

Socio-Economic History in Pre-Colonial North-East India

Trends, Problems and Possibilities

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The North Eastern states of India may be looked upon as a political unit for purposes of administrative convenience by the Government of India today, but historically at no point of time has it ever been a homogeneous unit, either culturally, economically or politically. That is why even a term like pre-colonial creates problems because there is no uniformity even in that phase of development. For instance, the British may have occupied parts of the Ahom kingdom in 1826, but what about areas such as Tripura or Manipur, because the economies of these states were never really colonised (they remained as Princely States) or even Mizoram or Nagaland for that matter where the British rule as such never really took off? If pre-1826 is pre-colonial for today's Assam, what would be pre-colonial for Tripura or Manipur? Problems such as these arise because of the variegated historical experiences the region has had which therefore also requires a fresh look into the question of periodisation of history in this region. The subject of the seminar, of which this paper was a part, was no doubt "Society and Economy in Pre-Colonial North East India" up to the 13th

century for the plains and the pre-British period for the hills. However for the purposes of this paper we shall use the idea of pre-Ahom rather than pre-colonial because the former term, for the North East, gives a clearer historical picture in terms of time and space.

In a complex historical situation like the one indicated above the task of making an assessment of the historical writings of the region becomes formidable. A study of the historical works of the period therefore cannot be confined only to an assessment of the trends of history writing that have developed over the times. Such an exercise is important no doubt but what is even more important at this point of time is to look into the problems of historiography that exist today, the areas of study which need special attention from historians and the data gaps that need to be filled up. A discussion on these issues will definitely enrich the status of knowledge on the societies of North East India before their exposure to British influences.

The earliest tradition of historical ideology which influenced the historians of this region was introduced by Edward Gait who represented the British imperialist tradition.¹ In the first edition of his book Gait used mainly literary sources, with a few available inscriptions, to reconstruct the history of the pre-Ahom period. In the second edition however he also used the available sources of the reign of Bhaskara Varman.² His approach, according to Mignonette Momin, "vindicated James Mill's hypothesis that Indian society had hardly changed from time immemorial. Gait believed that the major changes in Assam were those of dynasties until British intervention brought stability to the Valley by putting an end to hostile incursions and internal disensions."³ Although Gait introduced the Imperialist historiography into the study of the Pre-Ahom Brahmaputra valley the trend did not have too many followers because the works that came to be written after the first few decades of the twentieth century⁴ came under the gradually developing nationalist ideology in which the main attempt was to focus on the heritage of the Indian culture and also to glorify that culture, very often without much critical assessment of the historical realities. This glorification aspect is particularly evident in K.L.Barua's narration of the political history of Kamarupa. These were however works which

focussed on pre-Ahom Assam with the then available literary and epigraphic sources and the few archaeological finds which were extant at that point of time. The focus still was mainly on dynastic histories. The perceptions regarding history existing at that point of time and the methodologies used in the writing of history did not equip the historians to handle social and economic developments. But what should be of concern to historians of the region today is that K.L. Barua's perceptions and ideas about history of the pre-Ahom period have been used almost unquestioningly by historians even today. One can understand the nationalistic influences on historians like P.C. Choudhury⁵ and B.K. Barua⁶ who agreed with almost all that K.L. Barua had written, but to see Barua being used uncritically in a work written as late as 2001 does raise very serious concerns about the status and trends of historiography in the region. The book in question is *A History of the Temples of Kamrup and their Management* published in 2001.⁷ In this work the author writes very conclusively that "the earliest mention of Pragjyotisa may be traced in both the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. The *Adikanda* of the *Ramayana* ascribes the city of Pragjyotispura by one Amurtaraja..."⁸ While making this assertion the author did not think it necessary to go into the controversy that exists on this point or even to give any references of the existing views on this issue. It appears that he has repeated K.L. Barua's view which was based on P. Bhattacharya's contention in the *Kamarupa Sasanavali* that according to the *Adikanda* of the *Ramayana* Pragjyotisa was founded by Amurtaraja. M. Momin has however argued that as "pointed out by M.M.Sharma, *Inscriptions of Ancient Assam* (Gauhati University, 1978, p.0.05), the *Adikanda* does not speak of Pragjyotisa's foundation by either Amurtaraya or Amurtaraja; instead, it refers to the foundation of Dharmaranya by Asurtaraja.... K.L. Barua did not check its authenticity before accepting it."⁹ D.C. Sircar had mentioned that the reference to Pragjyotisha is rare in the *Ramayana*.¹⁰ If Adhikary has new information based on the *Ramayana* then historical research methods required that he should have discussed that in the light of the new information available to him. However this unwillingness to assess and acknowledge the existing status of knowledge in a particular field is not a shortcoming of Adhikary alone but is a general

problem of historical research in the region, which has resulted in a lot of repetitive research and is also the reason why trends of history writing do not seem to be making any headway or advancing in any strikingly new direction.

