



HIDDEN KINGDOMS: THE FORGOTTEN RULERS OF NORTHEAST AND SOUTH INDIA

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ABSTRACT :

The history of India is often narrated through the grandeur of empires such as the Mauryas, Guptas, and Mughals, yet much of the subcontinent's rich and complex past remains obscured within its regional kingdoms. Nowhere is this more evident than in the histories of Northeast and South India, where dynamic yet often forgotten polities flourished. The Ahoms of Assam, the Kamarupa and Manipur kingdoms, the Cholas, Cheras, and Pandyas of Tamilakam, and the lesser-known Kadambas, Gangas, and Chalukyas of the Deccan each played vital roles in shaping India's political, cultural, and religious landscapes. These "hidden kingdoms" not only sustained regional autonomy but also fostered vibrant cultures, literary traditions, maritime trade, and systems of governance that contributed to the broader Indian civilization. This paper reexamines the histories of these forgotten rulers, illuminating their contributions to polity, culture, and diplomacy, while arguing for their rightful place in India's national historical narrative.



KEYWORDS : *Ahom Dynasty; Kamarupa; Cholas; Pandyas; Cheras; Kadambas; Chalukyas; South India; Northeast India; Regional Polities; Maritime Trade; Indian History.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Indian history, as traditionally constructed, tends to focus on the grand empires that unified vast territories under a single rule. However, the true essence of India's civilization lies equally in its regional kingdoms—its smaller yet powerful polities that maintained distinctive cultures and governance structures while contributing to the subcontinent's composite heritage. The narratives of the Northeast and South India often remain marginal in mainstream historiography, overshadowed by the dominant northern empires. Yet these regions were homes to sophisticated systems of administration, flourishing economies, maritime enterprises, and artistic innovation.

In the hills and valleys of the Northeast, dynasties such as the Kamarupa rulers and the Ahoms shaped a unique cultural synthesis blending Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryan, and Southeast Asian elements. Similarly, the peninsular South was a cradle of enduring civilizations—those of the Cholas, Cheras, and Pandyas—whose maritime prowess linked India with Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, and beyond. The hidden kingdoms of the Deccan, including the Kadambas, Gangas, and Chalukyas, laid foundations for temple architecture, Kannada and Telugu literature, and local self-governance. Exploring these regional

powers not only diversifies historical understanding but also reveals India's capacity for cultural pluralism and political innovation.

2. THE EARLY KINGDOMS OF THE NORTHEAST

The early history of Northeast India is often associated with the ancient kingdom of **Kamarupa**, centered in present-day Assam. Mentioned in the *Puranas* and the inscriptions of Samudragupta, Kamarupa flourished between the 4th and 12th centuries CE. Its most celebrated ruler, **Bhaskaravarman** (7th century CE), established diplomatic relations with Emperor Harsha of Kanauj, as recorded by the Chinese traveler Xuanzang. The kingdom's political system reflected both indigenous tribal structures and Aryanized monarchical institutions, demonstrating a sophisticated process of cultural assimilation.

The rulers of Kamarupa patronized Sanskrit learning and temple building, as evident in the *Kailashnath Temple* at Guwahati and the copper-plate inscriptions of Tezpur. However, Kamarupa's influence extended beyond religion and culture; it acted as a bridge between India and the regions of Southeast Asia, maintaining trade links through the Brahmaputra valley.

Following the decline of Kamarupa, the **Ahom Kingdom** emerged as the most enduring polity in Assam. Founded in 1228 CE by **Sukapha**, a Tai prince from across the Patkai Hills, the Ahoms ruled for nearly six centuries until the advent of British colonialism. Their polity represented a fusion of Tai administrative systems and local Assamese traditions. The Ahoms introduced advanced wet-rice cultivation, a robust bureaucratic system called the *Paik*, and a written chronicle tradition preserved in the *Buranjis*. Rulers such as **Suhungmung**, **Pratap Singha**, and **Rudra Singha** expanded their territories and fostered cultural synthesis by patronizing both Vaishnavism and traditional tribal faiths.

