

## Changing Dynasties, Enduring Genealogy: A Critical Study on the Political Legitimation in Early Medieval Kāmarūpa

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In spite of the fact that there are increasing numbers of works on the regional history of North-East India, the dominant trend in writing of political history of Kāmarūpa has been towards dynastic, genealogical and chronological reconstruction. According to the epigraphic records of three different dynasties of Kāmarūpa from the fourth to the twelfth century A.D. (the Bhauma-Varmans, the Mlecchas and the Pālas),<sup>1</sup> though the origin and ethnic identity of each ruling family are still obscure, it is persistently claimed that they were descendants of Naraka, a son born in the union of the Earth and Viṣṇu in his Varāha incarnation. The mighty warrior Bhagadatta of the *Mahābhārata* was said to be a son of Naraka and Vajradatta was mentioned to be either a son or brother of Bhagadatta in several inscriptions. Based on the epigraphic evidences and Puranic records, particularly the *Kālikā Purāna*, scholars have tried to reconstruct the 'successive and continuous line' of genealogy of Kāmarūpa and sought for a certain 'historicity' of the mythical progenitor, Naraka.<sup>2</sup>

For instance, it is claimed that Naraka was 'either the adopted son of king Janaka or his illegitimate issue through a courtesan' (Baruah 2002: 91). Some scholars considered Naraka as 'a historical personage' in the end of the third century A.D. whose son was Puṣyavarman (Shastri 2002: 45), or 'a political adventurer' who established himself in power somewhere between 200-500 A.D. (Kakati 2003: 29). There was even more farfetched interpretation claiming the presence of 'several Narakas' or 'the Naraka dynasty'.<sup>3</sup> Emphasis often laid on the lengthy and glorious history of Kāmarūpa in ancient times, especially the Bhauma-Varman dynasty. That is often identified as the period to which some historians traced the ethnic and cultural root of pre-Ahom Assam. Therefore, 'racial' (or 'ethnic') affiliation of Naraka and his descendants has been one of the important issues in the historical writings. Various speculations were posited; Naraka was a Dravidian (Vasu 1998: I. 122) and Kāmarūpa was probably a Dravidian Kingdom (Barua 1966: 25ff.); he was a powerful Kirāta chief who rose into prominence in the proto-historic period. (Das 2006: 3); and he was one of the Aryans who were the traditional rulers of Assam (Choudhury 1966: 6). However, it is nearly impossible to identify Naraka and to determine his date notwithstanding attempts of several historians to do so. In fact, most of such attempts have led to the arbitrary historicizing of mythical figures and the considerable juggling with chronological tables and fragments of legends.

As was emphasized by Thapar, traditional genealogies are rarely faithful records of times past. Their primary function and purpose perhaps lie elsewhere. This is not to deny their chronological dimension, but, rather, to suggest that genealogies provide elements

of other facets of society as well and these facets have often been ignored in the study of genealogical material from Indian sources (Thapar 1978: 286). In this paper, I would like to move away from the chronological reconstruction of genealogy of Kāmarūpa. Rather, I will try to deconstruct the successive line of genealogy and discuss the process of making of genealogy through which unrelated figures of epics and early *Purānas* were linked on purpose and different descriptions of events were forged and reinterpreted in a new narrative.

## II

Firstly, let me begin with the *Mahābhārata*. Unlike the later records, the important four figures of royal genealogy of Kāmarūpa, viz. Varāha incarnation of Viṣṇu, Naraka, Bhagadatta and Vajradatta, are described in an isolated manner in the *Mahābhārata*. There are few accounts connecting those four figures and their relationships are mostly left undefined.

As to Naraka, it is said that he resided in a great citadel, Prāgjyotiṣa and was called Bhauma [the son of Bhūmi]. He stole away the bejeweled ear-rings of Aditi. The gods led by Indra could not defeat him in war because of his valour. Finally, Kṛṣṇa earned great fame by killing Bhauma Naraka along with Mura and by recovering the ear-rings (Sukthankar 1942: Udyogaparvan, 47, 74-79). Again in the same parvan (128. 44-45), we are told that Kṛṣṇa killed Naraka, who had lived for several *yugas*, at Prāgjyotiṣa and rescued thousands of damsels from his control whom later he wedded. These episodes find place in the later Puranic and epigraphic records again and again.

Although the later records invariably refer to Naraka's birth from the union of Viṣṇu in his Varāha incarnation and the Earth, the *Mahābhārata* mentions only the mother of Naraka. In a story explaining how Naraka became invincible, it is clearly stated that Prthivī asked Viṣṇu to give Naraka, her son, Vaiṣṇavāstra (the weapon of Viṣṇu) to protect him from *devas* and *asura* (Sukthankar 1958: Droṇaparvan, 28, 27-32). The fact that Vaiṣṇavāstra was bestowed on Naraka may allude to a certain relation between Viṣṇu and him, but their relationship is undefined in this context.

