

MEDIEVAL AND EARLY COLONIAL ASSAM

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# Medieval and Early Colonial Assam

Society, Polity, Economy



AMALENDU GUHA

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**To  
Anima, Supratik and Monisha**

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## FOREWORD

History in the round, history that takes into account the solidity and the rigidity of the *terra firma*, yet recognizes the constant changes wrought by human endeavour on it and within the limits set by it, history that can describe the myriad aspects of human consciousness as expressed in literature, art and in social institutions such as the family, the kin group, the tribal formation, castes and states remains an ambitious yet unattainable goal for most historians or social scientists. The great exemplars of this *genre*, of course, remain the myriad volumes turned out by the *Annales* school of historians in France. Without any conscious attempt to imitate the methods of the *Annales* school, through a sense of deep engagement with the material and through a lifetime of scholarly endeavour, Professor Amalendu Guha has brought off a feat—a feat of writing the history of medieval and early colonial Assam in the round.

For Indian social scientists this achievement not only sets a standard to emulate. The history of medieval and early colonial Assam has a fascination of its own. Assam was for many of us a land of mythic frontiers, not only the frontier of myths, but also of the intrepid European planters taming the jungles to produce the tea for the civilized world. For those of us who were more concerned with the fate of the human beings whom the European planters disposed of as so many animate tools, Assam was also the frontier where an alien civilization bred a new kind of slavery. Nearer our own time, the Assam movement and other political movements demanding new kinds of autonomy in the name of the people posed fresh challenges to our understanding and to our capacity to act as responsible citizens of an independent country.

Professor Guha dispels much of the mythic opacity from the land and the people he has so lovingly and yet so dispassionately portrayed. We understand the difficulties of communication between the plains and the hills, between different stretches of the Brahmaputra, between the hilltops and the valleys, between hill people enjoying a kind of primitive affluence and plains immigrants winning land from the swamps foot by weary foot. But if he only stressed the difficulties,

Professor Guha would have given us an etiolated narrative at best. He goes on to show how communication and trade created symbiotic structures between hill and plains-people and between different groups of plains-people and hill-people. He also shows how changes took place in the patterns of living of different groups of people under the impact of perennial wet rice cultivation as against shifting (*jhum*) cultivation or under the impact of the coming of the iron plough to gradually displace the hoe as the main implement of cultivation.

He shows how a structure of feudal relations was built up in the Tai-Ahom kingdom, and how, paradoxically enough, a process of Hinduization helped these conquerors from further east consolidate their power on a basis of hierarchical ideology. He stresses the specificities of the Vaishnavism that spread in Assam in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and shows how the more radical sects of the Vaishnavas inevitably came into conflict with the feudal state apparatus. He goes on to explore both the ideological and the more materialistic roots of the Moamaria revolt of the late eighteenth century. Peasant discontent found its idiom, if not its ideological moorings, in the neo-Vaishnavite movement of the Moamara (Mayamara) Satra. This conflict exhausted both the contending parties, and prepared the way for a brief Burman conquest followed by the British take-over.

Professor Guha is as careful a guide to the history of the colonialization of Assamese economy and society as he had been of the precolonial period. His work on the plantation economy of Assam is, of course, by now a recognized classic. But he takes us outside the boundaries of the planter Raj, and shows the peasants of the Brahmaputra valley in their exploited and differentiated state. But he shows them also responding to new stimuli emanating from the international and the larger Indian economy.

Professor Guha often talks of state formation and de-tribalization as processes operating in medieval Assam. But it is a proof of his sensitivity to the tenacious maintenance of identities of different groups of people that we never lose sight of the Bodo-Kocharis, the Koch-Koches or the Tai-Ahoms even while they are being intermingled with one another in the melting pot of Assam. They enrich one another's culture, but the enrichment somehow requires that the distinctiveness of each people is recalled from time to time.

We are now passing through periodic ethno-linguistic conflicts in different parts of the country—conflicts that sometime take a violent form. I would like to believe that in a democracy, if the different peoples with distinctive memories recognize one another's contribution to the rich tapestry that is Indian culture, then political solutions within a constitutional framework can be worked out. Professor Guha has presented a historical portrait which is a microcosm of India. But we must recognize that for purposes of cultural synthesis, symbiosis and effluence, Assam is rich enough to be a macrocosm in itself. I hope other people will read the book with as much wonder and as much pleasure as I have done. I consider it a privilege that I have worked with a scholar of Professor Guha's distinctive stamp for more than fifteen years in the same institution.

