

**PROCEEDINGS OF  
NORTH EAST INDIA  
HISTORY ASSOCIATION**

**NINTH SESSION**

**GUWAHATI ; 1988**

Printed & Published by  
Jayanta Kumar Bhattacharya  
General Secretary

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9

*Edited & Published by*  
**Jayanta Bhushan Bhattacharjee**  
General Secretary  
on behalf of

**North East India History Association**  
Department of History  
**North-Eastern Hill University**  
Shillong - 793014

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## PREFACE

*The ninth session of the North East India History Association at the Gauhati University was indeed the fulfilment of a long cherished objective of the Association to hold a session in the premier University of the region. In fact, there had been efforts on the part of the Association ever since it came into existence in 1979 to hold a session at the Gauhati University. We are thankful to the authorities of the Gauhati University for inviting the ninth session and organising it in an excellent manner.*

*Shri Bhisma Narain Singh, the Governor of Assam, inaugurated the session. Professor D. P. Barooah, Vice-Chancellor, and Professor J. N. Phukan, Head, Department of History, Gauhati University did the Association a great honour as Chairman of the organising committee and Local Secretary respectively for the session. It was presided over by Professor Bhupen Qanungo of the North-Eastern Hill University. More than one hundred and fifty delegates attended the session in which eighty-five research papers were presented and discussed.*

*The present volume is the proceedings of the ninth session of the North East India History Association held at the Gauhati University on November 3-5, 1988. I am thankful to my colleagues Dr. J. P. Singh, Dr. O. P. Kejariwal, Dr. M. S. Sangma and Dr. D. R. Syiemlieh for the help in selecting and editing the papers and publishing the volume. We are also thankful to the Indian Council of Historical Research for the generous financial assistance extended to the Association.*

**J. B. Bhattacharjee**

*General Secretary,*

North East India History Association.

Shillong

The 25 August 1989

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## An almost forgotten work on Assam

Gautam Sengupta

In his *Report on the Progress of Historical Research in Assam* (Shillong 1897), E.A. Gait narrates the circumstances under which enquiries into 'the ancient history of the province' was taken up at his initiative. Gait writes: "after the publication of Mr Risley's work on the Tribes and castes of Bengal, a suggestion was made by me that in Assam enquiries might at the same time be made into the ancient history of the Province. This suggestion met with Sir William Ward's approval, and in circular no 28 G dated the 23rd July 1894, District officers were requested to give all assistance in their power in the prosecution of such enquiries, Gaits' report is the logical outcome of this attempt.

Enquiries into Assam's past, however, pre-dates government-sponsored ventures. Gait himself listed a number of books and monographs pertaining to Assam. Authored mostly by the Europeans, these works dwell upon a range of themes; official reports about as yet unknown tracts, ethnographic studies, account of flora and fauna, literary, historical and quasi-historical studies. Two titles, however, stand out distinctively as representing the Indian perception of a region which till then was virtually unexplored. In many ways, Pandit Ramkumar Vidyaratna's **Udasin Satya-Sravara Assam Bhraman** (Calcutta 1880) and Jogesh Chunder Dutt's **Old Relics in Kamrup** (Calcutta 1891) are significant contributions. In this note, our attempt is to assess Dutt's slim work in the context of contemporaneous writings on Assam.

### I

Assam monuments, like those in many other areas of the Indian Sub-continent, were rediscovered

by the Britishers. The consolidation of British rule over the greater part of erstwhile Assam was preceded by the exploration of the region by a number of English officials; some of them were keen observers of ruins and antiquities. Consequently, a number of articles and communications were published between 1835 and 1885. A.R. Hoernle, in the Centenary Review of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, listed seven such articles relating to Assam monuments, the earliest of which is Captain G.E. West-maccott's 'Description of Ancient Temples and Ruins at Chardwar in Assam; followed by Major F. Jenkin's Ancient Landgrant on copper dug up near Tezpur in the Darrang district in 1840. Eight years later (1848) Lt. Col. S.F. Hannay described the antiquities in the vicinity of Suddyah in Upper Assam. In 1851, Hannay published a brief notice of an Ahom-period stone-bridge near Gowhatty in the Kamrup district. In 1855, there is an important contribution by Captain E. Taite Dalton, giving a full description of the antiquities of Assam, especially its temple and sculpture (in Gauhati, Tezpur, Sessa and other places). In 1877, there are two papers on subject which 'had been neglected since 1855'; Major H.H. Godwin Austen described the ruins of Dimapur and Mr J.M. Foster those of Jayasagar. Writing in 1885, Hoernle correctly identified the 'temple ruins of Assam as a subject .... well worthy of research'<sup>2</sup>.

