



INTERFACING MYTHIC NARRATIVES WITH ARCHAEOLOGICAL REALITIES: A STUDY OF BHISMAKNAGAR ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE IN THE DIBANG VALLEY OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Bhismaknagar, located in the Lower Dibang Valley district of Arunachal Pradesh, India, is a significant archaeological site that offers deep insights into the region's medieval history and cultural heritage. Believed to have been established around the 8th century CE and abandoned by the 16th century, Bhismaknagar is associated with the Chutiya dynasty, a powerful medieval kingdom in Northeast India. This fortified settlement is associated with the legendary King Bhismaka and his daughter Rukmini, a central figure in the Mahabharata. Myth holds that Bhismaknagar was the capital of Bhismaka's kingdom, where Lord Krishna is said to have eloped with Rukmini, defying royal conventions and igniting divine romance. This paper explores how Bhismaknagar's mythological associations have shaped its cultural identity and influenced archaeological interpretations. It argues that the site's enduring legends enrich its historical narrative, offering a multidimensional lens through which to understand Northeast India's ancient heritage.

Keywords: *Idu Mishmi, Chutiya, Ahom, Kalita, Archaeology, Myth, Folklores*

Introduction

Bhismaknagar, located in the Lower Dibang Valley district of Arunachal Pradesh, India, is a significant archaeological site that offers deep insights into the region's medieval history and cultural heritage. It is situated at the foot of the Mishmi Hills, about 24 km south-east of Roing by road and about 40 km north-east of Sadiya.

Believed to have been established around the 8th century CE and abandoned by the 16th century, Bhismaknagar is associated with the Chutiya dynasty, a powerful medieval kingdom in Northeast India. The Chutiyas (also spelt as 'Sootiya') were ruling in the region around Sadiya in the eastern extremity of Assam, and their dominion extended into the foothill areas of the Lohit District. They were gradually being Hinduised into the fold of the Tantric school of Brahmanical Hinduism when the stronghold of the Ahom was taking place in their territories. Later, they were defeated by Ahom king Suhungmung in 1523 A.D., and their territories were put under an Ahom ruler known as "Sadiyakhowa Gohain" or the Viceroy of Sadiya. (Dalton, 1973:77)

This fortified settlement is associated with the legendary King Bhismak and his daughter Rukmini, a central figure in the Mahabharata. According to the Mahabharata, a king named Bhismak was the ruler of Vidarbha. Vidarbha is generally known as modern Berar, but the popular tradition in Assam locates this kingdom near Sadiya, where a place called Bhismaknagar or the city of King Bhismak, the mytho-historical king of Assam, existed.

The Bhagavata, the Mahabharata, the Vishnu Purana, and the *Rukmini-Harana* of Sankaradeva narrate how Krishna married Rukmini against the wishes of her father, Bhismak, who arranged her marriage with another prince named Sisupala.

Bhismaknagar became a great tourist destination after the Department of Research and Development, Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh and the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) organised the Madhavpur Ghed Fair on March 28, 2018. According to local folklore, this event was organised to commemorate the marriage of Rukmini, the Princess of Bhismaknagar, with Lord Krishna at Madhavpur in the Madhavrai Temple of Gujarat.

This paper aims to examine Bhismaknagar through both archaeological and mythological lenses, highlighting how oral traditions and excavated evidence coalesce to shape its identity.

Mythological Narratives

Myth holds that Bhismaknagar was the capital of Bhismaka's kingdom, where Lord Krishna is said to have eloped with Rukmini, defying royal conventions and igniting divine romance. However, according to the tradition and the Vishnu Purana, his capital

was at Kundina on the Kundil river flowing through the Sadiya region. Kundina is said to be near Sadiya, but its exact location is not known. (Choudhury,1966:106) It might have been floods that washed away the traces of the place, similar to the Sadiya areas being washed away in 1952. It can be assumed that Kundina was the earlier name of Bhismaknagar.

The earliest British account on the Bhismaknagar ruins by Lt. E.A. Rowlatt (Rowlatt, 1845) in 1845 associates the place with the myth of Krishna and Rukmini.

Moreover, Major S.P. Hannay (Hannay, 1848) writes;

Bhismook-nagar- This is a Hill fort; built according to the traditions of the people of Upper Assam, by a rajah of that name (Bhismook), whom the Hindoostanees appear to identify with Bheekhrum, rajah of Koondilpoor, the father of the celebrated Rukhmini. It is situated at the foot of the mountains nearby, north of Saddyah, between the Dikrong River and the Debong River, and may be distant about 16 miles distant.

