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# History and History Writing in North East India

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**Manorama Sharma**

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A contribution to the current debate on the status of historiography of North East India, this book presents a detailed discussion and also a critique of the mainstream history writing in the region. By critically discussing the major contemporary approaches and scrutinising the most famous historians of North East India it makes a significant contribution to the study of history. The book is an essential reading for teachers, students and researchers of History in India. In view of the international interest in the happenings of the contemporary North East India this book should be of interest to the general reader also.

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NORTH EAST INDIA



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## PREFACE

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The collection of essays in this book encompasses my years of questioning whether what was being written in the North East and was being presented to scholars and the lay people in the name of History was actually history or not. In fact in my college days in Lucknow and later in the post graduate classes in Gauhati University I kept asking myself why was History so drab and dry? If History is supposed to reflect the life of the people in a society then could that life be so lacklustre and uneventful? While reading Allan Bullock and *Mein Kampf*, in my undergraduate class, to write an assignment on Hitler I felt the stirrings of some ideas and a feeling that I was perhaps beginning to see something, but the training that we had been given in history since our school days did not enable me to grasp what I felt I saw. Perhaps the greatest day for me, and particularly for my understanding of History, was the day I was taken to the world of Marxist literature by my sister. I felt overwhelmed by the new world of comprehension that seemed to open out before me. I was greatly interested in the way in which Marx presented History, the minute details woven into his deep theoretical arguments and insights into human societies. What really opened out a new world of historical understanding was his concepts of class and class struggle. For the first time I felt that History was living and alive. The stirrings which I had felt a long time back as a young, immature student of History, now seemed to take on a concrete shape as I began to see a pattern in the evolution of History.

Having been trained in History in a system which held very orthodox, conservative and now that I think of it, quite

outdated ideas about History, devoid of any theoretical and conceptual perceptions, I have been feeling for a very long time that these lacunae of our approach to History need to be pointed out again and again. Particularly in the case of the writings on the History of the North East this lack of theoretical conceptualisations has made the majority of the writings more of documentation than History. Therefore I have felt that it is the duty of every conscientious student of History to dwell on these aspects of History so that gradually a more integrated type of History writing could emerge. Awareness of the need to combine theory with empiricism would definitely free History writing in the North East from its present shortcomings and weaknesses.

With the idea of popularising the need for a theoretical approach to History I had been continuously presenting my ideas in different academic gatherings for discussion and further clarification of my ideas. These essays are a result of those endeavours. If there is any common binding theme in these essays it is the attempt to develop a realisation of the need for a very critical appreciation of the existing writings on the history of North East India so that a scientific methodology can develop which would take stock of the current status of research on a particular area and thus take research ahead instead of going in for repetitive research. The main thrust of the essays, except the first one, has been to dwell upon the various perceptions and biases that exist in the writing of History. The first essay attempts to give a broad sweep of the various theoretical trends which have influenced historiography concluding with a brief insight into what ails history writing in the North East. In the other essays, after some discussion on the theories and methods of various perceptions in the writing of history, a few works are taken up for a closer look. But these works are those which only represent a particular kind of perception discussed in the concerned essays and are not an exhaustive list of all the existing works. The intention has been to focus on those works which are very widely read in the North East both by scholars, and students of History and also by the laymen, and which have therefore helped in popularising certain trends in historiography. If this book can arouse some interest among the scholars and students about

enquiring into theories and concepts of history and thus bring about a reorientation in the thinkings about History I would feel greatly rewarded in my labour of many years. This book makes no other claims.

As these essays are the result of thinking and discussing over a number of years, I have benefitted in various ways from the exchange of ideas with a number of friends and colleagues. It is not possible to name all of them individually but I do acknowledge my gratitude to all of them for what I have gained by my associations with them. My students in the History department of the North Eastern Hill University to whom I taught Historiography since 1989 have also contributed to my urge to have a fresh look into the existing works of History in the North East from the perspective of theoretical formulations. But two persons I would like to mention individually who have made fundamental contributions to this work. The first is my sister, Prof. Tilottama Misra of Dibrugarh University who introduced me to Marxist literature which changed my entire perception of History. But the person who has contributed more to this work than any one else is my husband Prof. Apurba Baruah of North Eastern Hill University. His clarity of theoretical and philosophical perceptions in the field of social science has been my constant source of strength when I felt totally lost in the myriad of conceptual abstractions.

In the world of the commercial publishers it is difficult to find a publisher for a book of this kind, because most publishers would hesitate to take up a book which would find appeal in purely academic circles as, quite naturally, marketability is their prime concern. In such a situation I must thank Regency Publishers to have had the courage to publish and market this book.

13.6.98

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THEORIES OF HISTORY: A NORTH  
EAST INDIAN PERSPECTIVE  
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## CHAPTER I

# THEORIES OF HISTORY: A NORTH EAST INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Do we need a theory of History? Or, is it not necessary to enter into a lengthy discourse on the theories and methods of history for a successful presentation of the picture of a society because history should remain only a description of experiences or chronicle of events? These and a myriad of such questions have been raised time and again, particularly by those who seem to be satisfied with the notion that the task of history writing entails nothing more demanding than the presenting of information, with a slight sprinkling of analysis sometimes. Presenting a variety of information and taking enough pains to establish their authenticity, is no doubt a very useful task performed. But to claim that, that is all History is about, is nothing more than trivialising the discipline. Unfortunately this kind of claim about History has been making the rounds for so long that many generations of historians have actually been doing documentation and passing it on as the real stuff of history. The difference between chronicling and history did not dawn on them. The main reason for these confusions and misconceptions seems to have been due to the fact that not much importance has been given by writers of history to theoretical and conceptual questions. The importance of discussions on the theories of history therefore lies in this, and these discourses need to be carried on even in the face of criticisms of being repetitive and stating the obvious, because there is a need to sensitise and bring back into reckoning the long neglected aspects of history writing. To convert documentation to history is not a very easy task, particularly for those not familiar with the practise of analysing empirical data within a conceptual framework. An

analytical mindframe can develop only when there is a clarity of theoretical perceptions. Only a judicious combination of facts and analysis within a conceptual framework, can present a more or less acceptable historical explanation of society and social processes. Without such a combination history will cease its claim to be scientific.

