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Occasional Paper No. 43

A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE
FOR NORTH-EAST INDIA

AMALENDU GUHA

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AMALENDU GUHA

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A Historiographical Perspective for Northeast India*

I wish to express my most sincere thanks to the Executive Committee and the general members of the North East India History Association for the honour they have done me by electing me as President for its second annual session. Myself a founder member, I felt duty-bound to accept this honour, in the hope that this session would be another step forward towards deepening our historical consciousness in more than one direction, particularly, in understanding the many-sided problems of the history of this region.

The North East India History Association is still in its infancy and time is not yet ripe for a stock-taking. Its first two years of existence saw through a period when the region was in great turmoil and much of educational activities had remained disturbed. Nevertheless, it can be said even at this stage that the Association's existence has already been felt by the teaching community at large, the Universities of the region, the North Eastern Council and the Indian Council of Historical Research. We, particularly, owe gratitude to Professor H.K. Barpujari, the outgoing founder-president of this Association and doyen of this region's historians, for shepherding us through these years in the wilderness. We are grateful to him, not only for his many-sided contributions to the historiography of our region, but also for his uncompromising stand on the independent and truth-finding role of historians, under all kinds of circumstances.

I am referring here to the service he rendered to our host, the Dibrugarh University, while serving on a commission of enquiry into a delicate academic issue involving the historian's craft. I may also make a mention here of his scientific contribution, in a recent seminar, towards exploding the age-old myth of there having been a native clerks' conspiracy at the root of the displacement of the Assamese language from local schools

* Presidential address delivered at the second annual conference of the North East India History Association, held at the Dibrugarh University, 25-27 September 1981 (slightly abridged). All footnotes to follow constitute a post-script.

and courts in the 1830s.¹ On both these occasions, as well as on the occasion of his disassociating himself from the Government's Political History of Assam Project after the first volume was ready, he did highlight the historian's role as that of a fearless truth-seeker. We look forward to his continued interest in this Association.

II

In North-East India, we have a rich tradition of historical writing. source materials on regional history for periods, ancient and medieval — inscriptions, coins, sculptures, architectural ruins, chronicles and literary sources — all these have been probed into by many scholars as they are still doing. Standard secondary works apart, well-edited compilations of the source materials are also available by now in handy publications. These have made the future scholars' tasks all the more convenient and easy. However, within the last few years so many new materials — coins, inscriptions, images etc. — have been unearthed and so many new questions have been posed that there is no scope for complacency. A lot more has to be done in the matter of compilation of and systematic enquiry into the primary sources. For instance, the catalogue of the provincial coin cabinet which was last revised in 1930 has now become totally out-dated.² So is the descriptive Catalogue of Manuscripts prepared long ago by Hem Chandra Goswami and printed at the Calcutta University Press. So far as ancient and medieval inscriptions are concerned, we are however in a more comfortable position thanks to some recent publications brought out by the University of Gauhati and the Assam Prakashan Parishad.³ It is in the field of cataloguing the available old coins and manuscript chronicles and publication of such catalogues, with all necessary information regarding their physical conditions and whereabouts, that government action is called for to supplement private efforts. The Government of Assam's resources in men and money should have been better engaged precisely in this sphere, rather than in the preparation

of an 'official' political history. Search for and preservation of historical documents and objects and the creation of an infrastructure in the form of libraries, archives, museums and funding authorities — these should have remained the primary and proper area of the State's direct interest in historical research.

This brings us to the question of relations between the existing research bodies and the Government. Historical research, if it is to be carried on with scientific competence and single-mindedness, needs supporting funds from the public exchequer. Whether channelized directly or through agencies, such funds, if without strings, are always welcome. I have no knowledge of the situation in this region's other states. In Assam, however, the state's performance on this account does not appear satisfactory. The Yamrup Anusandhan Samity (est.1912), the oldest body for historical research in this region, continues to receive only a meagre grant-in-aid not worth mentioning, and is in a moribund condition today. The journal it once used to publish is no more brought out regularly. Associated with the memories of eminent scholars like Padmanath Vidyavinod, H.C. Goswami and K.L. Barua, this sick institution needs today nursing and preservation. The Government should come forward and find ways and means, in consultation with local historians and interested public bodies, to turn it once more into an active research body, while it continues to be autonomous as before.

