

## The North-East in Indian Historiography : the Need for a Corrective

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In his 'Introduction' to a recent issue of *Modern Asian Studies* which carries texts of papers presented at a Conference on Indian economic and social history held at Cambridge in 1984, Gordon Johnson spoke of the geographical imbalance which existed in Indian historical studies. According to him, Indian historiography was dominated by the study of the north and he hoped that with greater work being done on south India, this geographical imbalance would soon be redressed.<sup>1</sup>

Johnson's statement reminds one of what Vincent Smith said more than half a century ago. According to him, "The historian of India is bound by the nature of things to direct his attention primarily to the north, and is able to give only a secondary place to the story of the Deccan plateau and the far south".<sup>2</sup> Does this mean that as regards the geographical dimensions of Indian history, we stand today, the threshold of the twenty first century, as we did at the beginning of the twentieth ?

Perhaps not. It can hardly be denied that since Smith's days, valuable work has been done on south India and the region has been extensively explored from the historical point of view. Johnson could not have been unaware of this but what perhaps prompted his remark was the fact that the history of south India did not find a prominent place in discussions on the history of India in general.

What, however, positively escaped the attention of both the historians, Vincent Smith and Gordon Johnson was that the geographical imbalance prevailing in Indian history was all the more pronounced in regard to the vast and immensely strategic north-eastern region of the country. In Smith's time, this may have seemed pardonable in view of the scant attention paid to this area from the historical point of view : today, it may not be so.

Take for instance the recently published *Cambridge Economic History of India*, whose review papers formed the main basis of the Cambridge Conference. In spite of Johnson's remark, the history of south India would not seem to be so badly neglected. The region figures in almost all the chapters of the first volume, and there are separate sections on the Deccan and the south in chapters dealing with the State and the Economy, Systems of Agricultural Production, Agrarian Relations and Land Revenue, Non-agricultural Production, Towns and Cities, and, the Standard of Living. There are also

separate chapters on 'South India : Some General Considerations of the Region and its Early History, and on Vijayanagara. But come to the north-east and what do we find : almost as an after-thought, an Appendix has been added on "The Medieval Economy of Assam" by Amalendu Guha. In the second volume, we find two sections on Eastern India by B. Chaudhuri, but to Chaudhuri as also to Tapan Raychaudhuri who gives a background of the mid-eighteenth century India, eastern India signifies Bihar, Bengal, Orissa and some passing references to Assam and that too confined to some parts of the Brahmaputra Valley. The vast region east of the Valley would seem to be outside the pale of attention of a historian of India.

This paper seeks to present some aspects of north-eastern history and their treatment in some of what are generally considered standard books on Indian history. An attempt of this sort has necessarily to be sketchy, both, from the point of view of the aspects of north-eastern history which one feels should have found prominence in broad treatments of Indian history as well as from the point of view of books dealt with. Nevertheless, the treatment, sketchy as it may be, it is hoped, will bring out the point sought to be made in the paper.

Let us begin with Ancient India and the problem of periodization in Indian history so constantly and repeatedly stressed by Romila Thapar. To any student of the ancient period of India, the name of Bhaskarvarman would seem to be an important one in the post-Gupta period. Not only did he gain the alliance of Harsha, carry his arms into Bengal increasing the 'power and prestige of the kingdom of Kamarupa to an extent never dreamt before',<sup>3</sup> but also stood out as a patron of letters. He figures prominently in Hiuen Tsang's account as well as in the *Harshacharita*. According to Sir Edward Gait, "Bhaskarvarman has left behind him a name uttered in the same breath with the noblest monarchs of India."<sup>4</sup> And yet, he does not so much as find a mention in Romila Thapar's *History of India*. Nor is there a word to explain the omission. Moreover, a look at her treatment of this region in her history would bring out the casual manner in which it has been dealt with. Seldom does it find an independent mention, being clubbed with Bengal, Nepal, or Orissa<sup>5</sup> or treated as a mere trade route between Burma and the rest of India.<sup>6</sup> But then what better can be expected of a historian who would describe Kamarupa (Assam) as a 'mountainous region'?"<sup>7</sup>

