

Studies in the Writings on History of Medieval North East India; Some Comments

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This paper is a modest attempt to look into some of the recent studies carried out on medieval North East India, together with a few suggestions on their significance.

In the recent past the study of social and economic history has attracted the attention of historians all over the world. In India too historians have grown immense literature by examining themes like agrarian structures, peasant societies, trade and commerce and other such problems connected with material aspects of peoples' life during various periods of their history. But despite these attempts scholars working on medieval Indian history have not been in a position to produce a generalization that would be widely applicable to medieval Indian society¹.

What seems to have manured this impossibility is the tremendous regional variation in medieval Indian context². While examining the nature of medieval Indian society, either the source material of some of the regions has been inadequately studied or completely neglected. Besides some of the regions have been extremely poor in source material particularly in scriptural or literary form and no alternate efforts have been made to fill this void.³

North Eastern India is one among such regions whose history in medieval context remains unproduced. However, N. R. Roy Choudhury, S. C. Dutta and N. N. Acharya have made some efforts in this direction⁴. But all these efforts appear to be some what unsatisfactory from the point of view of our problem. They seem to have adopted a typically descriptive style of nineteenth century mainly extolling the political aspects of various dynasties. These works are by and large political in nature. Seldom if ever is there a reference to any social or economic problem of time in them.

The most important characteristics of historians' app-

roach i.e., (a) the richness of source material, (b) extensive investigation (c) better awareness of historical setting are all absent in these works. Mostly these works are based on some of the inscriptions, Buranjis, and a few traveller's accounts. The information gleaned from these sources has neither been examined in the light of Persian and other sources of that period nor subjected to new sets of questions posed by the scientific historical research. For example, N. R. Roychoudhury states,

"After the death of Ratna Manikya I his son Pratap Manikya became the ruler of Tripura. According to *Rajmala* he was cruel and unpopular. The ruler of army who became very powerful murdered him."⁵ This style of historical research eliminates many necessary aspects. Author's tendency to focus the specific individuals has led him to accept uncritically the only piece of evidence provided by *Rajmala*.⁶ The cruel nature can not be assigned to Pratap Manikya merely because *Rajmala* has made mention of it. In such cases it becomes essential for historian to immerse deep into the then prevailing social, economic, political and religious institutions and measure their impact on the entire society. Here it should be noted that such an absence of cross examination in turn results in absence of exactness of information on various aspects.

Such occurrences are very much frequent in these writings. At another place Roychoudhury attributes greatness to Dhanya Manikya for crushing the rebellious feudatories and army chiefs and also for weakening the strength of the Narayan and strengthening the position of the Riangs.⁷ Employing such methods in reconstructing the history of a particular period does neither eliminate errors nor facilitate a well meaning generalization but merely permits the same old description to find place in documents. Many such repetitive occurrences are not supported by any empirical validity in Roychoudhury's writing⁸.

Likewise N. N. Acharya's writing too suffers from many inadequacies at various levels. Acharya has generally tried to cover vast stretches of human experience without establishing the significance of various processes of change and development involved in them. To quote Acharya, "From the time of Sukhapha (1228-1268) to the reign of this king a long period of peace and order existed in Kingdom and Ahoms succeeded in fully establishing their supremacy on the indigenious population of the land".⁹ In another instance he states, "The proprietorship of land under Ahoms was generally vested with

the king above but persons other than the king also laid claim to a right upon the land that in name was called ownership".¹⁰ Elsewhere, "The history of the seventeenth century was mainly one of the Ahom mughal conflicts which arose out of ambitions of (the) mughals to extend their territories further to the east...".¹¹

I think the statements quoted above from Acharya's writing are enough to illustrate the vagueness of his generalizations. Because Acharya characterises a particular period as period of peace without evaluating the structural changes of that period. Because when we attempt to understand any historical phenomenon like the establishment of Ahom supremacy, or the nature of proprietorship of land or the history of political and military successes, with a value and character of its own we can not disregard the varied changes occurring at the lowest ends of society.

In reconstructing these various aspects of people's life either literary evidence by itself or quantitative evidence does not alone provide a sufficient analysis especially when the object of study is a very broad social structure.

Another historian, S. C. Dutta, has chosen slightly wider theme than Roychoudhury and Acharya. His work commences with a sound synoptical view of various aspects concerning the Mughal relationship with North Eastern region of India.¹² Though the nature of Dutta's writing is much better than Choudhury and Acharya from organizational point of view, but his work also lacks quest for authenticity of evidence and analytical strength.

