

## North East India: Trends in Historical Writing 1947–1997

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Historical studies on North East India may be traced to the early decades of the 19th Century,<sup>1</sup> though the historical sense was preserved by literate societies in their respective chronicles and non-literate communities in their folklore and oral tradition. Research into the region's history started with Edward Gait's historiographical study<sup>2</sup> and his popular *A History of Assam* written early this century which was sufficiently comprehensive given the time and material available to him. Historical research was dominated in the 1930s–1940s by S.K. Bhuyan whose works can be categorised into historical, biographical and miscellaneous. Between 1930–1938, he compiled, collated and edited 11 Buranjis; during these years and on to 1959, he authored 4 histories<sup>3</sup> apart from a whole variety of writing that was curiously both nationalistic and an acceptance of British rule. Bhuyan was a historian with a mission. Throughout his career he was a crusader for finding Assam a befitting place in the historical writing of India. He aired this view when in 'Cuttack', Orissa in 1953 and a year earlier as President of the Indian History Congress expressed that it was his "religious zeal to let the world know the great and good things of Assam which forms an integral part of Mother India".<sup>4</sup> Joined by Padmanath Bhattacharyya Vidyavinod, Benudhar Sharma, Hem Chandra Goswami, Kanak Lal Barua and Banikanta Kakati the

historical writings on Assam moved from its nascent stage to details of a variety of histories. To a great extent this was made possible through the foundation of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti (April 1912) and its journal (1933).

The post 1947 period did not immediately provide an opening for historical studies despite the changed political situation. It was some years before Assam's role in the freedom struggle was given attention. K.N. Dutt first drew notice with *Landmarks of the Freedom Struggle in Assam*, Guwahati, 1958 and Hem Barua centred on a particular phase with *The Nineteen Forty Two Upheaval in Assam*, Jorhat, 1964. Thereafter, there has been a veritable deluge of material on the freedom struggle in Assam with important contributions from Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-47*, New Delhi, 1977; H.K. Barpujari et al. (ed.), *Political History of Assam*, Government of Assam, Gauhati, Vol. I, 1977, Vol. II, 1978, Vol. III, 1980; reference in Sumit Sarkar's widely acclaimed and readable *Modern India 1885-1947*, New Delhi, 1983, and R.C. Majumdar's edited *Struggle for Freedom*, Bombay, 1969. Research into this aspect of history continues to draw the inquiry of many younger historians in M.Phil., Ph.D. dissertations and in articles, particularly in the various *Proceedings of the North East India History Association*, too many to enumerate in this paper.<sup>5</sup> Amalendu Guha's Presidential Address to the Modern History Section of the Indian History Congress in 1984, is especially remembered for interweaving some aspects of the history of this region in his discussion of Indian nationalism in general.

There was little sense of Indian nationalism in the hills of North East India for historical reasons. Tirot Singh, Kiang Nangbah, Ropuiliani, Togan Sangma and Sonaram Sangma led resistances against the British has been fairly well covered in the general histories of the region. Recently however, due to the importance taken by histories of communities and the new states in the region a fresh interpretation is being sought to explain the role of these and other leaders as local national heroes — to use a term of Irfan Habib.<sup>6</sup> An historian has used a novel for historical data to draw attention to Tirot Singh's last days;<sup>7</sup> another eulogises this Khasi Chief as the "Greatest Freedom Fighter of North-Eastern Region" without making a

comparative study of the struggle by other leaders.<sup>8</sup> One is reminded of the words of caution given by S.K. Barpujari that:<sup>9</sup>

There has been a tendency in our local studies to magnify regional achievements, to exalt local heroes and to glorify local languages, customs and usages out of all proportion to their intrinsic value.

Reinterpretation of the events leading to India's independence and the incorporation of Manipur and the Khasi states into the Indian Union is under way. Scholars in Manipur have questioned the entire process of integration of the former princely state and if the sentiments of a section of Khasi society is considered pertinent, the integration of the 25 *Himas* into India in an Assam administration will be scrutinised.<sup>10</sup>