It appears that, though long aware of its special responsibilities towards the cause of historical research, the State Government in Assam was never able to formulate a long-term policy on the matter. Instead of limiting its activities to discovery and preservation of the objects of antiquity and to encouraging autonomous scholarly bodies to take up creative research, it has always tried to intrude into even the latter sphere directly through departmental action; and that, too, haphazardly. Its still active

Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, a legacy of the British times, is poorly staffed, though burdened with multifarious activities from collection of antiquarian objects to the publication of source materials, the running of a research library and the routine drudgery of supplying answers to questions raised on the floor of the Assam Legislative Assembly. The result is that it has failed to live up to its past tradition under the changed circumstances.

Yet another venture of the Government after Independence was to appoint a Special Officer, with a separate establishment to collect materials for writing a history of the freedom struggle in the region. After wasting lakhs of rupees on the project during the 1950s and early sixties, the project was finally closed down. Later, during the Emergency, a full-fledged Department for Preparation of Political History of Assam was created in the Chief Minister's Secretariat almost overnight by a Government Notification dated 22 November 1975. The said political history having been prepared and published in three volumes by 1980, this department also was finally -- and rightly -- wound up. This kind of state enterprise in historiography on an emergency footing remains perhaps unique in Indian experience :

The Government's interest in promoting history is surely commendable, but not the drift and lack of direction in its relevant policy. The Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, unlike the aforesaid Department, still maintains its existence. However, it is obvious that it can no more serve a useful purpose in its present form. It needs a total reorganisation. Whatever antiquarian activities it is associated with, should belong to an appropriate department of archeology, having a complete establishment of necessary trained personnel. And for historical studies, the present Directorate, together with the Narayan Handiqui Institute, might

be transformed into a full-fledged and autonomous research body with necessary State and University support. This suggestion, if accepted by the authorities concerned, I believe, will go a long way in meeting the needs of scholars engaged in historical research in this State.

I have kept my observations limited to what has been done and could be done by the Government in Assam. In other States of the region, the nature of the problems and tasks is different. Organizations evolved, or to be yet evolved, to promote historical research might not follow a set pattern. But here, too, appropriate relationships between government and autonomous bodies will have to be worked out.

III

In our region of seven sister states, one cannot but note a degree of unevenness in the structuring of history of these states, particularly, in terms of the time dimension. Assam is a well-charted field of enquiry, with its written records going back to the 4th century A.D. . The historiographical literature on Assam is rich with its neat periodization into times — ancient, medieval and modern. But this kind of neat periodization breaks down, the moment the historian enters the preliterate parts of the region. We have no knowledge as to how the hills areas were peopled and how they fared in ancient times.

It is only after the 13th century that Tripura, Manipur and parts of Meghalaya begin to come within the reach of historiography, but only on the basis of legends, some late chronicles and other written records and a few datable antiquarian objects. Consequently, our knowledge about how they fared in medieval times is also extremely inadequate as compared to our knowledge of the Brahmaputra Valley. In fact, for most parts of our region, the starting-point of proper historiography falls within what is conventionally called the modern period of Indian history. It is then that, under British

administration, a plethora of written records describing these parts, as well as the tribes inhabiting them, begin to appear, thus providing historians with some solid stuff to start with. Under the circumstances, the conventional periodization into times ancient, medieval and modern is hardly meaningful in our region, outside the Brahmaputra Valley. In Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal in particular - and partly also in Assam, Manipur and Tripura - pre-modern history, as well as much of so-called modern history, has to be necessarily prehistory and proto-history.

