

**INSIGHTS
INTO
HISTORY & CULTURE**

MAHMOOD HASSAN



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www.BlueRoseONE.com

info@bluerosepublishers.com

+91 8882 898 898

+4407342408967

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This book is dedicated to:
My dearest Abba Md. Hassan Ali
(b. 1935 - d. 2008)
&
My dearest Amma Mostt. Husnuara Begum
(b. 1945 - d. 2018)

Introduction

“The ink of a scholar is holier than the blood of a martyr”

This was what Prophet Mohammad said about importance of knowledge back in the 7th century. Despite being an illiterate the Prophet emphasized his followers to acquire knowledge by learning to read and write. The first lines of the Holy Quran begins with the word "*iqra*" which in Arabic means 'read' or 'recite'. Almighty Allah sent His messenger Gibrael to the Prophet asking him to 'read' or '*iqra*' in the name of the almighty. The verse in the Holy Quran is "*Iqra bismi rabbi kallazi khalaq*" which meant "Read by your God's name". Expressing words of wisdom creates a message for the humanity. The inspiration to pen down the words for the benefit of the well-wishers and readers took up the pen from the college days to write these articles for publication in the newspapers. On receiving appreciation from readers and well-wishers in the ACS fraternity the insatiable passion to write grew more and more.

The subject of history fascinated me to such a level that I took up the subject for my graduation for my academic pursuit. By completing post-graduation in Medieval Indian history in Delhi University I have been trying to dispel the distortions and wrong notions that tend to mislead those who read the subject with seriousness. Many of the distortions and fabrications were spread by the writings of the British historians. They spread the idea of 'oriental despotism' to show that they were a superior race who has come to colonise Asia to civilize the people. In due course their works they gave a communal twist to various

facts that in fact led to the formulation of the 'two nation' theory. They were responsible for communalization of our history. Their narratives gradually gave birth to schools among the fundamentalist forces in both Hindu and Muslim communities. A false narrative like periodization of history was created by the British historians like John Stuart Mills when he coined phases of ancient period as Hindu period, medieval as Muslim period and modern period when they ruled was not Christian period. The British that sowed the seeds of disharmony led to rise of schism and communalism in Indian society where all communities lived peacefully for ages. One line of study of history was to dispel the false notions associated with religion. The medieval period of history of India fascinated me. The role of the Sufi and Bhakti movement in the medieval period is another subject that attracted me and I wrote a number of articles on these liberal and syncretic ideologies propagated by the Sufi Pirs and Vaishnava saints. The Sufi and Bhakti Movement spiritually and socially unified the country but the politics divided the country. The role of Islam in world history interested me as lot of wrong notions propagated by the western historians led to distortions of various facts of history. This has been constant area of research among the scholars across the globe. I have written a few of such articles that found good reviews from the well-wishers. Conservation of the edifices of the past is an important responsibility of the historians and archaeologists is another feature that fascinated me.

The promotion of the liberal and tolerant ideology was my areas of specialization in post-graduation in Delhi University. Hence I wrote a series of articles on Sufism that interest me the most. The beautiful religion that gave birth

to a renaissance has been destroyed by such spurious pseudo religio-political ideology has now led to terrorism and bloodshed. It is time to introspect about the Islamic civilization that gave birth to a scientific civilization. Cordoba has the oldest library after Baghdad that was the largest library in the medieval world called *Bayt al Hikma* or the Grand Library of Baghdad. First University of the world was set up in Fez, Morocco. Knowledge was an important part of the Islamic golden age that flowered under the Abbasid caliphate. But today the religion has been degraded to a faith of hate and intolerance at the hands of fundamentalists' forces like Al Qaeda and ISIS. Hence I have tried to dispel these false notions spread by some destructive elements.

For compilation of the old articles I would like to thank my staff namely Mohidul Islam, Computer programmer of Assam Minorities Development Board and Sadiqul Islam Khan, Computer programmer of the Directorate of Char Areas Development, Assam for editing/ photoshopping of the book. I am grateful to my office staff for compilation and preparation and typing of the old articles. I would like to thank all my well-wishers for provoking me to compile the articles in form of a book. I hope readers will enjoy reading the book and send their feedback through my e-mail that could prompt me for more writings in future.

I hope sincerely that the readers will enjoy reading each and every topic that appeared in various regional dailies of Assam. They may send their feedback in the e-mail that will delight me.

I have compiled the manuscripts a couple of years ago but could not publish the materials in time due various pressing issues. Finally it was time to publish the writings done over the years as soon as soon as I joined the state civil services for the benefit of the readers.

I am grateful to my batch mates of ACS 1992 batch who constantly persuaded me to write regularly so that they have a taste of the various issues I raised over the years. Moreover the senior officers also appreciated by endeavour and asked to write more on multifarious issues. So I would like to thank all of them for their support, persuasion and appreciation. Finally I would like to thank my wife Masuma Hassan and son Nashaat Mahmood for their support in completing this work. Last but not the least I would like to thank my publisher Blue Rose publication for publishing the book.

With good hope close to my heart, enjoy reading the informative articles.

Mahmood Hassan, IAS

Guwahati

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(1)

Colonial strains and Indian History

‘Itihasa parampara’ the tradition of history is not new to the Indian culture. The tradition is as old as the civilization itself. From the Vedic ages, an oral tradition was passed down by the elders to the younger generations and this continued for centuries. The monarchs showed keen interest in presenting their names for posterity. Historical rock and pillar edicts bear an eloquent testimony of an emperor like Ashoka and the vast empire that he governed. In Assam also, ancient myths, legends and cults represent rich historical heritage of the region. The Ahom administration employed scribes to chronicle the noteworthy events in the voluminous narratives called *‘Buranjis’*. However, unlike modern history, ancient and medieval traditions are devoid of any specific objective or scientific scrutiny. History as an academic discipline came to the subcontinent as a part of the colonial legacy.

A modern and secular sense of history, what scholar Peter Burke in a different situation calls the ‘renaissance sense of the past’, was something the British brought to India. The British historians misinterpreted and distorted Indian history in manifold aspects. Most of the early writers like James Mills, Elphinstone, William Jones, John Malcolm were prominent functionaries of the East India Company. Therefore, their works were intrinsically related to the political exigencies in an age of imperial expansion. Despite critical research and advances in studies, ideologies of imperialism continue to strain our historical studies at the hands of a few Indian apologetics

till today. Without any logical apprehension, many of the academics in Assam particularly adhere to the philosophies propagated by the 'imperialist school'. In the words of Ranajit Guha, they have to be reminded that: 'History was not a spiritual gift pressed by British liberalism on India for the benefit of the natives. For, contrary to such a cargo cult theory of culture blithely retained by imperialist writers and their Indian imitators, the production of a colonialist historiography was from the very outset an exercise in dominance and not an act of charity. It is, therefore, impossible to deal with the question of an Indian historiography of India as anything other than a question of power'. (Ranajit Guha, *An Indian Historiography of India: A Nineteenth-Century Agenda and its complications*, Calcutta, 1988).

In the Third World, Asiatic societies' history did not evolve as an intellectual experience of such societies, but as a part of 'the cultural baggage of imperialism'. Ravinder Kumar aptly analyses – "The discipline sought to explain the past of non-European societies through discourses which facilitated political control at the same time as they facilitated the appropriation of the material and cultural resources of such societies. It is necessary to emphasise this fundamental relationship between Third World history and imperialism". (Ravinder Kumar, *Exploring the Historical Conjecture*, Social Scientist, Vol. 19, No. 9 – 10, Oct-Nov, 1991). The imperialist writers deny that India was in a process of nation-in-making, believing that the country consist of islands of religions, castes, communities and interests. All these prescriptive groups based on caste and religions are the real basis of political organization. All these misconceptions manifested

in the policies of ‘divide and rule’, separate electorates, provincialism, playing one caste against another, replacing language, etc. that continues to have repercussion till today.

The very essence of communal ideology comes from colonial history. Historian Romila Thapar, also a member of the National Integration Council is of the opinion that works of the imperialist historians reflected this ideology by colouring India’s past with religious overnotes. They were the earliest writers to periodize our history into Hindu, Muslim and British / modern civilization (curiously not Christian civilization) in place of ancient, medieval and modern periods respectively. This directly provided historical justification to the two-nation theory by laying down communal foundation in Indian culture. Do religion solely determine our historical process? History is full of conflicts that should be primarily perceived from politico-economic viewpoint and secondarily from religious angle. Thus, the colonialists failed and defied intentionally to observe the variegated integrative and composite nature of India’s tradition of history.

The inception of intellectual Indian history under these circumstances compelled it to take a polemical course, the target of polemics being the imperialist historiography.

As a consequence, pregnant ideas gave birth to the nationalist school armoured with the anti-imperialist stance. ‘Yet nationalist historiography’, argues Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘in spite of its anti-imperialist stance and substance, shared a deeply embedded meta-narrative with imperialist accounts of British India. This was the meta-narrative of the modern state. If the British plotted Indian

past in terms of a movement from ‘despotism’ to a British inspired rule of law’ (instituted by the colonial state), nationalist history-writing portrayed all anti-imperialist struggles in India as steps towards a sovereign national state, a state that would one day stand on the very foundation that the imperialists themselves had laid. The life of the people was thus subsumed within a hallowed biography – which is what this history was – of the (nation) state’. (Dipesh Chakrabarty, *History as Critique and Critique(s) of History*; Economic & Political weekly, Sept. 14, 1991).

There has been ambiguous assertion by imperialist writers that the national movement for independence was not a people’s movement but a product of the needs and interests of the elite groups who used it to serve either their own narrow interests or the interest of their prescriptive groups. Such a false notion can easily be refuted by the fact that the elites and the masses participated together for a common cause under the pioneering leadership of Gandhiji, irrespective of self-interests or motivations. Renowned historian Bipan Chandra observed that the imperialists treated the national movement as a cloak for the struggle for power between various section of the Indian elite, and between them and the foreign elite, thus effectively denying its existence and legitimacy as a movement of Indian people for the overthrow of imperialism and for the establishment of an independent nation state. He further notes that ‘Categories of nation, class, mobilization, ideology etc, which are generally used by historians to analyze national movements and revolutionary processes in Europe, Asia and Africa, are usually used missing from their treatment of the Indian national movement. This view

not only denies the existence of colonial exploitation and underdevelopment, and the central contradiction, but also any idealism on the part of those who sacrificed their lives for the anti-imperialist cause’.

Throughout their writings, a negative and bleak picture was drawn by the colonialist even though some of them were appreciative of a few aspects of Indian culture. The Utilitarians supporting the regime of the colonialists, attributed the backwardness of India to what they fallaciously described as its predominantly irrational culture, the lack of a legal system, its stagnant society and the existence of despotism. European authors tend to vituperatively theorize the superiority of the ‘Occidental’ (Western) over the ‘Oriental’ (Asiatic) civilization in all aesthetic aspects and values. The Oriental was described as spiritual and unconcerned with material culture, whereas the Occidental was material, realistic and civilized in outlook. In fact, oriental despotism, related to the Asiatic mode of production, becomes a favourite European theory to make exaggerative generalization and superficial apprehension of Asian historical tradition. This dichotomy dominated historical thinking till recent times. Other stereotypes were also reconstructed, like showing racial differences between Aryans and non-Aryans or showing communal differences between Hindus and Muslims as separate entities and nations. What is interestingly striking about all these stereotypes is that they do not even occur as facts in the cultural tradition of pre-British India.