Even though P.C. Choudhury and B.K. Barua were not imperialists in the sense that Gait was, yet they did hold up one imperialist perception that the only change that took place in pre-Ahom Assam was that of change in the ruling kings, i.e. pure dynastic histories. They could not integrate their discussions of the economy and society of the period with the process of change and saw these only as parts of an administrative structure. Interestingly even in the revised and updated edition of P.C. Choudhury's work published in 1987¹¹ there is hardly any change in perceptions about history. There has only been an updating of data by the inclusion of the archaeological finds of Ambari. It is not only in the approach of Choudhury that we do not find any substantial changes but even in the general trend of writings on the pre-Ahom period we hardly notice any change. Except for one or two exceptional works like Nayanjot Lahiri's book¹² and the articles written by Chitrarekha Gupta¹³ and Mignonette Momin¹⁴ most of the other works have either just placed information or followed the colonial historiography of dynastic accounts or the nationalist ideology of glorification of the past. This latter ideology may have been necessary for political reasons in the early decades of the twentieth century, though not a very healthy trend for historiography *per se*, but to keep following those ideas in the last decades of the last century or even in the present century definitely creates problems in the development of any scientific trends of history writing. As Momin has aptly stated: "The stereotypes have persisted down to the present day, despite the rapid strides made in Indian historiography during the last forty years or so. The most glaring example is *The Comprehensive History of Assam, Volume I*, edited by H.K. Barpujari and published in 1990.... However, about the only point of difference from earlier works of the same genre is in the quantity of information supplied, derived from numismatic evidence, a few more inscriptions and the excavation reports from Ambari in Gauhati."¹⁵

The main problem seems to have been a lack of a conceptual framework in the writing of history which could provide a

scientific paradigm for seeing history as the emergence and evolution of social processes. Because of this there has been an inability to see the link between the information provided in the sources and the process of socio-economic formation. The dominant tendency of tagging along social and economic data as an appendage of the administrative set up has in fact been the greatest obstacle in the path of the development of a scientific socio-economic history of pre-Ahom Assam. In fact the search for works focussing on socio-economic processes of change in the pre-13th century Assam often has led to a dead end because the information collected and presented has not been used for the reconstruction of the socio-economic developments of the time. Here one can mention the work on the temples of Kamrup from the earliest times to the present, by Gajendra Adhikary which has been discussed above.¹⁶ There is no doubt that Adhikary has made a commendable collection of data from inscriptions, and other corroborative sources and has also tried to, as he says, "have an idea of the role played by the temples as a centre of economic redistribution as well as nuclear area for the legitimization and consolidation of the Hindu or Hinduised kings of the old Kamarupa in tribal or partly de-tribalised surroundings."¹⁷ He gives us a lot of information about the wealth of the temples, how they were acquired (mainly through grants), and the nature of that wealth. The problem however remains at the level of integrating that data into the socio-economic milieu of the time. Even the concept of nucleus and periphery, as used by Burton Stein in his study of the temples of South India, which Adhikary has discussed is not integrated with the empirical data which he presents. Here again we see the same problem that we have mentioned earlier, that of the lack of a perception of the aims and goals of history, although one must agree that Adhikary did try to go beyond just an enumeration of facts. Even a work like that of B.N. Mukherjee¹⁸ on early trade of North East India suffers from this problem of not being able to link the commercial transactions to the socio-economic levels of development of the time. In this context if one compares Chtrarekha Gupta's writing on the early trade of Kamrup¹⁹ with Mukherjee's work on trade one can see the point that has been sought to be made. Gupta has made a definite attempt to show

how the articles of trade reflected on the process of socio-economic and political institutional formations in the state. Mukherjee for instance gives us very interesting information about the possible existence of "sites of manufacture"²⁰ and the fact that "the art of pottery was well known. Industries concerning manufacture of transports (boats, palanquins, etc.) continued to flourish.... Structures were made not only of stone, but also of bricks. A brickfield is mentioned in the Suwalkuchi inscription of Ratnapala".²¹ Now if this kind of valuable information had been related to the social and economic processes of development they signified, the entire discussion would have taken on a completely new shape and the work would have become a significant work of socio-economic reconstructions instead of remaining a source book towards that end. Such a trend would also have provided a new line of enquiry for the younger scholars of the region. Books on sources there are quite a number for the pre-Ahom period of the Brahmaputra valley²² but what is actually more required are works like those of Nayanjot Lahiri, Chitrarekha Gupta and Mignonette Momin²³ who have tried to go beyond the mere technicalities of information contained in inscriptions, coins etc. and have attempted to historically interpret the contents of these sources to identify the processes of socio-economic developments. For instance while discussing trade and markets of North Eastern India, Gupta concludes on the basis of evidence derived from the articles of trade and trade route connections that:

The tribal people of North-Eastern India though participated in foreign trade in costly articles like silk, malabathrum or ivory and in internal trade on various types of goods this trade by itself did not generate significant social change in the life of the tribal people. The importance of this region in the general economic development of India, however, was gradually understood and so, the tribal people of this region attracted the notices of the foreigners like the author of the Periplus and Ptolemy.²⁴

This is where we can say that she has gone beyond the type of work done by Mukherjee. Or for that matter the discussion

by Momin on Urbanisation in the Brahmaputra Valley gives an example of how inscriptions can be used in trying to analyse social formations and social processes. By using the Parbatiya grant and the Tezpur Rock Inscription she argues that Hadapesvara was:

basically a political centre largely peopled by political and military figures. It stood on the banks of the Lauhitya and was apparently a part of the surrounding countryside. This last point is corroborated by the Tezpur Rock Inscription which records the settlement of a litigation caused by the resistance of the Kaivarttas, settled near Hadapesavara, against local authorities to place restrictions on the movement of their boats and their fishing rights. The settlement of the dispute clearly shows the threat of the use of force against those who would breach the law.... Against this background, the importance of the common rural folk to the scheme of agrarian relations and the process of urbanisation cannot but be underscored.²⁵

Such interpretations as these have been possible by these scholars because they have moved out of the colonial historiographic tradition of chronicling dynastic and administrative trends and also of the nationalist historiographic ideologies and have attempted a more scientific approach based on the perception of history that material conditions primarily provide the dynamics of change in a society. A well known historian like Amalendu Guha who also has a similar perception of history did in fact try to present a more plausible picture of socio-economic developments although his main focus was on the Ahom period.²⁶ But his commentary on the pre-Ahom period gets restricted because of the limitations in the use of the available epigraphic information.²⁷ Thus inscriptions and coins if used as a source of history and interpreted within a conceptual framework based on a scientific perception of history can definitely yield a lot of insight into the socio-economic development and the emergence of institutions based on such developments in pre-13th century or pre-Ahom Assam. It has however to be said, with a certain amount of sadness, that these

kinds of approaches do not seem to have found popularity with our scholars even today.

A mention may be made here of the increasing number of works which are being published in the Assamese language on various aspects of the history and culture of Assam. The publication of serious academic works in any vernacular is always a welcome development because it means taking ideas to a wider reading public. However, the search for writings on the socio-economic history of pre-Ahom Assam does not lead us very far. A work like Maheswar Neog (ed.), *Pabitra Asom*²⁸ is a compilation of descriptive accounts of the religious sites of Assam, and the perspective from which this has been done is "scientific and historical"²⁹ according to the editor of the work. But the entire account makes little attempt to integrate religious developments with the economy and polity of the times. There is no doubt that the book is very informative and could be a useful source book for a student of history but it is difficult to give it a place amongst works on social and economic history of pre-Ahom Assam. In fact on this aspect of the history of the Brahmaputra valley there exists very little literature in Assamese. Jatin Borgohain's *Asomor Arthanaitik Itihas*³⁰ is one attempt in this direction where he has attempted to throw light on the economic organisation in pre-Ahom Assam as well. A very interesting progress on the lines of integrating society, economy and polity of pre-Ahom Assam is reflected in Manoranjan Dutta's *Purani Asom: Jumor pora Samantratantraloi*. In this work Dutta has attempted an analysis of early Assam till the 13th century using the concept of material culture. More publications on the lines of Borgohain's and Dutta's works will definitely enrich the historical literature on early Assam's society and economy. It is only when we have sufficient number of works on the subject that a trend analysis can be done.

In the discussions on the trends of historiographic developments in pre-colonial North East India a lot of space has been given to the writings on the Brahmaputra Valley because, as of date, this is the region on which a number of works representing various trends of historiographic development exist. There are some studies that have been done on the Barak Valley, but most of these are in Bengali. The works in Bengali like Sujit Chaudhury's *Srihatta-Cacharer Prachin Itihas*,

U.C. Guha's *Cacharer Itivritta* or A.C. Chaudhury's *Srihatter Itivritta*³¹ may not be strictly dealing with an analysis of society and economy. They are more in tune with the existing ideas of political history. But works such as these have reference to a lot of material regarding land settlements and grants which definitely can form the basis of undertaking studies which would be able to integrate the idea that political history must be seen as an integrative process of social and economic developments. Amongst the ones written in English mention may be made of J.B. Bhattarjee's writings on the issue of state formation in the Dimasa-Kachari principality, Srihatta, and the Barak Valley in general.³² In these writings there is definitely an attempt to focus on the question that a theoretical understanding of the process of state formation is necessary before undertaking any analysis of the historical data that is available for the pre-colonial period of the Barak valley. Towards that end Bhattacharjee introduces his readers to the existing theories of state formation available to scholars of the social sciences like the works of Classen and Skalnik³³, F. Engels,³⁴ Fortes and Pritchard³⁵ and Morgan³⁶. Although in the final analysis of the data there still remains a strong politico-administrative bias introduced by Edward Gait but Bhattacharjee's writings do point towards a trend that definitely needs to develop in the study of societies of the pre-Ahom period of the North East.