Aristotle, for instance, denied history the very name of science and said that "poetry is more scientific than history, because history is a mere collection of empirical facts, whereas poetry extracts from such facts a universal judgement."<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, philosophers like Croce claimed that history was important enough to teach men how to live. At different points of time history has thus been assigned both prestigious and demeaning statuses in the "hierarchy of science."<sup>2</sup> With the advancement of human knowledge and methodology of the sciences the methods of enquiry used by historians have also undergone much change and today it is possible to admire the "precision and sophistication of the methods used by historians."<sup>3</sup> However, the controversy over the status, role, meaning and methods of history have not ended and in a situation of wide ranging controversy and debate the role of the professional and practising historians becomes very confusing. Should they shut themselves off from the controversies raging around them and continue with their work, or should they get totally involved in this debate and spend all their energies trying to round off the debate? Neither of these two attitudes would be fruitful, for historians can neither ignore the issues on the reflections on history nor can they give all their time and energies to them. They can therefore define their "own position in the debate and then exemplify it through their daily work."<sup>4</sup> In this way, they take up the issue of reflections in history and at the same time defend their own position while thus continuing the work of adding to the body of knowledge on which history depends. Thus it becomes the primary duty of a historian to define his/her own position in regard to the conceptualizations of history, because that makes the historian not only more intelligible to the readers, but more important, it makes the collection of data and analysing of that data much easier and more relevant to social realities. To achieve this end it becomes imperative

that a historian must have, if not a specialist's command, but at least a general knowledge of the prevailing controversies on the conceptualization and methodology of history. These controversies can be grouped together into what is called, various schools of historical thought and a knowledge of their groupings is necessary not only to define one's own position in the vast field of historical knowledge, but also in discussing issues like status of historical research in an area because the status can be discussed best from the stand point of historical reflections.]

[The attempt to theorise or to build a philosophy of history has been a long evolutionary process. In fact, in the antiquity and also during a large part of the Middle Ages, the goals of history writings were very different from what they were in the 17th or 18th centuries. For the ancients the task of history writing was not the formulation of true statements, but they saw history as a "form of practical, life-oriented activity."<sup>5</sup> There was therefore no attempt at probing into the causes of events or trying to analyse those events. The concept of critical history was non-existent. Gradually, with the evolution of the process of history writing, the search for truth about man's past came to be accepted as one of the main tasks of history, and then developed critical history because now the avowed task of history was to distinguish between the truth and the untruth. With these changes, although the earlier pragmatism did not die out immediately, the ideas of assessment and interpretation emerged and this opened the Pandora's box of theories, philosophies and controversies. From this point onwards advances in history writing kept step with the methodological and philosophical advances in other arts and sciences. Thus, in the seventeenth century, which was marked by extensive advances made in the field of the physical sciences especially in Europe, the "major intellectual controversies of the time inevitably centred round the points at which discoveries in these sciences impinged upon the traditional framework of thought and belief inherited from the Middle Ages."<sup>6</sup> As a result of this the scientifically oriented mode of thinking

began to enter into every area of philosophical enquiry and in this pattern of enquiry differences began to creep in according to the interests and social commitments of individuals and groups. As the scientific spirit began to gain ground it came to be noticed by historians that a search for the truth in history would become very partisan if such 'truth' could not be confronted with sound historical research.<sup>7</sup> Thinkers like Voltair, Turgot, Condorcet, Montesquieu, and Herder therefore stressed on the expansion of historical research and drew out a number of general ideas from the evolution of human societies. These strivings led to the development of two major trends in historical research—the eruditional (which emphasised the importance of accumulating data about the past) and the philosophical which emphasised the need to find out regularities of past events and this to be done with an eye on discovering evolutionary laws of society. On these two major trends there developed a number of schools of historical thought ranging from the Empiricism of Ranke, through the positivist schools and Hegelian dialectics to Historical Materialism of Marx and Engels.

All the philosophical and ideological developments of the 18th and 19th centuries have succeeded in dividing the world of social science research (of which historical research is an important element) into two major camps—the Liberal Positivist and the Historical Materialist or popularly known as the Marxist. A statement like the above might raise a volley of questions and protests, particularly from the pluralists, who would hold that narrowing down social science research into two camps in this way is arbitrary and ignores such important issues as those raised by anti-positivist and the structural functionalists and that it also ignores the existence of important schools of historical thought like the Rankean Empirism, the Universalism of Toynbee and Spengler, the Annales tradition of Marc Bloch and Namierism. However, our contention here is that even while giving due importance to the existence of all these various trends or schools of historical thoughts, it is still possible to show that they all fall within the basic trends of liberal positivism. There has been a lot of misconceptions about positivism and also Marxism, but more particularly liberal positivism, so much so that very often a historian feels

offended if referred to as a positivist historian. It is therefore necessary to look into the concepts of Positivism and Historical Materialism even more closely so that we can answer both the questions of what are Positivism and Historical Materialism and why it is possible to group almost all conflicting schools of historical thought into one or the other trend.

