

Vol 3 Issue 8 Sept 2013

ISSN No : 2230-7850

Monthly Multidisciplinary
Research Journal

*Indian Streams
Research Journal*

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RNI MAHMUL/2011/38595

ISSN No.2230-7850

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ARCHAIC INDIAN RIVERS AND THE KALIKA PURANA : A PROFILE TO A MERCANTILE HISTORY OF KAMRUPA



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Abstract: The whole geographical proceeding of the Kalika Purana is dominated by the description of rivers. More than fifty rivers of divergent identities have found their mention in this famous compilation of Kamrupa origin and naturally majority numbers of such references are about the rivers of Assam (Kamrupa). However, the treatise also speaks about the rivers beyond the territories of Assam which remains here as the core concerned of our study. Inspired by the ideal of "nadi stuti" of Rg Veda, the study intends to analyze the aspect behind those references of rivers that in appropriating the propositions regarding the domain or the extensiveness of the mercantile activities of Kamrupa. Accordingly, the study sum ups with some interesting resolutions like a declining tendency of Indian business with south-east Asian countries through the corridor of Kamrupa etc. etc.

Keywords: Archaic Indian , Mercantile History , geographical , mercantile activities .

INTRODUCTION:

The Kalika Purana a celebrated upa-purana of Indian Pauranic literature is famous for its beautiful geographical description. Popularly known as a compilation of Kamrupa origin, the topography of ancient Assam naturally remains as the primary concern of the treatise to deal with. However, the treatise also shows its emphasis in describing some major topographical features of Indian as well as south-east Asian region. The rivers beyond the territories of Assam are some of such significant features of the treatise to note about. The total number of such river in the Kalika Purana are seventeen; of them sixteen are the rivers from the larger half of Indian sub-continent and one from south-east Asian region.

River is an apt metaphor for life and settlements. Accordingly, their references in a treatise like the Kalika Purana certainly have some mean to state about the settlement pattern of our ancient civilization. Further, those references of rivers, especially of other localities, in a region centric compilation like our treatise may have the prospect also to explain the values of inter regional connectivity that our ancestor experienced at some stages of their development.

Regarding the growth of settlement, it is interesting to find that the Kalika Purana collaborated itself with the development of some urban corners in Kamrupa. Such types of urban growths are often remembered as a consequent development of trade. Numbers of avenue have already been detected by the scholars to state about the involvement of Kamrupa in long distance commercial intercourses. But unfortunately, the exact domain of such activities have not been confirm yet. Thus the study anticipates that in support

of some subsidiary evidences, those references of rivers in the Kalika Purana and may have opened up new horizon to the mercantile history of Kamrupa.

1.1 Statement of problem :

The references of rivers beyond the territories of Kamrupa and that too in a compilation like the Kalika Purana moulded the entire study to confront with some perennial problems like a) what will be the actual identities and location of these rivers? b) What will be the significance of those references to the cultural history of ancient Assam ? c) If they mean towards the mercantile activities of Kamrupa, how can they be related with the same? etc. etc.

1.2 Significance and methodology :

The significance of this study lies on the fact that it will introduced us with a new methodological approach to analyse some specified aspects of the cultural history of a region like Kamrupa. The collaboration of geographical resources from upa-pauranic enclave of Indian literature further accentuated the significance of the study.

To arrive at the sear objective, the study intends to adopt an analytical method to treat all those qualitative resources of the Kalika Purana. Above all a philosophical thought remains all along as a guiding spirit of the study.

2.0 OUR PRIMARY RESOURCES :

The sequence of our rivers can be read in following way Ganga, Yamuna, Mahakosi, Jambunadi, Baitarani Akasganga, Sipra, Chandrabhaga, Sita, Mandakini, Cuvery, Gomti, Devika, Sarayu, Iravati, Karatoya and Drisadvati.

Apart from Ganga, Yamuna and mysterious Jambunadi and Akasganga, the identity of other rivers may be made on the basis of their synonymous existence in some other Pauranic composition as tried by the scholars in following way.

