carried out. (And like wise) paddy has been granted to the *Samvāṅgīyas*: the outbreak (of distress) in the town during (this) outburst on superhuman agency shall be tided. When there is excess of plenty this granary and the treasury (may be replenished) with paddy and the *gamḍaka* coins".¹⁵

By reading this inscription it appears that an order had been issued to the *Mahāmātra* stationed at *Pundranagra* with a view to relieve the distress caused, apparently by famine to the people called *samvamgiyas*, who were settled around the town. Two measures appear to have been adopted to meet this contingency. The measures consisted of the advance

¹⁵ *Epigraphica Indica*, vol. XXI.

of a loan in the form of *gamḍaka* coins, to *galadana* who, may have been the leader of the *samvamḡiyas*. The *mahamatra* of Pundranagara was entrusted with the execution of this order. The second measure consisted of the distribution of *dhānya* or paddy from the granary. A wish is then expressed that as soon as these measures are carried out the *Samvamḡiyas* will be able to tide over the calamity. With the restoration of profusion and affluence they have been asked to return the coins to the treasury and the corn to the granary, in other words, to pay the state back in kind and cash.

The significance of Pundranagara comes out clear from the description given in the inscription. Hiuen Tsiang (A.D.626) in his records of his travels into 17 countries travels from *Pun-na-fa-tan-na* (Pundravandhana) eastwards to *Kia-mo-lu-po* (Kāmrup); after crossing the great river, showing its accessibility. In his description he talks about the richness, beauty and some kind of official significance.

“This country is about 400 li in circuit. Its capital is about 30 li round. The tanks and Maritime offices with their flowers and gardens occur at regular intervals. The soil is flat and loamy and rich in all kinds of grain produce. The panasa¹⁶ (*Pan-no-so*) fruit, though plentiful, is highly esteemed. The fruit is as large as a pumpkin when it is ripe, it is a yellowish red-colour. When divided, it has in the middle, many tens of little fruits of the size of a pigeon’s egg; breaking these, there comes forth a juice of a yellowish red-colour and of delirious flavour. The fruits sometimes collect on the tree branches as other clustering fruits, but sometimes at the tree roots, as in the case of the earth growing. The climate (of this country) is

¹⁶ S. Beal translates it as Jack or Bread Fruit.

temperate the people esteem learning.... from this going east 900 li or so, crossing the great river use we came to the country of *Kia-mo-lu-po* (Kamrupa)". (Beal 1905: 194-95).

The various references in the texts, such as Hiuen Tsiang's account and the inscription found at Mahasthangarh dated to the post-mauryan period, point out to the fact that, Mahasthangarh was accessible from the Brahmaputra valley. Mahasthan emerged into prominence due to its crucial position on the routes of exchange towards south-east Asia, as seen in the section on land –routes. It also drew upon resources from the hill regions and also the Brahmaputra valley, through the river Brahmaputra. Mahasthan, as is clear from the text of the inscription, had its own administrative set up, that controlled areas around it. Thus, its significance cannot be just brushed aside by terming it as a Mauryan Centre, as termed by earlier scholars.

Bhamo- M'cosh in his description of the various routes, gives an account of the route to upper Burma, which finally concluded in China. Bhamo, the culminating points of three routes, (as discussed earlier) stands without any ancient-records or archaeological evidence. Though it is strategically located, as it appears obvious, from its location on the map, yet at this stage, it has not been possible to provide sufficient data to substantiate, but never the less its significance cannot be denied, as there have been no attempts made to look at this region archaeologically.

An account of a survey conducted in 1848, is as follows:

“The direct distance between Calcutta and the Chinese frontier of Yunan is about 440 miles, nearly the same as that from Calcutta to Ava. The road covers the sub-divisions – Bengal (Calcutta and Silhet)

Cachar and Manipur.

Burmese empire

Part I from Calcutta to Silhet is known and on the whole distance, river communication is open at all seasons.

Bhamo, is the most important town of Northern Burma, it was the *emporium* of trade with China; Chinese Caravan arrived here, selling all their goods here, whilst only a few merchants proceeded towards Ava since the earliest centuries. The commerce transacted here is still considerable and consists principally in an exchange of the various products of Yunan and neighbouring provinces of China for those of Burma and the more northern countries of the Bor Khamtees, the Mismis and Singphos, as far as Assam and Tibet”. (Granges 1848:132-134.)

Ambāri: the site of Ambāri, is located at the heart of Guwahati city in District Kamrup. The city of Durjjaya is identified with modern Guwahati and the capital of king Ratnapāla in the 11th century A.D. (Lahiri 1991: 91). Hiuen Tsiang in his account, gave a detailed description of Kāmarūpa which is as follows:

“On the east this country is bounded by a line of hills, so that there is no great city (capital) to the kingdom. This frontiers therefore, are contiguous to the barbarians of the south-west (of China). These tribes are, in fact, akin to those of the man (man lo are the South-West Barbarians

named by the Chinese) people and their customs. On inquiry I ascertained that after a two months, journey we reach the South-western frontiers of the province of Szechuan (Shuh). But the mountains and rivers present obstacles and the pestilential air, the poisonous, vapours the fatal snakes, the destructive vegetation, all these causes of death prevail. On the south east of this country, herds of wild elephants roam about in numbers; therefore, in this district they use them primarily for war. (Beal 1905: 198).

Hiuen Tsiang's reference to the city highlights the fact that not only was it an important city from the administrative point of view, but also location wise as it was strategically located surrounded by hills, but also, due to the fact that it was accessible via south-east Asia. This is also substantiated by the archaeological evidence, found during excavations which is dated back to the 9th century on the basis of C-14 dating.¹⁷

Archaeological evidence: Since data for the study of exchange in the form of written records is not sufficient, clues from archaeology can be examined for the study of this region.

¹⁷ The Lid-forms from the earliest phase show similarities with those found at Sisupalgarh and as such may belong to the early centuries of the Christian era. The pottery of phase II consisted of bowls and vases of red, grey, buff and Kaolin ware, consisted of bowls and vases of red, Grey, buff and Kaolin wares, occasionally stamped or rusticated. The characteristic pottery of Phase II was the Kaolin ware, the main shapes being Lota and bowl. On the basis of the occurrence of a few sherds of the Chinese Celadon -ware as also the C-14 determination (895-105) of a sample from the associated strata, this phase is ascribable to Circa, 7th to 13th centuries A.D. Phase II was distinguished by the use of the medieval glazed ware. Radio-carbon dates for Ambari in district Kamrup, is known through charcoal at the Historical levels, Trench A X 1= 2161, Layer 3; depth 1- m 920-105 (A.D. 1030).

In the past there has been a possibility of cowrie shells being circulated in the valley. In all probability, they might have formed a medium of exchange for the luxury items during the early historic period. There have been three hoards of cowries from Assam at Guwahati, Lanka, Hojai (Nowgaon district). At Guwahati the Cowrie shells were found in an earthen jar. At Hojai 4225 Cowries were found in a mutilated state.

Apart from the cowrie shells, there have been finds of 2 boats, one that was found during the 1974-75, excavations at Guwahati at Dimar Jhar (near Engineering College). It is a boat shaped terracotta object 250 m x 65 m. Both the sides of the boats are connected internally by a bridge (IAR: 1974-75). During the 1967-68, excavations at Jalukbari, district Gauhati, a boat shaped object made of burnt clay was exposed at the university campus. Along with this a large number of sherds have been found 33 metres away (IAR 1967-68). There is also evidence for the use of terracotta boats in present day Bangladesh, to cross the river Brahmaputra as mentioned in Birt's account (Birt, 1906: 4). The finding of these terracotta boats is significant as they may have been models of the actual river boats. Since these boats are undated they pose a number of question in front of scholars.

As seen earlier in the Assam valley, the river was used as a route, which is navigable throughout the year. Henceforth the river Brahmaputra

was the life-line for any kind of movement between the various consumption centres, settlements and for other activities.

For the dating of these activities it can be concluded that, although we are discussing trade and trading activities through various route, especially on the basis of later day account, and also to some extent on the basis of archaeology, which determines the existence of such activities was before 5th century B.C., that proves that after emergence of early historic settlements along the Brahmaputra exchange was significant.