If this be so, then the historian of this region has to be largely unconventional in his methodology as well. Here, more than anywhere else, the methods of oral history have a significant role to play, if we are to extend our present knowledge further backwards into past history. The Vaishnava charita-puthis in Assamese, that throw light on the lives of Vaishnava saints and many aspects of the then Assamese society, were nothing but oral history, carefully recorded during the 17th-18th centuries. Even today we could illuminate, as the charita-puthi authors did, many aspects of the Assamese social development on which extant records by themselves are silent - by way of recording and analyzing what people still remember of their past. For the hills areas, the importance of such methods cannot be overstated. To some extent, we could rework local histories backwards in these hills tribal areas by way of collecting the geneological tables of the oldest chiefs and magician-priests as well as the folklore still surviving amongst the tribes. This way some idea about their migration patterns, their ways of life in pre-colonial times and their interaction with the plains-dwelling peoples could be formed. When did they replace their neolithic tools by iron tools? When and how they moved from shifting jhum to permanent terrace cultivation, and from hoe to plough, in those places where such phenomena exist? When and how was the firearm introduced and what was its impact on social and political organization? Why rudimentary state formations took place in certain tribal societies and not in others? Such are the questions that historians, in collaboration with other social scientists, will have to answer.

Oral history might miscarry unless the historian possesses an acute sense of the logic of historical development and is able to put what is gleaned from folk memory in its proper place on the appropriate time-scale of related known events. Its methodology, involving the use of interviews, questionnaires and tape-recording etc., has more risks of being incompetently handled than the conventional methodology. Public memory itself gets increasingly confused and blurred over time. Hence more care and rigorous training are necessary to make oral history fruitful. A beginning has already been made in this sphere by individual scholars as well as by the North East Hill University, and we look forward to not only the extension of such research activities, but also to the perfection of the methods and tools in use, through adequate academic measures at the University level.

Enlightened British administrators - some of them were also trained anthropologists, - left behind systematic accounts of the tribes they studied. But they did this spade-work with their 19th century imperialist outlook that had assumed an unchanging character for the oriental societies in general, and the hills tribal societies in particular, with a view to projecting the British rule as a legitimate agency of progress. Each tribe used to be described in isolation from the other tribes and from the world of the plains people. The resultant monographs followed a set standard pattern in which the tribes were depicted as so many fossilised segments of humanity, for whom trade and contacts with settled communities had no mentionable impact. These monographs also failed to see that the growing private property rights in stocks of grain, livestock, orchards and terraced paddy lands carried germs of a process of change within each tribe, however slow that might have been. The growth of such link languages as 'Nogamese' and 'Arunamese',⁴ the evolution of some chiefdoms into statchood and the spread of wet rice cultivation and new world crops like tobacco, chillies and pineapple - all before the coming of the British - these evidences of the tribes having a history were not given adequate attention. The task before today's oral historians is to dig up this history and push it as far back in time as possible on a scientific basis.

Not tribal societies as such, but some of their rituals and customs were indeed crystallised relics of the past, comparable to fossils. Data of social anthropology on such relics, as those of historical and comparative linguistics, are surely useful for reconstructing the past. Similarly, another sister discipline - archeology - too, has a special role in extending the historical time horizon of our enquiry into the hills tribal societies. Recently archeology has made big strides in our region. Systematic excavations in the Garo Hills and the North Cachar Hills have added to our knowledge of the spread of the South-East Asian neolithic culture in our hills and plains in more definitive terms than before. A new vista for Indian prehistory has been opened up thereby. However, more significant for the historian of this region are the results of the excavations at Ambari, Itanagar and Malinithan, that throw much light on the pre-13th century Assamese civilization.