Mahakosi³:

This river tried to be identified by scholars as Kosi,⁴ one of the most violent tributary of the northern bank of river Ganga. This river Kosi is formed by seven important Himalayan streams (Sapta Kosi) in eastern Nepal and now meets Ganga little below Kargola.⁵

Baitarani⁶:

The Kalika Purana described the river as being in the middle of the Puskaridwipa. This creates a great confusion in identifying the river as the land of Puskaridwipa said to have covered the whole region of Japan, Manchuria and south eastern Siberia. Leaving aside the confusion, if we concentrate only on the name of the river it appears that still there is a river of the same name in the state of Orissa of Indian federation. This river rises in the hills of the southern part of the district of Singhbhum and flows through the Bolasor district of Orissa from north west to south-east and ultimately merged with the bay of Bengal near Dhamra.

Sipra⁹:

Ujjain, the capital city of an ancient janapada Avanti said to have been situated on the bank of river Sipra.¹⁰ Ujjain, a region of eastern Malawa¹¹ is now in Madhya Pradesh. Though the Kalika Purana described it as an independent river, it now survived only as a tributary of river Chambal.¹²

Chandrabhaga¹³:

This river has popularly been identified as Chenab.¹⁴ At present Chenab drains through two major Indian states – Jammu-Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh and ultimately merged with the Arabian sea.¹⁵

Sita¹⁶:

This has been identified as river Yarkhand.¹⁷ Yarkhand is a tributary of famous Tarim river. In China Tarim and Hwangho are considered as one river and thus Yarkhand, Tarim and Hwangho in alternate sense can be considered as ancient Sita river.¹⁸

Mandakini¹⁹:

River Mandakini of the Kalika Purana may be identified as one of the tributaries of Alakananda an upper course of river Ganga.²⁰

Cuvery²¹:

Popularly known as Ganga of south India, the Cuvery river rises in Brahmagiri hill of western ghat parvat and drain the south western part of Karnataka and middle part of modern Tamilnadu.²²

Gomti²³:

This is a left bank tributary of river Ganga and one of the chief river to drain through Uttar Pradesh. The famous

Indian city Lucknow stands on the bank of this river.

Devika²⁴:

This river has been identified as one of the right bank tributary of Ravi.²⁵ Some scholar however, tried to identify it with Deva or Devika, a tributary of the southern bank of river Sarayu.²⁶

Sarayu²⁷:

It has been identified with Ghogra,²⁸ a tributary of Ganga who merged with her near the Chapra district of Bihar.

Iravati²⁹:

This river is identified with Ravi.³⁰ It drain through three Indian states Himachal Pradesh, Jammu-Kashmir and Punjab. The river has a strategic importance as being a part of Indo Pakistan boundary. It runs all along the Gurdaspur and Amritsar district of Punjab.

There is another river of the same name in Myanmar which naturally creates confusion in ascertaining the identity of this river. But considering the point of emergence of this river as suggested by the Kalika Purana, this river should better be identified as Indian Ravi instead of Iravati of Myanmar.

Karatoya³¹:

Scholars have tried to identify the river with modern Teesta or Trisrota, means three stream, the first one is modern Teesta, second one seem to be a less celebrated river somewhere near modern Goalpara district of Assam and third one may be identified with Dhirai river near Tezpur; of them the first one i.e. Karatoya was the most celebrated one and popularly known as Ganga of Dvaparā.³²

Drisadvati³³:

According to Alexander Cunningham this river constitutes the southern boundary of Kurukshetra region now in modern Harayana.³⁴ Later it being identified as Chitang, a tributary of Ghaggar, flows between Yamuna and Sutlej.³⁵

2.1 Our Secondary Issue :

(a) "No single person is in a position to produce everything that is required; so everyone is in a way dependent on proper procurement of certain items produced by others at different places, far and near. The urge to acquire certain items – not available locally or readily holds crucial clue to the economic activity called exchange or trade".³⁶ This interdependency made people involved even in long distance commercial intercourses. Indian history also had a long standing tradition of such commercial activities. Large numbers of archaeological as well as literary evidences³⁷ are there to prove not only the fact but also to exemplify the magnanimity commercial spirit that Indian holds throughout the period of the history of the country.