Two important traits are clearly discernible in this genre of writing, a concern with the mediaeval monuments and a matter-of-fact presentation. Ruins of a Kachari fort, temples and stone-bridges constructed under the patronage of Ahom rulers were closer to popular memory and thus easily comprehensible by the Europeans. Since the methods and language of Indian art-history was yet to develop, the authors seemed to have laid great emphasis on the technical and functional

aspects of the monuments. Hannay, for example, goes into some details about the 'technical aspect of stone-bridge situated about 8 miles North-West of North Gauhati'. One also notices an attempt at 'establishing correspondence (which) could make the unknown and the strange knowable'. Godwin Austen describes some of the Kachari Pillars at Dimapur as Chessman Pillars.

The British initiative must, however, be viewed in proper perspective. Confronted with a world, very much different from their own, the first group of officials came to realise that every bit of information contribute towards comprehending the reality of the situation. This explains the extraordinary zeal with which they had tried to collect and systematise information on the ethnographic, zoological, geological and cultural material Ruins or history, by no means, was their exclusive concern. As in other parts of India a concerted attempt was made to piece together the totality of indigenous life and psyche<sup>3</sup>.

## II

Dutta on the other hand, approached Assam's past from an altogether different point of view. A distinguished product of the 19th century Bengal, Jogesh Chunder belonged to the famous Dutt family of Rambagan in North Calcutta. A competent Sanskritist and an important political figure, Jogesh Chunder is, however, much less known compared to his younger brother Romesh Chunder Dutta, civilian-scholar and Literature. In spite of his involvement in the public life of Bengal, Jogesh Chunder found time to translate the Kashmir chronicles of Kalhana, Jonaraja, Prajya Bhatta and Pandita Suka into English in three volumes (Calcutta 1879-1887). The first volume (publicshed in 1879) is dedicated to his 'Younger brother R.C. Dutta I.C.S,' who also contributed a lengthy introduction to this volume. Besides *Old Relics In Kamrup*, Dutt also published 'A few notes on some Sanskrit Works' (Calcutta 1908).

ction therefore is the first attempt to publish the inscriptions of Assam." Clearly, Dutt is more concerned with the historical aspect rather than the contemporary social issues.

The title page reads: Old Relics In Kamrup/ by Jogesh Chunder dutt/ Calcutta/ Printed by Nundo Mohun Banerjee & Co/ AT THE FULL MOON PRINTING WORKS/ Published by the Author/ (All rights reserved)/ Price Eight annas. It is a slim work containing twenty seven printed pages ( 3cm x 17cm size) the Dedication is, however, fairly lengthy: To MR & MRS B. BORRAH whose affectionate care made my sojourn in Kamrup a source of happiness and of joy, and whose cheerful help and ungrudging exertions enabled me to visit the old relics of the place, and to obtain copies of the inscriptions, THESE PAGES ARE LOVINGLY DEDICATED.