The seventeenth and eighteenth century intellectual development in Europe was dominated by the search for scientific truth and thus for objectivity of knowledge. The methods of the natural sciences were sought to be applied to the social sciences as a step towards making the social sciences more accurate and objective. This was the spirit which guided Auguste Comte (1798–1857) who is considered to be the Father of Positivism. A mathematician by training, Comte was highly influenced by the Utopian Socialist ideas of Saint Simon and this impact of a progressive social philosophy on a mathematical mind produced a philosophy which could be called, in Collingwood's words, "Philosophy acting in the service of natural science, as in the Middle Ages Philosophy acted in the service of theology."<sup>8</sup> This is what is called positivism. This scientific quest for knowledge was a break with the assumptions of the middle ages regarding hierarchy, class and intergroup relations which were considered to be part of an organic Christian Civilisation. Positivism thus made the beginnings of a science of society. As a French Sociologist Emile Durkheim put it, "positivism which grew in the shadow of natural science, at that time transferred to the sphere of history the concept of fact"<sup>9</sup> which later, under the post positivists became one of the basic categories of reflection in historical research. The growth of positivistic historiography thus resulted in a very accurate accumulation of facts — all the facts that could be gathered. This age enriched historical knowledge by an unprecedented critical examination of evidence. But the historian never got down to the second stage of Comte's positivism — that of framing laws through generalisation from the facts, through the process of induction. Thus "positivism despite its profound adherence to scientific thinking is undergoing a deep ideological crisis because of an obvious and overgrowing rift between its methodological programme and the tasks, tendencies and principles of modern

science.

science. There is a glaring contradiction between the actual results of the evolution of positivism and its profused goals, between its pretentious claims and the real contribution to scientific progress."<sup>10</sup> This rift between method and goal brings out one of the major weaknesses of positivist methods in the social science. This is based on the "methodological position of fact value dichotomy. According to this position statements about facts should be separated from statements about values and the subjective preferences of the observer."<sup>11</sup> Values are however not entirely neglected in this position but values were to be reflected upon only as individuals, social scientists were only to cover themselves with facts. Thus took roots the idea of value-relativism which emphasises that "values are derived from life experiences of individuals and that superiority and inferiority of values cannot be decided on the basis of factual evidence."<sup>12</sup> This fact-value dichotomy was to a large extent present in the fore-runners of positivism like Ranke and his contemporaries of the 19th century such as the French Historians Thierry and Michelet and the Englishmen like Carlyle and Macaulay. All these historians, in various degrees, rejected philosophical speculations in history and as a result the concept of history for them remained essentially value neutral. But surprisingly enough, despite this insistence on positivist scientific methodology many of them also believed in an empirically unverifiable supernatural cause of history. Ranke for instance believed that changes in history are actually the outward evidences of God's Will and "every epoch is immediate to God."<sup>13</sup> One sees here a definite contradiction between methodology and belief. But by and large these historians believed in the purity and objectivity of temporal facts and felt that a historian's job was complete if all the facts were properly documented because, as Ranke said a historian's job is not to sit on judgement on the past but 'merely' to present the past as it really was. This view of Ranke became almost a slogan for historians after him because it absolved them from a lot of social responsibilities. It is in this respect of believing in the objectivity of facts and holding that value judgement can be independent of facts or that facts can exist independently of values, that Ranke and his contemporaries can be called the fore-runners of positivism. The

attempt to divorce philosophy from history is indeed the major problem of the positivist approach to the social sciences. "Logical positivism wanted elimination of metaphysical terms in all phases of research."<sup>14</sup> It "has regarded traditional philosophy as metaphysical first and foremost because it postulates the existence of transcendental reality different from and independent of the sensuous world. The question of the existence of the physical world independent of sensory experience has always been viewed by positivism from Comte to Reichenbach as a pseudo-problem at best."<sup>15</sup> This elimination of metaphysics and philosophy from positivism led to the growth of a number of critics of positivism in the 20th century like Karl Popper, Lakatos and the most radical of them Feyerband. All of them follow different paths and are interested in different aspects of scientific cognition, but they have one common goal — rehabilitation of metaphysics. Yet neither Popper nor the other critics have been able to go beyond the limits of empiricism and thus empiricism and fact value dichotomy has been the bane of positivism.

We have discussed these basic ideas of positivism so much in details because an understanding of the positive and negative aspects of positivism is necessary in comprehending the major issues of historiography in the 19th and 20th centuries. The various historiographic schools that have developed in the modern world have to a greater or lesser extent followed the major tenets of positivism, either the liberal version or the Marxist version. The liberal positivists have by and large accepted the fact-value dichotomy. Whether it is history written by the Rankeans or the Universalists, or those of the Annales tradition of Marc Bloch or even the Namierites, none of these trends have been able to break loose from the liberal positivist stronghold. It is true that many historians like Herbert Spencer, John Stuart Mill, Toynbee or Marc Bloch were aware of one major drawback of positivist historiography — that this historiography was acting as a break on explanations and that it made no attempt to link facts with change. But in trying to overcome this, historians either gave interpretations which were speculative, or criticised positivism with no better solutions coming forth. Where Marc Bloch took recourse to studying structures to overcome this positivistic problem of static reflec-