TRADE, TOWNS AND TEXTILES

The textiles of a region portray its cultural richness and variedness. The textiles highlight, each community's economic development, cultural richness, their rituals, religious affiliation and their ideas about the environment and also their interaction with the outside communities. The Brahmaputra valley, is known for its rich textile tradition. It is famous for its Golden silk called *mūga*, which is found only in the valley throughout the world. The valley is known for *pat* (silk) and *Eri* (a type of coarse cotton). Since the early historic period it is evident that silk has been available in the region as referred to in various texts such as Kautilya's *Arthasāstra*, *periplus* etc. But there is no archaeological evidence that when and how the textile craft emerged in the region. Only the emergence of exchange and consumption centres during the early historic period

provided an area of investigation that may be through these exchange centres along the Brahmaputra that the textile tradition was facilitated. This discussion is based on present day data available on routes, commodities, crafts and centres to construct the origin and significance of textiles along the Brahmaputra.

My attempt in this section, is to see the social complexity, that emerged, with the development of textile craft, in terms of its significance in society, with respect to the exchange and consumption centres, and not merely establish its presence. I have argued, that more than economic significance it had a social significance in the valley. Textiles are associated with social and ritualistic events from the very early times, and it has played a pivotal role not only in the economic life but also as a social activity of the people. (Roy 1979: 10).

There have been a number of crafts that have been associated with the region, which may have been of daily use, or ritual items to be used on special occasions such as marriage. The prime crafts present are the weaving of cotton and silk cloth, the preparation of molasses and mustard oil the making of boats, canoes and the manufacture of metal, earthen vessels, rough iron implements, and native jewelry.¹⁸ Crafts such as weaving, oil crushing, basket making, rice pounding and a number of other

¹⁸ The Imperial Gazetteer of India vol.VI, 1908.

crafts were all carried on primarily within the household. Production at the artisanal level too had existed side by side under Ahom patronage, when these industries primarily catered to the consumption needs of the royalty and the nobility (Khadria 1990:36). The significance of the textile craft would be discussed in the forthcoming discussion.

TEXTILES

Before I begin the discussion on textiles, I would like to enlist the variety of textiles that are available in the Brahmaputra valley. Fabrics such as *Karpaṣa* (cotton), *Kambaḷa* (wool), *Balka* (Bank) and *Kosaja* (Silk from Cocoons) have been mentioned in chapter 2. the *Kalika Purana*. In a description of the *Lauhitya-region* describes *Kambaḷa* as a texture of fine wool (Sheep's wool or goat's hair) most probably imported from Bhutan or Tibet (Borah 1998:12). The forthcoming discussion centres around the manufacturing and distribution of cotton and silk textiles, of which this region exhibits a rich tradition. This is not seen in isolation but in relation to the social context and the complexities that emerge.

Another distinction that needs to be made while discussing the textiles of the Brahmaputra valley in the light of the vast eastern Indian tradition is that the elite traditions in the plains overshadows the rich tribal tradition in the hilly areas. One usually talks of the fine woven Muslins, the *Jamdani*, *Kantha*, *baluchari*, *tangail*, and *bandhas*, but rarely of the rich

and varied range of tribal weaves and the fabrics woven for people's personal use. This region has an amazing variety of weaves which range from the sophisticated and distinctive silk, to the intricately woven loin loom weaves of the different tribes and communities inhabiting this region. (Dhamija et.al. 1989: 133).

In the Brahmaputra valley and in its adjoining hill areas, there is a distinct difference between the work of the hill tribes and that carried out by the plains people. The hill-tribes weave essentially with the use of the back-strap or loin-loom, used only by the women, while in the plains, both men and women use a frame-loom. The only exception is the hill Garos, who also weave on the frame-loom. However, except in Manipur, the highly organized commercial weaving is carried out generally by the women. (Jyotindra et. al. 1989:134).

Kautilya in his *Arthasastra* refers to '*Patrorna*' (Kangle 1965: 120) which could be identified with *Kechapat* (raw silk) or *Eri* on *Muga* Silk of Assam. The word 'Silk' is from a *Mongolion* origin, *sirh*, meaning silk, Korean *sir*, Chinese *Ssi* and Greek *Satin Sericum* are its various names. Kandali's *Ramayana*, which is considered to be the first *Ramayana* written in a modern Indo-Aryan language during the 13th century in the Brahmaputra-valley, refers to *Neta Vastra* in several places. This particular

name for silk was common throughout the eastern parts of the country (Goswami 1996:102).

Commercially, silk is of two kinds wild¹⁹ and true silk.²⁰ The wild silk of Assam is derived from the two species of worms, *Eri* or *Erandi* (*Attacusricini*) and *Mūga* (*Antherora Assamora*). The present day scientific name of the *Mūga* 'Silk-worm' (*Antherora Assamora*) denotes its peculiar connection with the valley and it is in fact, found in no other part of India, except Dehradun, where it occurs sparingly. Another kind of *Mūga* is known as *Mejankari* which is a product of the worm feeding on *Mejankari* on *Adākari* trees. True silk is the present day variety of silk, the white *pāt-*silk is called *pallā* and is the product of the species of the *Bombyx textor* and the *Bombyx Croesi* which feed on Mulberry Leaves. (Watt 1966: 992) (Borah 1998: 13-14).

WEAVING PROCESS

On seeing the rich variety of textiles in the region, a look at the process of weaving and dyeing of the textiles, further reinforces, the fact that it was unique in nature in comparison to the rest of the country. In the weaving process too, a distinction will have to be made between those, that are produced in bulk and those produced by the tribes.

¹⁹ Wild Silk as the name implies is the product of silk worms, which feed on the leaves of various trees and plants growing in the forests.

²⁰ True silk is the product of the mulberry silk – worm.

For domestic production, a throw shuttle is used in the non-tribal and back strap by the tribes. In the state of Manipur fly-shuttle Loom is used, with the aid of a Jacquard device. The commercial operations have their yarn dyed at local establishments, whereas, the tribes have their indigenous methods of colouring their yarn and textiles, using locally available natural-dye, such as bark, seeds, flowers and the leaves of trees. Cotton, *pāt* (mulberry) silk and (*muga*) and *eri* (non-mulberry) silk are the basic raw-materials used. (Barnard et al. 1999: 130).

This region thus, not only portrays, an indigenous pattern regarding textile weaving, but also, rather than economic significance, has a significance within the social set up, as it comprised more of domestic production. The various tribal groups were engaged in textile exchange in order to fulfill their requirements. We see that it was not only the luxury textiles that were significant in the region, but also the ordinary coarser varieties, as they were items of daily use and were required more frequently by the inhabitants.

WHO ARE THE WEAVERS?

In the Brahmaputra valley and adjoining hill regions, the emergence of a specific weaving –caste is absent. (Barnard et al. 1999:130). There is no separate weavers class; here all people weave, irrespective of caste or

creed or social position and almost every house contains a loom. (Borah 1998:14).

Sericulture and weaving of silk was carried on for both house-hold consumption as well as for supply to the royalty and Ahom nobility. Implements used for placing the cocoons were made of bamboo and the process involved engagement of two persons, fifty persons could be winded off in one thread, although twenty was the usual number (Khadria 1990:41).

In such a trend, where there is the absence of a specialized group and where there is such a richness in production, the domestic craft plays a substantial role.

THE VALUE OF CLOTH

For the tribals *eri*-culture is a way of life.

The value of textiles in a society is not measured in terms of its monetary value but its social value. Textiles have their value in terms of rituals, as gifts, as symbols in social relationships and interms of who is weaving in society.

Unlike, the rest of India, women form the bulk of the weavers throughout the Brahmaputra-valley and the hill region. In the existing tradition, a girl was not considered marriageable until she had proved

herself a proficient weaver. During *Bihū*, (an agriculture harvest festival) a girl would weave a towel called a *bihūan* and present it to her beloved. (Barnard et al 1999:130). It is customary even today to offer to the elders of the family a woven scarf, *gamcha*, woven by the young women, in white cotton with a patterned border, worked in red intricate patterns, (Dhamija, et al 1989: 139) comprising of stylized forms of birds, animals, humans, flowers, foliage and geometric motifs. Old patterns were preserved by the families by being woven as samples, with bamboo sticks added in place of the weft so as to preserve them over generations.

