

## Exploring Traditional Knowledge System in Kamrupa: A Study of Secular and Vocational Education


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Formal education, except the hereditary professional learning, was first introduced by the Aryans who migrated to Pragjyotisha or Kamrupa about the beginning of the Christian era. Religious teachings were prevalent in ancient Assam like other parts of India; and other branches of secular and vocational education system were also imparted in this land. Traditional knowledge system definitely flourished in Kamrupa. The royal princes were expected to become acquainted with the administration of justice during their period of schooling. Some knowledge of the use of arms and military skill naturally formed part of their education. The art of warfare and the science of polity formed a part of the educational training of the princes and nobles. The medical science concerning both human beings and animals are enshrined in the Ayurveda was also studied and practiced. Among the sub-castes, Vaidyas and Daivajnas practiced the science of medicine and astrology respectively. The veterinary science specially dealing with diseases of elephants and horses was cultivated in Kamrupa and this system of treating animal ailments has been in vogue since the time of the Hastyrveda. Kamrupa had its own system of astrological and astronomical calculations. Jyotisha, astrology, received special attention of scholars and attracted pupils. A system of working out arithmetic known as Kaitheli Amka has been in existence in Assam from early times. The art of dancing, both classical and folk, has a long tradition in Kamrupa. In ancient Assam, barks of Agar trees were most probably used as writing material; the use of about Agar bark is also furnished by Harshacharita. This paper is a humble attempt to throw light on the advancement of traditional knowledge in Kamrupa with reference to secular and vocational education.

**Keywords:** ayurveda, vocational, vaidyas, medicine, astronomical

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## 1. Introduction

The traditional knowledge systems in Kamrupa spread across a broad canvas from ancient textual material and manuscripts in classical languages to folk practitioners. The crafts and skills of the indigenous knowledge systems of ancient Assam form a living tradition in this land. They are a storehouse of retrievable information in various fields like textiles, metalworking, healthcare, astronomy, mathematics etc. It can be presumed that the ancient system of education and curriculum as prescribed by the *Dharmasutras* were also followed in Kamrupa. We can undoubtedly say that the pan-Indian system of education in ancient India was mainly Indo-Aryan and Sanskrit oriented. The education system in Kamrupa had similarities with the pan-Indian education system. Presumably formal education, except the hereditary professional learning, was first introduced by the Aryans who migrated to Pragjyotisa or Kamrupa about the beginning of the Christian era.[1]

Education in Kamrupa centred round the *Gurugriha*, Sanskrit *Tols*, village schools provided and managed by the Brahmanas and *Agrahara* villages. It is noticed that the priestly class was entrusted with the responsibility of imparting education in the society. If we examine the history of the ancient civilizations viz. Mesopotamia, Egypt etc. then it comes to our knowledge that the priestly class in those civilizations also engaged themselves in the noble job of spreading education in the society at the patronage of the ruling class. It is seen that in ancient times, the temple premises became also the centre of education, and the priests imparted knowledge among the handful of young learners; basically, male learners. In ancient India the *Gurugriha* became the learning centre initiated by *Guru*. *Agrahara* land grant was a common feature of the socio-economic history of India and Assam as well. One of the motives of the *Agrahara* land grant by the rulers to the Brahmins and priestly class was giving the responsibility of imparting education among the masses. So, the society was not totally indifferent towards education. Some rulers in ancient Assam themselves being learned persons paid special attention for spreading knowledge among their subjects. The royal court, attended by learned men, scholars, poets was itself an ideal centre of learning. From very early times, both Brahmana and non-Brahmana scholars and teachers

used to wander about the country holding discussions on various faiths, which helped in the expansion of education.[2] Along with religious teachings, secular and vocational education were also imparted in ancient Assam.

## 2. Review of Literature

*The Comprehensive History of Assam* vol. I edited by H K Barpujari contains a chapter "Education" contributed by S N Sarma has so many references regarding the educational scenario of ancient Assam. The writer focuses on various aspects of the state of education including secular and vocational knowledge in this land in ancient period.

*A Cultural History of Assam (Early Period)* authored by B K Barua contains reliable materials to reconstruct the educational history of Kamrupa. It is a scholarly work on Assam's cultural evolution for from 4<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century CE where the writer examines the early cultural landscape including political and social structure, religious practices, art, literature and architecture in a comprehensive way.

S L Baruah's *A Comprehensive History of Assam* is another important book that explores Assam's civilization from earliest times to the modern times. Part II of the book contains various aspects on the condition of education in Kamrupa.

*The History of Civilization of the People of Assam to the Twelfth Century A. D.* written by P C Choudhury is an important work where the author discusses the political history, cultural developments, religious influences, socio-economic structures of early Assam. His book has references of the educational aspects of the period under review.

Debabrata Dutta's *History of Assam* is an important book that deals with the socio-political and cultural developments of Assam and have references of educational condition of Kamrupa.