So far as the hill areas of the region are concerned (i.e the present day states of Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh) specific literature on the pre-colonial or pre-13th century period is very difficult to come by. It is therefore difficult to assess either the trend of writings on that period or the use of sources. As a general comment it can be safely said that there has not been much advance made from the ethnographic writings of the early British anthropologists cum administrators. For instance in the case of Meghalaya two of the earliest works on the Khasi and Garo are those written by P.R.T. Gurdon and Major Playfair.³⁷ Both these works were the result of a proposal by Sir Bampfylde Fuller in 1903 and sanctioned by the Government of India, to prepare a series of monographs on the more important tribes and castes of the province of Assam.³⁸ Gurdon's work *The Khasis* was the first in

this series and Playfair's *The Garos* followed. Being part of a government sponsored project these works were obviously aimed at facilitating the administrative machinery of the colonial rulers, because no people can be ruled without understanding their life patterns, customs, origins, history, etc. The two books therefore have an identical organisation of chapters, and both in the same sequence describe the habitat, appearance, origins, affinities, dress, etc., domestic life, laws and customs, religion, folklore and language of the Khasis and Garos. Neither of the two writers was a trained historian, but their works are comprehensive, ethnographic works that provide historians with a wealth of empirical information albeit from the British/colonial perspective. This perspective is revealed time and again in various small instances in both the works. However Gurdon's work has today become almost a source book for scholars working on the Khasis although the worrying aspect is that later historians have used Gurdon very uncritically.

The usefulness of Gurdon's and Playfair's works lies in the fact that they are descriptive narratives of the dress, religion, agriculture, etc. of the Khasis and the Garos. There is very little attempt at interpretations. For example, Gurdon writes that Khasis possess very few agricultural sayings and proverbs and lists a few of them.³⁹ But there is no explanation as to why this was so. This information can be useful for anyone trying to map out a history of socio-economic developments of the Khasis. But interestingly, or unfortunately, the ethnographic information left behind by Gurdon and Playfair have not been used as it should have been. Many questions can be asked of their information and the answers derived by using the tools of analysis available to historians today can provide very deep insights into Khasi/Garo society and economy. There is however no doubt about the fact that the works of Gurdon and Playfair are very useful and informative works, and they should have led other scholars to go to the roots of the causes of the various phenomena mentioned in the books. The necessity is therefore to go beyond Gurdon and Playfair and not merely to quote or repeat them. However in most of the published writings on the Khasis and the Garos there is not much evidence of either using the ethnographers critically or attempting to

construct a socio-economic picture of the societies based on sources other than the writings of British travellers, etc. The problem of sources for the history of this period of North East India we shall discuss a little ahead. A look into the existing works show that this period (the pre-13th century) usually forms an introductory chapter of the works where some traditions may be mentioned without much attempt at trying to link them to the social processes that they might be representing.⁴⁰ For instance Hamlet Bareh's work, *The History and Culture of the Khasi People* contains two chapters on the pre-British period. These chapters are also basically a descriptive account of the origins, culture, and society of the Khasis from the earliest times. For a large part of this part of the work he depends very heavily on P.C. Choudhury's work on early Assam⁴¹ and P.R.T. Gurdon's work on the Khasis. His conclusions are also those of Choudhury and Gurdon, and one must remember that many of Choudhury's conclusions have been quite controversial mainly because, as Mignonette Momin has pointed out, he was "not quite successful at offering a new historical insight because (he) subscribed to the existing stereotypes."⁴² About Gurdon's historiographic preferences we have already discussed above. Thus Bareh's discussions remain problematic both historiographically and empirically. Except perhaps for Namita Shadap Sen's⁴³ work on the Khasi-Jaintia people most other works on the Khasis and Garos, whether it is Bareh or Milton Sangma,⁴⁴ remain at the level of a mixture of colonial-nationalistic traditions. What is commendable in Shadap Sen's account is her use of philology to try and interpret legends and not merely record them, albeit one must agree that linguistic interpretation needs to be corroborated with other historical data to be able to arrive at conclusive assertions about socio-economic and political developments. There is however no doubt about the fact that Shadap-Sen has made a very definite attempt to move away from the dominant purely empirical tradition and provide a more analytical handling of her material of the early history of the Khasi-Synteng people although for the most part it remains descriptive and narrative with interpretations which remain at the superficial level of the data without trying to focus on the social processes which shaped history. Her work is by and large free of chauvinistic

and glorification tendencies and marks a break in the approach to the study of the Khasi-Jaintia societies. Her use of a variety of sources is commendable although the sources have not been used to the fullest extent. Mention may also be made here of a work like Soumen Sen's⁴⁵ on Khasi state Formation where he has tried to trace that process through the folklores that exist. This study definitely sets a new trend in the direction of studying the early Khasi society although one problem that crops up here as in many other works is the dating of tradition. But it must be agreed that Sen makes a very innovative attempt at reconstructing aspects of the society and economy of the early Khasi society from the information that could be gleaned from the existing folk traditions. Thus we see that except for works like those of Shadap Sen and Soumen Sen most other existing published writings have not really contributed much to the understanding of the socio-economic processes in the Khasi Jaintia society in the early times. The majority of the works have followed the conventional stereotype of recounting tales and describing rulers, their powers and the like.