Now, Kamrupa's association in such commercial exercises seem to be steered by three primary factors (i) Remoteness of this country had made its people, in one way or others, dependent on other region if not for their

essentialities but, atleast for their necessities. (ii) For a long time Kamrupa remained as a predominant power in eastern Indian politics. This naturally heightened the prospect of attracting political envoys,³⁸ merchants, travellers, persons belonging to different professional communities³⁹ to this land of mother goddess Kamakhya from different corners of the world. (iii) Apart from that, there was another nodal aspect to accelerate the commercial movement in Kamrupa that at one time this land was the only corridor of overland communication between greater half of Indian sub-continent and the south-east Asian countries.⁴⁰

(b) Such inter regional commercial activities are normally regulated by two primary aspects of trade-export and import. (i) Export – Number of evidences have already been cited by the scholars to show the involvement of Kamrupa in export business with some unique products produced by the people of this land. Among those products silk (both raw and produced) seem to have dominated the total volume of export of this land. Kamrupa was the producer of a specific variety of silk known as *patrona*. According to the *Arthashastra*, this brand of silk produced at 'Suvarnakundya' of Kamrupa was the best among the all other varieties of the same found in Magadh and Pundra.⁴¹ 'Dukula' and 'Kshauma' were the two other varieties of silk, (produced Vanga, Pundra, Kasi etc. places) but *Arthashastra* did not mention them as the product of Kamrupa. As they being referred as the product of Pundra, scholar now have an opinion that after occupying Pundravardhan by Bhutivarman of Kamrupa, the people of this land might have learned the art of producing them and possibly earned proficiencies in exporting them to the other parts of the country in later stages.⁴²

Along with silk, ivory, resins, aromatic wood, wood, musk produced by deer, lac etc. were some of the other exportable items produced by the people of this land.⁴³ It is generally believed that economic pattern of life changes with the passes of time. But interestingly the list of items that Assam had exported to the different corners of the country did not received too much change even at the every late age of British interaction with Assam.⁴⁴ This is not only an indication of a deep rooted tradition of producing export quality items by the people of Assam but also a manifestation of their involvement in export business with distant localities.

(ii) Import – Similarly, the inscriptional evidences of Assam have also made some references about the items which the people of this land might have procured only through import business. As for example, the Bargaon grant of Ratnapala mentions about the topaz shop⁴⁵ which was certainly not an indigenous product of Kamrupa country.⁴⁶ Again, Tezpur grant of Vanamala has mentioned that the king has the habit of making gift of gold and silver to the people on different occasions.⁴⁷ Here the import of gold is a controversial issue⁴⁸, but regarding the import of silver there is no such controversy as scholar now comes to a conclusion that silver was not an indigenous product of India as "bulk of Indian Silver in ancient period came from Balkh region and Cylon".⁴⁹ However it is interesting to find that the capital of Ratnapala of Bargaon grant was full of jewellery shops,

depending on which scholars would now like to make a suggestion that at one time in Kamrupa there were some persons who were highly proficient in the art of making jewellery.⁵⁰ This proficiency can be achieved only when there is an abundant supply of such precious metal in the land. That means, for gathering their secondary essentialities more appropriately for their luxurious beholding, the people of Kamrupa seem to have depended on the supply made possible to them by the merchants hailed from different corners of Indian sub continent as well as from South East Asian region.

3.0 TWO AUXILIARY OBSERVATIONS :

Over the years, urbanization or the growth of urban centres recognized to be a major consequent development of Trade. Throughout the courses of the history of Assam, there were four such prominent developments of urban centres popularly known as Pragjyotishpur, Hadupeshwara, Durjaya and Kamrupa nagara. The importance of these centres lies on the fact that they on different occasion served the country as its capital.