*Literature and Education in Ancient Assam* a research article by Rabindra Das highlights the *Gurugriha* system in Kamrupa, in which knowledge was imparted to the young learners in the teacher's residence. It also has the reference of palm leaves and wooden boards as writing materials in this land.

## 3. Methodology

This research article is a qualitative study where

data accumulated basically from secondary sources like books of some reputed authors and journals have been used, discussed and analysed. Thorough analysis, cross-checking and examination have been done to minimize the errors that may surface while writing a research article solely based on the secondary sources. Historical method of analysis is followed in completing this research work.

### 4. Discussion

The various references which we get from plates and grants clearly prove the existence of educational institutions maintained by learned persons, scholars and Brahmana where pupils were taught different branches of learning according to the proficiency of the *guru*. The other agency of transmitting education was the hereditary system wherein some used to receive education from their fathers.[3] The inscriptions, *puranas* and *smritinibandhas* states that besides the study of the Vedas and its ancillary branches, provisions for the study of *dharmasastras*, *itihisas*, different systems of philosophy, *Dhanurveda*, *Ayurveda* were in existence. There are reasons to believe that training in *devajana-vidya* (fine arts) and architecture, as evidenced from the sculptures and architectural ruins of the pre-Ahom period, was imparted assiduously either on hereditary lines or through professional guilds.[4] The epigraphs mention the study of *vidya* and *kala*. *Vidya* included the four Vedas, four upa-Vedas consisting of the *Ayurveda*, *Dhanurveda*, *Gandharveda* and the *Tantras*, the six Vedangas, *Itihisas*, *Puranas*, *Smritis*, *Arthasastra*, *Kamasastra*, *Silpasastra*, *Alankar*, *Kavya* etc. *Kala* includes the study of various arts like music, dancing and painting.[5]

Kamrupa was recognized as one of the important centres of the Tantric practice in eastern India; and Tantricism flourished centering around the Kamakhya temple. As the important and radiating centre of Tantric esoteric doctrines and practices, Kamrupa used to attract people from all over India. Kamrupa as the most suitable place for *Tantra-Yoga* practices has been eulogized not only by the *tantras*, but by the *Sakta Puranas* as well. Literature was undoubtedly a popular subject of curriculum. The inscription writers of ancient Assam were not only poets of remarkable caliber, but well-versed in the classical literature of India.

Materials are extant, though limited, from which it

can be presumed that the art of warfare and the science of polity formed a part of the educational training of the princes and nobles. The practical training in the art of warfare was probably left to the professional experts having specialized knowledge in different branches.[6] The top-ranked officers of administration were equipped with both theoretical and practical knowledge of running their own branches of administration. The *Subhankarapataka* has such reference in which one royal prince is highly praised for his expert knowledge in military science, who was also well skilled in action, adept in adventurous operations and possessed profound knowledge on important subjects.

The medical science concerning both human beings and animals as pointed in the *Ayurveda* was studied and practiced in Kamrupa. The *Brihadharma Purana* specifically mentions castes and sub-castes of Eastern India based on professions. Among the sub-castes, it mentions *Vaidyas* and *Daivajnas* who practised the science of medicine and astrology respectively.[7] Nagarjuna (he is not identical with the great Mahayani philosopher of the same name), a familiar name in the Ayurvedic circle in Assam, is said to have flourished in Kamrupa around about the tenth century A. D.[8] We can reasonably believe that the practice of veterinary science specifically pertaining to the diseases of elephants and horses was in vogue in ancient Assam. Elephantology, that is the science dealing with the characteristics, diseases, cures and training of elephant was an important study. A well-known treatise on the ailments peculiar to elephants entitled *Hastyayurveda* or *Gaja Cikitsa* was compiled by a sage known as Pala in the region where the river Lauhitya (Brahmaputra) flows from Himalayas to the sea. The treatise on elephant science is extensive compilation of 160 chapters, divided into four *sthanas* or sections.[9]

Jyotisha, astrology, received special attention of scholars and attracted pupils. The very name Pragjyotisha, the land of eastern astronomy, points to the cultivation of this branch of study. The existence of the temple of Navagraha or nine planets on the Chitrasal hill at Guwahati from early times and the ruins of Suryapahar and some other places indicate not only the prevalence of the solar cult but also the cultivation in all probability of the science of astrology and astronomy.[10] Kamrupa had its own system of astrological and astronomical

calculations. A large number of manuscripts on astrology dealing with various aspects of the subject, has come down to us from early times and this clearly proves the popularity and extensive study of astrology in early Assam.[11]