Moving on to Nagaland, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh there is really nothing very new to add so far as trends of history writing go. As in the case of Meghalaya the majority of the published works have not really progressed very far from the ethnographic accounts of the early British pioneers in this field. The early history of these societies have found place in a chapter or two of more general works. Haimendorf or Hutton still remain the most referred sources for Naga society and the status of knowledge also does not seem to have developed very far from them. For the studies on the Mizo society although there are quite a few works both by insiders and others as in Nagaland too, the bias of the colonial writings exist because of the dependence on the views of early British officers and pioneers like McCall and Shakespear.⁴⁶ Later scholars⁴⁷ remain satisfied with giving accounts of myths and legends of the various tribes, but viewing them from a historical perspective (like trying to date them or interpret them) does not seem to have troubled their pens. Thus significant studies on socio-economic developments in the early phases of development of these societies are yet to emerge. Arunachal Pradesh should be a historian's paradise because its variety of social formations

have remained by and large unmapped and untraced from a scientific perspective of history.⁴⁸ "Though scholars of Arunachal history have changed in course of time, the scope for occidental bias still remain(s)ed due to paucity of source materials"⁴⁹ and also a scientific historical approach to sources, both in tapping them and interpreting them. The early British monographs on the tribes and accounts of the foreign travellers do however provide a lot of valuable information which can be used to reconstruct the picture of society and economy in the pre-13th century period of many of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh.

Before moving on from the hills to the states of Manipur and Tripura we must refer to the fact that though the existing published works on the hill areas have not on the whole been encouraging historiographically the works of some of the younger scholars have been more promising. The only problem in this case has been the fact that since these works have remained as unpublished theses and dissertations they have not become a part of public knowledge and hence have not been able to influence directly the status of history writing. The reference to one or two examples will show the path which these younger scholars are trying to tread. For instance, Cecile Mawlong⁵⁰ in her doctoral work has studied the megalithic culture of the Khasis and tried to focus on issues related to certain phases of social evolution of these societies as can be understood through an interpretation of the traditions represented in the stone cultures. A very interesting work on interpreting a similar phase in the historical development of the North East can be seen in an M.Phil dissertation written by Nchumbeni Kikon⁵¹ where in the first chapter she tries to link legends of the Lothas to megalithic traditions and also interprets some of the oral/folk traditions to developments in the Neolithic period. For instance, she interprets the Lotha folklore about drying rice on a stone to the stone tools being used in agriculture and also to the gradual increase of rice production. This kind of work stands in contrast to the very perfunctory kind of analysis done by S.N.Rao in his article "Megalithic Practices among Khasis and Nagas".⁵² Some interesting works have also been done on early Mizo society. In his doctoral thesis Vanlalringa Bawitlung for instance has made an attempt to

analyse the institution of Chieftainship in Mizoram by not only providing a theoretical model for the study but also trying to link the evolution of the institution to the phases of economic development, production and acquisition of surplus in the society and the resultant stratification.⁵³ An area which has almost gone begging in studies on early societies in the region relates to development of technology in the societies, and more important, relating those developments to society and economy. A very promising work on that line appears to be Vanlalruata Rengsi's doctoral work.⁵⁴ In his work Rengsi uses technology as an analytical instrument to understand and analyse traditional Mizo society. Using this as a framework he comes to some very interesting conclusions where he relates shifting cultivation as an agrarian technology to patterns and phases of the development of the traditional Mizo society. In all the above works although there may remain problems regarding chronology and dating but the approaches and the perspectives of the scholars do bring a breath of fresh air to the world of history writing of the early North East, steeped as it is in the mire of stereotype and convention. The above list is by no means a comprehensive list, but a few works have been mentioned to indicate the kind of encouraging changes that seem to be emerging, but works like the above will have to be published so that they can make a dent in historiography.

For historians working on the early history of Tripura dearth of materials should not be a problem because there exist not only coins and inscriptions but also the very widely used royal chronicle *Rajmala*, although this chronicle can at best be dated not before the 15th century.⁵⁵ But it is to be noticed that very little significant use has been made of the epigraphic and numismatic sources for the purpose of constructing a socio-economic history of the early period of the state. Over-dependence on the *Rajmala*, on the other hand has resulted in the production of primarily dynastic histories.⁵⁶ At the other end there have been works on the various tribes of Tripura, but these, like the works on tribes in the other areas of the region have not gone beyond descriptions of traditions and customs primarily in the ethnographic style.⁵⁷ Thus the existing published writings on the early history of Tripura do not seem to have placed much importance in viewing political or cultural



240680

developments in the light of the processes of socio-economic changes in the society.