While arguing about the nature and growth of Mughal relationship in north east India S. C. Dutta observes, "The determination of Afghan chiefs in the frontier areas of Bengal to resist the Mughals and the conflict of interest between north east India and added to almost definite possibility of expansionist and imperial mughal intervention in the region".¹³ Here it is interesting to observe that the mere resistance of Afghan chiefs on the Bengal frontier was only a measure of defence after the mughals had made up their mind to penetrate into North eastern region. Such expansionist designs have always been effected by the transformation that resulted from the particular mode of production and appropriation. The nature of various socio-economic factors responsible for the expansion of the mughal empire in India also had a special relationship with such developments in the north eastern region.¹⁴

Commenting on Aurangzeb's attitude towards this region Dutta states, "The maintenance of political equilibrium and stable government with sound financial basis obviously evoked convulsion and excited the jealousy of Mughal rulers most of whom were believers of autocracy based on religious bigotry."¹⁵ In yet another statement he says, "The view generally accepted that Islam was spread by the conqueror with the sword on one hand and (the) Quran on the other was not fully applicable in the whole region of North East India."¹⁶

Both these statements demonstrate the lack of deep and thorough knowledge which has given such simplistic and sloppy character to these interpretations which often reach results that cause great damage to the growth of scientific historiography. The thorough probing of various essential sources of medieval history has disproved the religious bigotry of the mughal rulers. Besides it has never been accepted that Islam spread merely by force or persuasion. These are some of the scattered references which altogether can not be accepted as widely applicable.

There are many other terms also which Dutta has made use of very loosely, i.e., the phenomenon of feudalism and the institution of Zamindars. The phenomenon of feudalism in north eastern region can not be accepted by saying "The states of North East India big or small were generally based on crude form of feudalism in which an individual would hold and use land belonging to ruler. The individual would also render personal services to the government."¹⁷ Here it is hardly necessary to emphasize the nature of feudalism, that was prevalent in the North Eastern region during the earlier period, without the correct understanding of motive forces of history which are always vital pre-conditions for shaping human society. Holding land in return for services to the state is not the only essential characteristics of European or Indian feudalism. What is crucial here is the nature of various relationships while carrying the production and while appropriating. Such generalization without taking into account the role of ecology, economy, and technology and their impact on the structural features and economy, do not prove of much operational value for the future researchers. However, these inadequacies of all these works do not deprive them of their usefulness, they do provide valuable starting points in some respects.

Basically in order to produce the history of medieval north east one must examine various processes at their lowest

end, one must in other words carefully examine what changes if any were occurring in the manner in which the peasant cultivated his field and the manner in which various sections of society shared it. It is in fact this aspect which recent historical research carried out by J. B. Bhattacharjee and Amalendu Guha have thrown out as the most important in the context of north eastern region as well.¹⁸

Their serious efforts give a positive view of various problems which appear to have determined the direction of the evolution of social and economic structure of the region. With much clarity J. B. Bhattacharjee has presented the vision of state formation in the context of this region. His penetrating analysis of the case study of Dimas state has shown how state at various levels took no initiative to improve upon the existing system and went on exploiting the peasants to the point of leaving them utterly resourceless to attempt improvement on their own.¹⁹ He has also argued in detail as to how agriculture, though the main source of livelihood was, primitive in application of tools, techniques and how the steady deterioration gave a degree of unchangability to the economy of this region at times. He has clearly demonstrated how the apathy of the intermediaries did not permit any change in the production system from above because the form of payment that the peasant was supposed to make depended primarily on the arbitrary demands of the revenue machinery.²⁰ He has examined in detail the characteristics of transition from tribal structures to detribalisation and in forming of caste groups on the basis of profession and other economic ties.²¹

Likewise Amalendu Guha's writings do provide a thorough and valid analysis of medieval polity, economy and social organization. He has analysed in detail how the agrarian structure of the period was a matter of comprehensive interest affecting all sections of society and measured how the conflicting interests of ruling class and various segments of people made up all social classes in variety of ways.²² His studies provide a fuller understanding of various factors like the high degree of exploitation, lack of incentives, exploitation of artisans which generated only low level of commodity production and proved detrimental to the growth and development of society in this region. It will be more fruitful if study on these lines could be generated to fill the gaps. Because a study of medieval north east India involves a number of aspects which include :-

- (a) the nature and impact of ecology on the economy and society of this region.
- (b) the nature and extent of cultivation and other subsidiary occupations which provided subsistence to the people.
- (c) the problems involved in production process and the nature of technology utilised.
- (d) the nature and extent of various assignments and grants and the positions of the assignees and grantees in this region.
- (e) the nature of the administrative organisation and its functioning.
- (f) the composition of the ruling class and its attitude towards people.

All these aspects are closely related and require a detailed study. However, the sources in scriptural form will not be in a position to provide us answers to all these aspects but the careful study of inscription, field study, oral approaches and testing of the available evidences by various methods of cross examination shall certainly suggest some fruitful generalizations in this direction.