Archeology will be able, some day, to provide answers to some of our questions posed in connection with the historiography of the hills areas - say, for instance, one regarding the introduction of iron in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. When the neolithic people entered Assam from South East Asia they did not possess any knowledge of iron. This knowledge, together with that of cattle-powered plough and wet rice was brought to Assam by the Indo-Aryans. In 1842 Lt. Yule was so much impressed by the numerous and extensive traces of former iron-mining sites in the Khasi Hills that he guessed these to "have occupied the population for twenty centuries".⁵ In the absence of conclusive evidence, we simply do not know how and when the Khasis took to iron-smelting and the manufacture and use of iron implements. So far, the earliest evidence of iron manufactures of the Khasis comes down to us from the late medieval Assamese chroniclers.

The typical shouldered iron hoe of the Khasis, which is still in use, might not be as old as Yule might have thought it to be. But surely it has a long history of development that could be traced from finds of shouldered

stone celts in the neolithic sites of north-east India. In this connection, the excavations at the two Kamrup villages of Sarutaru and Marekdola, bordering on the Khasi Hills, recently carried on by S.N. Rao, throw some light.⁶ At Sarutaru, an undated neolithic site, seven shouldered stone celts, resembling present-day Khasi hoes were found together with crude cord-marked pottery of the south-East Asian neolithic types. At Marekdola, its adjacent post-neolithic site, only one such stone celt was found together with fine Ambari-type pottery and other objects which are definitely datable within the 9th-13th centuries (upper limit : 1292 A.D.) by a combination of carbon-14 and other methods. The two sites, between them, encapsulate the phase of technical progress of the shouldered hoe-using Khasis from crude pottery to the use of wheel-turned pottery, made in the plains, and - as it appears - from stone hoes to iron hoes, though no iron objects were found on the same site. The significant point is that even so late as in the 9th-13th century period, the stone hoe had not altogether vanished even from the submontane tracts that were already in close contacts with Ambari. The stone celt was still in use, as Rao concludes, for its symbolic, if not for its functional value. We may further conclude that, even if the Khasis had started entering the iron age a few centuries earlier, the use of the stone hoe must have long persisted until its use was reduced to insignificance or mere symbolism by the 13th century.

In any case, once iron was in use, its abundant production led to certain economic and political changes within the Khasi society. With iron hoes the soil could be puddled into mud for wet rice cultivation, more efficiently. On the basis of an increased rice production for consumption and a surplus iron output for trade with the surrounding plains, the Khasi society moved to the stage of state formations by the 15th century. From this time onwards we have a genealogy of the Jaintia Kings. Thus, we find that time and space, when out of reach of our written records, could be probed into by historians through a combination of oral history methods with those of archeology, social anthropology and other disciplines.

Ancient history of the Assam plains could also be extended backward beyond the 5th-4th centuries, the same way. The Mahabharata and several Puranas, that were rewritten between circa 2nd century B.C. and 2nd century A.D., the Kalika-Purana of the 9th/10th century A.D. and the Copper Plate Prasastis of the Kamarupa Kings -- all these contain elements of late-recorded oral history related to Assam's early Indo-Aryan settlers who were the carriers of a new civilization marked by iron, cattle, wet rice and the plough.

Iron technology discovered in Western Asia around circa 1800 B.C. reached India by 1000 B.C. and spread to Magadha by 600 B.C. . It was on the basis of an abundant supply of iron ore in its neighbourhood that Magadha was transformed into a powerful state and empire. By then the Magadhans were already a mixed people. The Indo-Aryan newcomers intermingled with the Kiratas and other pre-Aryan elements. When did large-scale settlements of these iron-using Indo-Aryans take place in Assam then? No late-recorded oral history alone could settle this issue, if archeology does not give some clue. It is the considered opinion of scholars that the antiquity of Bhagadatta, as a historical personage, should not be taken as far back as the Bharata War -- it probably took place around 900 B.C. --- ^{simplistically} relying/on later interpolations in the original Mahabharata. Neither can we accept Bhaskara-Varman's statement that his dynasty had been ruling for three thousand years.⁷ His claim only points out to the fact that his dynasty's rule was quite old. The tradition represented by Banasura, Naraka, Bhagadatta and Vajradatta related to the early phase of ^{the} iron-using Indo-Aryan settlements, east of the Karatoya.