The very rudimentary stage of genealogy of Naraka is noticed in the *Harivaṃśa*. In the description of Kṛṣṇa's merit such as recovering Aditi's ear-rings and defeating Naraka, the following is recorded as Bhūmi's speech addressed to Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva after he killed Naraka: "Oh, Govinda! *Naraka was given by you and killed by you (dattas tvay aiva govinda tvay aiva vinipātitaḥ)*" (Vaidya 1969: 91, 59). It implicitly suggests that Viṣṇu was the actual father Naraka, however, their relationship is not explained with details. Therefore, the narrative claiming Naraka's close relation with Viṣṇu must be regarded as later creation.<sup>4</sup> It is argued that the legend of Naraka being born of Varāha and Bhūmi probably developed after the Gupta period because the worship of Viṣṇu's *avatāra* and his *avatāra* theory becoming popular in the Gupta age (Sircar 1990: 85).

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In comparison with Naraka, Bhagadatta, the mighty hero in the Bhārata war, is described in a less mythical manner. In most episodes related to Bhagadatta, he is said to have been the lord of Prāᅡjyotiᅡa (*prāᅡjyotiᅡ-ādhipa*) and a powerful warrior who joined the Kaurava side against Pāᅡavas in the Bhārata war. It is mentioned that he, accompanied by his army comprising the Cīnas, the Kirātas and other warriors, went to fight in aid of Duryodhana (Sukthankar 1942: Udyogaparvan, 19, 15). He is said to have attended the Rājasūya ritual of Yudhiᅡhira with his followers from the Mlecchas living along the sea coast (*mlecchaiᅡ sāgar-ānūpavāsibhiᅡ*) (Sukthankar 1944: Sabhāparvan, 31, 9-10). Moreover, Bhagadatta himself is called 'dwelling in the eastern sea (*pūrvasāgara-vāsin*)' (Sukthankar 1942: Udyogaparvan, 4, 11) as well as 'having his abode in the mountain (*Śaila-ālaya*)' (Sukthankar 1948: Strīparvan, 23, 10). In other place, he is called the lord of mountain (*parvat-ādhipa*) (Sukthankar 1958: Droᅡaparvan, 28, 10).

On the basis of these accounts, scholars have continuously posited the vast territory of Bhagadatta's kingdom, *viz.* Prāᅡjyotiᅡa in the eastern region. (Bhattacharya 1931: 2. note., Gait 1926: 4, Barua 1966: 7, Choudhury 1966: 44-45, Barua 1986: 11, Vasu 1998: 134, Shastri 2002: 18-19, Baruah 2002: 74 and so on). However, unlike many scholars' assertions, the geographical location of Prāᅡjyotiᅡa is not clearly defined in the *Mahābhārata*. In the section describing *dig-vijaya* of the four Pāᅡava brothers, Bhagadatta, the king of Prāᅡjyotiᅡa, is mentioned as 'one of the powers in the northern region who resisted Arjuna' (Sukthankar 1944: Sabhāparvan, 23, 18-25). It means that Prāᅡjyotiᅡa might locate in the Northern Division of India, called 'Udīchya or Uttarāpatha' comprising the region between the Eastern Panjab and the Oxus in the north-west as well as the entire Himalayan region (Sircar 1990: 61). On the other hand, we are also told that when Bhīma set out the East and conquered many places such as Kosala, Ayodhyā, Malla, Kāśī, Matsya, Malaya, Vatsa, Niᅡāda, Videha, Vaᅡga and Tāmralipti, he finally reached the Lauhitya (the Brahmaputra) and compelled the Mleccha kings and dwellers of sea coast (Sukthankar 1944: Sabhāparvan, 27, 1-27). The king Bhagadatta of Prāᅡjyotiᅡa, however, is not mentioned in this context. Besides, the reference that 'Bhagadatta came to the court of Yudhiᅡhira on the occasion of his Rājasūya ritual with Yavanas to give presents including fast-moving horses of excellent breed' (Sukthankar 1944: Sabhāparvan, 47, 12-14) rather alludes to his possible affiliation to West India. It reminds us about the *Rāmāyaᅡa*'s reference to Prāᅡjyotiᅡa in which the city is said to have located in the west.<sup>5</sup>

According to these early epic accounts, it is certain that there was no fixed idea of the geographical location of Prāᅡjyotiᅡa. It is mostly uncertain and various. Prāᅡjyotiᅡa was the legendary citadel of demon Naraka or the kingdom of Bhagadatta which might locate in the East, the North, the West, or somewhere else. However, in any case, it is difficult to accept 'the historical presence of Bhagadatta's kingdom, Prāᅡjyotiᅡa' because this postulation was not corroborated by any material evidences. In fact, there are no reliable

sources which certainly verify whether the north eastern region experienced the early state formation before the fourth century A.D.<sup>6</sup>

As regards the genealogy of Bhagadatta, the *Mahābhārata* does not refer to any special relationship between Bhagadatta and Naraka. Unlike the later records in which Bhagadatta is often represented as a son of Naraka, the *Mahābhārata* mentions that he was born from a limb of *asura* called Bāṣkala (Sukthankar 1933: Ādiparvan, 67, 2), and he was called a great demon (*mahāsura*) (Sukthankar 1958: Droṇaparvan, 38, 34). The only point which may associate him with Naraka is Vaiṣṇavāstra. It is said that after blocking the weapon of Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa told Arjuna how this weapon, which was previously given to Naraka, came to Bhagadatta (referred to as Prāgjyotiṣa) (Sukthankar 1958: Droṇaparvan, 28, 33). Nevertheless, how Bhagadatta received the weapon from Naraka is not explained in this context. As the relationship between Viṣṇu and Naraka was uncertain, the relationship between the latter and Bhagadatta was not defined.