History written in the colonial period concentrated on politics, wars, administrative policies and territorial acquisitions, paying scant attention to the developments in

the socio-economic-cultural realm. The role of the masses comprising the workers, peasants, lower middle classes and women which was denied by the imperialists, calls for immediate reassessment. Assamese historians writing on this period, barring a few, also pay little attention to the contributions of these classes of regional history.

However, the ‘subaltern school’ is lately taking these subaltern classes as the ‘core groups’ of their study/research while making a serious attempt to remove ‘imperialist and elitist bias’ from Indian historiographies. Cultural synthesis, forged by the Bhakti and the Sufi movement persisting from the medieval period that was instrumental in creating a composite culture, remained entirely neglected by the colonialist historiographies. Further, European writers overlooked this phenomena, what the historian Tara Chand elaborately explain in his works, that the dominant Indian traditional ethos was that of tolerance and assimilation throughout the course of its history.

Social reformer Raja Rammohan Roy was perhaps the first eminent personality to develop a critique of the British rule that satisfied the most rigorous requirements of western scholarship. In course of time the nationalist and Marxist historians alike developed polemics of imperialist legacy and historiographies. Nationalism in this situation became a powerful ideology for the historians to generate a collective consciousness amongst the Indians. Not only was it a mere political manifestation, but it influenced every aspect of intellectual life – philosophy, literature, the arts and history – from the early part of the twentieth century. The past inspired the national movement, so was the

dominative influence of the Indian historians. Whereas colonialist created divisive history by promoting communal casteist and racial prejudices in their interpretation. All this 'false consciousness' has to be mitigated to make history more integrative and secular in character. The writing of history is valid and useful intellectual activity only if it is practised without bias. The discipline, therefore, has the enormous capacity of breaking all kinds of social barriers and presenting empirical truths of a bygone era.

This article appeared in The Assam Tribune on 16-06-1992.



Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1883):
Father of Social Reforms in India

(2)

Contributions from intelligentsia in colonial Assam

The British system of education created a new-socially distinct class of educated – Indians what the historians have variously described as the educated middle class, English educated elites or intelligentsia. This group played a very important social, cultural, political, economic and ideological role in the history of modern India from the 19th century onwards. On one hand they were created to help the colonialists in administering India, through collaboration and servility; whereas on the other, played an indispensable role in generating nationalist consciousness among the Indians for the very first time. Government civil servants, lawyers, doctors, teachers, engineers, writers etc formed the core’ of the class. Development of such a class in Assam, mostly educated in Calcutta became a potent force in the Assamese history and society. Apart from being loyalists, they became the front-runners of the anti-imperialist struggle as well as the instigators of a literacy-based ‘renaissance’ in Assam.

English as the medium of instruction was introduced in colonial India through Lord Macaulay’s ‘minute on education’ that was to form the basis of the John Company’s educational policy. Amazingly, Macaulay’s minute contemptuously discarded all kind of oriental learning as devoid of utility as well as incapable eliminating ‘native’ inferiority. In the words of Macaulay, “We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters

between us and the million whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect”. However, Macaulay’s dream of an English educated intelligentsia brown in colour but white in thought and tastes was, it is true, beginning to turn a bit sour by the 1880s. Prof. Sumit Sarkar opines – “Yet the ‘middle class’ ambitions which went into the making of provincial associations in Calcutta, Poona, Bombay and Madras eventually found expression through the Congress were still little more than an irritant”. (Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India 1885-1947*; Macmillan, Delhi. 1983). Western education brought with it an aura of global current and ideologies into the sub-continent. Ideas of nationalism, liberalism, rationalism, humanism and related contemporary developments in the west were transmitted through western education to these individuals. The traditional literacy castes without any hesitation took to western education. The socio-ideological outlook of the intelligentsia started to assume a new dimension by the last quarter of the 19th century. On one hand they became the torch bearers of the 19th century socio-religious reform movements and were bounded up with the emergence of more extreme varieties of nationalism affecting the society on the other.

In the late Ahom period, events like the Moamaria rebellion, Burmese depredations and deadly epidemics shattered the socio-economic and political condition of Assam. At this critical juncture of history Capt Welsh’s expedition came to be conceived as eventful rescue act bringing relief amidst chaos and confusion. In such a situation the advent of the Baptist Christian missionaries created awareness towards general education, even though

their primary concern rested on the spread of Christianity. Missionaries like Rev. Nathan Brown (1836) and Rev. Miles Bronson (1837) took a bold initiative to revive the dying Assamese language in that period. In fact, the credit of publishing the first journal in Assam '*Orunudo*' (1846) goes to these missionaries. Simple language used by this journal created awareness towards Assamese culture, which particularly affected the intelligentsia. The '*Orunudo*' gradually gave way to "The Trinity" of Assamese literature – Hem Chandra Barua, Gunabhi Ram Barua and Anandaram Dhekial Phukan. These doyens laid down the foundation of modern Assamese language and literature on a firm foundation. Their works were not merely confined to literacy tastes alone but reflected the advocacy for social reforms, rationality and modernistic outlook, in turn opposing all kinds of obscurantism, superstitions, blind beliefs and social taboos circumbing the Assamese society from time immemorial.

The Assamese intellectual pursuing studies in Calcutta were deeply influenced by the socio-cultural renaissance of contemporary Bengal. Strong currents of western culture created tremendous changes in the Bengal society, under the pioneering leadership of Raja Rammohan Roy. These reforms gradually spread to length and breadth of the country that sought to create a social climate for modernization of a retrogressive society. Historian Bipan Chandra opines – "Given the inter-connection between religious beliefs and social practices, religious reforms was a necessary pre-requisite for social reform". The socio-cultural resurgence in Bengal left an indelible impression upon Assam as well. Intellectuals like Maniram Dewan, Juggoram Khargharia Phukan, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan,

Gunabhiram Barua or Hem Chandra Barua – were the torch bearers of the modern Assamese culture. All of them were deeply influenced by the ideas of Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Henry Vivian Dorazio’s ‘Young Bengal Movement’ by one way or the other. According to Prasenjit Choudhury, the wave of influence to Assam came into two streams – firstly from those who went to Calcutta to pursue higher education, and secondly in form of journals, magazines, newspapers, books etc. i.e. the literacy medium that spread into the inquisitive intellectual circles in Assam in rapid fashion (Prasenjit Choudhury, *Unabingsha Satikar Assamat Abhumuki*; Guwahati, 1984).

Social reforms under the pioneering efforts of the western educated elites brought about some changes in the Assamese society. Prasenjit Choudhury says that Juggoram Khargharia Phukan was reputed to be the first Assamese to be influenced by the winds of modernism. He vehemently opposed the retrogressive social taboos prevailing in the state. Customs even forbade the learning of English at the first instance. Litterateur Lakshminath Bezbarua has himself admitted that initially his conservative father Dinanath Bezbarua had reservations on the use of this ‘alien’ language. Hem Chandra Barua had to learn English clandestinely without anyone’s knowledge during his childhood. Anandaram had to face opposition before going abroad. Jaduram Deka Barua attacked the heinous *Sati* system. He also wrote a series of articles in the Bengal – paper criticizing this evil practice, centring around a *Sati*-burning case in Sibsagar. Being an ardent supporter of widow-remarriage, he himself married a widow. Hem Barua stressed the necessity of womens’ education and widow remarriage. In 1869 Gunabhiram joined the Brahmo

Samaj and married a widow. He even attended the first widow remarriage ceremony in Calcutta, and wrote the first modern drama '*Ram Navami Natak*' wherein he gave a message for citizens to have a rethinking in encouraging perpetual widowhood. Holiram and Anandaram advocated the necessity of female-education in Assam.

The Assamese reformers did not feel the necessity of launching a reform movement on the lines of the large-scale Bengal renaissance, as the society already maintained a broad and liberal outlook as far as religions were concerned. Fertile atmosphere was already created by the Bhakti and Sufi movement with special reference to Shrimanta Sankardeva and Ajan Fakir respectively. These saints infused the tolerant and secular spirit into the Assamese society back in the medieval period. Therefore the English educated intelligentsia could conveniently adopt new ideologies leaving enough room for change and reforms. Language-based nationalism was another factor that assumed centrality within the social reforms. Another reason was that in Assamese society 'the standard of ceremonial and caste customs is not high' (LSS O'Malley, *Indian Caste Customs*; Calcutta, 1976).

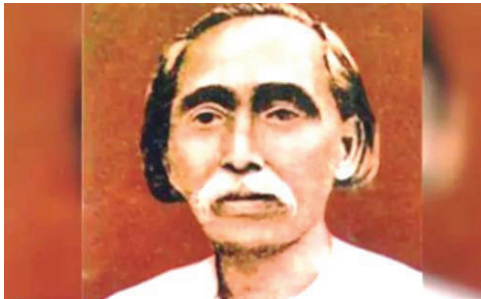
It can be agreed in broad terms that a self-conscious Assamese nationality emerged only in the colonial period. Dr Hiren Gohain disagrees to the view that this class was entirely a creation of the colonialists. Self-perpetuation also existed in the inception of this class. So he argues – "It was not a British intention and design. It was British official who denied Assamese its rightful place as official language. It was only in 1874 that Assamese was recognised officially. In 1905 Assam was linked to a part of Bengal

and nearly lost its separate identity”. (Dr Hiren Gohain, Colonial Legacy in Assam Today 1 & 2; The Northeast Times, 19 & 20.12.91). Even education suffered colonial constraints, since the system laid heavy emphasis on arts disciplines, whereas science and technology entirely were neglected. The first medical and engineering colleges were established in Assam only after independence. Many of the English educated personalities became loyalists of the Raj, praising them blindly as the “harbingers of a modern civilization”. There was a time in Assam, when Queen Victoria came to be revered by the elites and writers like Padmanath Gohain Barua, what historian Prasenjit Choudhury terms as “*Victoria-bhakti*”. Many reformers became important officials of the British administration. Holiram Dhekial Phukan became a close associate of David Scott and functioned as a revenue collector. Whereas Juggoram Khargharia Phukan was posted as a Superintendent of Police in upper Assam and later became the Sadar Amin in Guwahati. Colonial interests led to the creation of ranks like – *Mauzadar*, *Chaudhury*, *Patgiri*, *Talukdar* etc to run the economic administration. Exploitative colonial policies like Ryotwari settlement, opium cultivation and land revenue system led to popular unrest and peasant insurgency. No cosmopolitan motivations brought the Britishers to Assam. Ultimately, it was the same educated middle class armoured with Gandhian nationalism attacked the colonial Raj that aimed at exploiting rather than civilizing India.

This article appeared in The Assam Tribune on 30-04-1992.



Statue of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan (1829-1859):
Dreamer of modern Assam



Padmanath Gohain Baruah (1871-1946):
The literary and Cultural Gem of Assam. He was the first President of Asam Sahitya Sabha in 1917 and actively campaigned against opium cultivation in Assam.

(3)

Assamese intelligentsia as agents of social change

The modernization of the Assamese society begun under the pioneering leadership of a newly emerging Assamese intelligentsia in colonial era. In the early part of the 19th century that the educated individuals took the responsibility of bringing reforms in the society on a limited scale. They were educated in Universities and Colleges in Bengal *vis a vis* Kolkata and Dhaka in particular. Rise of an Assamese intelligentsia armed with the modernist awakening became the agents of change to the Assamese society. Do we see any such agents of change from the contemporary generation?

