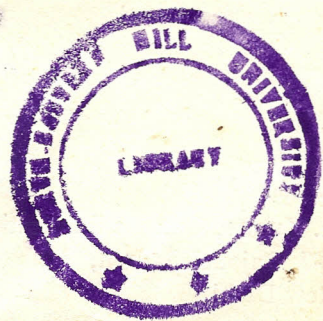


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NORTH EAST AS VIEWED BY FOREIGNERS

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FOREWORD

'Not to know what has been transacted in former times is to be always a child....If no use is made of the labours of the past ages, the world must remain always in the infancy of knowledge'...Cicero.

It gives me great pleasure to have been asked to write a few lines by way of a foreword to this book based as it is on the accounts by travellers from the past drawn from European and non-European countries including lands from East Asia and West Asia. Although he was certainly no foreigner, the treatise also includes an account of Assam as recorded by Guru Teg Bahadur, the ninth Guru of the Sikhs in view of the fact that the Guru's account throws some light on aspects of the history and geography of western Assam. What is remarkable is that the author has been able to present in a single volume important source materials for a systematic rediscovery of the past of Assam as it then was including certain areas which came to have distinctive identities in the era of independence of the country and the subsequent reorganisation of the north-eastern region in 1972. The title of the book is to be read in this context and the author has done it well to make a passing reference to it in his introduction.

In the post-independence period, a number of research scholars have done their endeavour to explore the field of historical research in the country's north-eastern region. Aside from general subjects like mediaeval Assamese society, defence of the north-east frontier, immigrant population, road transport in the north-east region, etc., subjects researched include : Ahom history with particular reference to relations with the tribal people ; the Tai and the Tai kingdom of Assam ; christian missionaries ; sociology of the Mizo society ; British-Lushai relations ; administrative developments in Arunachal Pradesh ; sociology of the Ramos of Arunachal Pradesh ; Government and politics of Meghalaya ; socio-religious study of the Jaintia tribe ; history

of the Khasi people ; Anglo-Khasi relations ; the Garos and the English ; pre-historic archaeology stone age culture of Garo hills ; Naga Polity ; Anglo-Naga relations ; British relations with Manipur ; case studies of selected Meetei villages ; economic development of Tripura, etc. But despite the progress recorded, the north-eastern region is still a virgin land from the standpoint of historical research. This is more so with reference to the pre-modern period, i.e., the early and the mediaeval ages. The variety of historical evidence is legion indeed and, the deeper the research, wider could be the coverage of source materials. It is known that some scholars engaged in mediaeval studies utilised place names, nature of the soil, technique of cultivation, forms of settlement, old maps, modern aerial surveys, ancient tools, folk-lore, social ideas, social relations, economic formations besides the available direct documents. The accounts of the travellers preserved the past and its memories in the forms of records for posterity, and the beauty of history lies in writing it afresh for each generation. Herein also lies the need for upturning the virgin soil of historical research in the north-eastern region's pre-modern period.

The accounts of travellers listed in this book provide a mine of information for further studies. The author of the book, Dr. N.N. Acharyya, Reader in History, Gauhati University, has been engaged for quite some years in exploring the source materials for the study of the region's history. He has published earlier two other works, viz., *Assam and Neighbouring States : Historical Documents, and Source Materials on the History and Culture of Assam and North-Eastern States*. These were well received and I have great pleasure in commending the present volume to the attention of the scholarly world and the interested general reader.

8 January 1985

Debo Prasad Barooah
 Professor and Head,
 Deptt. of Political Science, &
 Dean, Faculty of Arts,
 Gauhati University

PREFACE

History of North East India is a fascinating subject, but it becomes more fascinating after a study of foreign travellers, who visited the land since the early times. Indian sages have laid great stress upon travelling within the country, to get acquainted with the people inhabiting the different regions of the Indian sub-continent. Many adventurous souls from Europe, China, Middle East and mainland of India itself have left behind interesting accounts of their travels on the North East.