On the other hand, the relation between Bhagadatta and Vajradatta seems to be somehow clear, though there are two different references to a son of Bhagadatta in the *Mahābhārata*. It is said that after the death of Bhagadatta in the Bharāta war, his son named Kṛtaprajña was killed by Nakula (Sukthankar 1954: Karṇaparvan, 4, 29). In other place, we are also told that Vajradatta, a king of Prāgjyotiṣa and a son of Bhagadatta (Sukthankar 1960: Āśvamedhikaparvan, 74, 2-3), was defeated by Arjuna. However, in none of the later records there is any reference to a son of Bhagadatta named Kṛtaprajña (Sharma 1978: 0.8). In comparison with the later epigraphic records in which Vajradatta alone is named as a son of Bhagadatta, the *Mahābhārata* gives a vague idea of the genealogy of Bhagadatta. Only in the *Harṣacarita*, a third name Puṣpadatta is mentioned between Bhagadatta and Vajradatta. Though it is speculated that Kṛtaprajña might have been identical with Puṣpadatta, who could not become the king due to an early demise in the battle, as such could not also find any mention in the later records (Sharma 1978: 8).

### III

Those unrelated or very loosely related figures in the *Mahābhārata*, viz. Varāha incarnation of Viṣṇu, Naraka, Bhagadatta and Vajradatta, came to be placed in the unilineal line of sacred genealogy of the Bhauma-Varmans known as the earliest dynasty of the Brahmaputra Valley.<sup>7</sup> This genealogy seems to have been claimed at least from the seventh century A.D. (Sircar 1990b: 95), since it is noticed for the first time in the Dubi and the Nidhanpur C. P. of Bhāskaravarman,<sup>8</sup> and in the *Harṣacarita*. The claim was not found in the earlier Umāchal and Bargaṅgā inscriptions of the time of Bhāskaravarman's ancestors.

The contents of genealogy represented in the Dubi and the Nidhanpur C. P. are more or less similar (Sharma: 1978, 10-19 and 40-49). Both inscriptions begin with the eulogy to Naraka, Bhagadatta and Vajradatta. It is said that Naraka was born of the contact between

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the Varāha and the Earth when he rescued her from the ocean. Both records highly praise Naraka and describe him as not *asura* but 'all powerful on earth being the king of kings' (*narakaḥ kṣitau kṣitibhujānrājādhirājo vibhuḥ*) (Sharma 1978: 11, Dubi C. P. v. 2) or 'the chief of the rulers of the earth (*phārthiva-vṛndārko*)' (Sharma 1978: 41, Nidhanpur C. P. v.4). Then, Bhagadatta and Vajradatta are mentioned as his son and grandson respectively. Vajradatta was followed by several other kings after whom Puṣyavarman came to power. And thereafter his lineal descendents up to Bhāskaravarman are eulogized. It is noteworthy that Varāha, Naraka, Bhagadatta and Vajradatta are represented as their great ancestors in the records, but none of them are closely associated with Prāgjyotiṣa or Kāmarūpa. Whereas the king Puṣyavarman is called the lord of Prāgjyotiṣa (*prāgjyotiṣendra-puṣyavarmamā*) in the seal attached to the Dubī C. P. (Sharma 1978: 33, line 2) and the Nālandā clay seals (Sharma 1978: 35, line 1-2), those four figures are described in a more mythical manner. It seems that the actual progenitor of dynasty was considered to be Puṣyavarman and the four figures had meaning as his mythical ancestors.

The fact that they are supposed descent from the demon Naraka probably indicates the indigenous origin of the ruling family, though converted to the orthodox brahmanical religion (Majumdar 1962: 88). As Gupta rightly pointed out, it is possible that when Gupta power weakened, the Varman rulers asserted themselves not only politically by performing horse sacrifices, but also culturally by announcing their semidivine origin. A suitable genealogy, worthy of being recognized by all, came to be fabricated at that time. Thus the Vaiṣṇava *brāhmaṇas* of the fifth to sixth centuries A.D. seem to have played important role not only in the process of Sanskritization of Varmans but also in strengthening their hands in laying the foundation of a strong state (Gupta 1992-93: 4).

Especially, during the reign of Bhāskaravarman, the Bhauma-Varmans reached the zenith of their political power and territorial expansion in the region. As was well known, Bhāskaravarman made a political alliance with the king Harṣa, defeated Śaśaṅka and ruled over Karṇasuvarṇa, the capital of the Gauḍas. The brahmanical ideology such as *varṇāśrama-dharma* and *ārya-dharma* was particularly emphasized during his reign. (Sharma 1978: 42 Nidhanpur C. P. line. 35 and 37) Besides, the agrarian expansion proceeded significantly in the peripheral area and the regional state formation seems to have reached in a crucial phase during this period.