tion of facts, Toynbee proved to be more radical and one sees in his works the influence of Hegelian dialectics and Hegelian idealism. In this respect there are some close resemblances of the ideas of Toynbee with his contemporary anti-positivist philosopher Feyerband. But neither Bloch nor Toynbee or even Turner could find a method of linking facts with durable explanations for change. Marc Bloch and his *Annales* model however do stand a little apart in this. The *Annales* founded in 1929 was the first major departure that French history made in moving away from Rankean narrative. Under its influence history moved out of the ranks of humanities to be a branch of the Social Sciences in the United States.<sup>16</sup> Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre sought to "revitalise history, its methods, content, problems and ambitions,"<sup>17</sup> and thus imparted the differential weightage to the ecological, the cultural, the psychological, the economic and other factors.<sup>18</sup> The main aim was to achieve a synthesis of these casual sequences and thus "foster a somewhat uncritical or eclectic sense of 'total history'."<sup>19</sup> This eclectic synthesis developed mainly because the *Annales* tradition refuse to recognise a "permanent hierarchy" of causes. This seems to be problematic for explanations because it separates events (conjunctures) from structures and thus "reveals traces of the positivist difficulties of linking facts with changes."<sup>20</sup>

[The first real alternative to this liberal positivism was offered by Marxian philosophy which is also a type of positivism but has fundamental and basic differences with liberal positivism.] Within the scope of this paper it would be presumptuous to even attempt an exhaustive discussion of Marxist philosophy. We shall therefore concentrate primarily on highlighting the methodological differences between liberal positivism and Marxist methodology or historical materialism, and pointing out how in contrast to positivism, historical materialism relates to change. In the very beginning of this part of our discussion we must be very clear about certain ideas about Marxism. First and foremost it must be understood that Marxist philosophy is not a dogma which has to have rigid application, regardless of historical or social differences. In fact Marxist approach to history can be viewed in two ways : "as a method of historical interpretation and as a doctrine which claims to give guidance

in political practices.”<sup>21</sup> When referring to historical materialism as a theory we mean by it “the set of general statements on past events, statements which explain movement and development in society,”<sup>22</sup> and historical materialism as a method of historical interpretation means a set of guidelines which forms a model for explanation of the past. It is therefore very wrong to believe that historical materialism is a set given pattern into which all data has to be fitted. It is because of incomplete knowledge and lack of understanding of Historical Materialism and Marxist philosophy that both non-Marxists and conservative Marxists have failed to grasp the true essence of Marxism. For instance, the views expressed by a prominent historian of the North Eastern region of the country<sup>23</sup> on Marxist historiography stems from a complete misconception about Marxist philosophy. (He is however not an exception in this because in a section of the generation that he represents such misconceptions about Marxist ideas is quite common.<sup>24</sup>) He says, for example,

“To the generality of historians . . . under no circumstances should facts be suppressed or distorted by a historian to conform to a particular theory. *Attempts have been made of late by a few scholars to give a new interpretation to the developments and personalities of the period based on materialistic or Marxian principles.* Admittedly, such interpretations bring into light many significant features and open up new awareness for studies in colonial and exploitative society. It would be however an anachromism to interpret the past in the light of present thoughts and developments.”<sup>25</sup> (Emphasis added)

The purpose of this lengthy quotation is to bring out how little Marx has been understood by a whole generation of historians and how pronouncements have been made about Marxist historiography without comprehending the essence of Marx's ideas. For instance, if we accept the above quoted ideas that the utility of Marxist historiography is only for the understanding of colonial societies then we will have to submit that historians like D.D. Kosambi, R.S. Sharma, Romila Thapar, Muhammad Habib, Irfan Habib, and a host of other historians who analysed historical evolution of an earlier phase

of our society using historical materialism as a methodology and theory of history have been guilty of not only using present thoughts to understand the past but also of suppressing or distorting facts to conform to a particular theory. It is not sought to be arbitrated here that all historians have to follow the Marxist historiographic tradition, but what is sought to be projected here is the idea, that any historiographical trend if it is to be accepted or rejected must be done after serious study and understanding of the philosophy of that trend. So if Marxist historiography has to be rejected it must be done seriously, not in the off-hand manner in which it has sought to be done by some historians. Therefore as we have done in the case of the liberal positivist trends in history, it will be in proper order to understand at this point how Marxist historiography should be viewed in relation to methods of historical research and also in relation to positivism before a historian can decide to accept or reject the approach.

The thoughts on history have played a central role in all of Marx's social, political and economic writings. He held the view that "Socio-economic systems, the theories that seek to explain or justify them, and the social classes that exist within them, are historical and transient phenomena."<sup>26</sup> Marx had thus formulated a very specific concept of history and various terms have been used to characterise this conceptualisation of history. The most popular terms being used to characterise Marx's views on history are economic interpretation of history, scientific socialism and dialectical materialism. But none of these terms are satisfactory because they do not express the totality of Marx's approach to history. "To Marx history appeared to consist of a continuous development of societies in which the 'engine of change lay in the material conditions . . . of the relations' of production. These set the frame for the legal and political institutions."<sup>27</sup> These in turn condition men's intellectual life because Marx believed that "it is not the consciousness of men that determine their existence, but their social existence which determine their consciousness."<sup>28</sup> This then is the first premise of historical materialism, that Nature exists independent of Man's consciousness of it. But Man is rooted in this nature, "living in constant interchange with the natural world; but the interchange is always mediated through

society, and history itself is the record of continuous transformation of human nature."<sup>29</sup> While taking this historical conception of man Marx does not fail to give due importance to man's intelligence and creativity. He distinguishes man from animals while saying that men produce while animals only collect and he also points out that there are certain characteristics in relations of man with nature and thus with each other which are true under all systems of production. Thus he emphasises the fact that though man is rooted in nature, he also interacts with nature in such a way that he can bring about relative changes in nature. Man's labour is the most important link between himself and Nature. "Man produces when he is free of physical needs; he produces instruments of production, that is, he is a tool-maker; he produces a whole new nature, the 'anthropological nature' of the social environment, he is a purposive and self-aware animal with a unique capacity for reason and language."<sup>30</sup> Man is therefore conditioned not by nature but by what he has made of himself, and thus historical development is not an automatic process which takes place independently of human action.