I am under no illusion to have solved these problems but only hope to have aided clarification.

Notes and References

1. A large number of works have been produced to explain the nature of medieval Indian society. For detailed understanding of this phenomenon please see "Feudalism in Non-European Societies" *Journal of Peasant Societies*, Vol. 12, No. 2 and 3. edited by H. Mukhia and T. Y. Byres, April 1985. In this debate some of the eminent historians, Harbans Mukhia, Irfan Habib and R. S. Sharma, have critically surveyed various key issues of the problem and set out some of the important conclusions very clearly.
2. In India the regional variation does of course exist in the present context as well but mostly on geographical and cultural levels because the increasing penetration of developing capitalism has affected all parts of India which seems to have been absent in medieval times. In north eastern region there are problems of periodization. The history of north eastern region can be divided into two periods, pre-colonial and post - colonial, what I imply as medieval is late pre-colonial period.

3. A thorough field work and an oral approach would certainly prove rewarding in reconstructing the past history where the reliable literary sources are nonexistent.
4. Apart from various state gazetteers, travel accounts and the valuable records left by christian missionaries, a large number of books have been written on various aspects of north eastern India but the ones particularly devoted to some aspects of the region in its medieval period are by N. R. Roychoudhury, *Tripura through the Ages*, Delhi, 1983.
S. C. Dutta, *North East and the Mughals*, Delhi, 1983.
N. N. Acharya, *The History of Medieval Assam*, Delhi 1985 (Reprint).
5. N. R. Roy Choudhury, *Op. cit.*, p. 16.
6. *Rajmala* has been written by Sukreshwar and Baneshwar Battacharya in 15th Century A. D. The exact date of this book is still a matter of controversy.
7. N. R. Roychoudhury, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
In fact history is generally full of such examples where a particular class of nobility worked to suit to their interests or to prolong their dominance over other social groups. Hence there is not anything special which justifies Roychoudhury's glorification of Dhanya manikya except the unawareness of the basic fundamentals of historiography.
8. See his arguments, pp. 1-37.
9. N. N. Acharya, *op. cit.* p. 62.
10. *Ibid*, p. 123.
11. *Ibid*, p. 39.
12. The various aspects studied in this book relate to Geography, Early mughal relations, Aurangzeb's attitude towards North East India, the expedition of Mir Jumla, Ram Singh's campaign, dealings with Shayista Khan, Ahom politics and the nature of Mughal impact from 1661-1714. for details see S. C. Dutta, *op. cit.*
13. *Ibid*, p. 18.
14. Basically the need for immediate resources for mobilizing the support of various chieftains and other nobles had played an important role from time to time, which S. C. Dutta seems to have neglected while looking into the sources. See for details Athar Ali, *The Mughal nobility under Aurangzeb*, Bombay, 1966.

15. S. C. Dutta, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-53.
It is difficult to accept the view that Mughal autocracy was mainly based on religious bigotry. Such communal interpretations will cause great dangers to history writing.
16. S. C. Dutta, p. 241.
In almost every region the conversions to Islam have been due to diverse reasons. They were certainly not confined to external elements like force or persuasion, but the phenomenon has surely hard social, political, economic and ideological elements which interacted with one another to make one religion more attractive than another. Hence neither the views expressed by S. C. Dutta are generally accepted, nor was the North Eastern region a sole exception in this regard. For detailed analysis of this phenomenon see R.L. Hangloo, *Religious conversions in 14th Century Kashmir*, Delhi, 1984 a *Monograph*. Also see H. Mukhia, *Communalism ; A Study in its Socio-Historical perspective*," *Social Scientist*, pp. 40-45, Vol. I. No. 1, 1972.
17. S. C. Dutta, *op. cit.*, pp. 19, 26, 227.
18. For details see. J. B. Bhattacharjee, "State formation in pre-colonial tribal North East - A case study of Dimasa state", *North Eastern Hill University Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, Vol. II, No. 3, July—Sept, 1984, pp. 1-28.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. The other pioneering efforts of the author include the analytical study of sources of medieval and modern Manipur and Cachar. For details see, "Some important Sources of the history of Medieval and Modern Cachar", *Shodhak*, vol. 4 pt. A, Jaipur 1975, pp. 460-72. also see "Sources of late medieval and modern Manipur", pp.439-453, N. R. Ray, (ed.) *Sources of the history India*, vol. III, Calcutta 1982.
22. For detailed understanding please see, Amalendu Guha, "The Medieval Economy of Assam," *Cambridge Economic History of India*, Tapan RoyChoudhury and Irfan Habib, vol. I, pp. 478-505. see also Amalendu Guha, "Pre Ahom roots and the state of Assam", *Social scientist*, No. 133, June, 1984, pp. 70-77.