In this context, a suitable sacred genealogy for the great king, Bhāskaravarman was probably re-formulated and became a fixed tradition. The making of royal genealogy was not so unique to Kāmarūpa. It is argued that in the post-Gupta period, many local dynasties had sought political validation and there was rush for or fabrication of genealogies providing the *Sūryavaṃśī* or *Candravaṃśī* origin of local dynasties. This is evident from the genealogies of the Rajput kings; even more interesting is the case of the Gonds of central

India associated with the Candella kings who claimed *Candravaṛṣī* status (Thapar 1978 a: 119-20).

The sacred genealogy seems to have operated in various ways. Firstly, it asserted the reputation of Bhāskaravarman when he sought for a political alliance with the king Harṣa. The genealogy of Bhāskaravarman was narrated by Haṅṣavega, the envoy of Bhāskaravarman in the court of Harṣa when the envoy conveyed his master's will to make friendship with Harṣa (Cowell 1993: 216-17). Secondly, it impressed the Chinese monk Hsuan Tsang who visited to Kāmarūpa in the early seventh century A.D. Hsuan Tsang emphasized the lengthy history of Bhāskaravarman's family and wrote that the king belongs to the old line of Narayaṇa-devā and sovereignty over the country was transmitted in the Bhauma-Varman family for 1000 generation (Beal 1994: pt. II, 196). Thirdly, it legitimized the sovereignty of Bhāskaravarman. The Nidhanpur C. P (Sharma 1978: 43, line, 47-8) mentions that Bhāskaravarman has 'the power of splendour (*prabhāvaśakti*) exhibited by the elevation of the rank obtained through the succession of the son of Vasumatī (i.e. Earth).' It denotes that the resource of his power was the lineage of Naraka.

By the end of the seventh century and the beginning of the eighth century A. D. political power passed from the hands of the Bhauma-Varmans to the Mlecchas (or alternatively the line of Śālastambha). Though the political transition in Kāmarūpa from the Bhauman-Varmans to the Mlecchas and ethnic identity of the latter have been a subject considerable controversy, it is mostly considered that the Mlecchas are local inhabitants. It is argued that Śālastambha may have been a local tribal chief originally owing allegiance to the king(s) of Bhauma-Varmans and successfully utilized the opportunity of extirpating his overlord. 'Mleccha' may be the Sanskritized form of the tribal name 'Mech' in this case (Sircar 1990b: 122).

The Hāyūṅthal C. P. of Harjaravarman, which is the one of earliest epigraphic records of the dynasty so far discovered, possibly dated the middle of the ninth century A.D., says ".... therefore, Oh Pārthiva! Your future descendents will, for this reason, be called Mlecchas" (Sharma 1978: 90, v. 2). It may be suggested that a story was fabricated by the *brāhmaṇas* at the court of these kings to explain away their aboriginal origin (Sircar 1990b: 124), though the content of story was not known due to the corroded portion. Nevertheless, the Mlecchass also sought their political validation from the lineage of Naraka. The term 'pārthiva' appeared in the Hāyūṅthal plate means not only king, but also a progeny of Pṛthivī, which suggests that the king, who is addressed here, belongs to Naraka family. Therefore, some scholars claimed that the Mlecchas and the Bhauma-Varmans were of "common descent or at least belonged to the same political tradition" because "like the Bhauma-Varman family, the line of Śālastambhas also traced their ancestry from king Naraka" (Lahiri 1991: 75).

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It is, however, unlikely that there was a certain connection between the Bhauma-Varmans and the Mlecchas. All inscriptional records which were issued in the reign of the Mleccha kings kept silent on the Bhauma-Varman rulers and their lineage. Rather, the Mlecchas associated themselves directly with the mythical ancestor Naraka and his son Bhagadatta in order to gain their own political legitimacy. This fact alludes that the mythical story of Naraka must have gained in increasing popularity and became well-established tradition in the region.

The epigraphic records of the Mlecchas give us more or less similar list of the genealogy of their ancestors. Nevertheless, several significant differences are noticed in the portion describing Naraka and Bhagadatta, and they show how the legend was re-interpreted and re-formulated within a tradition. Firstly, the life of Naraka is quite well represented with the elaborate episodes—such as his birth from the union of Varāha and Bhūmi, his misdeed, viz. stealing ear-rings from Aditi, and his death brought by Kṛṣṇa—in the Tezpur, the Parbatīyā, the Uttarbarbil, and the Nowgong C. P. (Sharma 1978: 97, 116, and 129). Most of records are assigned to the ninth century A. D. In comparison with the former records, they keep various facets of Naraka myth which were employed from the *Harivaṃśa* and other Vaiṣṇava *Purāṇas*. It seems that Mlecchas tried to represent the entire life of Naraka, from his birth to death, in their records in order to emphasize the authenticity of their version of Naraka story.