By the fag end of Ahom rule in Assam large scale epidemics interspaced by the invasion of the Burmese or the Maans destroyed the age old stability peace and harmony in society. Many lives were lost and property destroyed. Education, trade and agriculture that flourished for centuries naturally received setback. This was undoubtedly the darkest period of history as many of the families moved from one place to another to avoid the Maan invaders. The Ahom king and his nobility was unable to save the state that fell into anarchy. The *Dangorias* or nobles including few intellectuals made mendicancy before the British administrators in Kolkata to make intervention in Assam to expel the Maans and restore Ahom monarchy from the prevailing anarchy. British took control of Assam and restored the situation in the state. In a way the advent of

East India Company finally broke the isolation of Assam by bringing it to the main stream of the Indian national life. This was the reason that many of the contemporary intellectuals like Padmanath Gohain Barua supported the British-rule for restoring peace and harmony in the province.

At this backdrop there was an intellectual awakening in Assam influenced by the contemporary renaissance in Bengal. The Assamese youths had to travel to places outside the province as there was no institutes for higher studies in the state till that period. *Samachar Darpan*, a contemporary newspaper in Bengal noted in 1831 that within seven years of British rule some enlightened youths of Assam achieved remarkable distinction in their quest for academic excellence and contact with Bengal. The intellectual environment marked the years of preparation for the awakening in Assam. Some of the pioneers of the movement were Haliram Dhekial Phukan (1802-1832) and his brother Jaggaram Khargharia Phukan (1805-1835) and Jaduram Deka Barua (1801-1869), was followed by Anandaram Dhekial Phukan (1829-1859), Gunabhiram Barua (1834-94), Hem Chandra Barua (1835-96) and Kamalakanta Bhattacharjee (1855-1936).

The western educated youths with modernistic vision contributed to the social reforms of the 19th century. At the same time the Christian Missionaries came to Assam in form of Baptist Mission that started the first schools in Assam. Eventhough they were on an evangelical mission but their action ended up contributing immensely to the development of language, literature, and education in Assam. In fact literature was the sole medium through

which the social reformers could spread their new ideas advocating social reformation. They expressed their intellectual ideas and thoughts through the Bengali journals like *Samachar Darpan* and *Samachar Chandrika*. Finally when the printing presses was set up the British missionaries in Assam they started contributing in the missionary journals like *Orunudo* followed by *Assam Bandhu*, *Assam News*, *Jonaki*, *Banhi* and *Bijuli*.

The reformers were primarily from the high caste Hindus and reforms were confined to that caste only. They focussed on the problem of the high caste Hindu women. Emancipation of women was the priority in social reforms of that period. They were influenced by the Bengali social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar who propagated on women education, widow remarriage and opposition to child marriage and polygamy. The Assamese reformers focused on women's education as they remained uneducated during those periods. But there was no attempt to establish any schools. Baptist missionaries took the responsibility in women education. But the reforms faced opposition from some of literate Assamese like Bolinartyan Bora, Ratneswar Mahanta, Purnakanta Sarma and Lambodar Bora. They believed that they should be given limited education so that they can take care of domestic works and bring up the children. All the reformers in Assam took the measures to educate their respective daughters and wives at home.

Attempts by the intelligentsia for reforms were met with much resistance from different sections of the society. But despite all the opposition the process of reformation rolled on in the 19th century. Priority was given to widow

remarriage at the influence initiated by Bengal reformer Raja Rammohan Roy. Jaduram Deka Barua married a widow himself leading the way for others to follow. The reformers had to deal with social issues like prostitution, foeticide that infringed the social norms. (Gunabhiram Barua on *Bidhaba Bibah* in *Orunudo* p188). Gunabhiram Barua was deeply influenced by Vidyasagar's campaign on widow remarriage and he himself married a Brahmin widow in accordance of ritual of Brahmo Samajis. Swarnalata Barua, his daughter became the first Assamese girl educated in Bethune School, Calcutta setting the precedent for women's education in the province.

There were instances that before the remarriage process started the Brahmin and Ganak widows went to live with the Mohammadans, low caste Hindus and even Kacharis (Census Report of Assam, 1881, p 161). The reformers had to find shelter houses for such widows and giving proper livelihood so that lead their lives properly. Child marriage was very rampant during the period. In fact Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua both married child brides. Eventhough the British administration passed the Age of Consent Bill in 1861 there was no impact in the society but controversies regarding marriageable age of a girl was published in journal *Jonaki* that took a leading role in publishing article to create social impact.

Opium addiction was a big issue as colonial administrators concentrated on opium production for earning revenue to run the administration. This opium was exported to China for consumption by the Chinese. This issue also attracted the attention of the intelligentsia as a huge section of the population was addicted by this drug.

Hem Chandra Barua created the satire on this social issue in his work “*Kaniyar Kirtan*”.

The intelligentsia was not strong enough to carry out the reforms strongly or with conviction. Only few individual came out and there was no collective efforts as they were also victims of social ostracism. The tribals were left out of the reform process. Issues of opium and liquor addiction was very common among the tribals and were economically and culturally backward and superstition prevailed. Education did not reach them during those period. The high caste Hindus treated them as ‘uncultured’ or ‘untouchable’. It was only after social and educational reforms brought about by the Christian missionaries that tribal people adopted the modern ways of life and gradually many influential tribal leaders were born like U. Jeebon Roy who tried to reform the Khasi society. Education brought about a revolutionary changes in the socio-political life of the tribal communities. Socio-economic development gave the community in exposure to modernization with spread of English education spread by the missionaries.

In his work “Impact of the Bengal Renaissance on Assamese society and culture” historian Amalendu Guha stated that this socio-cultural movement shaped the trajectory of Indian modernity marked by rise of rationalism, reformism, new epistemologies and literary creativity. It deeply influenced the neighbouring region of Assam. The Assam-Bengal cultural interaction during the colonial period enabled transfer of ideas, institutions, and values from Bengal to Assam. Unfortunately blind beliefs and superstitions continue even till today. Late Birubala Rabha must be seen as the contemporary social crusader

and agent of change for her role in ending witch-hunting. Today's so called numerous *jatiyatabadi* or Nationalist organizations can draw lessons from the Assamese intelligentsia to become agents of social change.

Conservation of historical heritage



Dargah of Haji Malang at Ratnagiri:

Chattrapati Shivaji gifted 654 acres of land for the shrine in favour of Muslim cleric Yakub Babar Peer Suhrawardy.



Jama Masjid at Ahmedabad was built in 1424 by ruler Ahmad Shah I resembles Hindu temple represents Indo-Islamic architecture

(4)

Historic trends in modern India

History for the layman today is an unbearably boring and dull discipline considered only to be the study of dead past. Our traditional historians bear the brunt and responsibility for adopting very narrow attitude towards history. They only give interesting accounts of glorious kings, their bravery in battles and about dates. This has reduced the subject to mere collection of facts, event and politics of the elites. But for the last half the on-going researches has drastically changed the entire nation of the past.

Historians are gradually rejecting the traditional trend of writing political, factual and dynastic histories. The methodological orientation has also changed. Adopting a scientific outlook, the trend has shifted towards writing socio-economic history. It has become the study of the socio-economic forces or of the society in transition. Historian Ronald Wright says history studies the method of reconstruction on which events really occurred and tried to evaluate their importance in the story of mankind.

Our ancient scholars did not take much interest in writing about history. Most of the ancient literature basically contains religious themes. These works do through ample light on the socio-culture condition of that period. Perhaps *Kalhana* must be categorized as the only exceptional historian of the 12th century. Writing on the history of Kashmir his work is entitled – *Rajtarangini* is well-based upon the principals of historiography. After

Kalhana, no other scholars tried to emulate his ideas. Coming down to medieval age a large number of historical works were compiled in Persian by the courtiers of the Sultanate and Mughal regimes. These works were not based upon scientific lines since they were eulogistic of kings or simply narration of events. The Ahom *Buranjis* are an important source of history of medieval Assam despite being narrative of contemporary period.

History is no longer the study of “great individuals” like Gandhi or Nehru. From such “elitist” style, the centrality of the discipline has shifted to the ordinary people and unsung heroes who also contributed largely in shaping India’s destiny. Today’s heroes of the historians are the peasants, labours, tribals etc, whose names were wiped out by the sands of time. Aiming to make the sub-altern classes like the peasants, tribals, labours, working classes plus the agronomic structure as the main subject of their study the “sub-altern school” is a newly emerging phenomenon in Indian history. These group comprise of a few Indian and British historians like David Hardiman, Ranajit Guha, Kapil Kumar, Sunit Sarkar, Gyanendra Pandey, Shahid Amin, Hitesh Sanyal and others. Like the Marxists, the sub-alternates have tried to get around the difficulties created by the “elitist” nature of historical sources, but it is open to question whether they have already been able to overcome this limitations. What is emerging from such studies is a new emphasis on “a history from below”, distinct from all variations of the elitist approach. It provides scientific and critical look into any historical factors. Sumit Sarkar’s “Modern India” (1857-1947) is a classic work on this line. Similarly Gyanendra Pandey’s recently published ‘The

construction of Communalism in Colonial North India' (1991) is another polished work.

Modern historians take much precautions in critically assessing and scrutinizing the facts from all angles before presenting them. Such well researched works has detrimentally placed the discipline on a more scientific, objective, dynamic and rational plane. The interdisciplinary approach of holistic or "total" history circumbing sociology, social anthropology, archaeology, the political and economic process so on and so forth has brought us closer to the past than ever before. We must not forget that the task of the historian is to judge and truth must be the *raison-d'être* for the considered authentic historical sources on medieval Assam.

The modern trend of writing Indian history started in the 18th century under the auspices of British historians like James Mills, Elphinston, William Jones, John Malcolm and others. Since most of the writers were functionaries of the East India Company, their works were intrinsically related to the political exigencies in an age of imperial expansion. They supported the necessities of British rule in India. Thus emerged the imperial school that analytically dealt with various facets of administrative and political transactions under the benevolent aegis of the British Raj. This school came under bitter attack from the Indian nationalist school.

From the 1870s the 'nationalist school' emerged largely due to the influence of nationalist ideas and partially linked to the renewal of oriental studies in Europe. They challenged the dominant views of the imperialist school. Nationalists were largely motivated by a desire to counter

imperialism, economic exploitation and the inherent contradiction within the upcoming model in Indian society. Historians like RG Bhandarkar, KP Jayaswal, RK Mukherjee, Tarachand, RC Majumdar and Bipan Chandra are the pioneers of this school.

The “Marxist school” were the first to stress the economic factors to give a new dimension to historical research. Contributions to this school came from scholars like RP Dutt, MN Roy, PC Joshi, AR Desai and a few Soviet writers. But from Prof. Sumit Sarkar’s view point their works “failed to offer a fully satisfactory alternative, being usually over-general and sometimes rather mechanistic in their use of class-analysis” nevertheless, Marxist influence gave a new interpretation to more thematic and pragmatic aspects of economic themes virtually left untouched by the traditional historians.

The “Cambridge School” came to dominate Indian studies in Britain in 1970s. This school drew attention to the financial aspects of the crisis of the Mughal Empire in the mid 19th century leading to the foundation of British Colonialism. From this school came the works of Anil Seal, Amiya Bagchi, Broomfield, Judith Brown and others. They interpreted nationalism in terms of uneven development and development of study of history. In the words of Leopold Von Ranke- History has had assigned to it the task of judging the past, of instructing the present for the benefit of ages to come.