In part this trend in history is reflective of the over-emphasis on the history of Assam, and particularly that of the Brahmaputra valley to the neglect of the Barak valley, the hills between the valleys and the hill fringe. From Gait's history of Assam to S.L. Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, New Delhi, 1985, the hill region is only referred to in passing and in Ahom relations with the tribal states and societies. It would require historians from among the Nagas, Khasis, Garos, from Cachar, Manipur and Tripura to fill in the lacunae in detail. But first the history of these areas may be traced to Abdul Ali's *Notes on Early History of Manipur* (1923), Verrier Elwin's *India's North-East Frontier in the Nineteenth Century*, Bombay, 1959, and *Nagas in the Nineteenth Century*, Bombay, 1969. The Jaintias had their first historian in S.M. Ali whose *History of Jaintia*, Dacca, 1954, made an attempt to narrate the history from both oral and written sources. As states and union territories were formed in the region in administrative reorganisations beginning 1950 with the Chief Commissionerships of Manipur and Tripura and subsequent changes with Nagaland's statehood (1963) and ushering in of the states of Tripura, Manipur, Meghalaya and the Union Territories of Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh (1972), their history was given focus. M. Alemchiba's *A Brief Historical Account of Nagaland* spans the history of the various Naga tribes from their ethnological affinities to the outbreak of hostilities and statehood. Hamlet Bareh came up with his

doctoral thesis, *History and Culture of the Khasi People*. J.N. Choudhury next presented a more readable *Khasi Canvas*. His other notable studies *Arunachal Panorama* and *Arunachal Through the Ages* continue to be in demand. A slender book *Tripura Through the Ages* by Nalini R. Choudhury set a trend for projecting the history of that state. Vumson's *Zo History* attempts to broaden and integrate the various clans and tribes of the Zos vieriing away from the earlier works (by Mizos), who generally make Lushai central to all history of the Mizos. The study by Suhas Chatterjee *Mizoram Under British Rule*, set the pace for later and more detailed histories.

Under the guidance of H.K. Barpujari a team of historians have been working over the years in an ambitious and result oriented *The Comprehensive History of Assam*. Financed by the Publication Board, Assam, the five volume history covers the time span from Pre-history to 1919 and includes the history of the neighbouring hills. The volumes cover the art, religion, social and economic conditions apart from political and administrative developments. A reviewer noted that "old interpretations and conclusions have been re-examined, re-assessed and even revised,"<sup>11</sup> in the background of the tremendous extend of research that is now available. Numismatics has been a core area of research in North East India. Beginning with the interest shown by British collectors a small and closely connected group of numismatists continue to find areas of study and broadening their interpretations to social and economic life. Some notable studies in this field are the essay in J.P. Singh and Nisar Ahmad (ed.) *Coinage and Economy of North Eastern States of India*,<sup>12</sup> J.P. Singh, *Monetary Development in Early Assam*,<sup>13</sup> contributions to the 3rd International Colloquium *Coinage Trade and Economy*,<sup>14</sup> and Nicholas Rhodes, *Coins of North East India* delivered as lectures in the North East Hill University in 1995 under the H.K. Barpujari endowment.<sup>15</sup>

Archaeology and Prehistory continue to draw attention of scholars to explain questions of antiquity. Here again the start made by British officials reporting on archeological finds was then taken by the Archaeological Survey of India undertaking excavations,<sup>16</sup> and scholars individually or collectively working on sites scattered from as far as Malinithan in Arunachal Pradesh

to Baitbari in the Garo Hills and the Ambari excavations in Guwahati.<sup>17</sup> Interesting extensions of these disciplines have been done in art history, iconography, and inscriptions. While individual researches of this nature find mention in academic circles it is regretted that the region, including the recent researches in the early history of the Nagas, Khasis and Garos has not found adequate mention in general histories of India. The same seems to be the case with the ancient, medieval and modern history of Assam (the plains areas) where substantial contributions have been made and yet are not given much notice by Indian scholars. The writing of the history of North-East India a historian argues has been overlooked in general histories of India because of the "poverty of material which has an all India bearing," and that "this region has not so far been an inherent part of the historical consciousness of India."<sup>18</sup> It must be admitted that scholars in the region have generally an insular approach. There has been no historian from the region who has written a 'national' history and use of parallels and comparisons from beyond East Bengal have been few. The focus here has generally been region, state, valley and society.

Notwithstanding this approach confined as it is, the thrust and focus of historical inquiry has been drawn to newer areas of research which is both regional and sub-regional as shall be explained. Take state formation for instance. The earlier writings on state formation were largely empirical. The trend today is analytical. Studies in state formation has not been the preserve of historians. Folklorists such as Soumen Sen, *Social and State Formation in Khasi Jaintia Hills*, Delhi, 1985; political scientists as B. Pakem, "State formation in Pre-Colonial Jaintia,"<sup>19</sup> Amalendu Guha's paper on Medieval Assam,<sup>20</sup> and historians with J.B. Bhattacharjee's numerous papers on the subject took up the social, economic and political forces in the state formation of Srihatta, Tripura, Jaintia and Cachar. H.J.M. Claessen and Peter Skalnik (eds.) in *The Early State*<sup>21</sup> set the academicians working in this area to give fresh interpretations. The "maturity this field has attained over the years" was manifested in three papers on state formation in North East India being included in *Tribal Politics and State System in Pre-Colonial and North East India*,<sup>22</sup> and in *Social and Polity*

*Formation in Pre-Colonial North East India; The Barak Valley Experience.*<sup>23</sup> Recent additions to this investigation are those on the Boros, Mizos, Khasis and Nagas by scholars of the North Eastern Hill University.<sup>24</sup> Research is in progress to examine the processes of state formation in Khyrim and Sohra Himas.