21 May 1990

Amiya Kumar Bagchi  
Director  
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Calcutta

## INTRODUCTION

Contributions included in this volume have been selected from a wide range of research papers I published over a span of twenty years between 1965 and 1985. These were written to add certain new dimensions to the stereotyped interpretations of Assam's past, handed down to us by historians of imperialist and nationalist schools. I have not undertaken now any large-scale revision of what I wrote earlier. Not much accretion to our received knowledge has occurred meanwhile to warrant such revision.

It appears that, mine were among the earliest attempts at applying what D. D. Kosambi used to call 'the combined method of history' towards understanding Assam, a region grossly neglected in our national historiography. This is why I have ventured to bunch together some of those original texts in one place within easy reach of the new generation now taking increasing interest in that methodology.

However, while making a coherent whole of the intermittently published disparate pieces, some marginal emendations could not be avoided. We have also shortened their original titles while arranging them serially around a central argument. Their full titles and first publication details have however been listed, among other entries, in our bibliography section. Since all non-English terms have repeatedly been explained in their appropriate places in the text, no glossary has been provided.

Whether or not India's pre-colonial social formation was feudal in essence and whether or not colonialism helped promotion of its transition to a new formation have currently been the two major issues of debate. I have examined both in the light of the experience of just one region, Assam. Here under the 600-year old dynastic rule of the Ahoms, an offshoot of the Tai people of Southeast Asian origin, a

variant of feudalism emerged directly from tribal formations. The first six contributions in this volume highlight certain peculiar aspects of this feudalism which underwent a political and moral collapse even before the British appeared on the scene. An economic crisis culminating in peasant revolts hastened this collapse. The remaining six contributions examine what colonialization meant for the Assamese people in terms of economy and culture and why it lacked a regenerative role. Even its destructive role *vis-a-vis* the old institutions was limited and halting, because of its compromises with feudal elements and its commitment to an enclave economy. 'Tea change' was in no way a sea change for the better.

The central perspective that runs through this collection is as follows. Essentially feudal though, the mode of production that thrived in medieval Assam sharply contrasted with comparable modes that coexisted elsewhere in India not only in scale but also in quality. The basis of this contrast was not so much in the realm of production relations, as in that of the productive forces. Therefore and for other reasons the transition from a pre-modern to modern society here was also of a different genre. Colonialism reduced the indigenes more or less to one dead level and built enclaves of capitalism where they hardly had any place. Neither E. A. Gait, nor S. K. Bhuyan, nor even H. K. Barpujari or Maheswar Neog—all historians of eminence—could aptly comprehend the process, because of the limitations of their conservative ideology and perspectives. They missed much of the dynamics of the medieval society and of the colonial domination that followed.

A historical process is not determined by a mere series of accidents, nor is it determined by ideology or economic factors alone. Yet it is the predominant role of the material conditions of social life, and the class struggle within it, that underlies the dynamics of change. This is how I looked at the developments in Assam and, to my satisfaction, found new lines of enquiry opening up. Quite a number of younger scholars with a Marxist orientation and commitment to Northeast India as a subject of historical enquiry found keen interest in my writings and, in their turn, are already making significant

contributions in the field. It is to their insistence that the present publication is primarily indebted.

For more than sixteen years till recently, I had been on the academic staff of the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta and before that for more than six years on that of the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Pune. It is in these two institutes that my writings took their final shape and I am particularly grateful to the former for getting this collection published. I am also grateful to all those with whom I had the privilege to work together—I do not like to name only a chosen few—for every kind of help towards its preparation.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

[ Not many abbreviations have been used which need clarification.  
Those which need are given below. ]

CUP	The Cambridge University Press
DHAS	The Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Government of Assam, Guwahati.
GOI	The Government of India
ICCR	The Indian Council for Cultural Relations, New Delhi.
IESHR	The Indian Economic and Social History Review, Delhi.
JARS	Journal of the Assam Research Society, Guwahati.
JASB	Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta.
JBORS	Journal of the Bihar and Orissa Research Society, Patna.
NAI	The National Archives of India, Delhi.
PPH	The People's Publishing House, New Delhi.