

AN  
ACCOUNT OF ASSAM

FIRST COMPILED IN 1807-1814

By :

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## CONTENTS

|                               | PAGE  |
|-------------------------------|-------|
| PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION  | - V   |
| PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION | - VII |
| PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION  | - IX  |
| BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE          | - XIV |

### ACCOUNT OF ASSAM

#### PART I.—ACCOUNT OF ASAM

|  |      |    |
|--|------|----|
| INTRODUCTION   | .... | 1  |
| ✓ CHAPTER I. History   | .... | 3  |
| CHAPTER II. Form of Government and Topography  | -    | 15 |
| SECT. I. Of the King and the Officers at his Residence                                 | ..   | 16 |
| SECT. II, Of the Officers Employed in the Government and Protection of Provinces       | ..   | 25 |
| • SECT. III. Of the Officers employed in the Management of Revenue                     | ..   | 43 |
| / CHAPTER III. Of the Administration of Justice, Divisions of the people, and Religion | ..   | 51 |
| • CHAPTER IV. Productions, Manufactures, and Labourers                                 |      | 60 |

#### PART II.—ACCOUNT OF THE COUNTRIES ADJOINING TO ASAM

|  |         |
|--|---------|
| CHAPTER I. Of the Countries North of the Brahmaputra                 | 69      |
| CHAPTER II. Of the Countries South or on the Left of the Brahmaputra | .. 78   |
| INDEX  | 101—112 |

## PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

(Buchanan—Hamilton Manuscripts are first published under the title of 'An Account of Assam' in 1940 and it was carefully edited by Dr. S. K. Bhuyan, the then Honorary Provincial Director of Historical and Antiquarian Studies of Assam. Hamilton, a pioneer historian in the nineteenth century prepared his manuscripts probably in 1808—1809 and it was published in the 'Oriental Literature' for June, 1820. 'An Account of Assam' is a concise but informative work which deals not only topography, history and antiquarian alone but also gives some information about socio-cultural-economic life of the people of Assam contemporary to his visit.) Hamilton, specially used some old and unfamiliar orthography which needs further revision and editing with annotations.) Anyway, the third edition was given in the press prior to my taking over charge as Honorary Director. Now, it has come out after 24 years of its second edition.

I express my deep gratitude to the Education Department, Government of Assam for kindly sanctioning necessary fund to bring out this publication. My thanks are also due to all members of the staff who render assistance and co-operation in bringing out this publication. I do apologise for some printing mistakes already crept in.

Guwahati  
The 15th June, 1987.

Lila Gogoi,  
Honorary Director,  
Department of Historical and  
Antiquarian Studies, in Assam,  
Guwahati.

## PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

The book was first published by this Department in 1940. It contains an account of Assam from the coming of the Ahoms to the period of Gaurinath Singha and the Moamoria rebellion. It was under the instructions of the East Indian Company and at the instance of the Governor General-in-Council that an wide survey of Eastern India and of the territories lying adjacent to it was conducted by Mr. Hamilton during the period from 1808 to 1814 with a view to collecting materials and writing about the condition of the people living there in. With regard to Assam he conducted his survey from his head-quarters at Goalpara and Rungpur where he stayed from 1807 to 1809; but he did not make an on-the-spot inquiry into the affairs of the people or of the country. Whatever it is, the purpose behind the survey and recording of facts was evidently administrative. Assam at that time lay outside the pale of the company's administration. The British authorities tried on many occasions in the past for interfering into the affairs of the Government of Assam, to some extent because of the failings of the Ahom administrative set up, and into the commercial activities of the inhabitants of the place. It was, however, the Burmese invasions that provided the best opportunity to the authorities of the East Indian Company for interfering directly into the affairs of the people and of the country : the misfortune was yet to befall.

The informations that he has incorporated in his '*Account of Assam*' are no doubt valuable : his description of the adjoining territories has added importance to the *Account*. This is not based on on-the-spot study of the country. To cite his own authority, as given in his *Introduction*, the "account was collected during the year 1808 and 1809, partly from several natives of Bengal who on different occasions, had visited Assam, and partly from natives of that country who were fugitives in Bengal". He has no doubt stated to have been accurate as far

## VIII

as possible. But, what usually happens in the case of a historian or a recorder of events who for his records depends entirely on the materials supplied by informants, some discrepancies and even errors have crept into his account as well. He could have enquired into and verified the authenticity of the said informations and taken into confidence a few responsible Assamese officers as well as businessmen before recording, for instance, that the Assamese are known for their cruelty ; and the Assamese traders are not to be trusted, etc. The statements lack confirmation or present only one-sided views.