The account begins with an appeal to those 'who delight in the loveliness of Nature' (P.I) and goes on to a vivid description of the surroundings encountered in course of the steamer journey between Jatrapur and Gauhati. Dutt creates an idyllic setting. "Hills, dales woods, the lake-like river, sandbanks and wooded islands make the scene bewitching". (P.2) Gauhati is described as a 'place ... of exceeding beauty;' but like most of his contemporaries, the point of reference is Europe and Dutt laments : 'and had it been in Europe, a picturesque little town, dotted with neat little houses, would have cheered the eye of the traveller, but in India the people are too poor and too low in the scale of civilization to take advantage of lovely sites for building picturesque towns." (p.2). but, Dutt's breadth of vision and understanding of the historical processes comes out clearly in this 'excerpt: "The Valley has its own annals and ruins which are neither uninteresting nor undeserving of notice. Here too, as everywhere else in the world, there have been wars and conquests, rise and fall of Kingdoms and nations, and struggle for

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supremacy and existence. Man's nature is the same everywhere, the arena of his action may be large or small in different places". (pp.2-3). Beyond doubt, one reads into it the reverberation of a kind of universalism; the author's intellectual legacy is clearly discernible. Dutt, however makes very modest claim about his own work, his intention is to "note down a short account of the historical and antiquarian remains which may be seen in the district of Kamrup"(p.3) which is aimed at those who "can" ill afford to undertake a study which requires both work and labour"(p.3)

Having spelt out his purpose, the author goes on to the origin of the name 'Asam'( pp. 3-4) and traces the history of Assam from the time of Bhaskaravarman down to the annexation by the British. Dutt utilised textual data and made generous use of Samuel Beal's translation of Life of Hiuen Tsang which came out in 1888 (pp.4-5). But Dutt was painfully aware of the absence of material remains of these 'remote period' (p.5)

The third section of the book gives a graphic account of the temple of Kamakhya, 'the oldest relic of the past' (p.6). Dutt recapitulates the legendary association of Naraka with the temple; ascribes its construction 'sometime after the Christian era' (p.6), its subsequent demolition by Kalapaphar in 1553 A.C. and the re-building on 'the stump that was left'. (p.6).

As a Sanskritist, Dutt's primary concern seemed to be the inscription and he reproduced three records datable between 1556/1557 A.D. and 1782 A.D. The first inscription, copied from the *Bhraman*, refers to the re-construction of the temple by Sukladhvaja between 1565 and 1567 A.D.; the second record, carved in a stone-slab, and transcribed by Dutt himself mentions the construction of the utsava-mandira by Dasaratha, the

Bar-Phukan, under the orders of King Rajeshvara Simha in 1759 A.D., the third, dated 1782, is a copper-plate charter alludes to the sacrifice of one hundred thousand animals in the Kamakhya temple (pp 8-9). What is remarkable about Dutt's effort is the almost total accuracy in reproduction of the records, although he had been rather-apologetic in the preface on this score. However, Dutt's apologetic stand about 'the immoral practices which prevailed here (i.e. Kamakhya temple) in days gone by is in conformity with the victorian moral values coupled with reformist attitude of the neo-Hinduism.

From Kamakhya, the author moves to the Nilachala hill and ponders on the beauty and solitude of the site. (section IV) But here again the victorian moralist speaks out: "But to what purpose did man use this sacred spot ? Here a temple has been built to goddess Bhuvaneshvari, and, according to tradition, it was before this dread goddess that human sacrifices were offered such was the state to which religion was debased through priestly craft and natural degeneracy. Thanks to the British rule, the dark days of human sacrifices are over but the memory of what took place haunt the spot yet." (p.10). Dutt, however, provides a historical view of the phenomenon: "Kamrup, it appears, was the very centre of the tantric cult, and that perhaps explains the rites which were performed in Kamakhya and Bhuvaneshvari temples" (p.11).

The temple of Pandunath, 'two miles further west', arouses Dutt's interest because of a fairly long inscription of the time of King Siva Simha, dated 1732 A.D. Commemorating the construction of a city-gate at this place. The temple, by contrast, "is a miserable thing, built of brick and thatched. There are, however, some beautiful pieces of sculptured stone, formed into steps, which are well worth preserving" (p 12).