Secondly, the character of Naraka is slightly changed with some sense of historicity. In the Uttarbarbil and the Nowgong C. P. in the reign of Balavarman III, which are dated the last quarter of the ninth century A. D., Naraka is described as not only a son of Varāha and Bhūmi, but also one who has Kāmarūpa conquered (*jitakāmarūpaḥ*) (Sharma 1978: 129, v. 5).<sup>9</sup> It is likely that they began to suppose Naraka as an outsider who conquered the kingdom Kāmarūpa in some time and took up his abode there. This point was far more elaborated and historicized in the later *Kālikā Purāṇa* around the eleventh century A.D. His close association with Kāmarūpa is described in the record as follows: “That (Naraka), who has conquered Kāmarūpa used to live in a city named Prāgjyotiṣa in Kāmarūpa” (Sharma 1978: 129-30, v. 5). Whereas the records of the Bhauma-Varmans claimed the universal kingship of Naraka, those of the Mlecchas rather emphasized his regional affiliation. Indeed, the regional factors came to be significantly recognized and mentioned in the epigraphic accounts of the Mleccha dynasty.<sup>10</sup> This point may be attested by the fact that most records of the Mlecchas begin with adoration to the ‘Lauhitya River’ (Brahmaputra) and paid homage to the river (Sharma 1978: 96, v.1 ; 116, v.1 ; 129, v.2).

Thirdly, Bhagadatta is also closely associated with Prāgjyotiṣa. He is called the lord of Prāgjyotiṣa (*prāgjyotiṣādhirājya* or *prāgjyotiṣādhinātha*) in the Tezpur and the Parbatīyā C. P. (Sharma 1978: 97, v.5 ; 116, v.5). In the Uttarbarbil C. P. (Sharma 1978: 130, v.7), he is referred to as the overlord of vassal kings and the regulator of *varṇāśrama-dharma*. It

is likely that the idea of ideal king governing over a regional kingdom was retrospectively imposed on their far remote past. An important point is that Prāgjyotiṣa mentioned in the records of the Mlecchas denotes not only the mythical citadel of Naraka or the kingdom of Bhagadatta appeared in the *Muhābhārata*, but also a historical city located in the kingdom Kāmarūpa as we have seen in the Uttarbarbil C. P. In this way, an elusive legendary city, Prāgjyotiṣa, in the epics was brought into the actual geographical map of Kāmarūpa.

The Mleccha dynasty came to an end with the death of Tyāgasimha and Brahmapāla seems to have obtained the throne of Prāgjyotiṣa-Kāmarūpa about 900 A. D. The descendent of Brahmapāla had names ending in the word *pāla* and the dynasty came to be known as the Pāla dynasty (Sircar 1990b: 141). In spite of the fact that Brahmapāla was the founder of a new line of kings, there was continuity in certain broad trends from the earlier period. The most significant affinity, of course, was that the Pālas also traced their ancestry from Naraka and his family. Most of the episodes related to Naraka were well narrated and the achievement of Naraka and his two sons (Bhagadatta and Vajradatta) was highly praised in the epigraphic records of the Pālas. However, the making of genealogy and its political validation became far more complicated issue in the time of the Pālas by comparison with previous dynasties.

For instance, after narrating the well-known genealogy from Naraka to Vajradatta, the Bargāon C. P. of Ratnapāla, dated the first half of the tenth century A. D., states as follows: ‘‘because of shaking of rules (*vidhi-calanaḥ*), the lord of Mleccha, Śālastambha, grasped the kingship of kings of Naraka family (*nārakāṇām rājñām*) who were, then, enjoying all the earth through the succession of lineage. In his [Śālastambha’s] line also there were famous kings like Vighrastambha numbering two times of ten (*viz.* twenty). When the twenty-first king of that line, named Tyāgasimha, retired to heaven without an heir, his subjects (*prakṛiti*), thinking ‘once again, oh, a Bhauma is put as our lord’ (*punaraho bhaumo hi no yujyate*), made Brahmapāla, who was capable of burdening and protecting the earth, [their] king because he was a kinsman [of the Bhaumas] (*sāgandhyāt*) (Sharma 1978: 156 v. 9-10).

This record demonstrates that there were several important changes in the way connecting their present with the past in the beginning of the Pāla dynasty. Firstly, they sought for their political legitimacy by associating themselves directly with not only Naraka himself but also the first ruling family who took him as its progenitor, *viz.* the Bhauma-Varmans. It means that the first dynasty itself became an important source for validating the present political power. In order to legitimize their authority over Kāmarūpa, the former ruling family, the Mlecchas are described as the illegitimate political power, who grasped the kingdom of Naraka because of shaking of rules. Therefore, Brahmapāla, who is claimed to be a kinsman of Bhauma, is represented as a rightful king. In other place in the record, he is called a king of the lineage of the Earth (*avani-kula*), and his son, Ratnapāla, is also



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said to belong to the lineage of Naraka (*naraka-ānvaya*) (Sharmā 1978: 156, v.12 and v.15). In order to show their relation with the earlier Bhauma kings, these Pāla rulers added the word *varman* after *pāla* in their names, so that Brahmapāla was also called Brahmapālavarmadeva (Sircar 1990b: 141). Besides, the format of Naraka story represented the records of the Pālas is also nearer to that of the Bhauma-Varmans.