Coming to the question of periodization, the need for re-examining the stereotyped division of Indian history into ancient, medi-

eval and modern, coinciding with the Hindu, Muslim and British periods has been a recurrent theme in Dr. Thapar's aspects of Indian history and needs revision. There are also some suggestions on the lines on which this could be done. To any scholar conversant with the history of the north-east, this stereotyped division of Indian history into the Hindu and Muslim periods on the basis of the establishment of Muslim rule is irrelevant to this region. This area successfully withstood the onslaught of the Muslim invaders down to the time of Aurangzeb. Again as pointed out by Amalendu Guha, "this kind of neat periodization breaks down the moment the historian enters the preliterate parts of the region".<sup>8</sup> These factors could have provided significant sign-posts to a historian, but they do not find any mention in any of the books dealing with the subject. The reason can only be that the veil of historical unawareness about the north-east continues to prevail on the general historian of India.

Take the case of the *Advanced History of India* by Nilkanta Sastri and G. Srinivasachari, published in 1970. This so-called *Advanced History* of nearly eight hundred pages felt it appropriate to dispose off Assam in less than 15 lines besides some scattered references. And in these lines, one significant observation is : "For many centuries, after Bhaskarvarman, nothing is known of Assam except that it was a part of Pala dominions."<sup>9</sup>

Now, by the time, in fact, much earlier to the publication of this book, the fact that the kings of this region though bearing the name Pala, were quite distinct from the Pala dynasty of Bengal had been firmly established : K. L. Barua's *Early History of Kamrup* had been published in 1933 and P. C. Chaudhuri's *History of the Civilization of the People of Assam*, incorporating this fact had seen its second edition. And yet, this fact has been conveniently overlooked in the *Advanced History*.

As for the medieval period, as has been pointed out earlier, if this period marks the beginning of the conquest of the Muslim invaders, then it must be stated that there was no medieval period in Assam. Mohammad Bakhtiyar, Ghiyas-ud-din, and Tughgril Khan and other Muslim rulers who tried to subjugate this area failed time and again. This in itself should be regarded as a significant factor in Indian history. Moreover, Raja Rudra Singha's attempt at forging an army by inviting the Kachari and the Jaintia kings to join him in launching an attack on the powerful Moghuls is an episode which should have featured in every book on Indian history and unfortunately does not find a place in any.

If the non-inclusion of many of the aspects of ancient and medieval history of the north-east in the general histories of India is sought to be explained away by the paucity of material available, the same does not hold good for the modern period. After the East India Company established its hold on most of the areas of this region, there was a spate of reports and studies on various aspects including the tribes of this region. Thus besides the valuable accounts of John Wade, Buchanan Hamilton and David Scott, we have the reports of Francis Jenkins, Richard Pemberton, and William Robinson. Sir Edward Gait's *History of Assam* and 'Report on the Progress of Historical Research in Assam' (1897) are milestones in the study of the history of this region. The study of tribes was taken up in a big way by the Department of Ethnography set up in 1874 : this resulting in the study of the Mikirs by E. Stach and Charles Lyall ; the Kacharis by R. S. Endle ; the Khasis by Gurdon ; the Garos by Playfair ; the Thadou Kukis by W. Shaw, and the Lushei-Kukis by J. Shakespeare ; and the Nagas by T. C. Hodson, W. C. Smith, J. P. Mills and J. H. Hutton.<sup>10</sup>

In spite of all this material, a cultural history of this region written so as to command sufficient attention of a writer of a general or comprehensive history of India is yet to emerge. We thus find that the Toynbeeian concept of 'industrialization of historical thought ; that is, the tendency of the historian to take up only such areas of study on which material is easily available, is not much applicable in this case. Take for instance, the case of David Scott who was primarily instrumental in the expansion of British influence in the regions beyond the Brahmaputra valley. An outstanding personality from any point of view, he does not figure in any of the general histories of India. Thus Alexander Mackenzie rightly remarks : "Had the scene of his life's labours been in north-west or Central India, where the great problem of empire was then being worked out, instead of amid the obscure jungles of Assam, he would occupy a place in history by the side of Malcolm, Elphinstone and Metcalfe."<sup>11</sup>