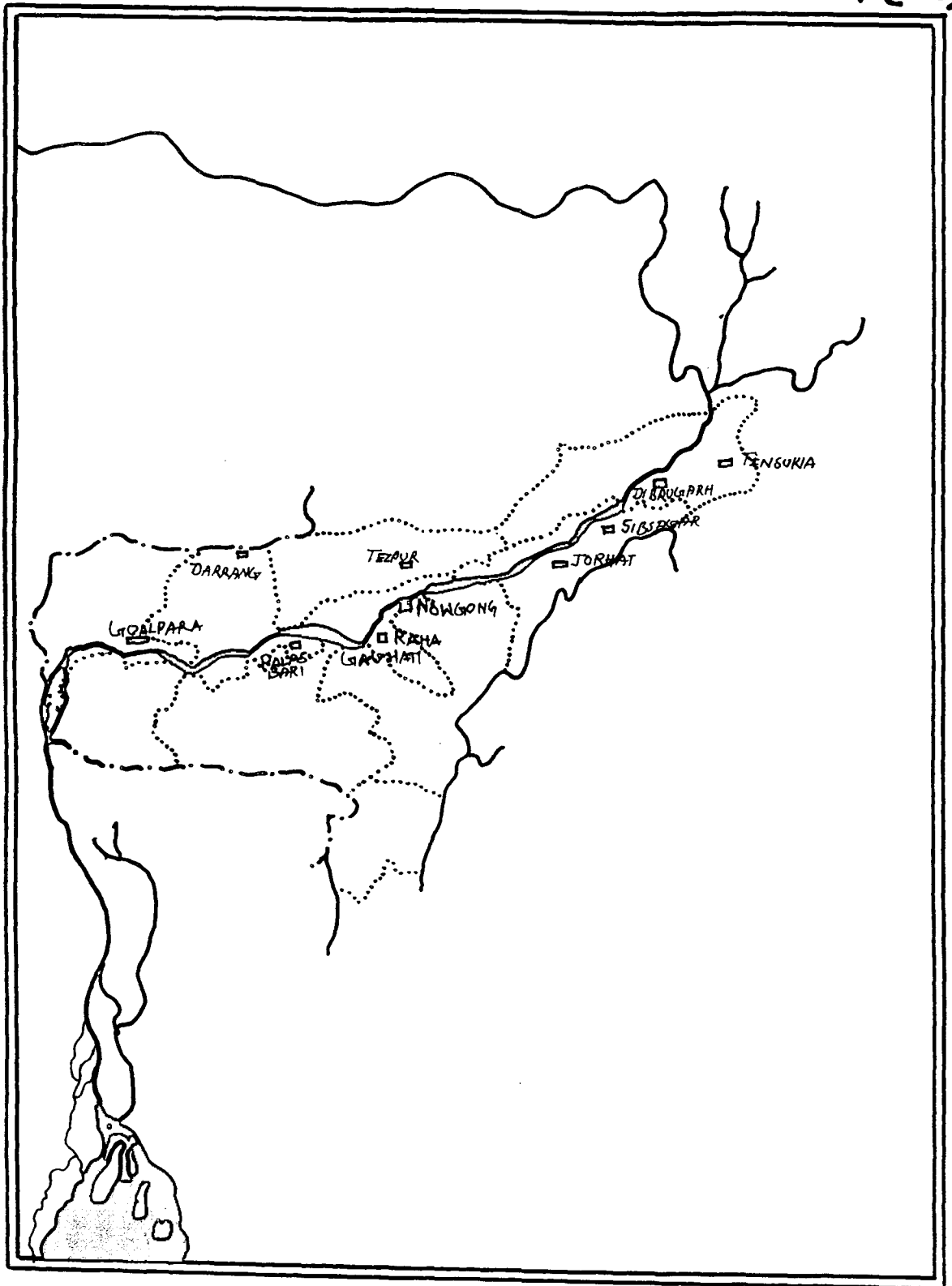
The significance of cloth in marriages is seen during such occasions as women wearing some article of silk at their wedding, emphasizing its sacred value. Apart from this a bride's wardrobe is incomplete, without a large section of silken clothes that she receives as gifts from the bridegroom and his parents. The silk *mekhalā-chādar*, traditionally worn by the women in the valley and hill its different versions in hill regions, is woven from the golden coloured *Mūga* silk which is a specialty. Rich brocaded patterns are woven on the *Mūga* silk with thick extra weft patterns which are worked in black, red or in natural white. A finely woven *chādar*, matching with the *Mūga* silk *mekhalā*, is an essential part of the wedding ceremonies or festivals of the people (Jain et al. 1989: 139).

Religious significance of cloth is seen in the later literature of Sankardeva and others, we get ample reference to this fabric as *sari*, *netā* *bhumī* etc. Cotton cloth is mentioned in several places. The donation of cloth on auspicious occasions is also mentioned. Sitting on a laid out cloth on auspicious occasions also is referred to (Goswami 1996: 103). Till today, in each household, the sacred text of the Vaisnavites the *Bhagvat gītā* is kept on a *thapona* a small wooden stool, and is covered with a *gamcha* (white –cloth).

Weaving among the tribal societies is a home-craft, using a simple back-strap loom of the kind found in Indonesia. The fact that the Brahmaputra valley and the hill region had pre-historic links as we had seen in the previous chapter. Scholars have also seen similarities in the textiles and also the traditional dress the *Mekhala*, which is worn in a slight variation in south east Asia such as, Vietnam, Indonesia and Burma. The textiles produced are simple striped fabric sometimes decorated with needle weaving and with shells, seeds, beads and pieces of metal. Thus, textiles do present a pattern, which has resemblances with South-east Asia. Ruthbarnes in her paper²¹ on the Naga textiles, draws similarities with the Naga and the South-east Asian pattern.

²¹ Ruth Barnes: 1989, Iconography and technology in the Naga hills: A Historical collection in the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford. Paper given as part of the panel: Local traditions and International contacts: Material culture as Historical Evidence in Mainland and Insular South east Asia.

WEAVING AND TRADING
CENTERS IN THE BRAHMPUTRA VALLEY (19th c.)



Thus, we see that cloth had varied functions, once it entered society. It's function is not only as a dress, but also as a gift on special occasions, such as marriage and festivals, also it had a religious significance in rituals.

TOWNS AND MARKETS

The richness in textiles, which exists in this region till today, played a crucial role in society, as is evident from the previous discussion. This section attempts to survey the present-day manufacturing centres and local markets, better known as hats, which have played a crucial role in the society.

The Brahmaputra valley and its adjoining hill regions, produce two-third of India's non-mulberry silk. Commercial weaving is centred at Sualkuchi, Raha, Palasbari and at other centres, but out of these Sualkuchi remains one of the most important *mūga* silk centres. (Dhamija et al 1998: 139). These manufacturing centres are located close to consumption centres, such as Guwahati.

On the question of its role in long distance trade scholars deny its role in a significant way. Silk is mentioned in lists of textiles in early, Buddhist texts the term *Ksauma* might refer to flax, but it could also mean a different grass fibre, of a type that was used in China during Han times and is still woven in the hilly region along the Brahmaputra valley. (Barnes 1997:44).

According to some scholars regarding the trade of silk, the Indians were intermediaries (Warmington 1995:176) in two ways-firstly, a part of the silk sent by the Romans was diverted from the land-route and secondly, the Gulf of Cambay may have received its silk in the same way and by ordinary trade between India and China; but probably due to the location of the routes, the silk that came from China by sea or through Yunnan, down the river Brahmaputra to the Bay of Bengal only as trade between India and China.

Nayanjot Lahiri (1991:97) is of the opinion that an insignificant amount of silk, produced in the valley was 'exported' to other parts of the country. Uptill the 19th century, the silk of Assam was produced not in a large quantity. She has termed it as a 'part-time' occupation, of every peasant household. However, the presence of the textile craft in the *Arthasāstra* indicates (the term *Patrorna*, is mentioned) how significant a craft this was in the Brahmaputra valley. Such views on either exchange activity or manufacturing of products, or its social significance is negated in society tends to lead to conclusions and myths, being formed in the minds of later scholars.