According to Edward Gait (Gait, 1967:16), Krishna frequently appears in Assam Mythology. In the Bhagawat, it is narrated that there was a king named Bhismak, who ruled in Vidarbha, which, according to popular tradition in Assam, is the designation of the country around Sadiya. According to ordinary Puranic accounts, Vidarbha corresponds to the modern Berar, but this is not the only case in which the early Hindu settlers in Assam assigned local sides for the occurrences mentioned in Hindu Mythology. Numerous similar instances occur in Further India, and even in Java, where many of the events narrated in the Mahabharat have been given a local habitation. The Brahmaputra valley is known to the Buddhists of Further India as Wesali. Bhismak's capital was called Kundina, a name which still survives in the Kundil river at Sadiya, and the ruins of an extensive fort, about 94 miles north of that town between the gorges of the Dikrong and Dibong rivers, are said to be the remains of his capital. Bhismak had five sons and a daughter named Rukmini. Krishna, having heard of her beauty, was anxious to marry her, but her father had arranged to give her to another prince named Sisupal, whose fort may still be seen a few miles to the east of the one attributed to Bhismak. Rukmini secretly sent the news to Krishna and, on the day bed for marriage, the latter suddenly appeared and carried her off in his chariot. He was pursued by the crowd of princes who had come to assist at the wedding, but he defeated them and married Rukmini.

The name Bhismaknagar was first observed in the Assam District Gazetteer of the year 1928. Moreover, the name Bhismaknagar was coined by researchers who discovered the ruins in the 1970s. It was probably named as a result of the Sanskritization of a legendary king of the Chutias named Bhirmukka. As per Buranjis, the founder of the medieval Chutia kingdom, Birpal, called himself a descendant of King Bhirmukka. Historically, it was popularly known as *Kundil-nagara*; being situated on the banks of the Kundil river, *Sadhayapura*; the rulers being *Sadhayapur-ishwar*, and *Che-lung* in Tai Buranji, meaning Bar-nagar in Assamese and Great City.

Moreover, the Chutiyas associate the Bhismaknagar with their mystical supreme ancestor Bhismak. Some historians have contested the narratives of the Chutiyas, claiming Bhismak, their supreme ancestor, had established a kingdom on the banks of the Kundil river. The historians and scholars hold the view that the ruins on the banks of the Kundil River do not belong to the Chutiya kingdom, but they existed many centuries before it. (Delley, 2018:51)

For instance, J.B. Neufville (1828) refers to Kalitas as earlier rulers of the Sadiya and the nearby foothills extending up to Brahma Kund or Parshuram Kund in the Lohit River. Major Hannay and P. Saikia attribute the Bhismaknagar ruins to be more than 2000 years old. P.C. Chaudhary, in his book 'The History of Civilisation of the People of Assam', views Bhismaknagar as *Kalita Desa* mentioned in Sankardeva's biography. Scholars like Gait and Saikia argue that the ruins belong to the pre-Chutiya Empire. (Delley, 2018:52)

Scholars like Bhavananda Burhagohain, R.F.K.L. Baruah and Dr L. Gogoi (Saikia, 1988:434) view that the Fados ruled over Vidarbha or Kundil, who later adopted the Tantrik form of Hinduism. However, the Chutiyas contend that they originated when Fados came into contact with the Idu and Padam tribes of the hills. Moreover, T.N. Burhagohain asserts that the Idus were undoubtedly a branch of the Chutiyas. (Saikai, 1988:434)

Bhismaknagar as an Archaeological Discovery

The Bhismaknagar fort is believed to have been built between the 8th and 12th centuries. This ancient archaeological site is recorded as the oldest archaeological site in the region. The site was first explored by I. Block in 1848, and afterwards it was excavated between 1965-70 by the Research Department of the Government of Arunachal Pradesh. The excavated site reveals the complex houses the ruins of a brick-built structure of 1860.52 sq. m plinth area, having three halls, two extension rooms and six entrances in all. A stone wall of a height of 1.5 meters surrounds the building, with a brick wall of the palace about 1 meter high. The base of the exterior of the building is covered with an offset of the bricks, while the wall stands almost on natural soil. (Tripathy, 2008:118) The inner side of the boundary walls is decorated with tiles and decorative motifs. It has two impressive gates: the eastern gate facing the south and the western gate facing the north, where the western gate is larger, having two rooms, whereas the eastern gate has only one room. An entry to the palace is made through a left turn; a direct straight entry is blocked for an unknown reason. Almost the entire area of the fortress is protected with a rampart wall made of bricks, stone and mud. The northern side of the fort is protected by the natural boundary of hills.

Explorations in the same site revealed the discovery of some tiles bearing carvings of animals, birds, human figures, floral and geometric motifs by T. Bloch in 1905. (Bloch, 1905) All of these excavated remains are being preserved in the Assam State

Museum, including a male figure in a standing posture, a human figure in a walking attitude, two warriors, a male and a female standing and a rowing activity.

S.P. Hannay (1848) writes that the specimens of earthen wares discovered from the ruins of Sadiya, the main centre of the Chutiyas rulers, including Bhismaknagar, bear close affinity to those found in the Gangetic Valley. He has come across a sculpture of Krishna, a fine specimen of the early medieval sculptural art, during his exploration of the Bhismaknagar area. In fact, he, along with Hamilton Vetch and Captain E.F. Smith, visited the place. They were the first to report on the existence of a fort at Bhismaknagar. (Lohit District Gazetteers, 1978:38)

Excavation was conducted at the site by the Department of Research of NEFA in 1969-72, which yielded remains of a fortress, a large number of wheel-turned pottery, terracotta plaque with animal and floral design, decorative tiles, figurines of horse and elephant, inscribed bricks with animal motifs, etc. (Raiker, 1972:31,36)

Later, L.N. Chakravarty undertook excavation at Bhismaknagar in 1966-67. Later on, during 1968-70, Y.A. Raiker also carried out excavations at the same site. The excavation revealed a well-planned and well-protected city inhabited by people who reached a high degree of culture and civilisation. The excavated materials have shown that apart from classical fort architecture, the people knew wheel-turned pottery, terracotta art and advanced metallurgy. The ruins of the brick-built palace, as well as the surrounding walls with massive and a massive ditch surrounding it, reflect the engineering skill of the people. (Pandey, 2006:43).