Secondly, the Pāla rulers tried to enhance their legitimation by adopting the political rhetoric in the Khalimpur plate of Dharmapāla dated to the beginning of the ninth century A.D. while they accepted the conventional genealogy of Naraka. As was well known, the record mentions that Gopāla, the founder of the Pāla dynasty of Bengal, was chosen as a king by the subjects (*prakṛti*) (Sircar 1983: 65, line. 6-7), though its historical verification still remains in controversy. This political rhetoric is employed in the Bargaon C. P. with a critical alteration. Unlike Gopāla, who was chosen as a king in order to free the land from anarchy (*mātsya-nyāya*), Brahmapāla became a king because the people thought that a Bhauma would be more suitable ruler for them, and, of course, Brahmapāla himself was considered to be the descendent of Bhaumas. However, as Sircar (1990b: 141) argues, it is difficult to believe that Brahmapāla was actually a descendent of one of the members of Puṣyavarman family, because, in that case, his claim was expected to have been more specific.

The reason why the Pālas of Kāmarūpa adopted the well-known political rhetoric of the Pālas of Bengal can be argued in several aspects: the Pālas' insufficient political basis in Kāmarūpa, the distinctive presence of Bengal Pālas as a new model of kingship and governance, the change of mode of legitimation in East India, the migration of Bengal *brāhmaṇas* into Kāmarūpa and so on. It is suggested that as the Bhauma-Varmans adopted their political ideology from the Guptas, similarly the later rulers from the Mleccha dynasty seem to have imbibed the political concept of contemporary rulers of Bengal and formats of the land-grants document were also nearer to similar documents of the Bengal Pālas (Gupta 1992-93: 11). This tendency seems to have continued in the Pāla dynasty in Kāmarūpa. Nevertheless, the rulers of Kāmarūpa never ceased to call themselves the decedents of Naraka. In the Puṣpabhadra C. P. of Dharmapāla dated the first half of the twelfth century A.D., the king was referred to as *śrī vārāha* (one who can trace his origin from the Boar incarnation of lord Viṣṇu) (Sharma 1978: 259, line17).

## IV

Eventually, the most elaborate story of Naraka and his progeny was represented in the *Kālikā Purāṇa*.<sup>11</sup> The whole story is quite extensive: it covers five chapters (from ch. 36 to ch. 40) of the *Purāṇa*. Whereas the epigraphic records provide the core of genealogy, which consists of succession lists or lists of decent groups, the Puranic records offer us the narrative tradition interspersed with genealogy. The narrative tradition, consisting of legends

or the description of incidents, inevitably changed more easily when the social norms changed and when new requirements demanded fresh comment (Thapar 1978: 288). By combining different clusters of myth and adding extra episodes to the succession list, the compiler(s) of the *Kālikā Purāṇa* composed the sacred genealogy of ancient Kāmarūpa, which became a crystallized version of Naraka story in Assam.

As regard the birth of Naraka, we are told that the Varāha begot powerful son on the Earth (Pṛthivī), but the birth of son was delayed by other gods for the good of the world. Then Earth prayed to Viṣṇu. He assured her that she would deliver a son in the middle of *Tretā-yuga* (Shastri 1992: 36. 6-52). In the meantime, Janaka, the king of Videha got two sons and a daughter at the sacrificial ground. As the daughter remained under the earth, the king had to plough the sacrificial ground. When Sītā came out of a furrow, the Earth told him she would give birth to a son there and requested him to bring this son till his youth. One day, Janaka found a male baby, Naraka, there (Shastri 1992: 37.1-60). It seems that the compiler(s) of the *Kālikā Purāṇa* tried to incorporate the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition into Naraka legend and fabricate his sacred genealogy through the relation with Sītā and Janaka. In this episode, he is represented as not only a son of Varāha and the Earth, but also the adopted son of Janaka and brother of Sītā.

On the other hand, the *Kālikā Purāṇa* does not ignore the demonic identity of Naraka. He was continuously referred to as 'asura' in the *Mahābhārata* and other *Purāṇas*. Thus, the compiler(s) of the *Purāṇa* tried to explain the reason why he became a demon by mentioning that the Earth got Naraka during the period of her impurity (Shastri 1992: 36, 7). It indirectly denotes that he was supposed to be born as a divine being but became a semi-divine being because of his mother's impurity. Besides, the *Purāṇa* alludes to his Kṣatriya identity. It is said that the sage Gautam named the boy as Naraka because he was lying putting his head on the skull (*ka*) of a man (*nara*) and performed his sacraments according to the method followed in the case of a Kṣatriya (Shastri 1992: 38. 2-3). It is absolutely a new invention of tradition.