Although Manipuri scholars claim that Manipur has a tradition of recorded history in the form of royal chronicles and family chronicles it is only in recent years that scholars have begun to make wide use of them. The first published works in English even here begin with the writings of the British, like T.C. Hodson, *The Meitheis*, first published in 1908. A Manipuri scholar laments that "Till date historians had not given a serious thought to the history of Manipur."⁵⁸ The same scholar makes a very vital point about historiography in Manipur when he writes that the tradition of glorifying the past of Manipur had greatly influenced the historians.⁵⁹ Generally therefore one can conclude that here too either we have dynastic recordings and nationalistic glorifications or ethnographic studies of the tribes.⁶⁰ Although E. Nilakanta Singh writes that the "research into the past of Manipur is at the moment largely confined to oral traditions and written records including the *Puranas* (called *Puyas* in Manipuri), which are plenty. But Manipuri archaeology... is still at its infancy..."⁶¹, O.K. Singh claims that there has been considerable archaeological works carried out in Manipur.⁶² Nilakanta Singh of course made it clear that by "archaeology we mean the results of properly conducted excavations.... Excavations worth the name have started only recently, eclipsing thereby most of the pre-historic and proto-historic phase of Manipuri culture."⁶³ Much therefore still remains to be done in the researches into the history of early Manipur society particularly in the areas of socio-economic developments. There may be unpublished works existing but till they become a part of public knowledge they do not really indicate an influential trend, as has been mentioned in the discussion above.

The survey of some of the leading works on the history of early North East India made above do bring out the fact that so far as the trends and perceptions of history writing are concerned there do exist some kind of uniformity in the developments in the North East. However at this point it will be pertinent to dwell on some problems which seem to face history writing in this region. The survey made above has enabled us to become aware of some of them and also of the

fact that the dominant trends existing in the region do not seem to be able to make historians aware of the necessity of addressing themselves to these problems. The first problem, as hinted in the beginning of this discussion, seems to be that of periodisation, chronology and dating. If one conceptualises the term periodisation then the question definitely arises whether the period called ancient for the rest of India is also applicable to the North East. Mere use of dates is not periodisation. When James Mill published his *History of British India* in 1817 and introduced the idea of periodising Indian historical developments into Hindu, Muslim and British he had in mind only dynastic changes.⁶⁴ But today we cannot still contribute to those ideas. If periodisation is viewed as the development of the various forms of property and division of labour, in short, a process of the development of material forces in the society and the resultant organisation of a civil society, then, ancient must needs to be seen as the phase of evolution of the first form of property, i.e. tribal property. "It corresponds to the undeveloped stage of production, at which people live by hunting and fishing, by cattle raising or at most by agriculture."⁶⁵ Such a phase of development also would see a division of labour broken at a very low level. This phase would gradually lead to the emergence of ancient and state property. Now these are phases of development which cannot happen uniformly anywhere, at least not in a diverse country like India. Thus the level of development existing, for instance, in the Gangetic Doab in the 4th century A.D., which has been periodised as ancient, may not have existed in communities of the North Eastern States. Such a level of development might have taken place much later. Even within the region different societies might have had different levels of development within a given time frame. Under these conditions it is only pertinent that historians of the North east should give more thought to the question of periodisation. It is perhaps unfortunate that questions such as these have not found place for discussion in a majority of the existing works. Related to this is of course the problem of chronology. Epigraphic sources and coins may be there for historians to use. But it is not enough to merely explain the sources technically. There has to be enough work done on these sources with corroboration from other sources to establish

chronology and significance. This is where a trained historian is needed. For many of the societies of the North East the problem of sources is also a major difficulty. There are many areas where there may not be any numismatic or epigraphic sources. For such societies the tapping of and interpretation of oral history becomes a very real need. In addition to this archaeology will have to play a very important role in adding to and corroborating the existing sources. What is needed for the region are works like those of Reba Ray⁶⁶ who has done a commendable work on mapping patterns of Palaeolithic and Neolithic settlements in Eastern India. In this work she has also focussed on the probable settlement patterns in North Eastern India based on the available field data. The data gaps that exist will thus have to be filled in with the workings on these sources.