Among early and medieval sources of the history of North East India not only works on archaeology, religion and literature are to be counted upon but also the accounts of foreign travellers which are valuable testimony of the concerned age.

I collected most of the material for this volume during my sojourn for two years in England 1955-57 and another two years in U.S.A. 1974-76. While teaching post-graduate classes I found the students eager to acquaint themselves with the material contained in the accounts of different travellers. Since these are not readily available I decided to prepare a handy volume incorporating all available sources.

I owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. D.P. Barooah, the Dean of the faculty of Arts, Gauhati University, for kindly agreeing to write a foreword. He has recommended the work to the scholarly world and the interested general reader.

I am also greatly indebted to my publisher M/s. Omsons Publications, New Delhi, for kindly undertaking the difficult task of publishing the book.

*Department of History
Gauhati University
January 8, 1985.*

Dr. N.N. Acharyya

DEDICATED TO
THE HALLOWED MEMORY OF MY MOTHER
ABHAYA DEVI

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INTRODUCTION

Assam, as the name of the region in the north-eastern corner of India, is comparatively of a later day creation. In ancient times this part of territory was known as the kingdom of Pragjyotisha or Kamarupa. Its limits vary from time to time and at present what we understand by the term 'North-Eastern India' was the synonym for it. These expanded limits comprehended the stupendous hills of Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan together with Siam, Ava, Arracan and the bordering kingdoms as far as China. This was circumscribed by the range of hills and forests that skirt the deep valley in Bengal proper demarcating the Chinese portion of peninsula beyond the Ganges. The glory of the region is its numerous rivers and more especially the venerable Brahmaputra, which fertilizes the soil and serves for the transport of its productions. In the rainy season the mountain torrents swell in a wonderful way, and within a few hours frequently rise twenty feet above their usual level, rushing down with much uproar and rapidity. In the dry season they flow through their broad sandy beds with a slow and sluggish stream. The country is generally swampy, and intersected with half-filled channels and stagnant lakes. Thus the land is very susceptible of cultivation and amply repays any labour and expense bestowed upon it by producing abundant crops.

Since time immemorial Assam has been serving as the eastern gate-way for the passage and communication of peoples, commodities and ideas between the Indian sub-continent in the west and China and other parts of South-East Asia in the East. This is situated in the centre of the network of national highway connecting different civilisations through the inland mountain routes. It was probably from the third millennium B.C. onwards that the great

Sino-Tibetan speaking people started to infiltrate into India mainly along the western course of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries from their original cradle near the courses of the Yangtze-Kiang and the Hoang Ho rivers. It was also one of the earliest parts of India where the fusion of Aryan blood with the autochthons took place when many other parts of Aryavarta were not fit for human habitation. This tract of territory is, therefore, a beautiful one and enjoys all the advantages requisite for rendering it one of the finest under the sun.

Assam is always found to have attracted travellers, scholars, invaders, traders, soldiers, religious reformers and missionaries. (The Epic, Puran, Tantra and secular literatures are eloquent as to give detailed description of the travellers during the Vedic age.) Assam felt the brunt of great Indian hero Raghu's conquests towards east. It is mentioned in the Raghuvamsam that Raghu crossed the Lohit, i.e., the Brahmaputra, and defeated the king of Pragjyotisha, who became tributary to him by presenting a number of elephants as tribute. Krishna, one of the greatest figures of ancient India frequently appears in Assam mythology. The hill of Asvakranta bears the hoof marks of the horses of Krishna who killed king Narakasur of Pragjyotisha. He also fought two more battles, one at Vidarbha (located around modern town of Sadiya) and the other at Sonitpur (Assamese equivalent Tezpur) details of which are narrated in the Rukmini Haran and Kumar Haran. On two distinct occasions the great Pandava warriors invaded Assam. Bhima, the famous club-fighter in course of his expedition to the east, reached the Lauhitya region in the lower Assam valley and compelled the king and dwellers of the land to pay taxes. Arjuna, the greatest hero of the Kurukshetra fame started his campaigns in the northern directions and entered the territories of Anarta, Kalakuta, Kulinda (Saharanpur and Ambala), Sakala, Prativindhya, Pragjyotisha, the tribes of Kirata, China and some isles surrounded by the sea. He was resisted by Bhagadatta, the king of Pragjyotisha, who fought for eight days being accompanied by a host of Kiratas and Chins and numerous other warriors. The fierce fighting ended with a defeat to Bhagadatta who was compelled to pay tribute.