On the other hand, the treatise like the Kalika Purana have made some significant references about the existence of some subsidiary urban localities in the region like Sonitpur, Bhogvati, Alakapuri etc. etc.⁵¹ But unfortunately, those references often escape the sight of the scholars and as a result of that their identities still remains under the warp of an obscurity. Leaving aside the question of their identities, those references of an important treatise might have suggested a steady growth of urbanization in the region. In alternate, it can be said that the development of such urban pockets in the region were the result of an enduring tradition of commercial intercourse that kamrupa had enjoyed with distant localities.

On the other hand, smooth circulation of coins or the provisions of adequate monetary system regulates the intensity of commercial intercourses between regions. Accordingly, the dearth of archeologically available coins often creates problems in appropriating the mercantile history of this region. But regarding the question of coins of ancient Assam we are fortunate enough to have a significant note about the circulation of a famous ancient Indian coin in the region, Niska in the Kalika Purana.⁵² Along with that the treatise also mention about the use of golden coin by the people of this region. Niska was certainly not an Assamese coin. People of this land might have learned about its circulation either through the merchant, who came to this region or through the people who visited the other parts of Indian sub continent for earning profit out of their product.

4.0 SUMMARIZING NOTE :

Thus, the study concludes with the following observations.

(i) One of the phenomenal contributions of trade from place which in turn creates and atmosphere of cultural exchange even between the regions distantly separated from each other. In such rows of movement people's interaction with rivers, more appropriately their experiences of crossing over them from time immemorial fascinate the human mind. It was probably because of that fascination we have found in

the scripture like Rig Veda a complete chapter dedicated to river known as 'Nadi Stuti.' Thus is a chapter of salutation to the gracious presence of river. In other word it can be said that this 'Nadi Stuti' seem to be an unrest effort made by our ancestor to solemnize their pleasant experiences of river that they crossed over when tried to open up new settlement in different corners of Indian sub-continent.⁶³

In such anticipation, the rivers of our study in the Kalika Purana may also have suggested some clues in appropriating the questions regarding the extensiveness of such cultural as well as mercantile relationship that Kamrupa might have experienced throughout the period of the history of this composition. And accordingly, it can be presumed that a vast tract of land stretching from Jammu-Kashmir in the north (as indicated by river Ravi) to Tamilnadu in the south (as suggested by river Cuvery) Ujjain in the west (as suggested by river Sipra) and Chinese main land in the east (as suggested by river Sita), fall within the domain of commercial activities of Kamrupa.

(ii) In terms of the sequence, the Kalika Purana clearly shows its emphasis in describing the rivers from the greater half of Indian sub-continent rather than the south-east Asian region. Only one river from the core corner of the south-east Asian region has found its mention in the Kalika Purana. This might be considered as an indication of a declining trend of commercial activities that the region once had with the south-east Asian countries. In other word, it can be said that by the time of the composition of the Kalika Purana the frequencies of such commercial movements between Indian and south east Asian region through the corridor of Assam might have been declined. It was probably because of the emergence of other easy accessible routes from India towards these countries. However, this is only a rude presumptions, new study in future may shed more light on this matter.

NOTES & REFERENCES :

1. This celebrated treatise said to have been composed somewhere in or very near about Kamrupa (Assam). "This Upa-purana was written not later than AD 1100 and most probably in the tenth or eleventh century and it contains valuable materials for the study of the social, religious history of Kamrupa.
2. R. C. Hazra; The Upa-puranas, published in Cultural Heritage of India (ed.), Vol II, 2000, Calcutta, pp. 280-81
3. A. K. Dutta., The Brahmaputra, 2001, New Delhi, p ix.
4. This river has found mention in the Kalika Purana in reference to a romantic incident in which lord Siva tried to explain before his newly wedded wife Sati that like many other places of the world, the beautiful bank of Mahakosi river also had the latency to be her abode if she choose for. Kalika Purana 25/20 D. N. Bhattacharya (trns & ed.), Kalika Purana, 2008, Guwahati, p. 137.
5. A. Borooah., Ancient Geography of India (1877) 1971 (RP), Guwahati, p. 110.
6. R. L. Singh (ed.), India - A Regional Geography, 1989 (R.P.), New Delhi, p. 196.
7. The Kalika Purana describes the sacred river Baitarani as the creation of the tear of lord Siva, drip out of a deep sense of

sorrow at an unexpected death of his wife Sati; this river flew toward the eastern sea.