Finally a brief comment on an area of research and analysis which has been overlooked by almost all historians working on the early period. Most of the writings which exist have seemed to totally ignore the fact that men and women must have made civilisation together. The gender bias of the works that are making the rounds is thus very obvious. The historians of today will thus have to make a special effort to fill up not only this data gap but also to bring about a change in the entire perception of history so that women do not remain in the peripheries of history as "also beens" but get integrated into the whole process of history so that a more total history of the socio-economic developments of the early societies of the North East can be written.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. E.A. Gait, *A History of Assam* (first published 1905, revised edition, 1926). It was the 1926 edition which was later reprinted with editorial notes.
2. For further discussion on Gait's work see Mignonette Momin, "Studies in the Political and Socio-economic History of Pre-Ahom Assam: Perspectives and Prospects" in *North Eastern Hill University Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, Vol. I, No. I, Jan.-June, 1998, pp. 1-3.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
4. For instance some of the works which can be referred to in this context are those of N.N. Vasu, *The Social History of Kamarupa* (First published Calcutta, 1922); P. Bhattacharya, *Kamarupasanavali* (First published, 1931); K.L. Barua, *Early History of Kamarupa* (First published 1933).

5. P.C. Choudhury, *The History of Civilisation of the People of Assam to the Twelfth Century* (Gauhati, 1959).
6. B.K. Barua, *Cultural History of Assam* (Gauhati, 1951).
7. Gajendra Adhikary, *A History of the Temples of Kamrup and Their Management* (Guwahati, 2001).
8. *Ibid.* p. 5.
9. Mignonette Momin, *op. cit.*, p. 4(n).
10. Even D.C. Sircar mentions that of the two works *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* mention of Pragjyotisha is rare in the latter. See D.C. Sircar, "Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa" in H.K. Barpujari (ed.), *The Comprehensive History of Assam* Vol. I, (Guwahati, 1990), pp. 59-78. The views of Sircar found in this writing should also have been critically assessed by a historian in the late twentieth century who was working on inscriptions.
11. P.C. Choudhury, *The History of Civilisation of the People of Assam to the Twelfth Century A.D.* (Guwahati, 1987).
12. Nayanjot Lahiri, *Pre-Ahom Assam: Studies in the Inscriptions of Assam between the Fifth and the Thirteenth Centuries A.D.* (New Delhi, 1991).
13. Chitrarekha Gupta, "Evolution of Agrarian Society in Kamarupa in Early Medieval Period", *Indian Historical Review*, XIX, 1996, pp. 1-20; and "Trade and Markets in North Eastern India: The Ancient Period, in Jai Prakash Singh and Gautam Sengupta (ed.), *Archaeology in North East India* (New Delhi, 1991).
14. Mignonette Momin, "Urbanization in the Brahmaputra Valley Circa AD 600-1200" in Jai Prakash Singh and Gautam Sengupta (ed.), *op. cit.*
15. Mignonette Momin, "Studies in the Political and Socio-economic History of Pre-Ahom Assam...." *op. cit.*, p. 15.
16. Gajen Adhikary, *op. cit.*
17. *Ibid.*, preface.
18. B.N. Mukherjee, *External Trade of Early North-Eastern India* (New Delhi, 1992).
19. See Chitrarekha Gupta *op. cit.*
20. Mukherjee, *op. cit.*, p. 69.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
22. In this context reference can be made to the works of scholars like M.M. Sharma whose *Inscriptions of Ancient Assam* (Gauhati University, 1978) is a most essential source book for any scholar interested in the early history of Assam. Also P. Bhattacharyya, *Kamarupa Sasanavali op. cit.* and D. Sarma (ed.), *Kamarupa Sasanavali* (Gauhati, 1981) provide equally valuable information even though Sarma suffers from the same bias of the nationalist ideology as perceived in the historians of the early decades of the twentieth century; R.D. Choudhury, *Archaeology of the Brahmaputra Valley* (Delhi, 1985), also works under the same kind of historiographical bias even though he almost condemns the works of M.M. Sharma and D. Sarma as being not original and says of D. Sarma that it did not "carry any useful additional information relating to the latest discovery of the inscriptions nor its standard is maintained. Rather it has carried some misleading information to his discredit." This however may be a view which many may consider not properly substantiated in respect of the technicalities of Sarma's work. However none of the works of this kind have provided any deep insight into the socio-economic developments