The above mentioned defects, among others, do not, however, take away the intrinsic merit of the book, and by his account, Mr. Hamilton has proved himself to be a pioneer historian of Assam.

At the end I take this opportunity of expressing by gratitude to the Government of Assam in the Education Department for kindly placing funds at our disposal for publication of this edition. My thanks are also due to all members of the Staff who have assisted me in this respect, and to the proprietor, Nabajiban Press, for printing the volume.

**P. C. CHOUDHURY.**

*Director,*

*Department of Historical and  
Antiquarian Studies in Assam*

**GAUHATI, ASSAM**

**THE 13TH JUNE, 1963**

## PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

*can Part of*  
 (The Buchanan-Hamilton Manuscripts deposited in the India Office Library, London, are invaluable for the purpose of investigation into the political, economic and social history of the districts now comprised in the provinces of Bengal, Bihar and Assam.) The neglected condition in which they have been allowed to remain for a long time since the date of their compilation has been frequently commented upon by antiquarians, historians, administrators and archivists. For some years past, considerable interest has been roused in the matter of the Buchanan-Hamilton Manuscripts, resulting in the publication of several of the journals and reports.

The Buchanan-Hamilton Manuscripts are the result of a long and laborious survey of the districts of Eastern India which formed part of the East India Company's territories or were adjacent to them. This survey was undertaken in 1808 to 1814 at the instance of the Governor-General in council. Dr. Francis Buchanan <sup>he</sup> afterwards known as "Francis Hamilton, formerly Buchanan," was instructed to extend his enquiries "throughout the whole of the territories, subject to the immediate authority of the Presidency of Fort William." It was also desired, "that you should extend your inquiries to the adjacent countries, and to those petty states with which the British Government has no regular intercourse. In performing this duty, however, you are prohibited from quitting the Company's territories, and are directed to confine your inquiries to consulting such of the natives of those countries as you may meet with, or natives of the British territories who have visited the countries in question." The inquiries were to be directed to the following subjects :—(1) topography, history, antiquities of the country;

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★Francis Buchanan was born in 1762, and died in 1829. In 1815 he dropped the name Buchanan and assumed that of Hamilton.

(2) the condition of the inhabitants, sanitation, costumes, food, medical treatment, education; (3) religion, customs, priests; (4) the natural production of the country, animal, vegetable and mineral; (5) agriculture, vegetables, implements of husbandry, manure, measures connected with floods and inundations, domestic animals, fences, farms, landed property, tenure; (6) fine arts and common arts, architectures, sculptures, paintings markets; (7) commerce, exports and imports, weights and measures, transport by land and water, roads.

The survey was commenced after the rainy season of 1807 and it continued upto the hot weather of 1814. Hamilton, according to the terms of his instructions, could not enter Assam which was then ruled by Ahom princes. He conducted his survey of Assam from his headquarters at Goalpara and Rungpoor where he stayed from 1807 to 1809. At these places he came across Assamese princes and nobles who had taken shelter in Bengal, and Bengalis who had paid occasional visits to Assam. His inability to come to Assam has deprived his *Account of Assam* of any mention of its architecture and sculptures which could not obviously be described by one who had to depend upon secondhand reports. (The Assam account forms part of the fourth volume of the Buchanan-Hamilton Manuscripts, and it was examined by me at the India Office Library, London, in October 1936. An earlier version of the Assam report is to be found in the third volume. The second version which is incorporated in the fourth volume gives an impression of finality as far as language and the arrangements of the chapters are concerned. Fortunately for us the second version was published in the *Annals of Oriental Literature* for June 1820, pp. 193-278, (during the life-time of Hamilton himself) thus probably receiving the benefit of the author's final revision in proofs. A part of the *Account of Assam* was inserted in the third volume of Montgomery Martin's Eastern India, published in 1838.

Besides the *Account of Assam*, there are several Assam papers among the Buchanan-Hamilton Manuscripts :—(1)

*History of Kamarupa*, which has been printed as an appendix to the *Kamarupar Buranji*, published by the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, in 1930; (2) *Vocabularies of the Assami and Kamarupa Languages*, from Ruchinath Kamarupi, 1810, a transcript of which has been prepared by us from the India Office original; (3) There is also a vocabulary of about 1800 words arranged by topics in English Banga, Koch, Rabha, Garo, Kachari, Panikoch, Assamese and Manipuri.