Ancient Assam was visited by many sages of ancient times. Name of the sage Parasurama is associated with Parasuram Kunda

now in the Lohit district of the Arunachal Pradesh where a fair is held every year even to-day when people from various parts of the country go there to take their holy bath in the Brahmaputra. Similarly the hermitage of the sage Vasishtha situated at a distance of twelve kilometres from the city of Gauhati is a prominent hindu pilgrimage of present time.

The invasions of the Greeks opened the doors between India and the West and the cultural contact that followed as a consequence proved to be a matter of great significance. Assam like other parts of India received her due share from the writings of the classical Greek and Roman travellers. The earliest of them is the anonymous author of the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*. He was a Greek merchant and travelled in India about A.D. 80. He gives a very interesting account of the trade activities of ancient Assam especially in tejpāt, ivory, muslins and gold. He also refers to the coin *caltis* (used by the Kalitas of Assam) and the land of this (*Pragjyotisha*). The same can be said about another Greek traveller Pliny who refers to the river Brahmaputra as important water-route for transport of silk products of China to Greece. Ptolemy, the famous Greek geographer writes about the geographical account of different tribes of ancient Assam as the Nagas, the Dimasas, the Dekeras and the Kokis. These valuable references to ancient Assam are very significant and they throw interesting light on a very dark period of Assam's history.

Epigraphic sources give the account of invasions of ancient Assam. The Allahabad Stone Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta records that the king of Davaka (modern Nowgong District) and Kamarupa were forced to pay tribute to Samudragupta. Mandasor Stone Pillar Inscription of Yasodharman refers to Yasodharman's conquest of the Brahmaputra region and Apsad Stone Inscription of Adityasena describes the defeat of the Kamarupa King Susthitavarman in the hands of Mahasenagupta. Unfortunately the invaders did not leave details of their Assam exploits.

The writings of the Chinese travellers on Assam form a valuable supplement to the Greek and Roman accounts. Ancient Assam enters into a new phase and became a decisive factor in the politics of India as a whole in middle of the seventh century A.D. In this regard the testimony of the Chinese travellers, Yuan Chwang and I-tsing, deserves special mention. Yuan Chwang was a

Buddhist monk of China. He entered the north-western border of India in A.D. 630 and during the next fourteen years travelled all over India. He was honoured by the great Indian rulers, Harsavardhan and Bhaskaravarman. Yuan Chwang visited Assam in A.D. 642 on the invitation of the King Bhaskaravarman and he stayed in Assam for a period of one month. He had recorded his impression on Assam and this record is preserved in its original form in the Si-yu-ki, T' ang Shu, Chuan 10, She-kia-fang-che and in the writings of his biographers. We learn from the records that the kingdom of Kamarupa in Eastern India was 10,000 li (nearly 1700 miles) in circuit. The ruling king Bhaskaravarman was fond of learning and his subjects followed his examples. The people were of simple and honest disposition ; they were earnest in study and had retentive memories. Men of high talent and ability from distant regions came to this land for study and also in search of livelihood.

The Chinese pilgrim I-tsing also supplies us valuable information on Assam. He followed the foot-steps of Yuan Chwang and travelled into India in the second half of the seventh century A.D. It is recorded in his account that the sea-route to China from India was under the control of the Varman line of Kamarupa kings. Bhaskaravarman asked Yuan Chwang "by what route you propose to return ; if you select the Southern Sea-route, i.e. by way of Java, or Sumatra, then I will send official attendants to accompany you".