That the Buddhist sources carried no reference to Kamarupa and/or Pragjyotishpura is significant.⁸ This suggests that the Indo-Aryans had not crossed over to Kamarupa ^{before} 500 B.C. Archeologically, we only know that the iron age and the Maurya rule firmly reached the banks of the Karatoya by 200 B.C. Bands of Indo-Aryan adventures from Magadha must have had crossed the Karatoya

by then and moved into the forested Brahmaputra Valley in search of elephants, valuable timber and virgin lands for settlement. The Arthashastra commentator's (Bhattasvarin) suggestion that certain items of Magadhan trade originated in Kamarupa (though not clearly mentioned by Kautilya to that effect) appears valid in this context.

The alluvial plains of Kamarupa, until its Aryanization, remained thickly forested under the heavy rainfall conditions. Neolithic jhum settlements, however sparse, were till then found only on banks of hill streams and river-confluences, where land was cleared through the natural process of erosion and flooding and where raw materials of a stone tool industry were available in plenty in the vicinity. Their agriculture was characterized by slash-and-burn and land rotation. The neolithic settlers' stone implements were not however equal to the task of uprooting the deep forests for agriculture. It was the newcomers, equipped with shaft-hole iron axes and iron-tipped traction ploughs, who cleared such forests on an extensive scale for permanent cultivation of wet rice, and they caused thereby a rapid increase of population on the basis of a more abundant rice supply. It was on this basis that the State or Janapada of Kamarupa emerged, in due course, and that we moved in this region from proto-history to history by the 4th century A.D. The Magadhi language emerged, in a slightly different form, as the dominant language within this State.

IV

So far I have discussed in some details how the existing areas of darkness in the history of the hills and plains of our region could be lighted up in the absence or paucity of contemporary written documents. The methodology has to be varied, and for the local historian, oral history methodology will be rewarding, at least for the times conventionally styled as modern. Teachers and students of history, placed as they are in the region's several states, could effectively contribute to the writing of the history of their

respective localities and states. I hope, the University and College Departments of History would utilize their personnel in organised attempts at exploring the history of the districts in their respective areas by way of oral history methods and other means.

It is conventional on the part of presidents of such learned gatherings to say something on the basis of their own original research. My current field of enquiry being history of medieval Assam under the Ahoms, I may be permitted to say a few words, not on any new findings but about the problems I face in this field.

The most important source material for me is, of course, the buranjis, both published and unpublished. A complete printed catalogue of such manuscript buranjis, showing their places of preservation and giving other ancillary information, is long over-due. True that most of the representative buranjis are now available in well-edited, published versions. Even so, a catalogue is still necessary so that sceptic scholars could check the quality of the editing and translation to eliminate biased distortions, if any. Such distortions, even though not deliberate, are possible since much of our buranji-based research was motivated either by the needs of an alien administration or by the needs of a local patriotism, both liable to lapses.

Yet another difficulty we face is in the matter of identifying the relative antiquities of the extant manuscripts. These have come down to us in their present form through a process of time-to-time copying, with the subject-matter undergoing abridgement, elaboration and extension at the discretion of the copyist-cum-chroniclers in that process. The extant manuscript copies belong to a period not earlier than the 17th century, and some only to the early 19th century. Under the circumstances, it is high time that serious attempts are made, on the basis of a scrutiny of the language and style, to ascertain the relative antiquities of the stylistically disparate pieces that constitute the buranjis. Perhaps, scholars of Assamese and Tai languages could take care of this aspect.

It is also unfortunate that no specialized glossary has yet been exhaustively compiled to explain the terminology of the buranjis, giving their etymological roots and their original Tai equivalents, if any. In fact, many terms have already become obscure. For instance, much confusion persists in the meaning of such terms as 'Hatimur', 'Ghar-phalia', 'Lukhurakhan', etc. An exhaustive glossary will not solve the problem of getting at their meanings, but it will surely help further research towards solving it.