The second important premise of the Marxian view of history is that historical development takes place through "the strife of contradiction." The first major contradiction is man and nature and out of this contradiction develops the productive forces. Marx explained this as follows, "Labour is, in the first place, a process in which man and nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates and controls the material reactions between himself and nature. He opposes himself to nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms, legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate nature's productions in a form adapted to his own wants. By his acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. He develops his slumbering powers and compels them to act in obedience to his sway."<sup>31</sup> This primary contradiction between man and nature is however a dynamic contradiction because the "productive forces which emerge as a result of this contradiction tend to develop constantly."<sup>32</sup> The second identifiable contradiction which controls social development is the contradiction between the productive forces and the

relations of production. "In the social production of their life; men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces."<sup>33</sup> At a certain stage of their development the productive forces come into conflict with the relations of production because the productive forces are more dynamic than the relations of production. This in short means that social groups who had hitherto been the greatest beneficiaries of the development of productive forces are opposed to changes in the productive forces because such changes would go against their interests in the society and the production relations they represent. Out of this contradiction develops a new set of relations of production which are suitable to the level of development attained by the productive forces. In these new relations a new social group thus become the beneficiaries, and this is an unending process because the productive forces can never lose their dynamism so long as man remains an intelligent and creative being.

The third and an important contradiction that takes place continuously relates to the fact that "the changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense super structure . . ."<sup>34</sup> This immense superstructure consists of "legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic — in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out."<sup>35</sup> Marx further explained that the ideas, institutions and views, in a society, that is, the level of consciousness of a society "must be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the conflict existing between the social forces of production and the relations of production."<sup>36</sup> Just as the relations of production are less dynamic than the forces of production so also the superstructure as a whole is less dynamic than the relations of production. So when the relations of production changes as a result of the second existing contradiction we have discussed, then there ensues a conflict at the super structural level, because the new relations of production cannot co-exist with the old set of ideological norms. The conflict is between "those elements (in the superstructure) which serve the existing (old) relations of production and those which are in favour of

changes."<sup>37</sup> Out of this conflict emerges a new superstructure which however retains many elements of the old superstructure because as Marx wrote, "No social order is ever destroyed before all productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society."<sup>38</sup>

The theory of historical materialism thus evolved a methodology of studying social developments by enunciating laws of such development. It is in the context of this that Marx talked of class and class struggles and the material foundations of society. In fact, Marx never claimed that he had either discovered the existence of classes or that of the successive economic formations, because works on both these aspects had existed before him. He wrote "No credit is due to me for discovering the existence of classes in modern society or the struggle between them. Long before me the bourgeois historians had described the historical development of this class struggle and bourgeois economists the economic anatomy of the classes."<sup>39</sup> Marx has rightly said so because before him French historians like Thierry and Guizot and English historian like John Wade had written histories from the point of view of rising middle classes and economists like Richard Jones had written on the history of economic formation. "What appears to have happened is that Marx began to see a set of systematic links between several ideas which had been born independently of each other: the notions of class conflict, of successive economic formations in history and the economic role of classes in production."<sup>40</sup> This synthesis of ideas sets Marx apart from the earlier economists and historians and by using the scientific methodology of dialectical materialism, historical materialism has been able to identify definite laws of social development. Taking the cue from the world of nature Marx pointed out that just as in nature changes do not take place accidentally so also in history developments do not take place by chance or accident. There is a definite law of development and the beauty of history lay in recognising the laws. In all his writings Marx constantly emphasises the unlimited capabilities of man, and he specifically says that

nothing is beyond human knowledge. By unravelling the laws of universal development man's knowledge of nature keeps expanding, similarly there is nothings mystical in history. There are no happenings in history which are beyond human comprehension. Thus "the theory of historical materialism by discovering the mechanism of development, provides a specified model for the explanation of history. This model is dialectical (development oriented), and hence holistic and dynamic. This model indicates the path to the solution of one of the most baffling problem in social science, namely that of linking the study of structure with the study of changes. The dialectical model indicates that explanations (for change) are to be looked for in contradictions in the systems (structures) under investigation. Where those contradictions are to be looked for in the study of the past of mankind is indicated by the theory of historical materialism."<sup>41</sup> To quote Marx,

"this conception of history thus relies on expounding the real process of production . . . and comprehending the form of intercourse connected with and created by this mode of production, i.e., civil society in its various stages, as the basis of all history; describing it in its action as the state, and also explaining how all the different theoretical products and forms of consciousness, religion, philosophy, morality etc. etc. arise from it, and tracing the process of their formation from that basis; thus the whole thing can, of course, be depicted in its totality (and therefore, too, the reciprocal action of these various sides on one another). It has not, like the idealist view of history, to look for a category in every period, but remains constantly on the real ground of history; it does not explain practice from the idea but explains the formation of ideas from material practice . . ." <sup>42</sup>

This lengthy quotation has been incorporated above mainly to highlight, in Marx's own words, the fact that the Marxist conception of history aims at explaining change in its totality and emphasising that social development is continuous and so there can be no permanent social forms. The greatest disservice to Marx has been done, not by the non-Marxists (who can be excused for their ignorance of Marxism) but by some of his

own followers who had insisted on categorizing all societies according to a rigid universal periodisation of a succession of forms as Marx had seen to have been present in the European societies that he had taken up for close study.<sup>43</sup> Such conservatives have also tried to mechanically interpret Marx by making out ideas to be mere reflexes of the material conditions. However, Marx has nowhere said and he constantly reiterates that ideology cannot have the same precision as the natural sciences, and that man, because of his intelligence constantly reacts with the productive forces and so there is 'reciprocal action'. Understanding the Marxian concept of history does not therefore mean just a mechanical application of dialectical materialism. The holistic (or total) nature of this concept has to be grasped. Such a concept therefore naturally requires enquiry into various areas of a society's past which had never before been considered to be a part of history. Areas like technology, mass psychology, philosophy, development of natural sciences, etc., have to be looked into to arrive at a total concept of History.