Today much attention is being paid to uprisings against the British in the writings of Indian history and yet the Jaintia rebellion of 1860-63 has gone unnoticed by authors writing on India in general. The reason can only be that there was unawareness of this episode only because it occurred in the north-east. Speaking of such uprisings, let us take the case of the recently published *Subaltern Studies* by Ranajit Guha. A rough analysis of the contents of the first three volumes (which were readily available to this

author) would show that there are five specific articles on Bengal, four on U. P., two on Bihar, two on south India and just one on the Kamrup-Goalpara region, the uprisings being those of the Mughal times giving an impression that little happened in this vast region during the British period. We, of course, know better. The way the Nagas and the Mizos offered resistance to British expansionism is one of the romantic sagas of modern Indian history and yet which finds no place in histories of modern India in spite of their claims of being Advanced or Comprehensive.

It can perhaps still be argued that little or no material is available on this region which has an all-India bearing and hence this region has been overlooked in general histories of India. This may be correct to an extent, but what is more obvious is that this region has not so far been an inherent part of the historical consciousness of India. If it were, then there should have been discussions on why such and such an event or development taking place in the rest of India had little or no impact in this region. For example, David Syiemlieh in his work on 'British Administration in Meghalaya' has dealt with the reasons why the Khasis and the Jaintias "played no part in the upheaval of 1857-58."<sup>12</sup>

Now with the emphasis of historical writing shifting from dynastic and political history to the history of the people, the omission of this region seems all the more glaring. Certainly, the people here did not live forever in a preliterate and pre-historical stage. Their social institutions and economic conditions changed and developed during the period when the rest of India underwent transformations. The two streams may not have been parallel, but in any case, this development has never been uniform all over the country over the same period of time. For a proper perspective, therefore, histories of India must take into consideration the changes that have occurred in this region and if they are different from changes occurring in other parts of India, then the historian must explain the reasons for the same.

All the foregoing observations must not lead one to think that the plea being made is for giving undue importance to the history of this region in the general histories of India or to embark upon a search for, as Irfan Habib puts it, "local national heroes."<sup>13</sup> Such a step would go exactly in the opposite direction and again lead to harmful results. The plea that is being made is to see that the history of this region is interwoven in the broad fabric of Indian history.

To achieve this, the historian of the north-east cannot afford

to leave this task to the historian of another part of the country and hope for the best. No, the initiative must come from himself. So far, the performance here also has been dismal. The historian of the north-east by and large has been extremely insular in his approach so that the impression which is allowed to remain is, on the one hand, there are historians of the north-east and on the other, that of the rest of India.

Take for example, the performance of this very Association itself. Its publication of Proceedings of six sessions held so far carry a total of 181 articles (excluding the Presidential Addresses), and yet there are not even five papers which look beyond this region.<sup>14</sup> Such an insular outlook could lead to attitudes not very conducive to the nation or the craft of historical writing. One must remember that the line between promotion of regional studies and the promotion of regionalism is razor-sharp, and, if not properly balanced, one could easily lead to the other. It must also not be forgotten that the historian of the north-east is also the historian of India. S. K. Bhuyan, one of the greatest historians of this region was acutely aware of this. Thus in his Presidential Address in the Local History section of the Indian History Congress of 1959, he remarked : "You will see that physically remote, Assam was not outside the cultural hegemony of Aryavarta and Dakshinatya. Its inhabitants had been influenced by the great religious upheavals that swept over India."<sup>15</sup> And again, "A thorough knowledge of Assam is a matter of vital necessity to Indians in general and to the people of the province in particular."<sup>16</sup>