Bhaskaravarman's glory as a great king and conqueror was upheld by the later kings in the succeeding periods. Harsha-deva has been described in the Nepal record as Gauda-Odradi-Kalinga-Kosala-pati, which imply that the king ruled not only over Assam, but also over Bengal, Orissa, Kalinga and Kosala or Eastern U.P. The next rulers like Pralambha and his successors, and those of Pala line of Kamarupa, also seem to have maintained a rule of honour for Assam. This is testified from the accounts of the Arabian traveller Alberuni who describes location of Kamarupa and the adjoining lands, Tibet, China, Nepal and Bhutan and trade-routes between them early in the eleventh century A.D. Alberuni was a court-scholar of Ghazni. He accompanied Sultan Mahmud in his Indian expeditions and his reference to the land of Pragjyotisha, Kamarupa, Lohitya, Kirata and Udayagiri in his

monumental work *Kitab-ul-Hind* is of immense historical significance.

By the beginning of the thirteenth century A.D. a new kingdom named Kamata came into existence over a vast region in North Bengal and Western Assam. On the east of it there was the upper valley of the Brahmaputra. It was divided into several petty principalities. A line of Chutiya kings were holding the region north of the Brahmaputra and the east of Subansiri and Disang. Further west there was the Kingdom of the Kacharis along the south bank of the Brahmaputra from Dikhu to Kalang including the valley of Dhansiri and the North Cachar Hills. West of the Kacharis and the Chutiyas, there were the domains of a number of Bhuyan chieftains covering both the banks of the Brahmaputra.

The Ahoms, a branch of the Shan tribe, started under their leader Sukapha from Maulung in A.D. 1215, and crossed the hilly region of Patkai. They came in course of their wandering march to Eastern Assam, and settled at Charaideo in A.D. 1253. Sukapha was succeeded by his son Suteupha, during whose reign the Kacharis gave the country to the east of the Dikhu river to the Ahoms. The Ahoms also carried on a protracted war with the king of Kamata and thus consolidated their kingdom in the thirteenth century A.D. and gave the name Assam to the country which was earlier known as Pragjyotisha and Kamarupa. Having conquered the whole of the Brahmaputra valley, the Ahoms subjugated not only their powerful predecessors and rivals the Chutiyas and the Kacharis but also the hill tribes like the Nagas and the Mikirs. Between A.D. 1680 and 1720 the Ahoms had defeated the Khasis and Jaintias. The Koch kings Biswa Singha and Nara Narayan (aided by his brother, Sukladhwaj), formed their great empire in Eastern India with whom also the Ahoms fought for supremacy for a long period and in the end both gradually merged into a single Assamese speaking people. Assam under the Ahoms beat back the tide of Turko-Afghan and Mughal conquest and maintained her independence till the early part of the nineteenth century A.D.

Alberuni's narrative closes a long series of accounts written by the foreigners about ancient Assam. Two centuries later the Muslim Turks established their political supremacy over India, and introduced the art of compiling chronicles recording the political

events. Many of these chronicles are devoted on Assam and from a careful scrutiny of the details of the accounts it appears that the chroniclers had travelled over Assam. Among these travellers mention can be made of Minhaj-i-Siraj who narrated the events of Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji's invasion of Assam recorded in the Kanai-Barashi-Bowa Rock Inscription of North Gauhati (A.D. 1205) in his *Tabakat-i-Nasiri* which was completed in A.D. 1260. By profession Minhaj was a judge and in his writings he is found very rarely to have indulged in high flown eulogy like many writers of the time. He narrates his facts in a plain and straightforward manner and this brings confidence to the readers in regard to the sincerity of his statements and accuracy of knowledge.