This article appeared in Northeast Times on 15-09-1991.

Conservation of historical heritage



Writer in front of Ranghar



Bortops displayed at Talatalghar complex in Sibsagar



Shifting of Minaret of Puranigudam Masjid due to extension of the National Highway



Present Minaret of Puranigudam Jame Masjid

(5)

Misrepresentation of history

THE rejection of Assam's tableau depicting the first Ahom king Chaolung Siu Ka Pha, on grounds of being a 'foreigner' for this year's Republic Day function in New Delhi has created a storm in the state. Misconceiving the historical vestiges associated with the great Ahom monarch has led to widespread protests across the state. The wrong portrayal of the 'migration of the first king Siu Ka Pha to Assam' by the cultural development of the state yet again proves that historical research is not done properly before creating a tableau on such a significant subject.

To date, the Culture Department of state of Assam has failed to clarify why Assam remained unrepresented in the function due to its blunder. As part of the damage control exercise, the Assam government has ordered an enquiry into the fiasco. The big question is whether Siu Ka Pha was a 'foreigner' or 'aggressor'? The wrong understanding of history is indeed a matter of concern for everyone.

The initial damage was done by the defence ministry by rejecting the tableau model, but by the state's cultural department by not send a proper project to display during the Republic Day parade. Several monuments of Ahom period were depicted as contributions of the first Ahom king, when in reality this is not true at all. Even though the monarch founded the first capital of the kingdom at Charaideo in 1253 where several *maidams* were located, the *maidams* were constructed at a much later

period of Ahom history. The presenter, who virtually lacked any historical knowledge, ridiculously portrayed Siu Ka Pha as the cultivator of *saanchipaata*. It was clear that there was lack of proper planning before portraying such an important theme. The presenter neither had any knowledge of the past, nor did he take any care in obtaining advice from experts. The worst part was not consulting experts, historians or researchers like Siu Ka Pha award winner Dr Jogen Phukan or Dr Puspa Gogoi. This lack of understanding of history by some mainstream historians has led to misunderstanding of contemporary history.

The Ahoms belonged to the Tai-Shaan race that migrated from the Myanmar-Thailand region. Historians are of the opinion that the race arrived from Yunnan province of China through upper Myanmar. Historian Padmeswar Gogoi in his work *The Tai and the Tai Kingdom* (1968) states that Tais were the original inhabitant of central and south western China in the country's Yunnan province. He further states that from Yunnan, the Tais migrated to the south and settled at Laos and Thailand. The race established their first kingdom in upper Myanmar in the 6th and 7th century; it was the Mungmit Kup Kingnao kingdom that later came to be known as Mao Shan. In this region, the community came to be known as Shaan. Myanmarese and Chinese chronicles refer to this as the kingdom of Pong. Siu Ka Pha was the province of this kingdom's royal family. Historian of Assam started Tai Shaan as the homeland of Mou-Lungin.

Prince Siu Ka Pha left the country in 1215 accompanied by 9,000 men, women and children along with two elephants and 300 horses. After a long and

arduous journey across the Patkai Mountain, he arrived in the valley of Assam. Had he been an outsider, would he have risked the lives of more than 9,000 people by moving around for 13 years? He finally reached Namrup and Tipam in 1228 after crossing the Naga Hills. After moving from one place to another, he finally reached Charaideo on December 2, 1253 and decided to make it the capital of the Ahom kingdom. The Ahoms ruled the state till the 19th century. The fame and glory of the Ahom rule is an important chapter of Indian history that continues to be neglected. Hence wrong notions of Northeasterners have been concocted in mainstream India.

Interestingly, Padmeswar Gogoi points out that the first Tai kingdom in South East Asia was set up in Assam in 1228 and not in Thailand where the kingdom was set up at Sukhotai (or the Sanskrit Sukhodaya) in 1238. Towards the end of the 12th century, the Kamarupa kingdom lay disintegrated into small principalities till Siu Ka Pha arrived on the scene. The Ahoms were responsible for unifying the state that was hitherto ruled by various chieftains in tiny principalities scattered across the valley. The Morans, Barahis, Chutiyas, Nagas etc. were united after setting up peaceful alliances intended to usher reforms in contemporary society.

Siu Ka Pha's political acumen was proved when he subjugated the local tribes under his fold without resorting to bloody warfare. He established matrimonial relationship with the tribes and appointed their men into the royal kitchen. Even colonial British administrators and historians understood the significance of Tai-Ahoms coming to Assam. One such historian, CU Aitchison, writing in 1938

thought that the history of the state began only with the Ahoms' arrival.

The Ahoms not only played an important role in setting up the valley's first democratic administration, but also contributed towards the formation of a unified Assamese society from the 13th century onwards. The community's socio-economic contributions undoubtedly prove their ingenuity of becoming part and parcel of local society. New agricultural practices were introduced in Assam by the great king. He was responsible for creating wet-rice culture. Until that period, the Brahmaputra valley remained wholly uncultivated and covered by jungles. It was perhaps for the first time that they introduced buffaloes and oxen and developed minor irrigation system. Many *paiks* were given the responsibility of tilling the land and providing a portion of the harvest to the royal granary. Further Siu Ka Pha introduced the revenue collection system and it was his initiative to start constructing roads. Hence, we can sense the ruler's mission of turning the state content and prosperous. All these welfare activities manifested themselves into the construction of magnificent buildings that still remind us of the golden era.

George Grierson once remarked that the Ahoms have left at least two remarkable legacies to Assam – a sense of writing history or '*Buranjis*' and developing a system of administration that stretched all across. Yet, how can the central government neglect these age-old narratives that speak volumes about the pride, sacrifice and valour of the Ahoms?

The kingdom further rose to become a great military power. The territorial integrity of the state under

the Ahoms later commanded respect from local tribes, the Koches, as well as the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughals. In fact, further territorial division was contained due to the prowess of the Ahoms. This must be the reason that their rule lasted for more than 600 years without any major threats. A proper introspection will reveal that perhaps the Ahom dynasty was the longest running kingdom in India.

Siu Ka Pha died in 1268 after a 40-year reign. He married three tribal ladies as a part of his friendship agenda with the region's ethnic tribes. He created the Assamese notion, which is common parlance is "*Saat raaj mari ek korile*", meaning that the noble monarch brought all ethnic castes, creed and tribal communities under one platform. The creation of a secular and composite culture laid a sturdy foundation through which great social reformers like Shrimanta Sankardeva, Sri Sri Madhabdeva or Ajan Fakir subsequently carried out social reformation across the state. The Ahoms were responsible for creating a peaceful society in the region. They even left behind their religion and adopted Hinduism and gave up their original dialect to accept the Assamese language. In fact, the very name of 'Assam' and the term 'Asomiya' are said to be derivatives of the Ahoms.

If we compare the Ahom king to his somewhat contemporary, Mahmud of Ghazni, who invaded the subcontinent in the 11th century as many as 17 times in search of wealth, the latter must indeed be termed as the actual 'aggressor'. His invasion was led by the motive of collecting riches and not with an intention to rule. This was not true in Siu Ka Pha's case – in fact, he migrated with his followers to an unknown region for greener pastures with

the motive of settling down permanently. Had he been a foreigner or aggressor, he would never have married daughters of Moran and Barahi chieftains? The king made Kamarupa his home for rest of his life leaving behind his ancestry, language or culture. Had he been an invader, Siu Ka Pha would not have called Assam “*Mong-Dun-Sun-Kham*” the country of gardens and gold. Moreover, during the period that coincided with his rule, the concept of ‘Bharata’ did not even exist in the subcontinent.

Owing to widespread protests in the state, the Ministry has subsequently clarified that Assam’s proposal could not be considered due to time constraints. The state has to speed up the project of constructing the Siu Ka Pha Kalakshetra in Jorhat district’s Moubandha. Writer Sujata Gohain Baruah has rightly stated that Siu Ka Pha represents not only the Ahom community but the Assamese community at large. Hence, misunderstanding the great monarch’s legacy is tantamount to undermining his contribution in forming the greater Assamese community. The history and heritage of the 13th century has to be thoroughly studied so that kings like Siu Ka Pha can rightly inspire younger generations to attempt accurate understanding of contemporary history.

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Statue of Siu Ka Pha:
The first ruler of the Ahom kingdom



Swargadeo Chaolung Siu Ka Pha Samanway Kshetra-
Cultural complex located at Mohbandha in Jorhat

Assamese historical heritage

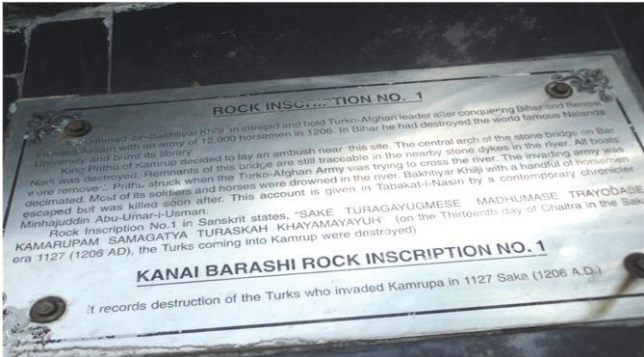


Manikarneswar Devalay built during the time of Swargadeo
Rajeshwar Singha in 1775 AD



Namdang *Silsako* or Stone Bridge built during the time of
Swargadeo Rudra Singha in 1703 AD

Undo the neglect of history



Rock inscription:

Kanai Barashi Bowa inscription that depicts coming of Mohammadan invaders to Assam

(6)

Neglect of tribal history

Historian Edward Carr once remarked that history is the less story of individuals than the social-forces. The conventional approach in writing history lay emphasis on great individuals whether they are kings like Ashoka, Chandragupta Maurya, Akbar et al or leaders like Gandhi and Nehru. However in the recent years the centrality of the discipline is gradually shifting from the typical 'elitist' approach to the ordinary masses i.e. the social-forces whose destiny too has guided the entire historical process. This social-force generally constitute the peasants, labourers, working class and above all the backwards tribal population like the Marxist. Lately the "Sub-altern school" of history is concentrating on researches of these neglected subaltern classes, including the construction of tribal history and culture. Poverty of academic interest in this realm has indirectly contributed in inflaming tribal unrest and self-assertion for separate identities. Barring some useful works by the anthropologists and sociologists, research works on tribal history is very limited. We lag way behind the rest of the country in this respect and calls for urgent attention.

In the formative phase of the Assamese civilization the tribal or ethnic traits strongly influenced the mainstream cultural ethos. Anthropologists have made detailed studies on how well ethnic folk-tradition, rites-rituals, arts-craft, literature, song-dance and social-behaviour left an indelible mark on the Assamese culture. Mention may also be made of the ethnic origin of craft items like *gamocha*, *hasoti*, *japi* etc. When the modern trend of writing history started under

the auspices of the Assamese-intelligentsia in this region, the academicians neglected the ethno-centric view of Assamese history. As a consequence one-sided versions were propitious enough to create radical and chauvinistic undertones in their interpretations analogical to the communal-ideology. A few even went on to vilify and condemn the history of the Bodos, Kacharis, Koches, Chutiyas and others. Apocryphal beliefs and ideologies were theorised to justify the present in an attempt to appropriate the past in their own mould. Fabricated versions of history from our intellectuals certainly promoted a great deal in rupturing the age-old cohesiveness of the societal-fabric.

