

Edited by
S. Dutta
B. Tripathy



MARTIAL

TRADITIONS OF

NORTH EAST INDIA



This compendium of twenty-two papers, presented at a national seminar on 'Martial Traditions of North East India', organized by the Department of History, Arunachal University, Itanagar, attempts to record the martial traditions of the various ruling dynasties and tribes of North East India.

The contributors deal with the various aspects of martial traditions such as war mechanism, warfare, cult of war Goddess, war tactics, war dresses and weapons, war strategy, forts and fortifications, and village defence mechanism. They also take a close look at the military history of the tribes of North East region.

S. Dutta, formerly Dean of faculty of Social Sciences and Head, Department of History, Arunachal University, Itanagar, is an eminent historian of North East India. Besides publishing seven books, he has published more than sixty papers in various research journals of repute and has edited many volumes. He is member of various regional and national academic bodies.

B. Tripathy, currently the Head of the Department of History, Arunachal University, Itanagar, is a keen researcher in the history and culture of the North East and ancient India. He has published several research papers in various research journals and edited volumes. He is member of various academic bodies.

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Martial Traditions of North East India



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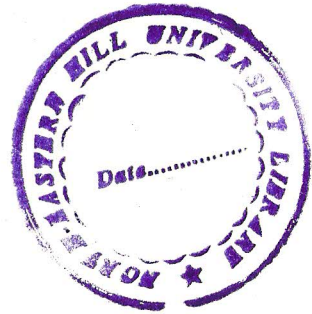
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F236
844

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355.009541C
MAR; 2

Cataloging in Publication Data—DK

Courtesy: D.K. Agencies (P) Ltd. <docinfo@dkagencies.com>

National Seminar on the Martial Traditions of North East India (2003 :
Itanagar, India)

Martial traditions of North East India / edited by S. Dutta, B. Tripathy.
p. cm.

Papers presented at the National Seminar on the Martial Traditions of
North East India, held at Itanagar during 18-19 November 2003.

Includes bibliographical references.

Includes index.

ISBN 818069335X

1. Military art and science—India, Northeastern—History—
Congresses. 2. War and society—India, Northeastern—History—
Congresses. I. Title.

DDC 355.009 541 22

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ISBN 81-8069-335-X

First Published 2006

© Editors

Published and Printed by

Ashok Kumar Mittal

Concept Publishing Company

45-16, Commercial Block, Mohan Garden
New Delhi-110059 (India)

Phones: 25351460, 25351794

Fax: 091-11-25357103

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Preface

This book has grown out of a National Seminar on the “Martial Traditions of North East India”, organized jointly by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies (MAKAIAS), Kolkata, and the Department of History, Arunachal University, Itanagar on 18-19 November, 2003. A number of eminent scholars and researchers from different disciplines participated in the seminar and presented their valuable papers. As many as twenty-two papers were presented, which dealt with various aspects of martial traditions like war mechanism, warfare, war-tactics, military history of tribes, cult of war goddess, forts and fortifications, war implements, village defence mechanism, martial arts, etc.

The work, perhaps is the first attempt to document the martial traditions of the people and of various ruling dynasties of North East India. The book, it is hoped, will prove useful for scholars as well as general public interested in the subject. The work is of regional as well as national importance as it throws light on the little known aspect of history and culture of North East India in particular and of India in general.

The volume would have not been possible without the help, support and cooperation from various persons, quarters and institutions. We are specially grateful to Prof. Devendra Kaushik and Prof. Mahavir Singh, Chairman and Director of the MAKAIAS respectively for providing financial aid for organizing the seminar. Prof. Atul Sharma, Vice-Chancellor, Arunachal University gave academic advice and material support in organizing the seminar. We are thankful to him. We are extremely thankful to

Prof. Imdad Hussain of North Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Shillong, for his learned Key Note Address. The learned contributors have spared their valuable time and precious researches, which have gone into the making of this volume. Thanks also go to our colleagues in the Department of History for their cooperation in organizing the seminar.