On the question of markets, there is epigraphic reference to a market place; *pattana* (Lahiri 1991: 109). The name of the town of Harappesvara

suggests that it may have been a *hāṭṭa* i.e. a market place.²² The basic structure of the market having undergone very little change, till today *hats* are still the most popular place for marketing transactions. These are mostly held once or twice a week and were the meeting ground for the primary producer and the middle man or *bepori* besides the buyers. Attendance at these hats depended on the importance of the locality (Khadria 1990:163).

An example of a well frequented *hāt* for eg. is the Sunday *hāt* at Singimari in Mangoldoi sub-division of Darrang District, used to be visited by 4,000 to 5,000 people. Villagers used to throng the market even from distances as far off as 25 miles, with their produce and transactions used to be carried on in grain, poultry, vegetables, fish, fruit, betel nut and coarse home-spun cloth and seasonally also in silk cloths, which were brought by Marwari Merchants. Latacil in Guwahati is referred to as one of the earliest *hāts* in the city (Khadria 1990:164).

The significance of such institutions, such as the *hāt* cannot be just underplayed. Guwahati, Palasbari in Kamrup, Bishwanath, Tezpur and Mangoldoi, Nowgaon and Roha, Golaghat, Jorhat, Dibrugarh and Sadiya, were seats of commerce along the Brahmaputra and its tributaries.

²² She dates the emergence of markets to the 7th century A.D. on the basis of the Dubi Copper-plate grants.

From the above discussion it is evident that textile tradition plays a significant role in the life of the inhabitants along the Brahmaputra. I have argued that the textile craft had a social significance in society, but in the process it led to the emergence of exchange centre and subsequently towns. As can be seen in the case of Sulakuchi near Guwahati, which is the main trading centre for silk along the Brahmaputra, emerged as one of the leading urban centres in Assam. Such centres have not evolved in a short process but requires a population base. The exchange of textiles among the tribes also played a significant role in this process. Thus we can come to a conclusion that textiles process helped to establish towns and trading centres to spread the commodities with respect to the population.

From the entire discussion of the two sections it might be possible to draw a conclusion that in the long process of time, locally available commodities with the help of peripheral available commodities helped to promote trade along the Brahmaputra.

CHAPTER IV

RIVER AND THE INHABITANTS

They are a war like ferocious people who make plunder their profession and live in a good measure by levying black mail from the cultivators.

(M'cosh 1837:141)

The above statement was written by John M'Cosh, a surgeon, by profession about the tribes inhabiting the Brahmaputra valley and its adjoining areas. Various perceptions that have filtered down from the colonial accounts have moulded the present day scholarship. Such an example is quoted below:

.....legends associate the beginnings of Aryanism in Assam with the establishment of Naraka's rule in that land of the *Kirātas*. These barbarans were known even to the Europeans as early as the first century A.D....

(Sircar 1990:81)

In chapter two, as we have discussed earlier that the contribution made by anthropologists in the study of the history of the Brahmaputra valley. As we had seen earlier that this contribution was by no means restricted to studying present communities, but much of the archaeological work in the region was also undertaken by anthropologists, such as Dilip Medhi and T.C. Sharma. As a result the focus has often been on tracing continuities between material artefacts unearthed in archaeological excavations and present usage or practice. In contrast, complexities in

social organisation, ritual observance and exchange networks have received much less attention. Besides, historical writing in the context of ancient India has primarily stressed the beginnings of agriculture and agrarian expansion and has hence focussed on developments in the Ganga valley. A combination of all these factors has resulted in the relegation of the Brahmaputra valley as an area of cultural backwardness. As pointed out in chapter II, this is a somewhat erroneous perception, especially in view of the region's rich pre-historic past. In chapter III, a survey on the areas exchange activities brought to light the richness of this area in terms of its commodities and the crucial role played by it on the exchange routes.

A NOTE ON THE SOURCES

As plethora of sources have been incorporated in the study of the inhabitants in this chapter ranging from the ancient texts such as the two epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, the *Althasāstra*, Hiuen Tsiang's account, the early medieval and medieval sources such as the inscriptions, and the *Buranjis* and also the later day colonial accounts. In such a varied range of sources we can see that there exists a diversity in the nature of these sources, as they have all been written with a different purpose.

Another significant factor that has moulded the perception of the region is the absence of indigenous written sources. As a result, the early

history of the region has been written based on Sanskrit sources and inscriptions. One source that has been under researched and under – utilised is the oral tradition and indigenous history. The inscriptions that were written in the region belong to a later date. The inscriptions are dated from the 5th to the 13th century A.D. whereas, the Ahom Chronicles, known as the *Buranjis* belong to even a later date from the 13th century onwards. The British accounts on the region date from the 19th century onwards, such as that of M’Cosh (1837). Thus we see that there is no chronological unity in the sources. The only common thread that ties up these sources is that they all highlight the cultural backwardness of the region.

This chapter attempts to look at the two different trends that emerge from the Sanskrit literature. There is a continuous dichotomy that exists in the way, this region and its inhabitants are perceived. On the one hand, they are seen s living outside the folds of agrarian life-style as forest dwellers and on the other hand the region emerges as providing exotic items and also practicing crafts such as textile weaving etc.

THE ANCIENT TEXTS

Among the ancient texts, the Sanskrit epics, the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata*, within the folds of the various *Parvas* and *Kandas* have given a description of the Brahmaputa valley and its inhabitants.

According to Macdonnel, the Kernel of the *Rāmāyana* was composed before 500 B.C. but the latter portions were probably not composed till 200 B.C. or ever later. The *Mahābhārata* may have been compiled between 500 B.C. and A.D. 400. The references that occur in the two epics, present a picture of this region being inhabited by various tribes, who inhabited the peripheries of kingdoms, but participated in activities within the kingdoms. The description in these two texts, present a dichotomy, as on one hand they are seen as contributing rich gifts to the kings and on the other hand they are seen as forest dwellers and tribals. This may however not be true in all cases as in section XIX of the *Udyoga Parva*, of the *Mahābhārata* and in the *Bhishma Parva*, where a vivid description is given of the composition of Yudhisthira's army, the *Kiratas* are referred to as forming the 'neck of the army' and it is clear that they comprised of a formidable section of the army.

The first instance in the *Rāmāyana*, where Sugriva sends his monkeys to the east in search of Sīta in the *Sundarkānda* (39:19-29).

Sugriva orders the vanaras:

"explore the eastern region, with its forests, woods and mountains.. search among the mountain fastness, the forests and rivers for Rama's beloved consort..... and the *Kirātas*, hunters who are golden hued, of pleasing looks possessing thick hair worn in a knot, who subsist on raw fish and those creatures tiger-men, terrible to behold. "O dwellers in the woods, search carefully in all these places that are accessible by climbing and swimming.

The *Kirātas*, mentioned in the above passage, have been identified as the forest inhabitants of eastern India, but there is no consistency in the texts on this point of view. Monier Williams defines them as a degraded Mountain tribe, inhabiting woods and mountains and living by hunting, having become *śudras* by their neglect of all prescribed rites, also regarded as *mlecchas*. Scholars have prescribed various opinions on the issue of their original home. There is also a possibility of the origins of the *Kirātas* in the Vindhyan Mountains in the east. There could be a probability of the migration of one tribe to another region. It is possible that the term *Kirātas* was used in a wider context by the ancient Indian writers. The name *Kirāta* in the course of time came to be used as a common noun i.e. to mean a savage, hunter, mountain habitat etc. *Kirāta* was used specifically for people characterized by such livelihood, such as hunting and fishing (Sen 1998).

In the various folds of the *Parvas* of the *Mahabharata*, we see that there is the incorporation of various peoples belonging to the various lands. There is a constant reference being made to groups of people such as the *Cinas* and *Kirātas*, made in the text, which will be taken up later for discussion. The *Bhisma Parva*, gives a vivid description of the composition of the army in the *Mahābhārata war* and the various groups coming from different regions and the *Kirātas* are referred to as forming the 'neck of the army'.

This is evident from an incident narrated in the *Mahābhārata* in the *Kairātapaṇvan*,¹ (*Mahābhārata* III: 38-41) gives a description of the famous episode the *Kirātarjūniya*, where Arjuna's encounter with a *Kirāta*, who was Siva himself in disguise. In this episode it becomes clear that if these *Kiratas*, who lived on hunting-gathering were looked down upon, Siva would have never taken the form of a *Kirāta*.