‘No historian till date has properly analysed the real nature of the politico-economic transition occurring throughout the medieval and ancient phases of Assamese history’, noted historian Dr. Amalendu Guha in his article “Tribalism to Feudalism in Assam: 1600 – 1750” (in *The Indian Historical Review*; March, 1974, vol. No. 1) terms the earliest period of Assamese history as “tribalism” when tribal-oligarchies dominated the political process. These oligarchies more or less resembled the ancient Indian republics referred as “*janapadas*” of the 6th century B.C. which assimilated large number of tribal chieftains. In course of the time the oligarchies attained political status in this region like other parts of the sub-continent. The formation of political-units was juxtaposed with the process of and races under single platform in different areas. This process got further consolidated by the time of Ahom-administration. Many theories are put forward regarding the tribal origins of several ancient kingdoms that still await

academic research like Kamrupa, Davaka, Kadali, Hirimba and Tripura.

Many scholars tend to view the dynasties like the Bhauma-Naraka line as of Indo-Mongoloid or tribal origin. Most of these dynasties gradually absorbed into the fold of Hinduism. Being the original inhabitants the Bodo-Kachari clan formed a large chunk of the population of the Brahmaputra valley. Many of them transformed themselves into Assamese peasants, once they took to permanent cultivation. Unfortunately Assamese history still marginalise the importance of this formidable group that actively participated in Assam's socio-economic process. Is it logical to alienate such a group from our history chapter? Interesting to note that barring doubtful references to one Brihadrava, not a single copper-plate inscription mention of any tribal individual. The tribal chiefdoms bordering Kamrup also get marginalised references.

Dr. Hiren Gohain in his article "The 'Dream-Time' of Assam History" (in Assam Tribune, 13.4.91) marks a critical evaluation of several ancient dynasties vis-à-vis adumbrating their ethnic origin. For instance, arguing on the lines of historian E.A. Gait, Dr. Gohain observes that the Chutiyas trace their genesis from the legendary king Bhismaka of Vidharbha. Or that the names of Narkasur and Banasur suggest that such dynasties might have been of Hinduised-tribal origin. Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee in the work "*Kirata-Jana-Kriti*" also claims that Kumar Bhaskar Varman was a tribal-neo-Hindu. This might be an exaggeration to certain extent, even though the ethnic background cannot be fully denied. Misappropriation of the past by some historians prompted Dr. Gohain to conclude

that “The rise of some of the tribal kingdoms like the Chutiyas, Ahoms and later Bodo dynasties during the interregnum between the fall of Kamrupa and the consolidation of Ahom rule did not necessarily mean an alienation of Assam from the rest of India”. Never was Assam ever alienated in such a way as blindly prophesised by some historians with caste and racial prejudices. Such doctored notions have already created dangerous and divisive tendencies. All these facts need critical and scientific introspection to make history more purpose-oriented, interrogative and progressive in character.

Like other parts of India, agriculture and trade was introduced in the north-east region by the Gupta period (275 A.D. – 445 A.D.) of Indian history. However by the later Gupta period the socio-economic process witnessed the gradual emergence of feudalism in the northern parts of India that was characterised by decline in trade and towns and the rural economy became prominent as emphasised by historians like R.S. Sharma, D.N. Jha or D.D. Kosambi further showed that Hinduised-tribal chieftains settled Brahmins in their respective kingdoms in this period. Land grants were made to some Brahmins who interestingly took to cultivation of crops, that became a prominent feature in north Bengal. Decline of trade and commerce affected Kamrupa as well. The trend of feudalism continued even in the medieval phases of Assamese history. In the Ahom period such an economy was too oppressive for the peasantry and the tribals. Even though the state structure attracted some Hinduised section of the tribals, the Bodos and other tribes remained isolated and were confined to jungle areas to pursue a primitive style of life. As a result, Assamese nationality suffered a basic setback since its

inception/formative phase as correctly asserted by the Dr. Sujit Chowdhury (in his article, Assam: Genesis of the present ethnic crisis, North East Times, 23rd and 24th April, 1991).

The Ahom-administration brought about far-reaching changes in the socio-economic-political domain of Assam. Their support base depended upon tribal-solidarity and their policies retained most of their tribal traits. It would not be an exaggeration to express in broad terms that the Ahoms broke the social barriers so as to admit people of diverse-origin to assimilate under their socio-political fold. Numerous frontier tribes were peacefully brought under their control for political reasons. In order to protect the tribal feudatories from other powers, monarch Pratap Singh evolved the system of paying '*Posa*' – a kind of tax or payment made as a part of protection. In return the monarch exempted them from equivalent amount of taxes payable to the government. The Ahom government maintained a deliberate policy not to interfere in the internal affairs of the tribes or attempted to absorb their land to their kingdom. Interaction between the plainsmen and hill-tribes came through cultural-mixing, political-ambience, economic exchanges, trade and commerce etc. Such a harmonic conjunction built up for centuries were obliterated by colonial policies. When history can teach us of such mutual co-existence, why cannot this spirit survive in such a way today? Historical exploration is pertinent at this juncture to refute all claims of separation and division.

The neo-vaishnavite movement also left an indelible mark on tribal history. Shrimanta Sankardeva being expelled by the Ahoms, gained foothold under the

Koch king Naranarayan. The principles of egalitarianism and brotherhood preached by the Sankarite-philosophy attracted a large number of tribals to embrace Hinduism. Some of these tribals became bhaktas who were later promoted to the position of *Saranias*, so as to become full-fledged members of the Assamese community. Historians are yet to pay proper attention to these authentic aspect that helped in the formation of an assimilative culture. But on the other side of the picture, Dr. Amalendu Guha observes that the elements of political feudality was marginally undermined by the neo-vaishnavite reforms. As the Ahoms took to Hinduism, some administrators rallied the forces of Brahmanism and right-wing neo-vaishnavism on the side of the Ahom court as against the rebellious left-wing satras. The latter group had to flee to remote tribal villages (with the fear of persecution) where they preached the ethnic communities. By the 18th century popular uprising took place under the grab of religion all over Assam paralysing the Ahom administration. These events aggravated into a civil rebellion (1770 – 1816) in which the left-wing Moamaria satra played a significant role. In the process tribes were alienated from the general administration during this juncture of history.

The policies followed by the Ahom administrators from the late 18th century resulted in the retention of the tribal pockets even in the heartland of Assam, not to delate. Dr. Sujit Chowdhury is of the opinion that — ‘Socially, this meant isolation of the tribals from the mainstream Assamese society. Culturally, it led to creation of tribal-diasporas where the tribes retained their distinct language and culture. Economically, the situation paved the way for the exclusion of the tribals from plough-based agriculture’.

Isolation and alienation received a further boost from the colonial-administrators, when they drove a wedge between the people of the plains and the hills through divisive policies like Inner line restrictions, preventing age-old interaction. Even the seeds of later chauvinism amongst the Assamese population was sown by the Britishers.

Today the Assamese identity is itself facing a serious dilemma. Who is an “Assamese”, is it the Assamese-speaking middle class solely or does it include the original ethnic inhabitants also? How such tribalism exist in the Assamese cultural ethos? Does the migrants population constitute a significant part of the Assamese population or are they mere vote-banks for politicians? All these queries need close scrutiny from our tight-lipped social-scientists. Indeed our intellectuals have failed in creating a cohesive ‘Greater Assamese community’ circumbing both tribal and non-tribal population. They newly established Tribal Research Center at Jawahar Nagar should open new vistas in answering some questions from a holistic point of view. Realistic interpretation of the past by the application of the ‘subaltern’ approach will certainly help in finding solutions even to the problems of self-assertion, ethnic-unrest and secessionism as well. To conclude with the words of Dr. S.K. Barpujari “Historians have a great responsibility in making the people of the region as well as of the country aware of the need of proper study of the historical basis of the problems confronting the region in the general background of Indian history”.

This article appeared in The Assam Tribune on 18-02-1992.

Of Zamindars, Jotedars and Jalsaghars...



Gauripur Rajbari or residence of Gauripur Zamindar



Statue of Padmashree Pratima Barua Pande (1934-2002):

The icon of Goalparia music. She was a member of
Zamindar family of Gauripur

(7)

Of Zamindars, Jotedars and Jalsaghars...

Once the undivided Goalpara was the gateway to Assam. Goalpara district in recent times was bifurcated to from the districts of Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon and Goalpara. However the district's history, culture and legacy continued to unite the people of this "greater" Goalpara region that formed part of Bengal or Assam at one time or the other throughout history. If it formed part of ancient Assam better known as Kamarupa, then in the medieval times the Koch-Kamata kingdom spread out into the Bengal region's including a large part of what now comprises of Bangladesh (Rangpur). Goalpara continued to be a part of Bengal under Mughal administration and later under the East India Company's rule. The region continued to remain a bone-of-contention between the two neighbouring States even during the time of the struggle for independence. Despite numerous diversifications and speculations one aspect that remained static was the system of land-revenue administration vis-à-vis the zamindari-system prevalent in this part of Assam and Bengal (unlike the rest of Assam) that prevailed from the later ancient period till the acquisition of the zamindaris by the Government in 1951. This system formed an interesting feature of Assam's history that has remained neglected at the hands of historians.

Rather than talking about the glorious and splendours of Koch-Kamata Kingdom and exploits of

monarch Naranarayan or Bir Chilarai, the contemporary elderly people of this region has made it an 'oral tradition' to talk about the socio-political and historical significance of the zamindars alias the zamindari system. The tremendous social, economic and political powers that the zamindars acquired in this part of Assam that their status can be compared to the status of kings and monarchs. According to historian S A A Rizvi "... all those who possessed rights superior to those of ordinary peasants were called zamindars. They are dependent for their livelihood, like the hereditary village headmen, upon receiving a share of the revenue paid by the peasants". Rizvi further states – "The zamindars either inherited or built fortresses to protect themselves from their rivals and from the high-handed government officials." In the 14th century the zamindars of the region were known as 'Bhuyans' which literally meant "lord of the land". These Bhuyans became local chieftains or governor on the basis of tremendous economic power over land under the Kamrupa and Koch-Kamata kings maintaining a small army. Under weak kings, this class rose to overthrow such weak kings to rule the principalities independently. In fact, the founders of the Khen and Koch dynasties has its origin in such petty Bhuyan families.

When the Koch-Kamata kingdom was falling into pieces due to repeated attacks by the Mughal-armies, some petty zamindars who were also chieftains to the opportunity to carve out independent territories in this region on both banks of the Brahmaputra. Prior to the advent of Colonial administration, Goalpara formed the eastern frontiers of the Bengal province. This province became one of the provinces (*suba*) of the Mughal empire, with river Manas (now in Barpeta) serving as the western boundary of Assam

from time to time. Entire greater Goalpara region remained an important part of the eastern Koch kingdom under the monarchy of Parikhit Narayan, which was later added to Rongpur (now in Bangladesh) of Bengal province. Rongpur city also served as the headquarters of this eastern Bengal area. On August 12, 1765 the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam granted the Dewani of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa to the East India Company making the company defacto administrative authority over the province. Historian H K Barpujari in this context states “The *suba* (province) of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa included the present district of Goalpara (then) in the State of Assam, it was a border area, separating the Ahom kingdom from the company’s dominions. The responsibility of administration and defence of Bengal necessitated the establishment of political relations with the principality of Koch Bihar which had old historical association with the Brahmaputra valley.”