Minhaj's account of Assam is the most trustworthy narrative of the invasion of Bakhtiyar Khilji and his defeat and total annihilation of his grand army, 12,000 strong in A.D. 1205-06, in the hands of the Kamrup-Kamata warriors. The narrative also incorporates the successive repulses sustained by Ghiyasuddin Iwaj in A.D. 1226, and Nasiruddin, the son of Iltutmish, in A.D. 1228 during the time of Kamata ruler Prithu. Minhaj brings down the sequence of events up to the year A.D. 1260 and includes in his chronicle Malik Yuzbak's invasion and occupation of 'the city of Kamrud' (Kamrup), his retreat along the foot of the Khasi and the Garo Hills, his defeat in the stiff battle in the hilly terrain in A.D. 1256-57 and his imprisonment during the time of Kamata ruler Sandhya. The indigenous Assamese chronicles and the contemporary epigraphs corroborate this account, and as such it is a living testimony to the economic prosperity and military invincibility of medieval kingdom of Kamata-Kamrup.

Munshi Ghulam Hussain Salim in his *Riyaz-us-salatin* refers to the first three Muslim invasions of Kamrup and Alauddin Hussain Shah's invasion of Kamata-Kamrup. It also presents a continuous narrative of the Mughal wars in Eastern Bengal and Assam and also the political relations of the Muslim viceroys of Bengal with the Ahoms and the Koches along with other sporadic incidents. The history of occupation of Mughal territory by the Koches and the Ahoms is also described in it. The narrative is brought down to the time of the author (A.D. 1787-88). Al-Badaoni in his *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh* which he completed in A.D. 1595 also records the early Muslim invasions and some religious

practices of contemporary Assam. Abul Fazal in his Akbarnama and Ain-i-Akbari describes the extent of the Koch Kingdom and its products especially in horses and elephants, intervention of Isa Khan and Man Singh in the Koch affairs and expeditions of Kalapabar and Mukarram Khan to Assam. Abdul Hamid Lahori, an official historian of the time of Shahjahan describes in his Padishanama the conflict between Lakshmi Narayan of Koch Bihar and Parikshit Narayan of Koch Hajo, imprisonment of Parikshit by the Mughals, Ahom-Mughal conflicts and the military administration of the Ahoms during the second quarter of the seventeenth century A.D. Shah Nawaz Khan and Abdul Hayy in their Mathir-ul-umara give valuable account about the participation of several Mughal Commanders and Generals in the Assam-Mughal wars of the seventeenth century A.D. It gives the location, architectural designs, arms and ammunition, and army of resistance of the Ahom fort at Simalagarh which was destroyed by Diler Khan. Muhammad Saqi Mustaid Khan in his Masir-i-Alamgiri prepares a narrative of the reign of Aurangzeb basing his account on the available state-papers and Alamgirnama. This incorporates information about the conquest of Koch Bihar and Assam (A.D. 1661-62), the conclusion of the affairs of Assam through Mir Jumla's advance towards Garhgaon, retreat and death of Mir Jumla and appointment of Raja Ram Singh of Amber to invade Assam.

Ibn Battuta, Mirza Nathan, Shihabud-din Talish and Teg Bahadur form a class by themselves since there is clear evidence that they travelled through the soil of Assam. Ibn Battuta visited Assam in A.D. 1345 and he met Saint Jalal-ud-din of Tabriz who settled in a mountain of the kingdom of Kamrup. His account narrates the geographical divisions, commercial products, magic and witchcraft and also the racial features of the fourteenth century Assam. Mirza Nathan was an important officer in Mughal Kamrup for a period of thirteen years from A.D. 1612-25 and hence an eye-witness and active participant in contemporary political events of Assam. He served as a Mughal General and took part in all the campaigns in Assam and Bengal during the period of Jahangir and Shahjahan's occupation of Bengal. Although primarily a memoir, his account describes the political condition of Sylhet, Cachar, Koch Bihar and Kamrup during the period (A.D. 1608-24), and portrays dynastic history of the powerful Koch kingdom and steady

growth of the Ahom power which ultimately banished both Koch and Mughal authority from Kamrup as far west as the river Manas.