The study and teaching of *Gandharva-vidya* was in vogue in Kamrupa; and its evidence is furnished by some literature, epigraphs and remains of art and architecture. The science of music, associated not only with singing and playing of instruments, but also with dramatic performances and dancing, was well cultivated.[12] Hiuen Tsang gives reference to the dancing and singing at the court of king Bhaskarvarmana. The grant of Vanamala refers to the singing to the accompaniment of musical instruments.[13] The Tezpur grant of Vanamala (v. 24) mentions about the gift of dancing girls or *Devadasis* to the *Hataka Sulin* temple. Some relief work in the architectural ruins, exhibiting dancing poses suggest that the art of dancing was a popular pastime. Whether there was regular provision for imparting formal training in this branch of art or it was transmitted from father to son as family tradition cannot be ascertained for want of evidence.[14]

The professional guilds shouldered the responsibility of imparting training to architects, craftsmen, artisans and sculptors. The ruins and remains of temples and palatial buildings specially those of Bamunipahar, Da-Parvatiya, Doboka, Yogijan, Suryapahar, Numaligarh; and various sculptures and icons of gods and goddesses, *gandharvas* and *mithunas* give testimony to architectural and artistic skill of the craftsmen and artisans of that period. The tradition of Hindu art and architecture was prevalent in ancient Kamrupa and its adjoining areas; and as such, necessary training was imparted by professional craftsmen from generation to generation.

*Karanikas* and *Kayasthas* were responsible for maintaining public records, who were in turn received specialized training. These two posts were not only associated with maintenance of records and accounts but also some were engaged as scribes. A system of working out arithmetic known as *kaitheli amka* has been in existence in Assam from early times.[15] The professional training provided to the *Kayasthas* and *Karanikas* was perhaps limited to those two classes alone and therefore hereditarily transmitted to the members of the guild.

The art of inscribing letters or scripts on slabs of stone or copper plates needed skill for the inscribers. They were to be familiar with the contemporary script and art of writing.

In Kamrupa, barks of *agaru* trees were probably used for making paper. The use of *agaru* bark is furnished by *Harshacharita* wherein it is stated among the presents sent by king Bhaskarvarman to Harshavardhana was a manuscript written on aloe bark. Since then, aloe bark (*sachipat*) had been the principal material used for writing manuscripts till the introduction of modern paper.[16] The *Yogini Tantra* mentions writing and inscribing on materials like clay, bark-leaves, silver, gold and copper. It also gives reference to *lekhani* (pen) made from bamboo, reed, bell-metal, iron and gold; the use of quill pen was also very common. The ink was made from peculiar ingredients such as *silikha* (*terminalia cibrina*) and the urine of bulls.[17]

The art of working in metal was known in ancient Kamrupa. The inscription of Vanamala refers to the carrying down of gold-dust by the Lohitya river.[18] Again, the art of the production of silk was also known to the people of ancient Assam; and its reference is found in the *Arthasastra*, *Harshacharita* and the writings of classical writers. Skill in the art of weaving and spinning has always been held to be one of the highest attainments of an Assamese woman. Almost all terms expressing excellence of attainments in a woman can be traced to this idea of skill in spinning and weaving.[19] The art of painting also flourished here. The Nidhanpur Grants has the reference of portraits hung on the walls of palace of the king.

## 5. Conclusion

The society in Kamrupa laid significant emphasis on education. The society here tried to educate the masses in true sense; people had more practical knowledge than the theoretical education. Skill based education system was emphasized. Unfortunately, such things seem missing in our present education system. In our state we have numerous educational institutions from primary to higher levels; and every year, we produce a huge quantity of educated students; a large number of them are graduates, post-graduates and even more. But the ironical thing is this that maximum number of these students are not employable; they just possess a certificate,

but don't have skill and necessary knowledge and expertise to get an employment opportunity. Simply saying, they are educated or even highly educated, but not employable. That is why we are producing large number of students every year and our educational institutions are just becoming some factories of creating unemployed youths. It thus gives us a clear picture that we are neglecting our skill-based education. We need to address such serious issues of our present education system in our society.

The important thing was that Kamrupa had their own indigenous and traditional knowledge system, suitable to the land and people here. Our forefathers definitely had researches which helped them to evolve their own system of knowledge. Such knowledge passed to the next generations in an informal way; since the young ones of a family experienced the practice of that indigenous knowledge from their elders. Another notable aspect of the education system of the ancient period was that there was considerable impact of religion among the people; and religious teachings were given great importance, but at the same time people in Kamrupa also paid due importance for secular education. They had the notion that for a balanced progress a society needs to focus on secular education besides imparting the teachings of the religious scriptures.

The secular and vocational education systems of ancient Assam were designed to equip individuals with values, knowledge and skills necessary to lead a balanced life. The legacy of Kamrupa's secular and vocational education system continues to inspire contemporary educational initiatives in this area. It is important to draw upon the wisdom of the past, combining traditional knowledge systems with modern approaches to create a more inclusive, relevant education system at present. By exploring and learning from this rich cultural heritage, we can work towards creating a brighter and enlightened future for the well-being of humankind.

## Endnotes

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