In the IXth section of the Bhisma Parvan, Sanjay gives a Vivid description of Bharata to Dhritarashtra. In the course of his mentioning the various provinces he refers to "the hilly tribes and many tribes residing on land staying at the foot of the hills", one of which is the *Kiratas*.

We also find the use of the term *Mleccha* for the king of Pragjyotisa in the Drona Parva:

"When those troops thus broken, fled away in all directions, the ruler of the Pragjyotisas then advanced against Bhima, upon his elephant, with its two (fore) legs and trunk contracted filled with rage and with eyes rolling, that elephant seemed to consume Pandu (like ablazing fire)... while the elephant was falling down, the *Mleccha* king also was falling down. (Roy 1970: 58-64).

In the text, the king Bhagadatta of Pragjyotisa may have been mentioned as a *Mleccha*, as he did not speak Sanskrit. On the other hand the *Mahābhārata* describes the king of Prāgjyotiṣa as 'the old friend of

¹ It is the 33rd of the minor Parvans of the *Mahabharat*, forming an episode to Arjuna's journey to the abode of Indra (Sorensen 1978: 372.)

Yudhisthira's father; he has bowed to Jarasandha, but loves Yudhishtira as a father.... He was a friend of Indra and equal to Indra in battle...'
(Sorensen 1978: 173)

In the above description in the Mahābhārata of Bhagadatta, the king of Prāgjyotisa is described as a friend of Arjuna's father. The text further describes him to be as brave as Indra himself. From the above references it becomes clear that the kingdoms beyond the Ganga valley were not considered weak, but always posed a threat to the agrarian based societies who always attempted to please the forest dwellers. However, it is not true that all forest dwellers, were robbers and plunderers, but infact were engaged in a number of activities in the forests.

The Mahābhārata also cites an instance, during Yudhishtira's Rajasuya yojna, where Bhagadatta the king of Pragjyotisa was among those who paid rich tributes to the king. These tributes comprised of articles such as swords with hilts made ivory and an iron vessel. Such exquisite tributes² could only be given by a king who was not just a mere forest dweller, but at par with the other kingdoms.

The Arthosastra (ascribable, to the last quarter of the 4th to the first quarter of the 2nd century BC) presents a similar dichotomy between the

² He brought *acmasaramayam, bhundam cuddhadanta - tsarun asin* (Sorensen 1978: 113).

various notions that the mauryan state harboured towards the forest dwellers and at the same time talks about exotic items such as incense, etc. being brought from the region of Kāmarūpa and also refers to the textiles such as Patrorna being brought from the region.

On the basis of the *Arthaśāstra*, we see that the forest dweller was known as the *aṭavika*, which generally ascribed to the food gathering population living in the jungle. The *Arthaśāstra* refers to two kinds of forests, namely the material forests known as *dravyavana* and the elephant forests called *hastivana* (Kangle 7.11.13). Various items such as fish, game, elephants and various raw materials were produced from the forest. (Kangle 1.18.20).

The Greek text *periplus* presents a dual picture about the Brahmaputra valley. The *periplus* refers to the term *Cirrhadae*'. Schoff (1995:253), on the basis of present day data ascribes them to the *Bhota* tribes; whose descendants, are still known as the *Kirata*, live in the Moungh, west of Sikkim. The description of the silk route in the *periplus* (Schoff 1995:272) mentions that only the upper course of the Brahmaputra was taken by travellers and that the lower course of the river was rarely used, owing to the 'savage' tribes inhabiting it. The *Cirrhadae*, are also defined as a 'barbarous tribe' and a race of men with flattened noses, very

savage; another tribe, the Bargysi and the Horse-faces and the long-faces,³ who are said to be cannibals. The periplus also refers to various commodities coming from the region. Items such as musk, spices and incense were procured.

Hiuen Tsiang's account (A.D. 629) (Beal 1905:198) gives a description of the kingdom of Kamarupa (Medieval name of the Brahmaputra Valley). The description has been quoted in detail in chapter III, but here in the context of the inhabitants, it says that the kingdom was bordering the barbarians of the south-west (of China). These tribes are, in fact, akin to those of the 'Man' tribe (Manlo are the south-west barbarians named by the Chinese people) and their customs. The 'Man' tribe in the present day valley are concentrated near the upper course of the Brahmaputra at Tinsukhia, their main occupation being settled agriculture and wet paddy cultivation (Singh 1994: 749).

The image given in the account written by Hiuen Tsiang is one where on the one hand they described as having close connections with the 'barbarian' tribe inhabiting China, in terms of their culture. However, the other image that the text gives us is, that Kamrupa was a capital city, that had a high level of organisation and was bustling with activity.

³ Schoff, mentions that the *Varha Samhita Purāna* mentions a people "in the mountains east of India, "that is, in the hills on the Assam - Burma frontier, called 'Asvavāda', meaning" horse -faced".

THE 'INSIDER' VIEW

As seen earlier, the Brahmaputra valley displays an absence of indigenous sources for the early historic period. So far the region has only been viewed in the light of non-local source such as the *Rāmāyana*, *Mahābhārata* and the *Arthasāstra*. The indigenous sources are the inscriptions and the *Buranjis*, as told earlier, belong to a later date. However, one cannot just overlook these perceptions, as they emerge from within the valley. A discussion on the nature of references, in the Sanskrit sources, comes out in contrast with relation to the local sources. The local sources available in the region are the **inscriptions** ranging from the 5th to the 13th century, the begin with the coming of land grants in the region uptill the Ahom invasions.

Earlier works have discussed the notion of Mleccha in the light of the inhabitants living in the region. There have been various attempts to draw continuities with the present day tribes. Dr. Nayanjot Lahiri's (1991) monograph looks at the social set-up existing during the pre-Ahom times, for instance the varna system, the jatis or occupational groups which may have been incorporated under the varna system in the society.

Scholars such as P.C. Choudhary (1956) have looked at the term *Mleccha*, and have identified it with the *mech* community living in the valley. However, this may not be the case as the term may just refer to a

non-Sanskrit speaking person. Such as the reference cited in the Bargaon grant of Ratnapala where Salastambha is described as the lord of the *Mlecchas* (Sarma 1981: 168) and not necessarily.

This view may be supported by the fact that the Tezpur rock inscription of Harjarvarma (Sarma 1981:170) refers to river ports and boats playing in the river Brahmaputra, carrying goods and people. This stands in contrast to the existing perception in the epics that had termed these people as hunters and *Kirātas*. The reference to the term Brhadrāva, in the Subhankarapataka grant of Dharmapāla, where he is referred to owning an adjoining piece of land close to a plot of land described in the text (Sarma 1981: 221), Vidyavinoda the pioneer translator of the interprets to be a Sanskrit version of the word Rābhā, and attributes the meaning to some prominent person from the Rabha community. There is a reference to people in the inscription that they did not smear away from the path of virtue. The reference is made to the indigenous tribes may not be derogatory, as the inhabitants could be prominent person in society and even be owners of land.

AHOM CHRONICLES

The *Buranjis*, which are the Ahom chronicles deal with events concerning the Ahoms from the earliest time to the end of their rule. A brief background on the contents of this text is essential in order to see the

nature and purpose of the text. The *Buranji* is divided into two parts, the first part which is called the *Deo-Buranji* (History of heavenly bodies, *Deo*-a God). The second part is termed as *Din-Buranji* (History of the earth; *Din* - the earth). The *Deo Buranji* gives an account of the state of the world before creation and also of creation (Barua 1930: Preface).

The *Buranjis*, just being chronicles do not give any detailed reference to the society that existed in the post 13th century. The first part of the text begins with the creation myth, establishing the legitimacy of the Ahoms. The description in the text is mostly limited to the conquests of the Ahoms. As the Ahom kings conquered various pockets they used the river Brahmaputra to move from one place to the other. The *Buranjis* give a detailed description of the Ahom administrative set-up known as the pyke system. The system consisted of giving of ranks to persons, and these ranks still exist as names in the Brahmaputra valley such as, Saikia and Hazarika. The text in various contexts refers to a number of tribes such as the Naga⁴, Chutia⁵ and Kachari⁶ that are still inhabiting the valley.