Unlike other parts of Assam where Mauzadari system was in vogue, the Zamindari-System of Goalpara and Cachar gave a distinct identity of its own also prevailing in Bengal. Land revenue being the main source of income for the British administration. Viceroy Lord Cornwallis effected the permanent settlement of the Bengal province in 1793 thereby officially recognizing the zamindar-class as the permanent owners of land, subject to payment of the fixed amount of revenue in perpetuity. They became a ‘Class’ of land-owners loyal to British administrators forming a stable element in the State who become the revenue collecting agents from the peasantry or *roysts*, apart from providing security and maintaining peace and stability. In the language of revenue administration they became “proprietors” of “permanently settled estates”.

According to J N Das, an expert on revenue laws in Assam – “The rights of proprietors of permanently settled estates are permanent and transferable and they have rights over mines and minerals. But they have to pay revenue, even though it may be very small and cannot be enhanced at any time. Their estates may be sold for arrears of revenue free from encumbrances. These permanently settled estates are found only in the districts of Goalpara, Cachar and foothills of Assam. Goalpara district during those days was divided into two district regions.

The Eastern Duars comprising Bijni, Chirang, Ripu and Guma Duars, which lie at the Bhutan foothills between Sankosh and Manas rivers and these were not included in permanently settled estates and permanently settled estates were covered by the zamindaris of Bijni, Mechpara, Parbatjoar, Chapor, Gauripur and Karaibari. These six zamindaris paid nominal revenue at the rate of Rs. 11414/- annually. Although there were six zamindaris under influential royal families, these were divided into 19 parganas. According to the Goalpara District Gazetteer these 19 units functioned as estates covering an area of 284 square miles. These included – Bijni, Mechpara, Parbatjoar, Chapar, Gauripur, Kasbe Ghilla/Ghurla, Karaibari, Tariya, Taluk Goalpara, Gola Alamganj, Kasbe Dhuburi, Nawabad Futuri, Khuntaghat, Habraghat, Kalumalupara, Aurangabad, Jamira and Mokrapur. Some of the smaller zamindaris (parganas) integrated with bigger zamindaris. In 1849 the zamindari of Kalumalupara was bought by Gauripur estate.

The most important salient feature of this zamindari-system was its land revenue administration which was purely based on the Mughal system of land

administration. The British administrators did not effect any major change in this sphere, Persian terms and definition continued to be used and which even continues till today. For administrative convenience the province or *suba* of Bengal was divided into *Sarkars* (or districts) and Goalpara some what resembled such a *Sarkar* or Bengal *suba*. For fiscal administration the *Sarkars* were further divided into parganas that comprised a group of villages. In this context, out of the 19 estates we are referring to mostly are actually parganas which were either under zamindars or an *Amil* or *Karori* who was the head of land-administration for the pargana chiefly responsible for revenue collection and promotion of agriculture. In most cases the parganas were sub-divided into Mahals placed under an *Amin*. *Amin*'s duties included issue of lease deeds or *patta* to the tenants and obtaining 'deeds of acceptance' or *qabuliyats*. He was assisted by *Qanungo* who was responsible for keeping land records belonging to the village within the parganas and assessment of revenue rates. The Mahals in parts of Goalpara were termed as '*Tahsils*' which is also equivalent of a '*Dihi*'. These '*Tahsil*' were placed under *Tahsildar* who was the collecting agent. The '*Tahsil*' were sub-divided into '*Jotes*'. The '*Jotes*' were under several '*Jotedars*', who were rich and powerful land-owners wielding wide socio-economic power in their respective locality and villages. They employed the tenants to cultivate their land. Under '*Jote*'s the tenants or peasants did not enjoy any right over the land they cultivated. The '*Jotedar*'s entered into agreement with their zamindars apart from owing political allegiance they collected revenue from the tenants. In turn they were given such *pattas* and *qabuliyats*, as recognition. However, such agreements

proved harmful for the already exploited tenants who hardly had any rights over the land they cultivated. There were many instances in history when the ryots revolted over unjustified enhancement in land-tax by the '*jotedar*'s and zamindars. But that is another chapter in zamindari history. However this interesting aspect of '*jotedari*-system' is yet to be researched upon by our historians.

The entire char-belt of the Brahmaputra River also has a separate history associated with Goalpara under zamindaris. These riverine deltas stretching from Rongpur (in Bangladesh) to Barpeta were either jungles or grazing grounds for cattles called *khutis* or *bathans*. The zamindars and *jotedars* brought Muslim-cultivators from Mymensing district of Bangladesh to settle the land who made sandy soil fit enough for cultivation. With subsequent settlements the *Chars* came to acquire Bengali names given by these immigrants such as Asamer Alga, Bamuner Alga, Nayeralga, Shiber Alga, Thakur Alga, Padmer Alga, Tinsha Bigha and Ashi Bigha.

The rich Muslim '*joteder*'s fought amongst themselves for every inch of land at a time when "might was right". Murders were common and chieftains burnt down each others houses and villages in enmity. The history of the *Chars* are repleted with numerous examples of such fratricidal wars between the chieftains, yet to be analyzed by our historians. Floods, erosions and earthquakes ravaged these deltas time and again. The major earthquake of June 12, 1897 ravaged the entire greater Goalpara region causing extensive damage to the south bank of river Brahmaputra. The entire countryside and *chars* went below the river and almost 50 per cent of the

population shifted to the northern bank. As a huge area became unfit for cultivation as jungles reappeared. However zamindars lost no time in resettling the land to the 'jotedar's, both to old and new immigrants. The earthquake of 1950 and instant flooding created serious dislocations.

The administrative pattern of the zamindars followed the Mughal-pattern of administration. All the parganas did not have the same rate of land revenue which varied from place to place. For example in Aurangabad pargana the revenue rate was Rs. 1.50 per *bigha*. Revenue was paid annually by the tenants and for them the revenue receipts were the only records of rights that they had over their land. The intermediaries collected the same on behalf of the zamindars who in turn paid the revenue to the East India Company. The zamindars also acquired rights over fisheries, forests, quarries and all corporal rights over all classes of land. From the time of colonial administration the zamindari were officially termed as 'Estates' which remained under the management of a *Dewan* (Manager).

The estate functioned on the lines of the Mughal Zamindari administration. The residence of the zamindars were called '*Rajabaris*' established at their respective headquarters. The *Rajabaris* of Gauripur (Gauripur), Abhayapuri (of Bijni estate), Bilasipara (Chapar Parbatjoar estate) still bear the vestiges of history of zamindaris of these region.

In the socio-economic and political life of Goalpara these zamindars wielded respect and enjoyed the status of minor monarchs. In fact, most of them were renerated with the kingship title of "Raja". After permanent settlement Khuntaghat and Habraghat pargana came under

zamindarship of Raja Amrit Narayan, that of Chapor under Raja Kirti Narayan Choudhury, Parbatjoar under Raja Mahendra Narayan Singh, Meshpara and Taluk Goalpara under Raja Prithiram Choudhury. But perhaps the most powerful of such Rajas was the zamindar of Gauripur who also ran the parganas of Ghurla (Gauripur), Kalumalupara, Gola Alomganj, Kasbe Dhubri and Nawabad Futuri. People from all walks of life from various caste, creed, tribe or religion lived in the communal harmony and paid full respect to the zamindars. One of the most important contributions from them were establishment of educational institutions, high schools were established at Abhayapuri, Bilasipara, Bagribari, (then Poine Nayani), Gauripur, Rupshi, Dhubri, Jogighopa, Lakhipur, etc. Children from all caste, creed and religions attended the schools. Scholarships were provided to the extraordinarily meritorious students by them. One such student who went on to become a literary giant in Assam was Chandranath Sharma of Barpeta who completed his education under the patronage of Gauripur zamindari. Chandranath Sharma was the first literary figure to oppose the removal of the Assamese language from schools with the imposition of Bengali language during pre-independence period.

Apart from providing financial assistance to scholars, zamindars provided sponsor to writers in publication of books and journals. Eminent historian Sibananda Sharma states in his work *Goalpara Zilar Itihas* that Gauripur zamindar gave financial assistance for printing and publication of *Kabindra Mahabharat* and *Social History of Kamrupa* written Nagendra Nath Basu. *Kamrupa Sasanavali* composed by Padmanath Bhattacharjee was financed by the Bijni zamindar.

An era rich in cultural heritage annual fairs were held regularly participated by people from all sections of society irrespective of caste, creed or religion. Fairs known as “*Sat Bisuva*” (on Seven *Bihu*) was celebrated on the lines of *Bihu* celebrated at the end of seventh month (*satmah*) and beginning of a new year. These fairs continued for seven days. Held under the patronage of zamindars, artisans and craftsmen displayed their skills and products like arts, pottery, pith craft, etc were exhibited. Groups of musicians called *gitals* performed in the fairs with gay abandon. Artists performed rich varieties of Goalpara folk songs and dances of Moinamati, Satyapir, Monai Jtra, Padmapurana, Bashipurana, Bharigaon, etc. In their palaces the zamindars organized *jalsa*, a *majlis* inviting prominent singers and dancers from as far as Lucknow. Such shows gave birth to local musicians and playwrights. *Jatras* or theatre-groups came from Calcutta to perform regularly.

The zamindari-system however left several long-term harmful effects. Total ignorance of the welfare of the tenants and subtenants or *prajas* (district) who were left at the mercies of the exploitative *jotedars* and amins led to wide spread discontent. The frequent enhancement of land-tax not only proved burdensome on the peasants but oppressive and exploitative as well. Imposition of excessive taxes and luxuries lifestyles of the zamindars led to revolts. As a consequence government was compelled to pass the Goalpara Tenancy Act in 1929 to safeguard the rights of the tenants. Luxuries lifestyle of this royal class destroyed the administration as they devoted more time to wine and women leaving administration at the hands of inefficient and corrupt officials, leaving a bad-impact on socio-economic and political sphere. With the acquisition of

zamindaris in 1951 most of them went bankrupt and many went to settle in Calcutta selling their estates. Wine shops and prostitution centres grew up in the zamindaris headquarters during those days. Appropriation and ostentatious spending of wealth at the cost of the blood of the peasants led to several revolts. The revolt of Habraghat is significant. During the struggle for independence from colonial yoke the Muslim league Movement in this region spearheaded by a pious leader named Abdul Hamid Bhasani took anti-zamindari undertones.

With the abolition of zamindaris following the acquisition of the estates by the State Government under the Assam State Acquisition of Zamindaries Act, 1951 this class lost their status and power. With it the land of the rich *jotedars* were acquired and distributed among the tenants or ‘*prajas*’. Even though at the initial stage the *Jotedars* were allowed to retain possession of 250 *bighas* land but was later reduced to 50 *bighas* by the Ceiling Act. With the replacement of estates with Tahsils, 16 new revenue circles were formed by the government notification, and revenue came to be collected by the government officials appointed as Tahsildar. The descendants of the zamindars are now on verge of extinction as most of the families shifted to Bengal. Prominent among the living members of Gauripur Zamindari is a well-known exponent of Goalpara folk songs Pratima Barua Pande. However people of Western Assam still cherish in their memories of a glorious period that flowered between medieval and pre-modern period of history.