Itanagar

Sristidhar Dutta
Byomakesh Tripathy

Introduction

The history and culture of North East India, occupies an important place not only in the history of India but also in the history of Asia. The geographical location of the region, touching Bhutan, Tibet (China), Myanmar (Burma) and mainland India, saw the blending of various cultural traditions in this part of the country since early historical period. More specifically, the socio-cultural traditions of the indigenous people of the area are so diverse and unique that the anthropologists and sociologists refer to the area as paradise for the study of tribal history and culture. The martial traditions of the people of the area have to be viewed in these perspectives.

The North East India was consisted of three independent states like Assam, Manipur and Tripura, besides many tribal pockets in various hills of the area. Before independence Assam, earlier known as Kamarupa and Pragjyotishpura, has a chequered history of warrior traditions. From the time of king Bhagadatta to the Ahom rulers of medieval Assam, the people of Assam showed their bravery, heroism in the battlefield. The military organization was efficiently structured and that is the reason, we see that throughout the history of Assam (upto 18th century), hardly the soldiers of Assam tasted defeat permanently in the hands of the enemies. The epigraphs, the Ahom Buranjis, manuscripts and various folk traditions of Assam throw light on various aspects of warfare, war organization, espionage system, war tactics, and on various related aspects. Even the medieval Muslim historians have praised the warfare of the Ahom kings in a befitting manner. Adjacent to the plain area of Assam, a number of martial tribes inhabited the Northeast Frontier (now known as Arunachal Pradesh). These

tribes are notable for their valour and courage and could challenge the mighty British off and on, which reveal their warrior traditions. The village defence system, the role of their dormitories and traditional political institutions in warfare, their war dances, festivals and rituals associated with war etc. are of considerable interest to study their warrior tradition. Here mention can be made of the Wanchos, the Tangsas, the Noctes, the Mishmis, the Adis, the Nyishis, the Tagins, the Akas and others, who used to show their valour in the battle fields, which can be known from a scrutiny of archival literature of the period. The number of actual forts and fortifications, noticed in the foothills of Arunachal and various parts of Assam, reveal their offensive and defensive techniques. Various kinds of tribal warfare can also be gleaned in the military report and political proceedings of the British period, of 19th and early 20th century concerning the region.

The Nagas, considered as a warrior tribe, have a glorious history of their warfare, which was associated with headhunting. Their mode of head hunting, warfare, war mechanisms, village defence mechanism and philosophical dimension of head hunting reveal one of their best socio-cultural traditions. The Nagas observe a number of war rituals, dances and festivals, which are reminiscent of their warrior tradition of the past. Various ethnographers, military reports and literature of the period reveal various aspects of Naga warfare.

The Mizos of Mizoram had a good system of military administration in the early Mizo society and their socio-economic and political life was also greatly determined by it. The role of the Mizo chiefs, their regular militia, zawlbulk (house of dormitory), types of village fortifications, methods of warfare, weapons, hair dresses are of immense and considerable importance in the military system of the Mizos. The role of Zawlbulk and the village fortifications, besides employment of intelligence services etc.

reveal their form of military system. Infact every village was a military cantonment of the chief in which the chief himself was the supreme commander.

The hill region of Meghalaya, inhabited by the Khasis, the Garos and the Jaintias, like their counterparts in Arunachal and other states, had their own indigenous mode of warfare and war organization. The history of Meghalaya is replete with a number of references regarding British-tribe conflicts/war, in which the tribes of Meghalaya, did create a lot of problems and difficulties for the British administration. So was the case with Manipur and Tripura. The historical literature of Tripura, like the 'Rajamala' provides a number of instances of the participation of tribal people in defence mechanisms of princely Tripura.

The State of Manipur is notable for unique martial art, throughout India. The art, known as 'Thang-Ta' is part and parcel of their culture. This martial art in fact not only deals with kicks and punches but also provides enlightenment.