Kalika Purana, Ch. 18 Op.cit., 2008, pp. 161-178, 166.

7.S. M. Ali., The Geography of the Purana, 1983, Delhi, p. 44.

8.B. C. Law., Historical Geography of Ancient India, (1954) 1984, Delhi, p. 37.

9. According to the Kalika Purana, the Sipra river originates from Sipra lake situated on the western side of Himalaya to fall into the southern sea. The water of this lake become sacred as it received water once poured by hindu trinity on sage Vasistha and Arundhuti while solemnizing their marriage and that water later emerged on earth as Sipra river at the initiatives of lord Vishnu.

Kalika Purana 19/14, 17; 23/130-133

Op-cit., 2008, pp. 181, 182, 269.

10. Op-cit., (1877) 1971 (RP), p. 88.

11. R.C. Majumdar (ed.), The Classical Age, 1988, Bombay, p. 112.

12. Op-cit., (1954) 1984, p. 329.

13. According to the scripture, Chandrabhaga river originates from Chandrabhag mountain. In the treatise the river was a girl born out of the sight of Lord Brahma from Manas-Sarobar; later she was married to the lord of the sea at the consent of pitamaha Brahma; lord Chandra helps her to flow through the earth by breaking a portion of Chandrabhaga mountain with the tip of his gada (mass). The Purana also described its water as holy as that of Ganga.

Kalika Purana, 19/81; 22/4-10.

Op-cit., 2008, pp. 190, 233-34.

14. N. L. Dey., Geographical Dictionary of Ancient and Medieval India, 1899, Calcutta, p. 30.

15. G. Singh., A Geography of India, 1988, Lucknow, p. 78.

16. This river of the Kalika Purana said to have been originated in the Chandrabhaga mountain at the graceful word of lord (?); the secretion of ambrosils from the body of lord Chandra made the water of this river sacred. The story of sacredness of the water of the river Sita is related to a curse imposed by lord Dakshya on his son in law, lord Chandra due to latter's too much affection to one of his wife Rohini and ignorance to the others (all these wives of lord Chandra were the daughter of Dakshya)

Kalika Purana, 20/28-161; 21/1-121; 22/112.

Op-cit., 2008, pp. 233, 195-232.

17. Op-cit., 1899, p. 85.

18. Op-cit., 1983, pp. 101, 102.

19. Kalika Purana, 23/116-118.

Op-cit., 2008, p. 267

20. Op-cit., 1984, p. 31.

21. Describing the origin of the river, the Kalika Purana states that a few strips of bathing water poured by hindu trinity on sage Vasistha and Arundhuti on the occasion of their marriage also fall on Umakshetra which creates Caver lake there and it was from that the river Cuvery emerged on earth. Kalika Purana, 23/134-35.

Op-cit., 2008, p. 269.

22. Op-cit., 1988, p. 77.

23. According to the Kalika Purana, this river emerged from Gomat mountain on the southern side of Himalaya; the beginning point of this river is near the place known as Siva.