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Peasants - Armed

“....history deals not only with the lives of great individuals; in a sense it may be said to consist of the sediment of lives of millions of smaller men and women who have left no name, but who have made their contribution. Their lives make the material of history as a coral reel is built up out of lives of millions of molluscs”
(A.L. Rowse, The Uses of History; London, 1947)

Lives of great individuals have been relevant topics of historical study at the hands of historians since time immemorial. This methodology of emphasizing on “Individuals” can be described as an “elitist” approach to history. However, in recent years a school of historians categorized as ‘sub-altern school’ has developed a critique of this ‘elitist bias’ to the discipline and in the process has started researching on those neglected, unrepresented or gone ‘unknown and unsung’ classes in historical studies like the peasants, tribals, lower class movements, working class, female-movements, etc., that in the words of A.L. Rowse are “...smaller men and women who have left no name but who made their contribution”, in shaping the destiny of nations. The study on the nature of popular resistance by peasants against British colonization of India is one such important topic in history.

According to historian Bipan Chandra, the popular resistance against British raj in India took three broad forms – civil rebellion, tribal uprisings and peasant movements. The civil rebellions were often led by traditional ruling

elites like deposed rajas, nawabs and their descendants, zamindars, etc. The rapid changes in political and economic spheres led to disruption of the agrarian society like hike in tax and revenues that led to peasant and tribal uprisings. Since time immemorial peasants in India had remained an economically independent socio-economic class. Historian Harbans Mukhia describes the medieval Indian peasant as relatively “free” and Irfan Habib finds the peasant as an “independent producer” unlike its European counterpart. It was only after the establishment of colonial rule in India that invited peasant unrest at frequent intervals due to the exploitative economic policies.

In case of Assam (greater Assam then), she witnessed a series of revolts from the 19th century. Even though the peasantry remained an unorganized sector, village organizations like the *Raijar Mel* were formed in different parts of the State with an intention of uniting the peasants between 1860 and 1900 against imposition of numerous taxes and levies. The Jorhat *Sarvajainik Sabha* was one such organization that protested against the unfair hike in revenue, and overburdening of the cultivators. *Raijar Mels* in Kamrup and Darrang organized ‘no-rent’ campaigns. *Ryot Sabhas* in Tezpur and Nagaon also protested against the economic policies of the government. The educated intelligentsia, priests, craftsmen, artisans, etc. also joined these organizations to express solidarity with the peasants. In fact, many historians like Amalendu Guha argue that these organizations were forerunners to the Assam Congress (formed in 1921). Freedom fighters like Kushal Konwar, Madan Rowta, Kanaklata, Bhogeswari Phukanani were either directly or indirectly associated with

such *Mels*. These significant development are wide-open for historical research.

From the early part of 19th century there was an unprecedented hike in land revenue and taxes levied on betel-nuts, betel leaves, water, forestry, grazing, excise, etc. It is worthwhile to mention here that the administration abolished slavery in 1840 and so-called slaves like *lagua*, *likchou*, *bandi-betis* who were serving as slaves since the days of Ahom monarchy were freed. As a consequence a large number of male slaves became peasants increasing the peasant population. The Ryotwari land system was introduced to settle land with peasants in the districts of Kamrup, Darrang, Nagaon, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur. According to this tenure system the government fixed the land revenue for a stipulated period on land owned by the peasants who remained Independent producers and the rate of land revenue was hiked once the period was over. Such a hike was not only burdensome and oppressive for the peasantry but it also invited the wrath of the poor farmers who were compelled to raise the banner of revolt. Some of the peasants were compelled to raise to relinquish (*istafa*) their cultivable land. Aggrieved Hindus met in *Namghars* and Muslim in Mosques to come out together through the *Raijar Mels* to protest against the government move. By 1869 the *Mels* met frequently at places like Patharughat, in Mangaldai, at Govindapur, Hadira and Bajali and then in Kamrup. Police suppression on the leaders created resentment among the masses.

The Patharughat uprising near Mangaldai in 1891 was a historically significant peasant revolt that took place in Assam. Revenue enhancement led to peasant resistance.

The aggrieved peasants met at the *Mels* and decided not to pay land revenue. To force the peasants to pay the revenue the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang, Col. A.C. Comber accompanied by the superintendent of police arrived at Patharughat. Non-payment of revenues led to an armed conflict between the peasants and the police that resulted in police firing. In the firing 12 persons died and many were wounded. Even though the uprising was suppressed the government was forced to relax some of the hard policies that hit the peasants. In a similar fashion the demonstrators in Rangia market became furious in 1893 against revenue hike threatening to destroy the police station, post office and Tehsildar's office. However the revolt was quickly quelled. A series of agrarian disturbances took place in Kamrup and Darrang when ryots refused to pay revenue, particularly in places like Sarukhetri or Lachima, Pati Darrang, Nalbari, Barama, Bajali and several mouzas of upper Borbhag.

An important uprising called Phulaguri uprising took place in 1861 which is also popularly known as '*Phulagurir Dhewa*' in Nagaon. Rumour spread in Nagaon that the government was planning to levy numerous taxes like house tax, betel-nut tax, betel-leaf tax, etc. The imposition of license tax and opium tax (excise) gave impetus to the rumour, particularly among the tribesmen of Phulaguri area. In 1861, about a thousand peasants agitated in front of the office of the Deputy Commissioner, Nagaon. Failing to get a satisfactory reply from the D.C., Lt. Herbert Sconce, the protest continued for several days with the determination not to pay any taxes. As a consequence armed battles were fought with police. According to historian Benudhar Kalita, 39 persons died due to firing and

hundreds were injured. The uprising was spearheaded by Narsing Lalung, Sipsing Lalung and Bahubali Koibarta. Historian Lakhinath Tamuli states that – “undoubtedly the Phulaguri uprising was the first organized revolt by the Assamese society against exploitation by the colonial administration. Even though the revolt was ruthlessly suppressed, it served as a lesson for preceding generations “ (*Bharatar Swadhinata Sangramat Asomar Awadan*).

Historian Amalendu Guha in his excellent work **Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle & Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947**, elaborately deals in details about the peasant revolts which according to him occurred due to excessive colonial exploitation of the Assamese peasantry. He cites that by 1874-75 the colonial administration derived Rs. 56 lakh from revenue of which Rs. 33.5 lakh came from land tax, by 1882-83 the total revenue increased to Rs. 81.5 lakh. In 1892-93 the total revenue earned in Assam province stood at Rs. 105 lakh of which Rs. 47.5 lakh was derived from enhanced land revenue. In spite of growing discontent authorities continued to impose fresh taxes and enhanced existing rates. In 1865 the rates of *rupit* and *on-rupit* land increased from 25 per cent to 50 per cent in almost all the districts of the province. Closely linked with these unrest was introduction of opium cultivation in Assam. H.N. Barpujari states – “Already hard hit by increase in taxation on land, the prohibitory order on opium cultivation shattered the domestic economy of the tribal areas where per capita consumption of opium was slated to be highest in the province” (Political History of Assam 1826-1919; Guwahati, 1977). Manifold increase in taxes led to revolt, yet colonial exploitation continued despite financial prosperity of the administration.

Zamindari system prevalent in lower Assam, viz. Goalpara, Dhubri, Bongaigaon, Kokrajhar also hiked land revenue led to widespread agrarian discontent. The British administrators were closely in league with these princely zamindars. Rebellions arose in Ghurla (1851), in Habraghat, in Khuntaghal Pargana (1862), Barpatgiri Hangama, etc. The hills also burned with uprising of the Garos. Imposition of house tax and stamp duty lead to the Jaintia or Synteng uprising of 1860 and 1962 which were of a serious nature. The Khasis revolted against introduction of license tax in the hills. In such a situation the Amrit Bazar Patrika, a newspaper published from Calcutta observed in an editorial that "...in the Deccan the fury of the ryots was directed against money lenders, in Bengal against indigo planters in 1869, in Pabna against zamindars in 1872 but in Assam, at this moment, it is open rebellion against the government".

An important aspect of such revolts was the absence of pioneering leaders. In words of Sajal Nag these were – "Self mobilized movements involving sub-altern classes and the leadership was collective. This will be more substantiated by the rule of *Mels* in it. The absence of leadership in the peasant movements is not unprecedented or new, but it is a crucial feature still, for further exploitation because it belies the whole theory of 'patron-client relationship' between the rural leadership and the peasants and also establishes the falsity of government suggestion that the movement was actually the "dealing of outside forces" who were self-seeking persons" (Peasant and the Raj – Study of Sub-altern Movement (1893-1894) in the North East Quarterly, Vol. 2, July 1984, No. 1). However, participation to such movements were not

confined to the economic class solely, but were equally joined by non-cultivating classes like the Brahmins, Mahantas, Muslims, Dolois, artisans, etc. giving a more or less cosmopolitan character to the movement. In many cases, as some historians argue, such movement were directed not only against colonialism but also against the money-lending Marwari traders.

Ranajit Guha in his work “Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1983”, studied the series of peasant revolts between 1783 to 1900, taking much pain to isolate the ideological invariants of ‘peasant consciousness’ and their ‘rational unity’ – i.e. to say in its paradigmatic form Guha has identified six ‘elementary aspects’ as he called them that causes ‘insurgent peasant consciousness’, viz. –

- (i) negation
- (ii) ambiguity
- (iii) modality
- (iv) solidarity
- (v) transmission and
- (vi) territory.

The insurgents always have a negative consciousness or antagonism towards the authority. In case of such insurgency in Assam the denominator was the steep hike in land revenue leading to such protests. The degree of ambiguity was also prevalent as the direction of the revolts remained ambiguous. The modality was resistance and defiance to authority like launching of the non-tax campaign. Solidarity was strong undoubtedly but not in a disciplined form. The transmission of message, sometime in form of rumors gave credence to revolt amongst all classes.

The territory or specific geographical region was not defined but confined to larger areas with common language, customs, habits, rituals, etc. in case of Assam. However, as far as historical research is concerned, these elementary aspects have remained unexplored till date.

The Indigo Revolt of 1859-60 in neighboring Bengal left a deep impression upon the ryots of Assam. A play titled *Neel Darpan* written by Deen Bandhu Mitra earned fame for vividly portraying the oppression of the indigo planters by the administration. The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 also left an indelible mark on the ryots. Excessive exploitation and usual depression threatened the age-old position and existence of the peasantry. The peasantry through these revolts showed remarkable courage, spirit of sacrifice and solidarity cutting across religious and caste barriers. By directly challenging the administration, they succeeded in winning considerable concession from the Colonial Raj. But it is sad to notice today this class has remained a purely disorganized unit. Despite playing a significant role throughout history today it is felt that there is an urgent need to reorganize them, give them direction and ideologically orient the peasant class into a single secular organization to promote economic development of the country.

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Peasants - Armed



Swaheed Minar (Martyr's Column) at Patharughat



Memorial of Phulaguri peasant uprising in October 1861

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Visionary king-maker

Chanakya the new 52 episode TV serial, has hit the small-screen in the 9 a.m. Sunday slot. Perhaps many of the viewers are ignorant of the history of the period Chanakya belonged to. Known by various names such as Kautliya, Vatsayan, Malanga, Dramila, Paksila, Syami, Angula and Vishnugupta, he remained unknown to historians for nearly 1500 years till the discovery of his masterpiece, the Arthashastra in 1905. As a renowned personality, a famous historian portrayed Chanakya as “India’s first political scientist, a visionary who dreamt of a story and united India, the Brahmin with an amazing presence of mind, wisdom and foresight”.