Among the remains within the town of Gauhati, Dutt describes rock-cut-figures along the Sukresvara Ghat in some details, but without any comment on its date. Dutt, however, went into some length about two inscriptions in the Ugratara Temple dated A.D. 1725 and 1738. Surprisingly the second inscription refers to Sri sri<sup>5</sup> Phulesvari Devi although she had expired by then<sup>5</sup>. Dutt's observation about the 'plan' of the Kamrup temples are worth reproducing: "The principal portion is a circular or nearly circular edifice which towers high over the other portions of the building and generally ends in a spire. It is within this structure that the deity, to which the temple is dedicated, is placed. The room is pitch dark having no opening to admit light from outside: and is illuminated with lamps that make darkness visible, and dimly show the gods to the votaries. In front of this circular room, and attached to it, is a large hall where the votaries assemble to pay their devotion. The temples are generally built of small well-burnt flat bricks, small and unimposing. The arches are nearly semicircular, and mainly held by a final keystone at the top. This "Key" is also a well burnt flat brick almost an equilateral triangle in shape. The entrance to the temple is generally a long covered vault formed on the principle of the arch, described above, in fact it is a succession of arches one behind the other. This is, in short, the general style of architecture in the existing old temples of Kamrup. Most of them were built after the middle of the seventeenth century when the rajas of Assam had adopted the Hindu religion".(p.24)

In section six Dutt takes his readers 'about two miles east of Gauhati' (p.15) and introduces the Nava-Graha temple. After recapitulating the planetary association of Pragjyotisa, he reproduces the dedicatory inscription of the time of Rajesvara Simha, dated A.D. 1749 and another record referring to the excavation of a tank in A.D. 1753 (p.16). continuing his narration, the author discusses the legend connected

with Vasisthasrama and cites another inscription of Rajesvara Simha dated 1694 (p.17). Dutt, was intrigued by the lines of high embankments and pondered on this problem:" It appears that these lines were constructed where the hills, which formed the natural rampart of the city, failed. The position of this ancient capital was rather an exposed one from the military point of view, as it was subject to be assailed by the Bhuteas from the north and the Kashias from the south" (p.17). Dutt's account of the southern part of the town concludes with three 'beautiful islands which lie in the river' by drawing upon legends, architectural remains and known history.

Among the remains on the Northern bank, Dutt describes Asvaktanta on the basis of local legends, but rightly points out that the temple dates from the time of Siva Simha (p.19). He writes with a sense of humour, 'geology is not much in favour with the local cicerones' (p.19). The account is carried to the temple of Rudreshvara built by Siva Simha to commemorate the death of his father, Rudra Simha. Dutt was somewhat perplexed by the 'modest temple' meant to commemorate the greatest of kings of Assam'(p.20). He did recognise that "the numerous fragments of old stone building that can be seen in the town and in the neighbourhood indicate that at an early age architechere flourished in the valley"(p. 20). An assumption for which he found further evidence in the surroundings of the Chandra Bharati rock inscription (p.22). Proceeding further, the author enters into the 'place of Dhingia Grossains' who 'once made themselves famous in history, and the Assam rajas had to invoke their aid against another body of prelates who had risen in rebellion against the secular authority" (p.22).

Beyond the limits of Gauhati, one site in particular figured prominently in this account. Dutt discussed the Hayagriva temple at Haju (Hajo) in some details, cited the legend about its convers-

ion into a Visnuite shrine from the Buddhist roots, and its predominant 'Bhutea' pilgrims, its mutilation by Kalapahar and, "What is unique to Assam, there is a band of dancing girls attached to the temple" (pp.23-24). The authorship of the shrine is ascribed to the 'ancient kings of Kuch Behar' on the strength of legend and inscription, one of which alluded to the construction of the temple in A.D. 1580. Another inscription, cited by Dutt, mentioned the construction of a tower meant for Raslila in A.D. 1747(pp.24-25).

There is further reference to the "remains of a Mahomedan tomb on the adjoining hill known by the name of Poamecca"(p.26). where "A poa weight of soil was brought from Mecca to consecrate the ground" (p.26).

Dutt concluded his account with two general issues: a strong plea for the proper preservation of the monuments and an appeal for generous support to the descendants of the Ahom dynasty. Not surprisingly, *Udas in Satyasavar Asam Bhraman* ends with a similar note.