Though North East India has a chequered history of martial traditions, no comprehensive work has been undertaken in this regard and we do not know various facets of the glorious traditions of the people till now. Again due to modernization and other factors, these traditions are almost dying out. Taking these things into consideration, the Department of History, Arunachal University, organized a National Seminar on *Martial Traditions of North East India* on 18-19 November, 2003. The aims and objectives of the Seminar were: (i) to know various aspects of history of war, military warfare, war techniques, defence mechanisms etc. of various ruling dynasties of North East India and (ii) to document the war dances, war festivals, rituals, village defence mechanisms, role of village chiefs, role of dormitory system and traditional political organization etc. in various tribal pockets of North East India.

The present volume is the outcome of the seminar proceedings. The essays are not uniform in their content, analysis, references or otherwise. But it throws light on various unknown facets of martial traditions of the region. We hope, this proceeding will be of immense use for historians anthropologists and laymen, who want to know history and culture of North East India.

Sristidhar Dutta
Byomakesh Tripathy

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Keynote Address

Prof. Imdad Hussain

I thank the organizers of the seminar for doing me the honour of inviting me to deliver the keynote address. This is the first of its kind in this part of the country that I know of and I congratulate Professor Sristidhar Dutta and his colleagues in the Department of History on their choice of the seminar problem and the several themes they have so carefully worked out. In its planning they must have noted the absence, and perhaps ran into the context of the region this absence would worthwhile frame of reference. In the context of the region this absence would have been even more striking. Such being the status of research in this emerging new area of historical enquiry, this seminar to my mind assumes a special significance.

1. In a map in the Simon Commission Report showing the number of combatants in the Indian Army drawn from various parts of the country and Nepal, Assam figures as a virtual blank. Recruits from the Punjab, the United Provinces and the North West Frontier predominate, the first two provinces alone accounting for 62 per cent of the total Army. They were the so called martial races, "fine fighting material", the Report said "while the other communities and areas do not furnish a single man for the regular army". This has been the view of Assam of a succession of British army commanders and a host of military writers. Did Assam or what today is called North East India lack a military tradition? This is perhaps the key question before the seminar.

2. I have argued elsewhere that the martial races theory wants a more critical looking into. Indian regiment involved in the process of imperial expansion in the subcontinent from the mid-eighteenth century onwards were always raised in borderlands and frontier areas outside formal control, the very areas that were likely to become scenes of military activity, either as a prelude to their incorporation within the extending political boundaries or as regions annexed but vulnerable to external aggression.

The peasant recruit's importance after the annexation of his homelands correspondingly shifted: from that of the bearer of arms to that of the holder of the plough. This was what made wars in India different from those fought in Europe. Unlike continental warfare, colonial warfare, as one French expert of the subject noted—

aims not at the destruction of the enemy but at the organization of the conquered peoples and territories under a particular control. As far as possible it must avoid destructions during the campaign; first in order to preserve the productive potential of the theatre of operations and thus minimize the supply coming from more distant bases; but more important, because the country is to be integrated immediately after the conquest into the imperial whole, politically as well as economically.

3. British expansion east of Bengal and their recruitment policy follows this pattern in all its essential aspects. Early attempts to create buffer states and partisan forces along the Company's Eastern Frontier against the Burmese was given up once the entire region was brought under varying degrees of administrative control. Interest in recruiting local material gave way to indifference

once their territories were absorbed. It was only after the Second World War when experience had been gained of the northeastern soldier that opinions changed and at least one military officer, the author of the first volume of the *History of the Assam Regiment* (1959) was able to recognize that "Assam and her Military Traditions".