⁴ Long after, one bunkum was hunting buffaloes. He found a Naga slave, named Khunchu. this slave was handed over to the king Chaolaipha, who took him into favour (Barua 1930 ch.III p.24).

⁵ The Banarukia Hazarika of Chutia origin died in the battle at Banruk. (Barua 1930 ch. III, p.29.)

⁶ One of the Chief Officers mentioned at Rangpur in 1704 A.D. was Thaomung Banlung of Kachari origin (Barua 1930 ch. III, p.31.)

The reference cited from the text, highlight the fact that the natives were incorporated in the Ahom administration. They were given high ranks in society and there has been no reference cited in the text that refers to them as being looked down upon or living an uncivilised life. The inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley have been described as "living peacefully" (Barua, 1930: 36). There is an incident narrated in the text (Barua 1930: 55-56), where an Ahom king, asks the native ruler for a silver bracelet, a golden and silver umbrella. From the above incident it is clear that the native kings were capable of providing such expensive gifts.

BRITISH AND COLONIAL ACCOUNTS

As we have moved on from one account to the other, the changing notions of the inhabitants has been brought to light. The British accounts on the region, are many in number. They by virtue of their belonging to the 19th and 20th century, have influenced the present day scholars and their writings. The authors of these accounts are not only administrators, who during their tenure in the region, were exposed to the uniqueness of this region, but also a number of anthropologists, as this region provides a rich data for study. Another problem one faces, while reading these accounts, is the notion of "races" that emerges. A trend that emerges as a result of these accounts, that has filtered down in the present day writings, is to study the inhabitants of this region, either in terms of "race" or on linguistic grounds.

The accounts or works of scholars, in the region can be placed into two categories one is the work of scholars that have given a theoretical grounding to the classification of various races such as Risley, Dixon and Haddon. The other vast group is that of the various personal first hand accounts written by scholars, such as Hutton and M'Cosh expressing their views and perceptions.

H.H. Risley, in (1915) had laid the framework of the study of the ethnological background of the people of India, by dividing them in to seven races. this region has always been studied in terms of racial migration where the present day inhabitants comprise of these races. Another alternative provided by scholars such as Haddon, in 1924, is the division of these races into six categories based on anthropometric data. He identifies them with the various hill tribes, such as the Khasis, Kukis, Manipuri, Lepchas, Murmis and Kacharis.

R.B. Dixon, in 1922, classifies these races on linguistic grounds and identifies these races, with the regions of central Asia, Northern China, South East Asia and the Malay Archipelago. He concludes that the "dolichocephalic -leptorrhine" element was brought to Bengal and Assam by way of the Gangetic valley at a much later date by the Aryan immigrants". A view much followed by even present day scholars.

Scholars, have undertaken, in-depth studies of various races associated with this region, vis-a-vis, Negritos, Austroloids, Mongoloids, Mediterranean, Indo-Aryans and the Irano-Scythians. Works of scholars, based on race, is problematic as it overlooks the study of society in terms of social relationships and economic exchange. It has not only influenced, the framework of future research, but also the identification of physical features and races with the present day inhabitants has negated the role played by culture and social complexities.

The description of the region and its inhabitants by the administrators is even more problematic, as they present their accounts in light of their viewing of a different society. The administrators in their attempt to study societies not only in the Brahmaputra - valley but in other areas as well have done so in comparison to the existing norms and culture of their own civilized society'. This in turn has led to such views being nurtured by the common man and even by many present day scholars. Since a discussion of these accounts has been done in the historiography in chapter 1 the forth coming discussion would only entail the various perceptions and notions that these accounts harbour.

The pioneer I may say so in these accounts, was John M'cosh (1837) who gives a description of the various tribes inhabiting the region. In his description of the Bhotas a tribe in the region he says:

"Booteas are a middle or rather under - sized race of man, more remarkable for tension of their head, than weight of limb, their features are purely tartar". He further goes on "their persons are extremely filthy and their is an air of meanness and poverty about those holding offices of considerable trust and importance (M'cosh 1975: 138).

About the Akas, Suphlao and Koppachors he goes onto say

"they are a war - like ferocious people who make plunder their profession and live in a good measure by levying blackmail from the cultivators. (M'cosh 1975:141). In section IX of his book, he writes about the Naga tribe saying "Wildest and most barbarous of all the hills tribes.. consider them as ruthless, robbers and murderers. (M'cosh 1975:56).

M'cosh, being a surgeon by profession, gives the account not from his own personal experience, but from other series of manuscripts, such as the Manuscript of Buchanan and Mr. Scott; Satirical reports and journal of captain Jenkins. His viewing of the various tribes as barbarians and thieves, may not be completely true as his accounts are not based on his own first hand information and henceforth may not present the complete picture.

A look at the present day tribes (table 4.1) that are inhabiting the Brahmaputra valley and its adjoining areas, are highly dependent on the river. Their occupations as seen in table 4.1 vary from agriculture, to silk and cotton weaving, basketry, bamboo work, gold washing, black smithy and fishing. Most of these groups live in close proximity to the river for instance the Mishing tribe are mainly concentrated on an island on the Brahmaputra called Majuli which is the largest riverine land in the

world. Each tribe has its own dialect, their own, rich textile craft, rituals and exchange systems. However as concerns of scholars, studying this region. The sum up we can say, that the rich tribal traditions, that exists in the valley till today, cannot be overlooked and scholars before expressing pejorative notions, should consider these aspects.

TABLE 4.1
TRIBES INHABITING THE BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY

Name of the Tribe	Areas of habitation	Areas of concentration in the valley	Distance from the River (in Km.)	Language or dialect	Occupations
Garo	Meghalaya, Nagaland, Tripura, West Bengal	Goalpara, Kamrup, Karbi-anglong	50-100	Garo	Shifting and wet-cultivation (p.282)
Hmar	Mizoram, Manipur	North Cachar and Cachar district	200-250	Kuki-Chin	Agrarian (p.400)
Jaintia	Jaintia hills (Meghalaya),	areas adjoining the Jaintia hills	50-100	A Jaintia dialet of the Khasi language	Cultivation
Kachari Barman	-	Barak valley	350-500	Dimasa	Shifting and wet cultivation (p.435)
Bodo Kachari		Kokrajhar, Darrang Kamrup, Goalpara	50-100	Bodo Language	Settled agriculturists (p.436)
Kachari, Dimasa	Meghalaya, Mizoram	North Cachar and Karbi Anglong	150-200	Dimasa	Slash and burn cultivation (p.439)
Kachari Hojai		Nowgaon	50-100	Dimasa	Agriculture, Weaving culture of endi and Muga silk (p.441)
Kachari Mech	West Bengal	Goalpara, Dibrugarh, Nowgaon, Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and North Cachar districts	-do-	Bodo	Agriculture (p.444)

Kachari Sonowal	-	Dibrugarh	-do-	Bodo	Traditional gold washing, agriculture, sericulture weaving and Bamboo work (p. 447)
Karbi/Mikir	Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh	Karbi Anglong, North Cachar hills; Sibsagar, Nowgaon and Darrang	-d0-	Mikir	Shifting and settled cultivation, weaving basketry etc. (p.466).
Khasi, Lyngam	Meghalaya	Kamrup	Foothills of Khasi hills near the river	Khasi language	agriculture (p.527)
Kuki (Khocung/ Khongsai)	Manipur, Tripura Nagaland	North Cachar district, karbi-Anglong	500 km in Patkai range	Kuki	shifting and wet cultivation, weaving black smiths (p.645)
Lalung (Tiwa)	Meghalaya	Nowgaon, Karbi Anglong, Kamrup, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur	Foot hills of Khasi hills	Lalung	hoe and Plough cultivation (p.681)
Man	Meghalaya	Tinsukia	-do-	Assamese	settled agriculturists and wet paddy cultivators (p.749)
Mishing/Miri	Arunachal Pradesh	North Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar and Darrang	Along the river	Mishing	Cultivation, fishing, weaving (p.783)
Naga, Jeme	-	North Cachar district	200-250	Zemi Language	Agriculture animal husbandry, weaving (p.875)

Naga, Konyak	Nagaland	Sibsagar	Along the river	Konyak	Given up shifting agriculture and practice share cropping (p.884)
Naga, Kabui Rongmei	Nagaland, Manipur	Cachar	In the periphery	Rongmei/Kabui	Cultivators, women are expert weavers.
Naga Rengma	Nagaland	Karbi-Anglong	200-250	Rengma	shifting cultivation (p.900)
Naga, Sema	Nagaland	Dibrugarh	Along the river	Sema	Slash and burn cultivation, Animal husbandry, weaving basketry, smithy (p.906)
Rabha	Meghalaya, West Bengal	Kamrup, Goalpara, Nowgaon	along the river	Riang	Wet and dry cultivation, fishing (p.1014)
Riang	Tripura, Mizoram			Riang	Slash and burn cultivation, basket making, fishing, hunting, cattle - rearing. (p.1032)
Singpho/Jingpho	Arunachal Pradesh	Margherita Sub-division of Tinsukia	Along the river	Singpho	Shifting and settled cultivation (p.1079)

Source: K.S. Singh, 1974, *Scheduled Tribes of India*, Anthropological Survey of India.