The ruins of Bhismaknagar are believed to be associated with King Bhismaka of the Mahabharata fame, as the local people, the Idu Mishmis, have a tradition that King Bhismaka and Princess Rukmini hailed from the Mishmi Hills. However, this seems to be a mythological tradition as historians and archaeologists later stated that the site belongs to the early medieval period and most probably constructed by the Chutia rulers of the Ahom dynasty between the 11th and 13th centuries A.D. (Tripathy, 2008:119)

To this, Delley (Delley, 2018:56) in his article, *Krishna-Rukmini, Idu Mishmi-Bhismaknagar Phenomenon: History or Cultural Assimilation? A Study* contends that the popular myths and legends of the tribe do not reflect the Idu Mishmi-Rukmini myth. He suggests delving into a deep study of the *Igu* chants, the shamanic chants, to understand the Mishmi culture. He adds that the hairstyle of the Idu Mishmis has its basic and important identity to the tribe, whereas this cropped hairstyle has been viewed as a custom originating from the epic (Saikia, 1988:287). Thus, he concludes that the connection of Rukmini with Idu Mishmi is not validated by substantial evidence, demanding more facts to establish a relation between the two aspects.

In fact, in 2023, the Idu Mishmi Cultural and Literary Society (IMCLS), the apex body of the Idu Mishmi tribe, responding to the proposal for conducting a 'Bhismaknagar festival', urged the state government not to emphasize on Rukmini's connection, saying that there is not enough scientific and historical evidence to connect her with the tribe and the place. This news item was reported by Journalist Bengia Ajum titled "Rukmini's Arunachal connection: Narrative of myths, nationalism and political brownie point" in the local daily, The Arunachal Times, on January 8, 2024.

Interplay of Myth and Archaeology

Myths give meaning to archaeological sites, making them more than just ruins – they become living heritage. On the other hand, Sites with mythological significance often attract more attention and funding for conservation. Moreover, the fusion of myth and archaeology encourages interdisciplinary research, involving history, anthropology, literature, and religious studies.

The mythological narratives surrounding Bhismaknagar have guided archaeological interest and exploration. The legend of Rukmini and Krishna has spurred both scholarly and local curiosity, leading to sustained attention on the site.

While the myth places Bhismaka in a much earlier epoch (Dvapara Yuga), archaeological evidence situates the site in the early medieval period. This divergence invites critical analysis of how myths preserve kernels of historical truth, albeit in symbolic or exaggerated forms. The alignment of mythological reverence with archaeological findings reinforces the cultural continuity of the region. The site serves as a living bridge between ancient narratives and tangible heritage.

In essence, myth and archaeology are not rivals but partners in reconstructing the past. One offers the narrative, the other the evidence. When studied together, they provide a fuller, more nuanced picture of human history.

Conclusion

Bhismaknagar is more than an archaeological site – it is a cultural touchstone for the people of Arunachal Pradesh and the broader Northeast Indian region. Its mythological associations with Rukmini and Krishna have infused the site with spiritual meaning, making it a place of pilgrimage and reverence.

Bhismaknagar stands as a rare confluence of myth and monument. Its ruins whisper stories of a bygone civilisation, while its legends echo with divine romance and cultural pride. The archaeological evidence affirms the site's historical importance, while the mythological narratives enrich its meaning and relevance. This dual identity challenges scholars to navigate between fact and folklore, but it also offers a richer, more holistic understanding of heritage. Bhismaknagar is not just a place to excavate – it is a place to experience, interpret, and honour. Future research should continue to explore this intersection, integrating local oral traditions with scientific inquiry. In doing so, Bhismaknagar can remain not only a relic of the past but a vibrant symbol of living history.

The mythological aura enhances the site's appeal, drawing both tourists and pilgrims. This dual identity as a sacred and historical site adds layers to its preservation and interpretation. In addition, the beliefs and practices of local tribes offer valuable insights into the site's historical usage and significance, making community engagement crucial in archaeological interpretation.

It is a tourist destination that helped the people of the region to become economically sound by providing opportunities for employment. With the advancement of communication technology, the state and central governments have recently like the opening of the Dhola Sadiya Bridge over the Brahmaputra River and the opening of the Digaru Bridge over the Digaru River in Lohit district, tourist flow to this place is very frequent. This archaeological site has given new employment opportunities for the local youths to become tourist guides. There are many people who come from the national and international levels to visit this place. Thus, the stakeholders, policy makers, and state government should come up with appropriate measures for the promotion of tourism, incorporating the mythical and archaeological values of the site.

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