The Ahom resistance to Mughal invasions, particularly during the reign of **Lachit Borphukan**, who defeated the Mughals at the *Battle of Saraighat* (1671), stands as a defining episode of regional resilience. Their governance was meritocratic and remarkably decentralized for its time. The Ahoms left behind a legacy of political adaptability, ethnic integration, and cultural pluralism that continues to define Assam's identity.

3. THE KINGDOMS OF MANIPUR AND TRIPURA

In neighboring **Manipur**, the **Meitei Kingdom** developed an equally rich but distinct civilization. According to the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, the royal chronicle of Manipur, the kingdom's history dates back to 33 CE under King Pakhangba. By the fifteenth century, Manipur had established a consolidated monarchy that blended animistic, Hindu, and later Vaishnavite traditions. The reign of **King Garib Niwaz (1709–1748)** marked a significant phase of cultural transformation, as Hinduism, particularly the Gaudiya Vaishnavism of Bengal, became the dominant religion, intertwining with local practices.

Manipur's strategic location on the Indo-Burmese frontier made it a crucial point of contact between India and Southeast Asia. Its martial traditions, embodied in the classical dance form *Thang Ta* and later in the Manipuri dance, symbolized both defense and devotion. Similarly, **Tripura**, ruled by the Manikya dynasty from around the 13th century, evolved into a vibrant center of Hindu and tribal synthesis. The rulers of Tripura, particularly **Dhanya Manikya** and **Ratna Manikya**, patronized art and architecture, establishing temples such as the *Tripureshwari Temple* at Udaipur. Their political diplomacy with Bengal and Arakan reflected a nuanced regional statecraft, balancing autonomy and cultural assimilation.

4. THE SOUTHERN KINGDOMS: CHERAS, CHOLAS, AND PANDYAS

In South India, the **Sangam Age** (circa 3rd century BCE to 3rd century CE) marked the emergence of the three great Tamil kingdoms—the Cheras, Cholas, and Pandyas—whose cultural

achievements laid the foundation for Dravidian civilization. The Sangam literature, written in early Tamil, portrays a society deeply rooted in heroism, love, and ethical governance.

The **Chera Kingdom**, centered in present-day Kerala, controlled the western coast and its lucrative spice trade. The port of Muziris (modern Kodungallur) served as a major hub for trade with Rome, Arabia, and Southeast Asia. The Chera rulers, such as **Cenguttuvan**, are credited with promoting Tamil literature and patronizing poets who composed the *Pathitrupathu* anthology.

The **Pandya Kingdom**, based in Madurai, was renowned for its patronage of learning and art. The Pandyas supported the assembly of Tamil scholars known as the *Sangam*, which produced some of the earliest Tamil literary masterpieces. Their later rulers, such as **Maravarman Sundara Pandya**, expanded their dominion across the southern peninsula and maintained diplomatic ties with Sri Lanka and the Cholas.

The **Chola Empire**, however, reached the zenith of South Indian power and global influence. From the ninth to the thirteenth centuries, under rulers like **Rajaraja Chola I** and **Rajendra Chola I**, the Cholas established a vast maritime empire extending to Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and even parts of Southeast Asia. The Cholas perfected the art of administration through a well-organized bureaucracy, detailed in the *Uttaramerur inscriptions*, which testify to their system of local self-government. They were also pioneers in temple architecture, as seen in the **Brihadeeswarar Temple** at Thanjavur, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Culturally, the Chola period witnessed the flowering of Tamil literature and the refinement of *Bharatanatyam* and *Carnatic music*. Their naval expeditions, chronicled in Southeast Asian inscriptions, established India's maritime supremacy and contributed to the spread of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Indian art across the Indian Ocean world.

5. THE DECCAN DYNASTIES: KADAMBAS, GANGAS, AND CHALUKYAS

Moving northward into the Deccan plateau, the **Kadambas of Banavasi** (4th–6th centuries CE) were among the earliest indigenous dynasties to use Kannada as an administrative language, symbolizing the assertion of regional identity against northern Sanskritic dominance. The Kadambas established a strong bureaucratic framework and built temples that laid the foundation for later Dravidian architectural styles.