4. In popular perception the golden age of Assam's military history lies in her pre-colonial days, and is best illustrated in the Ahom-Mughal conflict. These wars, however, do not enjoy any centrality in regional history that, for instance, the Thirty Years' War occupies in seventeenth century European history. Rather, it is still dominated by accounts of individuals. Some time ago the Department of History of the Gauhati University held a seminar on Lachit Barphukan and his times, because the Governor of the state, himself a former Lieutenant General, felt that in not adequately projecting the military exploits of the great Barphukan historians have neglected Assam. The river battle fought at Saraighat has become the *Locus classicus* of Ahom warfare and military system. That Lachit Barphukan was heir to a military tradition has all too often been overlooked. Saraighat was in reality the culmination of techniques and structures that had been evolving over the past centuries. It started with the early rulers of Kamata followed by new military technologies adopted by the Koch, and both of which were developed under the Ahoms. The main elements of that tradition were the art of fortification, use of firearms and the methods of riverine warfare.
5. Sir Edward Gait says that the use of firearms by the Ahoms dates from the close of the conflict with Hussain Khan in 1533-34. Did this lead to a transformation of Ahom

warfare from about the middle of the sixteenth century with corresponding changes in social and political organization? Major technological advances in arms in Europe in the seventeenth century is said to have led to what Michael Roberts and Geoffrey Parker have called the 'Military Revolution'. Some of the collections in Goman and Kokff's *Oxford Readings on Warfare and Weaponry in South Asia 1000-1800* (2001) discuss the relevance of this concept to India.

did the Sultanate period see a military revolution? (Asked the General Editor of the series) How important was the development of artillery and firearms for Mughal Warfare? How far were new technologies of warfare devised in the immediate pre-colonial, the result of diffusion from the west or local initiatives?

6. There may not have been a military revolution in Ahom or Koch history comparable to what occurred in Europe but the impact of new technologies on their warfare seems to me quite discernible. To understand these one needs to go beyond the conventional periodisation into ancient, medieval and modern periods as in European history. This begs the question whether such periodisation is at all valid for military history. "Are not the real dividing lines in the history of a country based rather on social and material independent of the race or religion of the rulers"? Asked Susobhan Sarkar some years ago. Likewise, can we not build the chronology of military history around military technology or certain recognizable strategic or tactical concepts? The well-known military historian Major-General J.F.C. Fuller attempted just that in his *Armaments and History* (1945). He divided the period from approximately the fifth century BC to the post-Second

World War into six ages: the age of Valour, of Chivalry, Gunpowder, Steam, Oil and Atomic Energy. In his case, however, the result was a curious mix of social values and scientific developments. Yet such an effort would be much worthwhile than such narratives as Jagadish Narayan Sarkar's *The Art of War in Medieval India* (1984), which does not convey any sense of military dynamism.

7. Much of the difficulty academic historians have in writing military history lies in the confusion about definitions and terminology. The bulk of the writing on India or Assam have titles about military policy and military systems. An *Aide Memoir on the Science and Art of War* of the mid-nineteenth century defined military policy as "the habitual views of the Government regarding its ambitions or interests externally directed towards objects to be attained by force, or internally to be guarded by defensive means". Of the second, it says:

the military system of a state denotes the nature and composition of the forces by sea and land; the militia and reserves; their organizations; laws, pay, recruiting, clothing, discipline, instruction, promotion, rewards and punishments; fortifications, fleets, ordnance, equipments and all elements required for war.

Thus considered P.C. Chakravarti's well-known *The Art of War in Ancient India* (1972) which deals almost exclusively on subjects enumerated in it could well have been entitled the Military System of Ancient India. I would, therefore, draw the attention of the seminar to the importance of understanding military terms, concepts and definitions. They help not only in categorizing and evaluating the existing literature but also provide the direction to further studies.