The author offered some concrete proposals: "It is no doubt the duty of Government to preserve the relics of the past ... a very small grant will meet the requirement of Assam. A tolerably large bungalow at Gauhati and a small staff will be sufficient to rescue from oblivion many interesting fragment of stone which have a story to tell to all intelligent visitors, of the art and history of the times gone by and will be the means of instruction to the people. We hope our suggestion to establish an antiquarian museum at Gauhati will be duly considered by the Government of Assam" (p.27). About the descendant's of the sovereigns, who once owned these realms and reared these works; Dutt added with a sense of pathos. "Not only an occasional traveller in these parts, but the people no doubt keenly

feel the neglect to which the descendants of kings have been allowed to fall ... Now that the British have succeeded them in their extensive dominion, the British can well afford to be generous towards them. a small brick-built house will afford them a decent shelter. A favour-trifling as this-will, we are sure, be very much appreciated by the people, and will not be unworthy of the civilised power that now rules over India (p.27).

### III

As we read through this account, a number of issues pertaining to J.C. Dutt's intellectual orientation come out in bold relief. What strikes us most is Dutt's emphasis about the primacy of inscriptional evidence as opposed to the legendary and textual sources. This, itself, is a welcome departure from then prevalent approach to the past which based itself heavily on literary evidence. Dutt noticed more than a dozen of inscriptions, mostly of the Ahom period. These records, with few exceptions, have been subsequently published with little variation from Dutt's rendering, which is indicative of his deftness in handling a genre of source material. This, however, should not indicate that Jogesh Chunder was oblivious of other genres of sources; he did utilise Samuel Beal's translation of the Life of Hiuen-Tsang along with the Kalikapurana and Yogini Tantra - major texts, with significant bearing on the historical traditions of the region. And, inspite of snide remarks about the 'local Cicerones', Dutt made use of legends tales and other forms of oral traditions to understand the context of monuments.

Another significant aspect of the work relates to Dutt's perception of the Raj in India. Like most of his contemporaries, Jogesh Chunder characterised the British rule as a 'civilised power'. Though not explicitly stated,

there runs an undercurrent of thought which did not view 'Mahomedan' rule in very favourable terms; the Ahom kings are considered important because they could resist the Muslim rule(p<sup>28</sup>) An obvious manifestation of Jogesh Chunder's intellectual orientation is a rather apologetic position about Tantric rites and rituals which emanates partly out of victorian values and norms prevalent amongst the English-educated Indian gentry and substantially from the neo-Hindureformist spirit which looked back to the Pre-Puranic textual tradition for authentic Hinduism. Not surprisingly, Dutt observed: 'Thanks to the British rule, the dark days of human sacrifices are over' and 'such was the state to which religion was debased through priestly craft and natural degeneracy' (p.11).

*Old Relics In Kamrup* is, thus, something more than a descriptive account of monuments. It is a distinctive product of the cultural milieu of a Bengalee - Hindu, caught in the dichotomy of trying to understand India's past, in such terms and references as are not often indinenous in character.

### Notes & References

All references to page numbers relate to the 1891 edition, a partially mutilated copy of which is preserved in the National Library, Calcutta. (Acc. No. 174. A. 113)

1. Gait. Preface.
2. For a detailed discussion see Gautam Sengupta, studies in the Early Art of Assam. Trends and Perospects, **Social Scientist** (forth coming).
3. For a 'perceptive treatment, see Bernard S. Cohn. The Command of Language And The Language of Command, in Ranajit Guha (ed) **Subaltern studies**, vol.IV, Delhi, 1985.

4. Dipankar Banerjee, Centenary of the Publication of 'Coolie Kahini' in Manorama Sharma (ed) **Perspectives, Gauhati**, 1988, pp 6-15.
5. I owe this reference to Prof J.P. Singh Deptt. of History, NEHU, Shillong.
6. **Assam Bhraman**, p. 16.
7. For an authoritative collection of Ahom-period inscriptions, see Maheswar Neog, **Prachya-Sasanavali**, Gauhati, 1974.

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