Now how can this be achieved ? It is suggested that the ideal may be taken to be a historian like Nilkanta Sastri. Sastri wrote on the particular dynasties of the southern region like the Cholas, he wrote a history of south India, he wrote a history of India and also examined the cultural contacts between India and the west on the one hand and the south-east on the other: an all-round historian, if we may so call him. If this stupendous task cannot be duplicated by a historian of this region in view of the large amount of material now available, the various aspects can certainly be taken up as a co-operative venture. The kind of integrated approach pleaded for in this paper can, for instance, be seen in Amalendu Guha's Presidential Address in the Modern History Section of the Indian History Congress of 1984. In this piece, he has very ably interwoven some of the aspects of the history of this region in his discussion of Indian nationalism in general. It is felt that similar exercises will have to be undertaken regarding various chapters of Indian history,

if a balanced and integrated history of India is to emerge.

If such a development does not take place ; what then ? Perhaps the answer can be seen in the situation around us. Today India is perhaps the only country wherein the residents of one part are termed as 'foreigners' in another part of the country. When the nation faces a situation where its people are heard saying that they would be more secure in another country than in some parts of their own or when a person travelling in certain parts of his own country is accosted if he had come from India, then it is time for the historian to sit up and do some soul-searching.

Such an exercise had been undertaken once earlier in 1961 when the Indian History Congress had organized a symposium on "The Contributions of Historians to the Process of National Integration in India." We have lived through quarter of a century after that exercise and where have we reached ? The answer is not far to seek and is perhaps better left unspelt. This leaves us with only two alternatives : either we write off the historian's role as a factor in the promotion of national integration or admit for ourselves that Indian historical writing has not progressed in the desired direction or lacked something vital.

This is the question that this paper has tried to explore. The first alternative does not seem acceptable. If indeed it were so, then how do we explain the role of historians like Michelet who is supposed to have instilled in the French people a sense of pride in their nation, or Treitschke who laid the ideological foundations of German unity. K. M. Pannikar, has, in fact, outlined the role of the historian in promoting the cultural unity of Europe through their wide-based approach towards European history.<sup>17</sup>

This leaves one with the second factor, of something having gone wrong in the development of Indian historical writing. This paper suggests one such factor. There is no gainsaying the fact that the course of development of a country's history is often influenced by the work of self-seeking, short-sighted politicians. No one is more aware than the historian himself that political considerations often over-ride historical wisdom or even historical compulsions; but so far in the present case; it seems, even this historical wisdom has yet to emerge.

#### Notes

1. Gordon Johnson, 'Introduction', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 19, Pt. 3. July 1985, p. 353.
2. Vincent Smith, *The Oxford History of India*, p. 2.

3. R. C. Majumdar, quoted in Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, (revised and enlarged version), p. 26.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
5. Romila Thapar, *A History of India*, pp. 143, 144, 287.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 226.
8. Amalendu Guha, "Presidential Address", North East India History Association, Dibrugarh, 1981.
7. Nilkanta Sastri and G. Srinivasachari, *Advanced History of India*, p. 252.
10. S. K. Bhuyan, 'Presidential Address, (Local Section), *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress (PIHC)*, 1959, pp. 461-2.
11. Alexander Mackenzie, quoted in David R. Syiemlich, 'British Administration in Meghalaya,' (Unpublished thesis), NEHU, 1985, p. 77.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 128-9.
13. Irfan Habib, "The Contribution of Indian Historians to the Process of National Integration (Medieval Period)," (*PIHC*), 1961. p. 357.
14. Two of these deal with the integration of the Khasi States (by David Syiemlich) and Manipur in the Indian Union (by Ksh. Shyamkanhai Singh) in *Proceedings of the North East India History Association*, Vols. I, 1980, pp. 58-68 and Vol. III, 1982, pp. 224-8 respectively. Another paper which deals with politico-cultural contacts between Assam and Bihar is by G. P. Singh, Vol. II, pp. 63-72.
15. S. K. Bhuyan, 'Presidential Address, (Local History Section), *PIHC*, 1957. p. 464.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 465.
17. K. M. Pannikar, 'Presidential Address', *PIHC*, XVIII (1955), pp. 11-4.