8. In the hill areas where the tribal peoples were organized into small village based polities rather than in large territorial units, warfare was materially different from that waged in the plains. What in the nineteenth century literature on the hill tribes was called tribal warfare consisted of two distinct categories. The first was the inter-tribal and intra-tribal conflicts. Why these so frequently occurred has not yet been satisfactorily explained. But around them was built what I would like to call the 'warrior tradition' in preference to 'martial tradition', with its elaborate rituals and ceremonies. This warfare took a variety of forms, each determined by circumstances of population, social and political organization, the physical features of the country and so on. Warfare among tribal societies under chiefs appears to be more organized than were those under a more democratic system. Sema Naga 'military' terminology would bear this out.
9. More important was the second, the armed response of the tribal people to British military expeditions and to the imposition of colonial rule itself. Tribal methods, often called in contemporary British manuals as "savage warfare" apparently did not differ significantly from those they adopted in the conflicts among themselves. But what was the impact of these encounters on tribal society? In the areas of psychology or their economic and social organization little is known. Among the Angami Nagas, however, the innumerable military expeditions had the effect of revolutionizing their warfare. The arms traffic of the 1860s and 1870s and the transformation of their village defences into masonry fortifications complete with loopholes for musketry is a clear indication of this change. Similar

developments are noticeable in the Lushai hills prior to their annexation. I have brought out these two categories in the hope that it will bring clarity to the discussions on warfare in the hill areas.

10. If we consider the trends and developments in recent historiography one deficiency in military history at once becomes obvious. This is the almost total lack of focus on the conduct of warfare at the lowest level of participation. How did the private or the common soldier face up to the battle, what were his fears, his thoughts or mental condition? Some insights have been gained from letters written by them from the front during both the World Wars and surveys conducted among survivors. In the context of the North East India I would like to draw our attention to a private diary of a sergeant (corresponding to a havildar) in the 1st Assam Light Infantry Battalion, which describes action during the expedition against the Adis in 1859.

it's light enough work (says the entry) to climb up these hills with a rifle and ammunition through a tolerably level country, four days ration may be carried, but here (at Kebang) the climbing tries the wind and stamina too much without a load of provisions. Of Adi tactics, George Carter, the writer of the diary says: this noiseless peppering was very annoying: we could not tell where to aim at an Abor, but when any of our men fired, a dozen bows sent arrows towards the flash.

11. This makes interesting reading. But I would be more interested in the other side of the story. A nineteenth century authority on frontier warfare has called punitive expeditions into hills as "small wars" on the basis of the numbers of troops involved. Could a column of troops armed with modern rapid fire weapons marching against a village of a

few hundred defenders destroying houses, standing crops, livestock and stored grain have been to the small victims? One might ask. How then did the tribal people view these encounters? The answer would come from oral traditions. It will be necessary therefore to widen the source base of our research. Equally important would be the need to examine maps and topography sheets. Incidentally, the map on Guwahati and its environs prepared by Thomas Wood who accompanied Captain Thomas Welsh to Assam during 1792-94 provides the key to our understanding of how the war at Straight was fought.

12. I have placed before you some stray thoughts I have had on issues concerning this interesting if neglected area of research what then would be the core of my address. The chairman of the Indian Council of Historical Research wrote in October 1976 that "the study of military history, in all its strategic, tactical and logistic, as well as its economic and sociological aspects, has not received adequate attention from our historians so far." Twenty-seven years after those words were written I am making much the same point. Dr. R. Chidambaram, former Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, was said to be fond of the expression, "Velocity of Research". Velocity implies both direction and speed. If this is to be our *mantra* we need to be able to draw upon the resources of other disciplines, beyond our own Social Sciences. There must be cooperation between individuals, between institutions and between countries. This, after all is what our ancient scriptures have taught us. The Rig Veda feels us: *Let ideas come to us from every side.* The Taitireya Upanishad says: *Let us come together. Let us enjoy together. Let our strengths come together. Let there be light. Let there be no poison of misunderstanding or hatred. That way lies progress.*

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CONCEPT PUBLISHING COMPANY

A/15&16, Commercial Block, Mohan Garden
New Delhi-110 059

Ph. : 25351460, 25351794 **Fax** : +91-11-25357103

Cable: CONPUBCO **Email:** publishing@conceptpub.com

Showroom: Building No. 4788-90, Street No. 23,
Ansari Road, Darya Ganj, New Delhi-110 002

Ph. 23272187

ISBN 81-8069-335-X



9 788180 693359

Rs. 550