Marxist approach to history is therefore not status quoist, it explains change and identifies definite laws of social development. It is in this context that Marxist philosophy has been considered to be the first real alternative to liberal positivism.

## II

The section above tries to give a brief survey of the two major theoretical and philosophical trends into which most of the existing historiographic trends can be divided. A clear exposition of these two trends is necessary for any historian to decide where one stands as a historian and thus also enables a historian or researcher to identify the positions taken by historians. This is essential in understanding the status of historiography in India as a whole and North East India in particular. In a survey of the works of history in India, both by Indians and Europeans, in the modern period, i.e., from the 19th century onwards, one finds that these works would fall into either one or the other of the two theoretical trends discussed. It would not be correct to say that earlier phases of India's development had no historical consciousness



Positivism  
 ↳ HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

because, as Romila Thapar has argued historical consciousness need not necessarily take the form of historical writings. She writes that "each version of the past which has been deliberately transmitted has a significance for the present . . . . The record may be one in which one historical consciousness is embedded: myth, epic and genealogy; or alternatively it may refer to the more externalised forms: Chronicles of families, institutions and regions, and biographies of persons in authority."<sup>44</sup> [The historical consciousness of a society undergoes a change with major social and political change although one should not look for a "mechanical correlation between the two."<sup>45</sup> Thus from earliest time to the 14th–15th centuries historical consciousness has been expressed in different forms at different times, influenced by both internal and external factors. A historian studying developments in historiography studies these as ancient or medieval traditions of history writing. From seventeenth century however, a big revolution comes into historiography which gradually equipped the historian with very sophisticated tools of historical analysis. With these tools in hand historians began a reconstruction of the past by analysing the existing expressions of historical consciousness] The modern historians writing on India, both Indian and British, can be very clearly identified into either the liberal positivist or the historical materialist. Into the first group would fall various schools of historians. The imperialists like Ramsay Muir, Valentine Chirol, H.H. Dodwell, Macaulay, Vera Anstey and others who in various ways, orthodox imperialists or liberal imperialist, tried to justify British rule in India. Their main interests were to show either how India was conquered or how India was administered and in later years to counter the Nationalist charges of British exploitation of India. The Nationalist historians beginning with S.N. Sen, Tilak, Patabhi Sittaramaya down to R.C. Majumdar, Tara Chand and others presented the trend which justified the emergence of the National Movement and showed up the discriminatory and racial character of the British. The Nationalist School of historians however, had certain basic problems in their analysis which always kept Nationalist historiography a step behind the actual national movement. One major problem was their inability to identify the real roots of Indian Nationalism. The

roots of Nationalism they saw to be the propeller of nationalism and the propeller of nationalism were identified by them as the roots of nationalism.<sup>46</sup> The main reason for this confusion was that all these historians were influenced by the Western liberal ideas and so their theoretical motivation was also the liberal positivist motivation. What C.H. Phillips had said in general about the Historians of South Asia, that they placed "undue emphasis . . . on political, constitutional and administrative aspects . . . and too little on economic, social and cultural development and on the history of ideas"<sup>47</sup> seems to ring true even for the Nationalist historians. One major exception in that generation of historians was R.C. Dutt, who in his *Economic History of India* made a seething attack on British rule by exposing with accurate economic data, the exploitative nature of British rule in India. Till the 1950s this then were the basic historiographic trends in India when no attempt was made to go beyond the superficial levels of explanation and to explain basic changes in Indian social formation. R.P. Dutt with his book *India Today* stands out in this period as one who, in the 1940s used the Marxian approach to history to analyse British rule in India and its consequences in its totality. He not only analysed the exploitative nature of British rule in its economic implications, but studied the social, cultural and political consequences of Imperialist Rule. He also brought up important issues of anti-British feelings in India which later historians developed further to demolish the entire idea of *Pax Britannica* and with more researches done on civil disturbances in India, the idea of *Pax Britannica* stands totally discredited today. The writings of historians like Sumit Sarkar and Kathleen Gough show that there was no peace in British India as has sought to be upheld by many conservative historians.<sup>48</sup> In the late 1960s a group of Cambridge based historians, highly influenced by the methods Lewis Namier had expounded for studying 18th century parliamentary politics in England, sought to introduce a new approach to the study of the National Movement. This group which has come to be known as Cambridge School, came so close to the Imperialist views in their final conclusions, that they were severely criticised and they had to modify their stand. The principal exponent of this school was Jack Gallagher and his chief

collaborator Anil Seal whose book *Emergence of Indian Nationalism* "represents the best and most representative product"<sup>49</sup> of that school. "The main failure with Seal — and of his Cambridge School colleagues generally — is that it is not their facts but their setting that is wrong."<sup>50</sup> Using the Namierite methodology Seal saw the Nationalist Movement as elite conflicts and denied the existence of a nationalist ideology. Although there appears to be a lot of semblance to reality in what they write, yet to write off the entire Nationalist movement as only elite conflicts takes the mind out of the history of an entire phase of developments in India. Seal and his colleagues have however unearthed a mass of valuable information, but in arriving at their conclusions they overlooked mass movements and the entire economic critique of colonialism. Seal has not had wide following in India and less so in the N.E., but his type of writing makes interesting reading, and a point of take off for continuing the debate on the Nationalist Movement.