His migration from Videha to Prāgjyotiṣa has another significant meaning. The relevant story is presented as follows: Janaka brought up Naraka for sixteen years and trained him as a human being. When Naraka was about to complete his sixteenth year, the Earth took him to the Gaṅgā and narrated him the story of birth. Being eulogized by the Earth, Viṣṇu took Naraka and the Earth to the city of Prāgjyotiṣa through the Gaṅgā. This city was situated in the middle of Kāmarūpa. Naraka waged war against Kirātas, defeated them and eventually made a new kingdom (Shastri 1992: 38.1-117). In fact, Naraka was already referred to as '*jītakāmarūpaḥ*' in the epigraphic records in the last quarter of ninth century A. D. By adding extra episodes to this motif, especially Naraka's journey through the Gaṅgā, the compiler(s) of the *Purāṇa* perhaps attempted to make a certain geographical connection between Videha and Kāmarūpa, though it is only an imagined connection.

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Finally, the most critical development of Naraka story in terms of genealogy is his relation with his father, Viṣṇu and his son, Bhagadatta. Unlike the epigraphic records which mainly mention the paternal line of succession, the *Purāṇa* puts more emphasis on the interaction between father and son. For instance, Viṣṇu is not merely represented as the father of Naraka. He is rather an absolute being who rules over the entire life of Naraka. He ordered Naraka to move to Prāgjyotiṣa, that is the kingdom allotted to him, and fight against the local inhabitants, Kirātas. He forbade Naraka from opposing the sages and the *brāhmaṇas* ever and worshipping any other god or goddess except the goddess Kāmākhyā (Shastri 1992: 38, 98; 38, 106; 38, 146; 38, 149). Besides, He gave Naraka all precious things of Kirāta king, a gigantic chariot, and a special weapon called Śakti (Shastri 1992: 38, 136-41). After Naraka became a friend of Baṇa, a demon, he began to disrespect his father, Viṣṇu, conquered heaven, taken away wealth including Aditi's ear-rings and abducted sixteen thousand heavenly damsels. Finally, Viṣṇu incarnated himself as Kṛṣṇa, went to Prāgjyotiṣa and killed Naraka (Shastri 1992: 40, 1-107).

As Viṣṇu had a close relationship with Naraka, the latter's connection with Bhagadatta is also emphasized in the story. The Earth having seen her son Naraka killed approached Kṛṣṇa and said, "Oh, Govinda!... you have given me the son and you killed him. *Please protect his progeny.*" Kṛṣṇa promised that he would protect son of Naraka, Bhagadatta and anoint him on the throne of Prāgjyotiṣa. After that, he gave the weapon, Vaiṣṇavīśakti, which was previously given to Naraka by Viṣṇu, to Bhagadatta (Shastri 1992: 111-126). As was discussed before, the death of Naraka had been a recurrent theme which was noticed in the *Harivaṃśa* and other *Purāṇas*. However, there was no special reference to Naraka's descendants. The Earth's pray for Naraka's descendants is the most likely a new invention of the *Kālikā Purāṇa*. Similarly, the episode of Viṣṇu's weapon was already mentioned in the *Mahābhārata*. Though the weapon is said to be given to Bhagadatta, the epic does not give any relevant explanation. We have no idea how the weapon came to him. The composer(s) of the *Kālikā Purāṇa* utilized scattered and unrelated episodes of Naraka and Bhagadatta in the former tradition and made a new narrative for validating the royal genealogy of Kāmarūpa.

To sum up, the genealogy of Naraka had been continued throughout almost five-hundred years in the early medieval Kāmarūpa. However, this continuity does not mean the unilineal development of dynasties or any definite connection among different ruling families. In fact, each dynasty had denied the validity of previous dynasty for claiming their own legitimacy and the character and identity of progenitor, Naraka, were continuously reformulated according to the socio-political changes. The royal genealogy is not a record of the past, but a conceptual device for the present which validates existing political power. And the device still operates in the writing of particular version of history in present Assam.

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#### Note

- 1 It is generally postulated that after the decline of the Guptas, the Bhauma-Varman rulers became prominent in the Brahmaputra valley. Puṣyavarman who ruled during the fourth century A.D. was known as the founder of the line. By the end of the seventh century and the beginning of the eighth century A.D., political power passed from the hand of the Bhauma-Varman to the Mlecchas (or alternatively the line of Śālastambha). After the Mleccha dynasty came to an end with the death of Tyāgasimha, Brahmapāla became the first king of Pāla dynasty about 900 A.D. The Pālas continued to rule over Kāmarūpa till the twelfth century A.D.
- 2 Indeed, the issue of genealogy of Naraka has been critically connected with the subjective awareness of Assamese identity and their past. Since *The History of Assam* written by Gait had largely disappointed nationalists because of his dismissive attitude to historical source of the pre-Ahom period and lack of attention to the ancient past of Kāmarūpa, some scholars emphasized the lengthy history and continuous political genealogy of Kāmarūpa. (For the importance of Gait's historical writing and various responses of Indian historians to it, See Saikia's recent competent article (Saikia 2008: 141-71)). Bhattacharya, who was one of strong critics of Gait's work, underlined the glorious past of Assam which may go back to the 5000 years ago. He claimed that Naraka, Bhagadatta and Vajradatta were flourished 3000 years before Puṣyavarman, and the main line of kings of Kāmarūpa from Bhagadatta up to Bhāskaravarman ruled over the country *without interruption for several millennia* (Bhattacharya 1927: 845 italics mine). Though his assumption is untenable, it has continued to be maintained without significant modifications in the later major historical writings of Assam (e. g. Barua 1966, Barua 1986, Baruah, 2002, Choudhury, 1966 and so on).
- 3 Sarma (1981: 95-6) was of the opinion that there were as many as three monarchs bearing the name Naraka, all of whom ruled in the western region beyond the river Brahmaputra and the last of whom migrated from Videha and established himself in Prāgjyotiṣa, and that all this happened prior to the traditional Bhagadatta of the Mahābhārata period. On the other hand, Choudhury (1966: 132 ff.) speculated that Naraka-Bhagadatta was the dynastic name like Janaka and there were 24 or 25 kings of the Naraka-Bhagadatta line probably including the house of Puṣyavarman ruled for about 600 years. He assigned Naraka and Bhagadatta to the first century A.D.
- 4 For example, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (10. 59. 31) is quite explicit on the paternal genealogy of Naraka. After describing the combat between Viṣṇu and Naraka and the latter's defeat and death, it relates how Bhūmi appearing and addressing the god gives him the ear-rings of Aditi. In doing so Bhūmi said: "when you, assuming the form of a boar (*śūkara*) lifted me up, this son, begotten through the contract with you, was born from me" (Cited in Gonda 1969: 142). Almost same story of Naraka is narrated in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* as well.