I have already pointed out that the history of Assam is a well-charted field. Particularly, it is so for the medieval times in its political and socio-religions aspects. But, even so, much of our received knowledge lacks a sense of dynamics. Take, for instance, the Ahom political system -- the Khel, the Pāiks, the Pal-Seva, the Bar Cha'rā, the Patra-Mantri and all that. While describing this system, our historians have given us, more or less, a static picture of what prevailed during the 17th - early 19th centuries. They never bothered themselves with the question as to how this political system gradually developed since the times of Sukapha in response to the changing situation and growing needs of the Ahom society. Had the 'Khel' system been the same from the very beginning, there would not have arisen the need for borrowing the term 'Khel' from the Arabico-Persian vocabulary to denote it. Just as the Ahom tribal assembly hall, called Howlong (Bar-ghar/big house), was, in due course, transformed into the seat of the much-restricted Bar Cha'rā (and Bar-Mol), so was the original tribal obligation of supplying volunteers for common defence and public work transformed into the more regularised paik system. From scattered information lying unnoticed in buranjis and also relevant information gleaned from studies of other Tai peoples, we could perhaps trace the evolution of the Ahom political institutions from their tribal roots.

If much remains to be done in political history, the field of economic history remains almost barren. We hope that some of us here would devote their efforts to this field. I need not emphasize, while concluding my say, that if we mean research on medieval Assam to be a serious business, we cannot afford to allow the Tai-Ahom language to die out. The last scholars of this language have to be sought out and endowed with resources to keep up the tradition. The University of Dibrugarh has acted nobly and wisely in opening facilities for learning and cultivating the Tai language and literature.¹⁰ I wish this arrangement continues in existence and expands.

Footnotes

1. In 1836 Assamese was replaced by Bengali for use in the schools and courts of Assam, alongside of English by the British administration, and this arrangement continued until the early 1870s. There is a widespread belief in Assam, long shared even by historians, that this was done at the instance of the Bengali clerks, associated with the administration. Recently, Professor Barpujari rejected this view on the ground of the absence of supporting historical data.
2. A.W. Botham, Catalogue of the Provincial Coin Cabinet Assam (2nd edn., Allahabad, 1930).
3. One such excellent compilation, throwing light on Assam's ancient heritage is M.M. Sharma, Inscriptions of Ancient Assam (Gauhati University, 1978).
4. Pidgin Assamese is widely used by the tribes of Nagaland and Arunachal both for inter-tribal communication and communication with the plains people. This link language is nowadays called 'Nagamese' in one area and 'Arunamese' in another.
5. Lt. Yule, "Notes on the iron of the Kasia Hills for the Museum of Economic Geology", Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, vol 2, 1842, p.853.
6. S.N. Rao, "Excavations at Sarutaru : a neolithic site in Assam" Man and Environment (Indian Society for Prehistoric and Quarternary Studies, Ahmedabad). vol I, 1977, pp. 40-43 and "continuity and survival of neolithic traditions in Northeast India", Asian Perspectives (Hawaii), vol 20, pp. 191-205.
7. Nidhanpur Copper Plate Charter of Bhaskara-Varmān.
8. Sharma, n.3, pp. 0.3-0.4.
9. Harisena's Prasasti of Samudragupta (on the Allahabad Fort Pillar) referring to the conquest of Kamarupa by the latter, is the earliest available historical record for the region.
10. The arrangement for Tai studies has been made in the department of Assamese Language and Literature, Dibrugarh University, with Shri Bimal Barua as the only teacher to teach the language. In the Department of History, Gauhati University, on the other hand, there is no provision for Tai studies. However, Dr J.N. Phukan, there, has also taken up research in Tai chronicles and culture. It is felt that consolidated efforts should be made by the Government and the Universities to promote Tai studies in Assam.

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