The post 1950 period usher in some identifiable changes in the development of history writing in India. While the liberal positivist trend dominated, with staunch Rankeans like Jadunath Sarkar taking up the work of presenting Moghul rule as it was, and others like W.H. Moreland trying to understand revenue administration in Moghul India, an alternative to this trend of history writing also began to develop. This was symbolised in D.D. Kosambi whose first book published in 1965 (*An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*) brought about a complete shift from the models worked out by J.S. Mill and Vincent Smith.<sup>51</sup> For Kosambi, "history was the presentation in chronological order of successive developments in the means and relations of production."<sup>52</sup> He said that Indian Historians would have to use a comparative method, be interdisciplinary in the true sense of the term, because of the paucity of reliable data of the earlier phases.<sup>53</sup> In this endeavour, he argued that the Indian historians had one big advantage in the fact that "the country has one tremendous advantage that was not utilised till recently by the historians: the survival within different social layers of many forms that allow the reconstruction of totally diverse earlier stages."<sup>54</sup> The clue to identify the past was according to him in Marxism and 'what Kosambi was

doing was not forcing the facts to fit the received Marxist pattern on Indian history, but was instead using Marxist methodology to investigate a possible pattern and suggest a new framework, ... he was in fact using the method creatively."<sup>55</sup> In fact Kosambi always said that Marxism was not a substitute for thinking but a guide to research. Thus beginning with Kosambi, a whole group of historians followed who sought to explain change in society by using historical materialism and thus moved away from the liberal positivist stand-point. This trend from its very beginning faced a lot of criticism from, as Romila Thapar puts it, "non-Marxist and anti-Marxists historians ... with the predictable critique of all Marxist historians that ... (they) were forcing the facts to fit a preconceived theory: a critique which is applied *nauseam* to many versions of knowledge which are intellectually uncomfortable for those"<sup>56</sup> who resist change and wish to see no disturbance in the system which they seek to uphold. These criticism notwithstanding the Marxist historians have continued to do meaningful work seeking to understand India's historical evolution, not in staccato break ups, but as a continuous process of development of social formations from the earliest times to contemporary period. This is not to say that all historians using historical materialism to understand historical evolution have been equally successful, and a lot of debate is still going on on major issues, but the attempt to break away from the liberal positivist interpretations has brought about a sea change in the status of historical explanations in India. Among others mention can be made of historians like R.S. Sharma, Romila Thapar, B.N.S. Yadav, D.N. Jha, Muhammad Habib, H. Mukhia, Irfan Habi, Sushobhan Sarkar, Bipan Chandra, Sumit Sarkar, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya who have made remarkable contributions on these lines, and there are a growing number amongst the younger scholars who are increasingly making attempts to creatively apply scientific methodologies to study developments in India. The trend of historical writing is therefore fast undergoing fundamental changes in India and even the historians of the earlier trends who concentrated on political narratives are beginning to look to social and economic changes as well. This is proving to be fruitful in the gathering of empirical information but the basic problem of relating

empirical information to change still remains with the positivist school, while the Marxist school is attempting to overcome that problem by analysing change from the base rather than from the superstructure as the other schools do.

This brings us now to the last part of our survey of the development of historical trends, and that is to see what has been its status in respect of history writing in North East India. It has been argued in a paper written by myself in joint authorship with J.B. Bhattacharjee that academic and intellectual activities can not be alienated from the general pattern of socio-economic growth.<sup>57</sup> Just as the entire Indian history writing developments till 1947 were always a step behind the development taking place in England, because of India's economic as also intellectual dependence to a large extent, similarly, because of the comparative economic backwardness of the North East the social and consequently academic and intellectual developments also felt the effects of this. The trend of historical research also fell victim to this and thus the developments in the field of the study of history of the region particularly in its interpretative and analytical aspects still needs to see a lot of development. Before the onset of colonial rule the region had its own vehicles of carrying forth historical consciousness of the people and the famous *Buranji* literature of the Ahom period fall into the medieval tradition of Annals and chronicles which were external records of the historical consciousness of the time. These *Buranjis* form a very solid base of historical information which with proper understanding and interpretation can help to reconstruct a crucial phase of the region's development.

The trends of writing comprehensive histories of the region, on modern historiographical lines begins with Edward Gait's *A History of Assam* (1905), followed by S.K. Bhuyan who besides writing on Assam's relation with the British (*Anglo Assamese Relations* [1951]), made available to researchers many *Buranjis* by compiling, editing and translating them. Gait and Bhuyan were followed by a number of historians who have done yeoman service as pioneers in untrodden fields. But the main trend of history writing in the pre-1947 period and years that closely followed were heavily influenced by western liberal ideas of empiricism and documentation with very little

attempts at critical interpretative analysis. The works of these early pioneers are however valuable because they have brought to light many hitherto unknown and undelved source materials. The gathering of empirical data is important for every researcher and historian for the development of further interpretative work.]