Shihab-ud-din Talish accompanied Mir Jumla in his expedition to Koch Bihar and Assam and his account *Fathiya-i-ibriya* is that of an eye-witness. It describes the various aspects of military and revenue administration, habits and customs, religion and culture, arts and crafts of both the plain and hill people of entire north-eastern India with special reference to all the events that occurred at the time of Mir Jumla's invasion of Assam. Teg Bahadur, the ninth Guru of the Sikhs accompanied Raja Ram Singh of Amber in his Assam expedition (A.D. 1668). While in Assam he preached his religion among the local people. He established the 'Sikh tola' on the bank of the Brahmaputra at Dhubri. This is still in existence and visited by the people of the Sikh religion as a place of their pilgrimage. His account of Assam throws light on the history and geography of Assam.

The history of Assam is enriched by the writings of European travellers. Ralph Fitch was the first Englishman to enter the territory of Assam. His account gives us various details about the Assamese people, their dresses and customs at the end of the sixteenth century A.D. Two Portuguese Jesuit travellers named Father Stephen Cacella and Father John Cabral visited Hajo, Pandu and Koch Bihar in A.D. 1626. Their account describes the general condition of the land and people in the early seventeenth century A.D. It is mentioned that when the Koch Kings Parikshit Narayan and Lakshmi Narayan were kept under detention at Dacca, the people of Kamrup rose in open rebellion in various places under several bold and patriotic leaders. Besides Koch-Mughal relation, this account narrates the contemporary commercial transactions between Assam, Koch Bihar, Tibet, Patna, Rajmahal and Gaur. Francois Bernier, a medical practitioner was appointed as a physician for the Emperor's family at Delhi during the time of Auranzeb. Since he had access to the royal records at Delhi, his account of Assam relating to Hajo, Chamdhara and Garhgaon at the time of Mir Jumla's invasion in A.D. 1662 is almost like that of an eye-witness. J.B. Tavernier, a French jewellery merchant wrote about Assam in the sixties of the seventeenth century A.D. His description includes detail about agricul-

tural and mineral products along with various exports and imports of Assam. His information that the Ahoms first introduced fire-arms is really significant. Niccolao Manucci, an Italian soldier served in the army of Aurangzeb from A.D. 1656 to 1664. He was also a journalist and physician. He travelled in the neighbouring province of Bengal and collected information about Assam from the eye-witnesses. His account describes Ahom military administration and wealth and prosperity of contemporary Assam.

A good number of British military and civil officers visited Assam at the end of the eighteenth and in the beginning of the nineteenth century A.D. Alexander Dow, an English soldier wrote about Assam in A.D. 1769. His account incorporates invasion of Bengal by the Assamese soldiers in A.D. 1638. He also refers to the Assam king's occupation of the territory up to Dacca at the time of civil war around Delhi in A.D. 1658. Capt. Welsh, a British military officer was sent from Calcutta by Lord Cornwallis to suppress a rebellion in Assam and to reinstate Gaurinath Singh as the king of Assam. He was in Assam for two years from A.D. 1792 to 1794. He prepared a report on Assam critically examining the political system of the time and condition of economy including trade and commerce. J.P. Wade, a Surgeon accompanied Capt. Welsh in his mission to Assam in A.D. 1792. He was in Assam for fourteen months and collected information regarding geography and history of Assam. He produced two books treating his source material on the line of scientific research. F. Hamilton was deputed by the East India Company to undertake a survey of Assam which he carried out during the period from A.D. 1808 to 1814. He conducted his survey of Assam from his head-quarters at Goalpara and his account of Assam is an important contribution to the study of political situation, economic resources and social life of the people in the beginning of the nineteenth century A.D. just before the Burmese invasion of Assam. W. Robinson's "A Descriptive Account of Asam" (A.D. 1841) incorporates an exhaustive narrative on Assam. It describes the earliest traditions, ancient Kings of Kamarupa, Muslim invasions, rise of the Koches, the Ahom rule, insurrection of the Moamariyas, civil feuds and invasion of the Burmese. It also narrates medieval form of Government, officers of State, military stations, the coronation, civil law, criminal law, revenue system and feudal customs.