(Buchanan-Hamilton's *Account of Assam* represents the result of the third attempt made by the Honourable East India Company to collect information about Assam. In 1787, while appointing Captain Hugh Baillie as Superintendent of the Assam trade and Collector of Rangamati and Goalpara, the Governor-General instructed that officer to report on the resources of Assam, and the customs of the inhabitants. Some information can be gathered from Baillie's letters written from Goalpara to the Governor-General. But Baillie did not find time to compile a systematic survey of Assam as he had to close down his Goalpara factory and office early in 1790 owing to the dissensions and strifes then raging in Assam. The attempt was repeated when Captain Welsh was deputed to Assam in 1792 to expel the Bengal Burkandazes from Assam. The result is embodied in Captain Welsh's letters to Lord Cornwallis and to Sir John Shore, specially in his replies to Shore's *questionnaire* on Assam affairs.★ In addition to the mass of information contained in Welsh's letters, we have a more literary presentation of Assam in Dr. J. P. Wade's *Account of Assam and Geographical Sketch of Assam*.+ The appointment of Hamilton in 1807 to report on Assam, in addition to the districts of the Bengal Presidency embodies a deliberate

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★The replies have been printed in the Appendix to Sir. Alexander Mackenzie's *History of the relations of Government with the hill tribes of the North East Frontier of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1884,

+Wade's *Account of Assam* has been edited by Srijut Benudhar Sharma, and published at North Lakhimpur in 1927. Wade's *Geographical Sketch of Assam* has been edited by Dr. S. K. Bhuyan and published as a serial in the *Assam Review*, Silchar, 1928-30.

and a serious attempt to compile an account of Assam of which there was a regrettable lack of information.

It will be seen that Dr. Wade's *Account of Assam* was based on personal observation of, and direct contact with the life and manners of the people of Assam; whereas (Hamilton derived his materials mainly from Assamese fugitives in Bengal and Bengali visitors to Assam. In spite of the handicaps under which Hamilton had to work his account is an important contribution to our study of the political situation, the economic resources and of the social life of the people in the beginning of the nineteenth century immediately before the invasion of the country by the Burmese. The value of the book has been enhanced by the description of the Garos added to the *Account Of Assam*. Hamilton's love of accuracy, his sense of proportion, and his previous experience at compiling topographical and scientific reports have all combined to make his *Account Of Assam* a valuable contemporary document.)

It will be premature to point out the merits and defects of the book as far as the incorporated information is concerned, on account of the paucity indigenous materials relating to the period, and also for our hesitation to attribute an error to Hamilton in view of his general accuracy of description, and for the fact that he collected his materials from reliable eye-witnesses and spectators whose testimony has been accepted by historians of all ages as an important source of information.

(Hamilton makes several references to a map of Assam published in London by Arrowsmith in 1814.) We obtained a copy from the India Office Library; but owing to the disuse at the present time of the photo-zinco process by which the original map had been printed, the map-experts have reported their inability to reproduce the same without making the letters illegible. Hamilton's orthography has been strictly adhered to in the present text, though his spellings of names and places are very much out of use now.

In conclusion I express my indebtedness to Dr. H. N. Randle. Librarian, India Office Library, London, for lending

the copy of *Annals of Oriental Literature* for June 1820, and to Mr. W. T. Ottewill, O. B. E., Superintendent, India Office Records, London, for preparing for us copies of Arrowsmith's map of Assam through Messrs R. B. Fleming & Co., Technical Photographers, London.

NARAYANI HANDIQUI  
HISTORICAL INSTITUTE.

GAUHATI. ASSAM.

FEBRUARY 26, 1940.

S. K. BHUYAN,

Honorary Provincial Director of  
Historical and Antiquarian Studies,  
Assam.

## BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The following books are recommended for the use of those who want to know further about Dr. Francis Hamilton and the Buchanan-Hamilton Manuscripts :—

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  7. PRAIN, SIR DAVID. *Sketch of the Life of Francis Hamilton (once Buchanan)*. Published in the Annals of the Royal Botanical Garden, Calcutta, Vol. X, 1905.
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# ACCOUNT OF ASSAM

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## PART I

### Account of Assam

#### INTRODUCTION.

The following account was collected during the years 1808 and 1809, partly from several natives of Bengal, who, on different occasions had visited Asam, and partly from natives of that country, who were fugitives in Bengal. Some of the former had resided long in Asam, and had there connexions, whose office gave them an opportunity of being well informed. Among the latter were persons inferior to none in the kingdom in rank and education. The accounts on all points did not agree; nor can I be certain, that I have, on all occasions, been able to select the parts that approach nearest to truth. In general, however, I shall mention the most material differences, following, as my most ordinary guide, the information which I received from a very sensible Brahman of Bengal, who being of the family of the king's spiritual guide, had passed many years in the country. He happened to be at Goyalpara during the rainy season 1808, which I passed there, was recovered by me from a very severe distemper, and during his recovery I had abundant leisure to procure whatever information he could give.