[From the 1950s onwards a methodological progress was seen in the writings of H.K. Barpujari.<sup>58</sup> With him began a trend which shifted somewhat from the solely empiricist tradition of the earlier period. Barpujari has dominated historical writing in Assam in the post 1950s period not only by his own writings but by guiding numerous research scholars in their quest for historical knowledge. Like Jadunath Sarkar, R.C. Majumdar and their like Barpujari also believes in the Rankean view of history which presupposes a complete separation between subject and object and upholds that a hard core of historical facts exist which are independent of the interpretation of the historian. They therefore believe that by documenting facts the truth can be arrived at. Barpujari however does not stop just at the collection of empirical data, his works also have some interpretative elements but this interpretation emanates from the Rankean tradition and therefore is done from the liberal positivist standpoint. This standpoint of historical analysis, as we have discussed in the first section, describes change but cannot relate change to structural developments. Therefore in Barpujari's interpretation we find that his interpretation is confined at the level of events and individuals and there is no attempt at connecting facts collected for over a period of time to an inherent process of development.] The dominant trend of history writing in the North East has therefore been this positivist trend which has resulted in documented narratives but very little attempts at explaining change and seeing the interconnections between changes in structures and change in the overall social system and historical evolution is apparent.<sup>59</sup> The trend of history writing has therefore been mainly confined to narratives and interpretations at the superstructural level which is the identifying mark of all positivist history.

( From the end of the 1960s a new trend in the development of historiography of the region came to be seen in the

writings of scholars like Amalendu Guha and Hiren Gohain.<sup>60</sup> These scholars have attempted a more comprehensive understanding of the various phases of historical development of the region by analysing these phases with the help of the tools of historical materialism. They have thus posed the first real alternative to positivist historiography in the region and have initiated a trend which, if it develops as Kosambi or R.S. Sharma and others developed it for other parts of India, will lead to historical writings which would not remain at the level of chronicles, documents or narration but would go down to studying the sequence of development in socio-economic formations. Although Guha has set a new trend in this but even he very often deviates from the historical materialist viewpoint, and there are many instances in his writings (particularly in his book *Planter Raj to Swaraj*) where one has to look hard to find the identification of social formation and their developments.) These lacunae might have crept in because of the difficulties which any pioneer in a field faces, but he has succeeded in inspiring younger scholars to ask more fundamental questions of historical research. However, the Marxist trend of history writing has not really taken roots here for two major reasons. The first and more basic reason is the misconceptions and the lack of complete knowledge about Marxist views on history. This has happened because there has not been serious academic study of Marxist philosophy and the Marxist ideas that exist here have emanated from the official standpoints of some political groups.

(Thus, one of the main problems in developments of historical writings in the North East has been a serious shortcoming in the methodological, and theoretical orientation.) The major blame in this aspect has to be borne by the Universities in this region. The history syllabi in most of the Universities still remain very traditional with the result that from the school to University level history still continues to be understood as dates and names. If the status of history writing has to undergo major changes it has to be done by the new generations, and they can change it only if they have a strong foundation in methodological and theoretical orientation so that they can define their own positions in regard to the conceptualisation of history. A re-orientation of syllabi and

teaching right from the school level is therefore essential if the status of history writing has to develop.

(One major area to which all historians of the region has to give special importance to is the field of oral history.) There are many societies in the region where there is a total lack of recorded history for certain phases of their development. If the historical evolution of these societies have to be reconstructed and analysed then recourse to the tradition of oral history becomes almost mandatory. There is the necessity therefore to evolve a methodology of understanding, utilising and analysing oral history traditions. In fact, oral history is today gaining popularity amongst many historians all over the world.) As Paul Thompson has written, "the term oral history is new ... but it does not mean that it has no past. In fact, oral history is as old as history itself. It was the first kind of history,"<sup>61</sup> but gradually oral history lost its original eminence so much so that today it is even viewed with suspicion by many historians of the older order. The importance of documented history has so overtaken us that any deviation from it is considered dangerous.) But historians had never really said good-bye to oral history because Arthur Marwick for instance, in his book, *The Nature of History*, while discussing the various sources available to a historian also mentions "the folkways of the period." This means that folklore had never completely lost its importance for historians. There are however recognisable problems in basing historical interpretations on oral history alone. The need therefore arises of working out methodologies, techniques and skills to handle oral history. This thus appears to be a major task for historians of the North East of the future — the working out of as far as possible a foolproof methodology for handling oral history. In this respect there are a lot of works to go by — Besides Paul Thompson, there are historians like Jan Vansina (*Oral tradition: A Study of Historical Methodology*) and George Ewart Evans (*Where Beards Wag: The Relevance of Oral Tradition*) and historians writings continuously in journals like *Oral History* who have recorded their own experiences in handling oral history tradition. Thus, as Paul Thompson says, "the discovery of oral history by historians ... is not only a discovery but recovery. (It gives a future no longer tied to the cultural significance of paper

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documents ...<sup>62</sup> Oral history tradition therefore holds out hopes for understanding the historical evolutions of those societies without recorded history and where beginnings might have to be made with interpretation of legends, myths and folklore) But this is a job which needs the hand and minds of experts and the first step towards getting that expertise is theoretical clarity and methodological soundness. This then could be a clarion call for the younger historians of the region.

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57. See, Manorama Sharma and J.B. Bhattacharjee, "Historical Research in N.E. India: Trends and Directions", in Tarashankar Banerjee (ed.), *Indian Historical Research Since Independence*, (Calcutta, 1986). The major ideas in this section has been taken from the above paper because since the writing of that paper till date there has not been any major changes in the trends of history writing in the North East.

58. See H.K. Barpujari, *Assam in the Days of the Company*, (Guwahati, 1963); *Problems of the Hill Tribes: North East Frontier*, Vols. I & II, (Guwahati, 1970, 1976) amongst his other works.
59. This point will be substantiated further in the course of the discussions on history writing in the Chapters following this.
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