- Kalika Purana, 23/136
Op-cit., 2008, p. 269.
24. The mythology propounded by the Kalika Purana states that the river initiates from a place where wife of the king of mountain (Himalaya) Menaka, gave birth of a child known as Mainak; soon after its emergence, lord Mahadeva send her to the sea.
Kalika Purana, 23/137-138.
Ibid., p. 270.
25. Op-cit., 1983, p. 115.
26. Op-cit., 1984, p. 75.
27. Kalika Purana, 23/139.
Op-cit., 2008, p. 270.
28. Op-cit., 1983, p. 115.
29. This great river said to have been originated from Ira lake; like Jahnavi this river also full fill day to day necessities of the people around her; it flows towards western sea; she along with six other rivers considered to be the Mahanadi to bestow upon human being three fold Moksa (Dharma, Artha and Kama)
Kalika Purana, 23/140-142
Op-cit., 2008, p. 270
30. Op-cit., 1899, p. 30
31. For number of occasion, the river Karatoya has found its mention in the Kalika Purana. This sacred river said to have been on the eastern side of river Ganga.
Kalika Purana, 38/114; 51/86-88; 58/37
Op-cit., 2008, pp. 424, 647, 737.
32. M. M. Sarma., Inscription of Ancient Assam, 1978, Gauhati University, pp. 55, 59, 63.
33. The Kalika Purana described it as being a river in the middle of Brahmavarta; a famous city known as Karavir Nagar said to have been situated on the bank of this river; its water is as holy as the water of Ganga and had the capacity to remove sin.
Kalika Purana, 47/40-41, 71; 49/1-2; 51/89
Op-cit., 2008, pp. 580, 584, 600, 647.
34. A Cunningham., Ancient Geography of India, 1979, Delhi, pp. 280-81.
35. Op-cit., 1983, p. 115.
36. R. Chakravarti (ed.); Trade in Early India (2001) 2010, New Delhi, p. 13.
37. There are some distinct terms in Indian literature like "Vanik, Vaidehaka, banjara, apanika, Sresthi, Sathavaha, nauvittaka, rajasresthi" etc. to denote such commercial activities.
Ibid., p. 28.
38. There was an occasion of matrimonial alliance between Kamrupa king Indrapala (1960-990 AD) and Rashtrakuta princes Rajyadevi.
Gachtal Copper Plate Inscription (verse 22)
Op-cit., 1978, pp. 209 & 215.
This types of occurrences raised the prospect of diplomatic relationship or the movement of political envoys from distance principalities in Kamrupa.
39. R. M. Nath., The Background of Assamese Culture (1948) 1978, pp. 45-46, 63-64.
40. P. C. Bagchi., India and China, Bombay, 1950, p. 19.
41. Kautilya's Arthashastra, 2/11/105, 107, 113.
R. D. Sarma (ed.), Kautilyar Arthashastra, Gauhati, 2002, p.
56. Suvarnakundya has already been identified as place in Kamrupa.
P. C. Choudhury., The History of Civilization of the People of Assam, 1987, Delhi, p. 341.
42. H. K. Barpujari (ed.), Comprehensive History of Assam (Vol. I), 1990, p. 254.
43. Ibid., pp. 250-256.
44. W. Rabinson., A Descriptive Account of Assam, (1841), 1975, Delhi, pp. 238-242.
45. Bargaon Grant of Ratnapala (Verse 14).
Op-cit., 1978, p. 162.
46. Op-cit., 1990, p. 246.
47. Tezpur grant of Vanamala, (Verse 29).
Op-cit., 1975, p. 103.
48. There is evidences that Assam had produced gold from winding streams like 'Boroli, Subaushiri, Disni, Joglo' etc. rivers.
Op-cit., (1841) 1975, p. 36.
49. Op-cit., 1990, p. 248.
Robinson observed that silver used in Assam at one time imported from China.
Ibid., p. 35
50. Op-cit., 1990, p. 249.
51. Kalika Purana, 39/2, 40/60, 48/3-4
Op-cit., 2008, pp. 431, 455, 589.
52. Kalika Purana, 51/21
Ibid., p. 637.
53. Apart from nadi stuti there were some other evidences in Indian literature which shows the importance of rivers to the mercantile history of a region. As for example the old Pali text often shows preferences in mentioning the rivers that the road crossed over to a destination R.C. Majumdar (ed.), The Age of Imperial Unity, (1951) 1990, Bombay, p. 606.

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