- of the time by interpreting the epigraphic and numismatic sources.
23. See Lahiri, *op. cit.*; Gupta, *op. cit.*; Momin, *op. cit.*
 24. Gupta in Singh and Sengupta (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 286.
 25. Momin in Singh and Sengupta (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 268, 269.
 26. Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam, Society, Polity, Economy* (Calcutta, 1991).
 27. For an assessment of Guha on this point see Mignonette Momin, "Studies in the Political and Socio-economic History of Pre-Ahom Assam...", *op. cit.* pp. 16-17.
 28. Maheswar Neog (ed.), *Pabitra Asom* (Guwahati, 1960).
 29. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
 30. Jatin Borgohain, *Asomor Arthanaitik Itihas* (Jorhat, 1985).
 31. Sujit Chaudhury, *Srihatta-Cacharer Prachin Itihas* (Calcutta, 1992); U.C. Guha, *Cacharer Itivritta* (Dacca, 1921); A.C. Chaudhury, *Srihattar Itivritta* (Sylhet, 1317 B.S).
 32. See J.B. Bhattcharjee, "State formation in Pre-colonial Tribal North East: A Case Study of the Dimasa State" in *The North Eastern Hill University of Social Sciences and Humanities*, Vol. II, No.3, 1984; "The Economic Content of the Medieval State Formation Process Among the Dimasas of North East India", in *Proceedings of The Indian History Congress*, Goa, 1987; "Land-grants, Land Management and the Nature of Social Formation in Srihatta", in *The North Eastern Hill University Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, Vol. II, No.2, 1988. Most of the ideas and also the information in these and other writings of Bhattarcharjee have been found incorporated in his book *Social and Polity Formations in Pre-colonial North East India: The Barak Valley Experience* (New Delhi, 1991).
 33. J.M.H. Classen & Peter Skalnik (ed.), *The Early State* (The Hague, 1978).
 34. F. Engels, *The Origin of Family, Private Property and the state* (London, 1972).
 35. M. Fortes & E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *African Political Systems* (London, 1940).
 36. L.H. Morgan, *Ancient Society* (London, 1877).
 37. P.R.T. Gurdon, *The Khasis* (reproduced Delhi, 1993); Major A. Playfair, *The Garos* (Rep. Gauhati, 1975).
 38. Gurdon, *Ibid.*, Introduction.
 39. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
 40. The works which have been taken up for discussion here are those which have significance in analysis of trends of historiographic developments in the context of socio-economic history. The discussion should not be viewed as a bibliography of all published works on the Khasi-Jantia and Garo.
 41. P.C. Choudhury, *op. cit.*
 42. Mignonette Momin, "Studies in the Political and Socio-economic History of Pre-Ahom Assam; Perspectives and Prospects," *op. cit.*, p. 5.
 43. Namita Shadap Sen, *The Origins and Early History of the Khasi Synteng People* (Calcutta, 1981).
 44. Milton S. Sangma, *History and Culture of the Garos* (New Delhi, 1981).
 45. Soumen Sen, *Social and State Formation in Khasi-Jaintia Hills: A study of Folk Lore* (Delhi, 1985).
 46. See A.G. McCall, *Lushai Chrysalis* (Calcutta, 1949); J. Shakespeare, *Lushai-Kuki Clan* (Shillong, 1912).

47. For instance see, C. Nunthara and S.N. Singh, *Mizoram: Historical, Geographical, Social, Economic and Administrative* (New Delhi, 1994).
48. A number of works exist today in the Mizo language. These works need to be assessed to understand if they have thrown any light on society and economy in Mizoram in the pre-13th century period.
49. Gurudas Das, *Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh in Transition* (New Delhi, 1995), p. 6.
50. Cecile Mawlong, "Megalithic Monuments of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills: An Ethno-archaeological Study" (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, NEHU, 1996).
51. Nchumbeni Kikon, "History of the Lotha Tribe in Nagaland", (unpublished M.Phil. dissertation, NEHU, 1990).
52. S.N. Rao, in J.P. Singh and Gautam Sengupta (ed.), *op.cit.*
53. See Vanlalringa Bawitlung, "Chieftainship and the Processes of State Formation in Mizo Society" (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, NEHU, 1996).
54. Vanlalruata Rengsi, "Reconstruction of Traditional Mizo Society: A Technological Perspective" (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, NEHU, 1999).
55. See J.B. Battacharjee, *Social and Polity Formations*, *op.cit.* p.66.
56. As an example can be cited works like, Omesh Saigal, *Tripura: Its History and Culture* (Delhi, 1978); N.R. Roychoudhury, *Tripura Through the Ages* (Agartala, 1977).
57. For instance see, Jagadish Gan Chaudhuri, *The Reangs of Tripura, Treatise on Traditional Social Institutions of the Tripuri Community* (Agartala, 1983); Debapriya Deb Barman, (Agartala, 1983).
58. Naorem Sanajoba (ed.), *Manipur: Past and Present, Vol. I* (Delhi, 1988), p. iii.
59. *Ibid.*
60. An example of ethnographic studies can be seen in a work like Thangkhomang S. Gangte, *The Kukis of Manipur: A Historical Analysis* (Delhi, 1993).
61. E. Nilakanta Singh, *Fragments of Manipuri Culture* (New Delhi, 1993), p. ix.
62. O.K. Singh, "Aspects of Archaeology in Manipur" in N. Sanajoba (ed), *op. cit.*
63. E. Nilakanta Singh, *op. cit.*
64. James Mill, *History of British India*, Vols. I-III, (New Delhi, 1978 [rep]).
65. Karl Marx and F. Engels, *German Ideology* (Moscow, 1976), p. 38.
66. Reba Ray, *Ancient Settlement Patterns of Eastern India* (Calcutta, 1988).