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- 5 The *Rāmāyaṇa* (Shastri 1976: II, Kiṣkindhā kāṇḍa, 280) says that Sugrīva asked to Suṣeṇā to set out in a mission to the west for searching Sītā. While describing the various places to be visited by Suṣeṇā and his party, Sugrīva also describes the city of Prāgjyotiṣa located on the Varāha Mountain, surrounded by the deep sea and inhabited by Naraka.
- 6 As was well known fact, the Buddhist records of the Mahājanapadas did not mention the name of ancient kingdom, Prāgjyotiṣa or Kāmarūpa. Besides, there is no reference to Prāgjyotiṣa either in the early/late Vedic literatures or in the early Jain works. Kauṭīliya's *Arthaśāstra*, the Periplus of Erythraean Sea, Ptolemy's Geography and other early literary documents speak of economic pursuits of the tribal belt of the north eastern region, but had nothing to say about their kingdoms. Kāmarūpa, which was used as a synonym of Prāgjyotiṣa, is mentioned for the first time in the Allahabad pillar inscription of Samudragupta assigned to the middle of the fourth century A.D. It refers to Kāmarūpa and Davāka as the lands of frontier kings (*pratyanta nrpatīs*) (Sircar 1986: 265). Though, based on this epigraphic record, it can be assumed that state formation perhaps took place in the north eastern region before the advent of the Guptas, the process and scale of state formation could not be verified in the absence of large scale excavation in this area (Gupta 1992-1993: 2-3). Thus, most of theories claiming the ancient kingdom of Bhagadatta in East India are untenable. I have discussed the process of making of the historical region, Prāgjyotiṣa and its socio-historical implication elsewhere (Shin: forthcoming).
- 7 This family is called the Bhauma or the Naraka and also the *avanikula* in a more literary way (Sharma 1978: 0.29).
- 8 The former is assigned to the first quarter of the seventh century A.D. and the latter is dated between 620 and 643 A.D. (Sharma 1978: 10 and 38). Two other inscriptions, *viz.*, the seal attached to the Dubi C. P. and Nālandā clay seals, belonging to the reign of Bhāskaravarman also give the sacred genealogy of the Bhauma-Varmans (Sharma 1978: 33 and 35). However, both records provide only the succession list without giving any detailed information. A noteworthy point is that the Nālandā seals refer to Puṣpadatta between Bhagadatta and Vajradatta while it gives almost similar genealogy of Bhāskaravarman.
- 9 Here, the word *jitakāmarūpa* means one who has surpassed Kāma in beauty (*rupā*) and also one who has conquered the kingdom of Kāmarūpa (Sharma 1978: 137).
- 10 It is also pointed out that non-Sanskrit names for places, rivers, etc. are prominent in the documents of this phase of Kāmarūpa's history and these are in sharp contrast to Sanskrit names which appear in the Nidhanpur inscriptions in the Bhauma-Varmans dynasty. Thus, it is considered that a synthesis of brahmanical and local cultural patterns received impetus under the rulers of the Mleccha dynasty and carried further by the Pāla rulers of Kāmarūpa (Gupta 1992-93: 9-10 and 18). Besides, it is important that the presence of a local goddess Kāmākhya was mentioned in the records of the Mlecchas for the first time (Shin 2010: 8-9).
- 11 It was probably composed before the eleventh century A. D. in Kāmarūpa or in that part of Bengal which was very close to it. See Hazra (1963: 245). On the other hand, Barua (1966: 163) noticed in the text (55. 17) an allusion to the king Dharmapāla of Kāmarūpa, and consequently placed the text at the end of the eleventh century and the beginning of the twelfth century A.D. With regard to the geographical provenance of the text see Hazra (1963: 232) and Kooij (1972: 4).

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