EPILOGUE

After having presented and discussed the various dimensions of the river Brahmaputra, such as the settlements that are on the river, the river as a mode of exchange and also the inhabitants along the river, brings to light the richness of this region. This work has glanced through the various perceptions that have existed through time and have moulded the present day scholarship.

In the preceding chapters, a discussion on the settlements along the river brought to light the archaeological significance of this region. This region, which forms an integral part of the south east Asian block geographically as there are similar environmental conditions such as the wet monsoonal climate and also the similarly in the flora and fauna, such as the abundance of ginger, bananas and bamboo. Even culturally there is a stark similarity, such as the *japi*, which is worn by the cultivators in the valley and is known as the planter's hat in south-east Asia. This region as we had seen right from Indonesia, Bangladesh, Burma, and large pockets of North-eastern India form the rice producing belt, where the wet paddy cultivation is followed, owing to the heavy precipitation.

In terms of raw material, we seen that during the pre-historic period, there was the movement of raw material from one place to the other, for instance jadeite found in the sites such as Daojali Hading, could have been

procured from Burma. There is also the occurrence of fossil wood industry, in the Lalmai Mainamati sites in present day Bangladesh and also at the site of Daojali Hading. The Gazetteers of Burma tells about the abundance of fossil wood at Burma. Is there a possibility of its procurement from Burma, considering the distance.

The material culture of the Brahmaputra valley shows clear affinities with the Hoabinhian and Bacsonian culture of South-east Asia. The shouldered axes adges, querns and mullers, are pointers towards a life style comprising of both the dependency on plants and animals. The archaeological finds from the region conform mainly to the neolithic period, roughly dated to about 2000-1200 B.C. Does the occurrence of neolithic occur directly in the region? Is there not an earlier phase to the neolithic that occurred. Nothing is known about the Paleolithic period the Brahmaputra valley. Since no dating is available on the Indian frontiers, which is mainly reliable on carbon-14 dating a look at the parallel dating for south-east Asia given us a different picture. Sites in South east Asia such as Non Nok Tha and spirit cave have been dated to 10,000 B.C., to which period is owed the origin of the domestication of rice.

The availability of data, although limited in nature of the various pre-historic sites of Daojali Hading, Sarutaru, Marakdola, and the other sites along the Brahmaputra has brought to light habitation and the area

bustling with activity since pre-historic times. The region also witnesses a continuity in settlements on the river banks, during the early historic period. Since there is a lack of written records, these early historical settlements are not taken into account sites such as at Gauhati Tezpur and Goalpara continue during the early historic period. It is these settlements, that emerge into prominence due to geographical reasons such as its various advantages accruing from the river Brahmaputra these sites from the social background against which the early historical exchange emerged.

There is ample data available for the study of early historical exchange where the River Brahmaputra played a crucial role. The Brahmaputra valley witnessed the emergence of various consumption centres. It is these consumption centres that acted as controlling points in the exchange activity. As we have been seen in the texts such as the *Arthashastra* which refer to a number of commodities being manufactured and brought from the region. There is also the reference to silk textiles being manufactured in the valley. Since there has been no archaeological data found to substantiate this text, its significance has been put aside. However, the rich textile traditions in the region, not only comprising of silk woven in the valley, but also the raw silk, the other wild varieties such as the muga silk and also the coarser fabrics woven by various tribes which formed an important commodity for exchange. The textile tradition of the

various tribes being very rich, has, not been covered entirely due to the constraints in this dissertation

Coming back to the issue of consumption centres, as seen earlier the site of Mahasthan, in Bangladesh and Bhamo in northern Burma pose a number of questions to scholars. Mahasthan, which has been dated to the post-Maryan period, and had been looked at as the easternmost expansion of the Mauryas emerges as an important consumption centre. Mahasthan drew upon resources, from the Brahmaputra valley, and emerged into prominence. Thus, the exchange activities in the region point out to the fact that the inhabitants were engaged in the various crafts, such as textile weaving as referred to in the *Arthasastra*.

Another aspect, that came to light was that there is the absence of indigenous texts, for studying this region. By undertaking a study of the inhabitants residing along Brahmaputra, mentioned in the various sources, such as the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Arthasastra*, a dichotomous picture emerges, where on the one side, the inhabitants are seen as forest dwellers and hunters and on the other side, they are seen as providing rich commodities. The inhabitants took to collecting, processing and exchanging commodities such as incense, musk and spices from the forests.

Since this study incorporates a study of archaeological finds unearthed in the region in connection with the river forming a link between the neolithic settlements, early historic exchange activities and the inhabitants along the river, it has been unable to see a number of areas of study which form a link with the river. Such as that, the existence of megaliths which have been found in the Karbi Anglong and North Cachar hill district of Assam and different places in the entire present day North East India. These megaliths and their structure - and ritualistic significance resembles with south east Asian and South Indian Megalithic culture, as described by the anthropologist working in the valley. The resemblance of Megalithic cultures signifies various dimensions of research and enquiry. It may be later helpful for identifying the richness and culture of the inhabitants along the Brahmaputra. Another area of research, which we could look for research is the emergence of the Assamese language. How and when it originated along the valley and how much it is related to the Sanskrit and Tai languages and other tribal dialects. Through the finding of the origin of the Assamese language it may be helpful for identifying the uniqueness of region since the pre historic times.

Religion always plays a significant role in every society's history. How and when religious beliefs in the valley were formed since the prehistoric times is debatable. The local religion or animism, existing among tribes till today in the valley highlights nature worship and the Sakti

cult. As we know that Pragjyotispur was the centre of Sakti cult during the ancient period. Through this discussion it may be helpful to identify the similarities and dissimilarities with the religious beliefs existing in the valley and the surrounding area. This may be linked up with the study of the rituals and festivals celebrated by the inhabitants along the Brahmaputra.

Our understanding of the region should not be based on pre-conceived notions that the region is 'backward' or the inhabitants are 'barbarians' as the various existing perceptions have portrayed. This would form the base of a scientific study on the region and on its inhabitants.

Finally we can conclude by saying that the Brahmaputra valley has witnessed a rich culture and tradition since the early historic period, whose antecedents lie in the prehistoric past.

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APPENDIX 'A'

ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE AREAS BEYOND THE BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY

The region of the Garo hills located on the Shillong plateau is an area of high rainfall (200-400 cm) and dense forests. The peninsular Archaen granites continue this far and are traversed by Dolerite dykes, which were used by Palaeolithic man to make his tools. It is therefore obvious that even the dense forests did not deter early man as long as he got raw materials to make his tools, in fact, upto 1970, this area was considered to be devoid of Palaeoliths. Recent discoveries at Rongram, near Tura, have produced evidence of early man. (Agrawal 1982: 47). Regarding the evidence of Mesolithic culture finds from Selbalgiri-2 in the Garo hills, a pre-Neolithic microlithic industry, comprising points, lunates, trapezes and arrow-heads have been discovered. Associated with these is a coarse gritty handmade pottery of grey-brown colour. ¹⁴C dates are known from the site. (Agrawal 1982: 74).