The **Western Gangas** of Talakad and their contemporaries, the **Eastern Gangas** of Kalinga, further developed this tradition. The Eastern Gangas, particularly under **Anantavarman Chodaganga Deva**, constructed the iconic **Jagannath Temple at Puri**, one of India's most revered religious monuments. Their rule represents an intersection between political power and spiritual patronage, linking the Deccan with the cultural world of eastern India.

The **Chalukyas of Badami** (6th–8th centuries CE) and their successors, the **Western Chalukyas of Kalyani**, transformed the Deccan into one of India's most artistically advanced regions. The rock-cut temples at **Aihole**, **Badami**, and **Pattadakal** exemplify a synthesis of Nagara and Dravida architectural styles. These temples became prototypes for later structures across South India. The Chalukyas were not merely warriors but also patrons of learning and literature. The poet **Ravikirti's Aihole inscription** immortalizes their achievements in classical Sanskrit verse, while the Chalukyan administration was characterized by decentralized governance through local assemblies and guilds.

6. TRADE, CULTURE, AND REGIONAL NETWORKS

One of the most remarkable features of the kingdoms of the Northeast and South was their participation in extensive networks of trade and cultural exchange. The coastal kingdoms of the South—particularly the Cheras and Cholas—played a central role in connecting India to the global maritime routes of the Indian Ocean. Archaeological finds from sites like Arikamedu reveal Roman amphorae and coins, underscoring India's role in the ancient transoceanic economy.

In the Northeast, trade routes through the Brahmaputra Valley connected India with Tibet, Burma, and Yunnan. The Ahoms and the Manipuris managed border diplomacy and exchange networks that brought in horses, silk, and metals from the eastern highlands. These interactions led to a unique cultural hybridization that blended indigenous traditions with foreign influences, creating distinctive art forms, rituals, and languages.

Both regions displayed advanced forms of governance that balanced local autonomy with centralized authority. The village assemblies of the Cholas and the *khels* of the Ahoms exemplify participatory governance that modern scholars recognize as precursors to democratic institutions.

7. THE MARGINALIZATION OF REGIONAL HISTORIES

Despite their significant contributions, the histories of the Northeast and South Indian kingdoms have long remained peripheral in mainstream narratives. Colonial historiography, focused on North Indian empires, and post-independence centralization of history writing contributed to this imbalance. The neglect of local inscriptions, oral traditions, and vernacular literature further obscured these regions' achievements.

However, recent historiographical efforts have begun to correct this imbalance. Archaeological excavations in Assam, Manipur, and Kerala, along with linguistic and genetic studies, have illuminated the depth of historical continuity in these regions. The recognition of the Ahom chronicles (*Buranjis*), the Sangam corpus, and temple inscriptions as primary historical sources has enriched our understanding of India's plural past.

These "hidden kingdoms" were not isolated polities but integral parts of the Indian civilizational mosaic, participating in shared cultural exchanges and contributing to the diversity that defines India's historical identity.

8. CONCLUSION

The forgotten kingdoms of the Northeast and South India represent the diverse and decentralized genius of the Indian subcontinent. Far from being peripheral, they were dynamic centers of political innovation, artistic creativity, and cross-cultural interaction. Their histories challenge the notion of India as a civilization defined solely by its empires; instead, they reveal a network of vibrant regional polities that together sustained the continuity of Indian civilization.

The Ahoms, Kamarupa kings, Meiteis, Cholas, Cheras, Pandyas, Kadambas, and Chalukyas each embodied the spirit of resilience, adaptability, and inclusivity. They nurtured art, literature, trade, and governance systems that influenced regions far beyond their borders. By rediscovering these hidden kingdoms, historians not only reclaim lost chapters of the Indian past but also reaffirm the pluralistic foundation of India's present. The story of India's greatness is incomplete without these regional monarchies that, though forgotten by time, remain living symbols of India's enduring unity in diversity.

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