Another area of research that has drawn social scientist into debate is the emergence, role played by, and the ideology of the middle class. The research in this case too have been scattered over a whole array of journals with interpretations ranging from a literal understanding of the term to fitting studies in a Marxist framework. Important contributions to this have been done by Hiren Gohain,<sup>25</sup> Amalendu Guha,<sup>26</sup> B. Dutta Ray,<sup>27</sup> A.K. Baruah,<sup>28</sup> R.C. Kalita,<sup>29</sup> M. Sharma<sup>30</sup> among others. These discussions have taken as their space the Brahmaputra valley. Perhaps realizing an over-emphasis of this theme on this valley, a start has been made to extend both the framework and interpretation to the tribal societies.

Linked with the rise of the middle class in Assam has been their involvement and leadership in peasant struggles and the response of nationalists to the freedom movement, the history of which has been fairly well researched. An area that is steadily gaining attention is student movements. The pioneering works of Sheila Bora and Meeta Deka in their coverage of student activity between 1905-1972 on Assam<sup>31</sup> and other younger researchers on Meghalaya and Manipur indicates that much more will be forthcoming on this subject; particularly after the tumultous events of the 1980s in Assam and student activism today.

Research continues on various dimensions of British administration in North East India and in its relations with States that had come under indirect administration. These range from studies on British paternalism to details of policy and pattern with special emphasis on the Garos, Nagas, Mizos, the tribes of Meghalaya. A refreshing approach was undertaken by John Parratt and Saroj Parratt in their study of the Anglo-Manipuri conflict of 1891.<sup>32</sup> It was intended to have the book out in the centenary of the events it describes. Whereas this book has been fairly well received another which commented on the same events did not get a cordial reception. While at

this it may not be out of place to indicate that often historical research is encouraged by the number of years lapsing after an event. This seminar itself has set the time frame for its discussion to begin in 1947. Surprisingly not much interest was generated on the end of the Second World War and its 50 years retrospect but for a Presidential Address to the Indian History Congress.<sup>33</sup> Even 50 years of India's independence seemed to have little impact among the history community.<sup>34</sup> Need we wait platinum and centenary celebrations?

Church history of North East India has not made a complete break from the 'missionary approach' to mission history. It is understandable why for instance J.H. Morris, C. Becker or V. Sword wrote their histories. That dimension continues to have focus and its worth is the information that has been forthcoming on the various missions, particularly after their management by first, second and later generation believers. Guided by the Church History Association of India that its comprehensive *History of Christianity* should have more social focus, F.S. Downs' contribution to that project and particularly his H.K. Barpujari Endowment Lectures at NEHU 1994<sup>35</sup> have shown new avenues to understand the impact of christianity in the region. While the first histories were largely denomination and remain so a healthy trend is witnessed in a more ecumenical approach as in the recent collection of papers in *Impact of Christianity on North East India*.<sup>36</sup>

With so much written on its history it was expected and desirable that the historiography of North East India would be taken up. The gap in time between the review of Gait's history and the present concern on historiographical issues has been long but more than made up by historians of the region reviewing the developments on the subject.<sup>37</sup> Historiographical studies, however, have been few and therefore not sufficiently developed to provide a critical but appreciative assessment of the studies that have been undertaken.

The progress of historical research in the region has been made possible in part by the location of the new material, opening of archives and use of material previously not given much attention by historians. Historians have had to carefully venture to other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences to use tools to understand the past. It has been possible for

researchers not trained in the discipline to write histories for which there are numerous examples. As new material is located and archival material becomes available fresh studies will be undertaken; details will be added; additional chapters will be incorporated and reinterpretations will be attempted. The historian will be writing side by side with sociologists, political scientists, economists and those of other allied disciplines as was done for *Hill Cities*<sup>38</sup> or for the newer interests in ethnicity, nationalism, oral history, forest and environmental history.<sup>39</sup> Where economists have set a trend in economic history,<sup>40</sup> historian in the interest of their subject and to fill in this serious gap need to broaden their visions.

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