There have been pre-historic finds from the, Garo, and Naga hills. About one thousand tools made on dyke basalt were discovered from Rongram, Tura, Rangchangiri, Chitra Abri, Ronchungra, Rombhagiri Tura, Phalbari all located on the Arbela range at 600-700 m altitude. The Khasi hills form the eastern part of the Assam Plateau, quadrangular, triangular and also shouldered Celts of south east Asian type have been found from these parts. Besides the stray finds from the Mizoram hills and Manipur, Mushi and Abor hills Arunachal Pradesh have produced eighteen tools out of which six are made of jadeite and the rest of local rocks. (Agrawal 1982: 109) Table 2.1 indicates that this entire eastern region displays a range of pre-historic settlements, comprising of Palaeolithic Mesolithic and Neolithic sites.

TABLE A-1

Cultural – Chronology of the Garo-hills ¹	
Period	Dating
Early – Palaeolithic	C. 200,000-50,000 B.C.
Middle – Palaeolithic	C. 50,000-20,000 B.C.
Late – Palaeolithic	C. 20,000-10,000 B.C.
Mesolithic	C. 10,000-5,000 B.C.
New Stone Age (A)	C. 5000-2000 B.C.
New Stone Age (B)	C. 2000-1000 B.C.

¹ As given by T.C. Sharma, 1991, in 'Pre-historic Situation in North-East India', *ANEI*.

TABLE A 2
PREHISTORIC SITES IN THE GARO HILLS

Name of site	Location	Finds	Reference
Rongram	16 k.m. North of Tura, Rongram Valley.		
Rengchangiri,	3 k.m. east of Rongram, Rongram-Rongjeng Road.		
Rongru Abri	3 k.m. south of Reng Changiri.		
Chitra Abri	1 k.m. South of the above site.		
Rongdu	3 k.m., to the Southeast of Rangjeng in the north - eastern, part of the Garo-hills.	Stone tools resembling Paleolithic choppers	(K.A.S. 1984: 55)
Thebrongiri	21 k.m. to the North of Tura.	Microliths - blades, points, cores and hammers	(K.A.S., 1984, 60)
Matchakolgiri	5 km. North East of Tura - Phulbari road.		
Gonolgiri	About 10 km. to the North of Tura in Rongram river valley.		

APPENDIX 'B'

PRE HISTORIC (PALEOLITHIC) SITES IN PRESENT DAY BANGLADESH

Sites on the lower Brahmaputra	Finds	Material used	Reference
Lalmai -1	3 retouched cores 5 scrapers, 2 handaxes, 1 point, 3 burins, 3 blade fragments, 4 cleavers, 25 waste flakes, 1 split pebble, 24 tools, 1 end scraper, 4 cores	Fossil wood	(Chakrabarti 1992: 35)
Lalmai - 2	5 blade and blade fragments, 1 handaxe fragment, 1 cleaver, 1 re-touched core, 44 waste flakes	Fossil wood	(Chakrabarti 1992: 36)
Lila Mina and Takka Muar	3 handaxes fragments, re-touched flake 1 scraper, 4 waste flakes, 1 split pebble, 2 retouched cores, 1 double sided scraper, 1 point, 5 cores.		
Maharam Alir Bari	3 Handaxes, 2 retouched cores, 1 core, 2 handaxe fragments, 3 scrapers, 1 flake.		
Tipra Mura	4 blade and blade fragments, 1 side scraper, 27 waste flakes, 1 pebble cleaver.		
Mandara Mura	2 retouched flakes, 1 blade, 4 waste flakes,		(Chakrabarti 1992: 32)
Maidhar Mura	2 retouched flakes, 1 waste flake, 1 awil		
Membarer Khil	2 blades, 2 retouched flakes		

Source: D. Chakrabarti, 1990, Ancient Bangladesh.

APPENDIX 'C'

RADIOCARBON DATES OF NEOLITHIC SITES OF NORTH-EASTERN AND NORTHERN INDIA

Sites	Period	Preceramic / Ceramics	Radiocarbon dates based in years B.C. on half life 5730 ± 40	Thermoluminiscent Dates/MASCA and general suggested Dates
Daojali hading Sarutaru Marakdola Selbelgiri	Single Layer deposit single cultural deposit Single Cultural deposit	Ceramics Ceramics Ceramics Ceramics		Absolute dating Northeastern Indian Neolithic Culture is considered within time range from 2000 B.C. to 1200 B.C. (Derived from Archaeological data from Spirit Cave, Non Kok The and Ban Kao in thailand). T.C. Sharma has proposed 5000 B.C. for The early Neolithic Phase and 2000 B.C. for the Late Neolithic phase of North-Eastern India.
Tamluk Bharatpur Koldihwa	Period I Period II Period I	Ceramics Ceramics Ceramics	1350-1000 B.C. 6570±210 B.C. 5440±240B.C. 4530±185B.C.	Around 2500 B.C.
Mahagara		Cemented Gravel IV Ceramics Ceramics Ceramics	8080±115B.C. 1400±150B.C. 1330±120B.C. 1440±100B.C.	TL Dates: TL/7272-2-2265 B.C. TL/76-1-1616 B.C.
Chirand	Period I	Ceramics	1270±105B.C. 1375±100 B.C. 1515±155B.C. 1540±110B.C. 1580±100B.C. 1675±140B.C. 1775±155B.C.	Dr. Vishnu Mittre (Palaeobotanist) suggests that the bottom layers of Chirand Neolithic may be dated around 4000-3000 B.C. Neolithic cultural assemblage of Ganga-vindhyan region which has its own characteristics and can be dated around 3500 B.C.-1500 B.C.
Senuwar	Lower layers of Neolithic-Chalcolithic phase period IB	Ceramics Neolithic levels	1770±120B.C. 1660±120B.C. 1500±110B.C.	P.IB started around 1800 B.C. and the beginning of P.IA excavator suggested to the beginning of 3 rd millenium B.C. or a little earlier.

Barudih			750 \pm 110B.C. 1055 \pm 210 B.C. 595 \pm 90B.C. 660 \pm 90B.C.	
Burzahom	Period I	Ceramics	2225 \pm 105B.C.	MASCA Correction Range
	Period II	Ceramics	2375 \pm 120B.C.	2050-2780 B.C.
			1543 \pm 108B.C.	2929-2940 B.C.
			1825 \pm 100B.C.	2120-1760 B.C.
			2025 \pm 350.C.	2340-2460 B.C.
			2100 \pm 115B.C.	2500 B.C.
			1850 \pm 125B.C.	2160 B.C.
		750 \pm 105B.C.	800 B.C.	
Gufkral	Period IA	Aceramic	3130 \pm 100B.P.	14C dates <u>Uncalibrated</u> Period IA-Aceramic 2400-2000 B.C. Period IB-Early Neolithic 2000- 1700 B.C. Period IC-Late Neolithic 1550- 1100 B.C.
	Period IB	Ceramics	6570 \pm 110.B.P.	
	Period IB	Ceramics	3470 \pm 110B.P.	
	Period IB	Ceramics	3980 \pm 120B.P.	
	Period IC	Ceramics	3340 \pm 120B.P.	
	Period IC	Ceramics	2790 \pm 110B.P.	
	Period IC	Ceramics	3570 \pm 100B.P.	

Source: U. Sant, 1991, Neolithic Settlement Pattern of North-Eastern India, Sarita Book House, Delhi (India).

APPENDIX - 'D'

PROMINENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES IN THE BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY

Sl. No.	Name of the Sub-division	Name of the Monuments	Brief description of the Monument	Probable date of its establishment if known
1.	GOALPARA	Sri Suryya Pahar	Eight miles south-east of Goalpara town. A good number of Sivalingas, rock-Cut images, stone inscriptions and so on are extant at the site. Ruins are interesting from archaeological point of view.	C.9 th Century A.d.
2.	Gauhati	Umachal, rock Inscription of Surendravarma	At the foot of Kamakhya hills, towards the Brahmaputra, about 2 miles from Gauhati. The rock inscription bears no date but may be dated to the 5 th Century A.D. Earliest Epigraph so far discovered in Assam.	5 th Century A.D.
3.	Tezpur (Darrang)	Cole Park, Remains	Sculptural and architectural relics lie at this site	C. 9 th Century
4.	Tezpur (Darrang)	Dah Parbatiya Remains	About three miles from Tezpur town. Here lies the best and earliest specimen of Sculptural art of Assam. Ruins of a Siva temple exist here.	6 th Century A.D.

Source: From Archaeology in Assam by P.D. Chaudhury, 1964