Chanakya’s background has remained obscure as nothing is authentically known about the place of birth or the circumstances leading to his death. Some legends put it that he belonged to Patliputra (old Patna), the capital of Magadha. Son of a teacher of political science Chanak, he left for Taxila (now in Pakistan) to peruse higher studies. During those days Taxila University was the highest seat of learning, where students flocked to study arts, sciences and medicines under eminent professors. After his academic stint in this university, Chanakya graduated as a learned political-scientist. Meanwhile, as a wise and experienced person, he lamented to witness the internal political fabric of both Magadha and Gandhara (with capital at Taxila) torn apart by royal intrigues, conspiracies and internecine warfare.

From the 6th century BC, Magadha emerged as a powerful territorial monarchy under the dynastic rule of the Haryankas, the Sisunagas and finally the Nandas. The Nandas were considered by many historians as the first empire-builders in India. The first Nanda ruler was succeeded by his eight sons, of whom the last was Dhanananda. Contemporary Greek writers like Quintus Curtius refer him as Agrammes or Xandrames. Dhanananda proved to be the most incompetent and inefficient among the Nanda Kings.

Exploitation, corruption and chaos within the internal administration compelled the people to revolt. Even the capable and honest Magadha prime minister Shankatar revolted against the king and the corrupt bureaucracy only to be imprisoned. Internal crisis contributed to the ultimate rupture of the Nanda regime.

It was a time in history when the whole of India was ruled by incompetent kings. The dissenting republics were constantly engaged in futile internecine warfare with each other, without any desire for unity. Some of them were quite helpless against invasion from outside like that of the Macedonians under Alexander in 326-325 B.C. In such a situation, Chanakya strongly felt the necessity of arresting the forces of disintegration through a policy of coercion – Dandaniti. He was in search of a determined, compassionate king and a follower of old tradition as well as righteousness – Dharma. Finally, he found such a personality trait in Chandragupta, a man of humble origin. If Chandragupta was an adventurous person, Chanakya was the brain behind him.

A brahminical account suggest that Chandragupta was born of Mura, a Shudra woman in the imperial court of the Nandas. At an early age Chandragupta is sold to have served in the army of the Nandas, which helped him in understanding tactical knowledge of how the army functioned. When Nanda power started declining he left the army to join hand with Chanakya. Consequently, through sheer diplomacy of Chanakya, he was able to win a number of powerful hill chiefs to organize an army.

This army successfully expelled the remaining Greeks (in the satrapies) from the Indian soil. Undoubtedly, their northern campaigns were easy and short, but had tremendous significance.

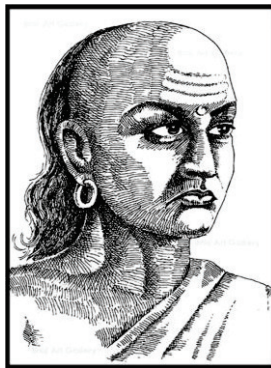
They took advantage of the growing weakness and declining popularity of the Nandas who were on the brink of collapse. In the ensuing battle, the Nanda troops lead by a general named Bhadrasala were utterly routed by Chandragupta's forces. This led to the establishment of the rule of the Maurya dynasty.

The magnum opus of Chanakya was the *Arthashastra* that remains a potent force in India's polity where state, king and people became the favourite subject of his study. He would like to see the king's power to be used for economic, social and spiritual welfare of the people. *Dharma* was his ultimate goal, and welfare of the community was undoubtedly ultimate goal for Chanakya's king. He aimed at bringing the whole of India under one political king. Commenting on the *Arthashastra* and indologist, John Campbell observed: "The caustic and sententious style, literacy facility and intellectual genius

displayed do high credit to the master of political devices who composed this amazing treatise.”

Probably through some spot-reading, a scholar like Chanakya is dubbed as another Indian Machiavelli after the Italian political innovator Nicolo Machiavelli (1467-1527) who had fascinated the western mind for nearly five hundred years with his work *The Prince* that advocated his formulae for warfare and diplomacy. In contrast, Chanakya was much more humane, noble, gentle, wise and a quiet philosopher than a shrewd, ruthless and heartless Machiavelli. The writer-director-actor of the serial, Dr. Chandraprakash Dwivedi himself wants to dispel the popular belief that Chanakya was an Indian Machiavelli. To provide a realistic account of that period, Dr. Dwivedi admits that Chanakya is not a dramatic presentation (like Tipu Sultan) but an actual depiction of history. This big-budget serial should be another big treat for the history-loving viewers that provide a fascinating depiction of India's first well-known king maker.

This article appeared in *The Northeast Times* on 02-02-1992.



Chanakya

(10)

All quiet in the Western Front

Protection of India's border in the western sector should remain the top priority.

We have to be vigilant on Chinese bellicosity.

The visit of the Indian Prime Minister to China marks a new beginning of relationship with the northern neighbour. Uneasy tension prevailed between India and China over international boundaries following the major face-off at Galwan Valley in June, 2020. Following the Galwan face-off, both the countries moved their men and materials to the Line of Actual Control (LAC) creating tension along the border for last four years. Chinese bellicosity along the Line of Actual (LAC) has a long history. Thereafter several rounds of negotiations at the level of army commanders of both the armies to disengage the troops from the 'friction points' at the borders have gradually led to easing of tensions. Now China has come forward to develop better relationship following US President Donald Trump's decision to impose heavy tariffs on the Chinese and Indian products.

The Union Territory of Ladakh in western sector is one of the most sensitive locations of India. Recently the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited India and held bilateral talks with Indian counterpart S. Jaishankar where agreements were reached to maintain peace and tranquility across the LAC. Border talks were held following the Agreement on the Political Parameters and Guiding

Principles of 2005. The two sides set up the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Cooperation (WMCC). Now, China wants to develop the bilateral ties for peaceful co-existence. Both the nations met at the SCO Summit in Tianjin and agreed on their commitment to fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable settlement of the border issue.

In the last decade or so New Delhi has taken large number of infrastructural projects including the improvement of the connectivity networks. The renovation of the highly strategic Durbak-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldie (DSDBO) Road from Durbuk to Daulat Beg Oldie that runs parallel to the LAC has created a headache for China. The Galwan Valley clash was primarily due to construction of a 450 metre long Col. Chewag Rinchen Bridge on the DSDBO Road. The bridge was inaugurated by the Indian Defence Minister on 21st October, 2019. The road lies adjacent to Galwan Valley that runs parallel to LAC on the Indian side. This road connects the northern most point of India i.e. The Karakoram Pass and the Daulat Beg Oldie where there is a defunct Advanced Landing Ground. The Depsang Plains is another area of dispute along the DSDBO road. Till recent times the Chinese troops often block the Indian patrols from going beyond the Y-junction to move to Daulat Beg Oldie. But with the latest agreement this threat has subsided. With development of this important road infrastructure movement of army and machineries. It has become far more convenient for patrolling and vigilance in the climatically hostile inhabitable region.

Despite showing their interest for bilateral co-operation, China continues to upgrade its infrastructure along the LAC. UK Think Tank Chatham House has

confirmed through satellite imagery that China is expanding the roads, outposts, modern weather posts, airfields, tunnels, bunkers across the LAC in the western sector. Recently a 400 metre long bridge over Lake Pongong Tso was completed adjacent to LAC without much protest from Indian side. This bridge is approximately 25 Kilometers from the LAC under Moldo Division in disputed Aksai Chin area. This bridge form a part of alignment of a newly proposed construction of a second major highway linking Tibet to Xinjiang. The first highway G219 was completed in 1957 without the knowledge of Indian Government during that period. Built in the disputed region of Aksai Chin that originally formed a part of India was occupied by China after the Indo-China War of 1962. A Divisional headquarter is set up at the edge of the lake.

China will pose another threat for India by alignment for a new highway named G 695 which is more like a Border road that will run parallel along the LAC for movement of troops. The population is very sparse in these area due to hostile climate. The movement of troops has been difficult on China due to small dirt tracks from G219 and hence has proposed to constructed this road. This will pass through Maza in Xinjiang, Zanda (opposite to Himachal Pradesh/ Uttarakhand), Burand (near Lipulekh pass on the LAC) Gyirong (opposite to Nepal) Kamba (30 KMs from Naku La in Sikkim) Cona (30 KM from Tawang), Lhunze (70 Km northeast of Cona). The average distance of the highway is 20 to 50 KMs from the LAC all along the border.

China has envisioned to complete this 2000 KM long highway within 13 years. India has not yet launched

any strong protest on construction of this highway. Further another highway is under construction called the Galwan Valley Highway or Tiankong Highway that is likely to join this new alignment to ease the troop movement up to Galwan Valley. All these activities of China shows its bellicosity that shall have military implication for India. Now the situation has improved as an agreement on the border management has been reached .Direct flight between the countries has also resumed since 2020. China has allowed pilgrimage to Mansarover and Buddhist sites. Both countries have lifted reciprocal tourist visa restrictions.

Again, lately China is planning to build a Railway network parallel to the LAC to connect the Xinjiang with Tibet through the disputed Aksai Chin area will have a strategic implication that will improve the logistical capabilities in this inaccessible and challenging terrain .This project is a larger part of China's plan to develop a 5000KM rail network cantering around Lhasa by 2035.

In last few years India has not remained behind and spent more than Rs 2000 crores over development of infrastructure in the western frontier. The Advanced Landing Ground at DBO needs to be operationalized and upgraded to guard the northernmost frontiers up to the Karakoram Pass. The positive development in these areas is that another route has been constructed to DBO through Saser La pass via Murgo in eventuality of targeting of the DSDBO road from Galwan valley. Now India is planning to make Siachen, the world's highest battlefield and Galwan valley as new tourist destination after Siachen Base Camp was opened for tourists in 2020. All these areas are now well connected by black-topped roads. Even the

remote *Umling La* pass located near Demchok at a height of 19024 feet is the highest motorable mountain pass in the world is opened for tourists. Lately even the *Umling La* pass has been surpassed by construction another sky road which has surpassed even *Umling La* pass named *Ming La* pass located at an unbelievable height of 19400 feet connecting the strategic Likaru and Fukche Road right near the LAC.

Both nations have improved their infrastructure and protective measures for strengthening their respective positions. Lately disengagement of troops from the claim line of the borders has begun by both the countries at Depsang and Demchok areas. Patrolling along the Depsang plains is restored without intervention and grazing of cattle in border area in Demchok has been restored.

On the sidelines of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit at Tianjin few days ago, Prime Minister Modi told Chinese Premier Xi Jinping that “We are committed to progressing our relations based on mutual respect, trust and sensitivities”. The SCO congregation has shown a new order of **Global South Solidarity**. With the visit of the Indian Prime Minister to China and restoration of bilateral ties, New Delhi can concentrate on further improvement of infrastructure, connectivity and development of tourism circuit when the borders remain undisturbed as peace and stability prevails.



**Bumla Pass on Indo-China border
in Arunachal Pradesh**

Conservation of heritage of Assam



Puranigudam Jame Masjid established in 1824



Paanch Pir Dargah at Dhubri town

(11)

Conservation of heritage in Assam

Assam has a rich legacy of historical heritage .These historical heritage needs protection and conservation. Most of the heritage sites in Assam are facing problems of encroachment and construction activities. A law was recently tabled in the Parliament for restricting such construction near the heritage and historic monuments by heritage bye laws. The National Monuments Authority of India emphasizes that there will be no construction works within the periphery of 100 meters from any national monuments. This is significant step in the sense that many of the monuments are being gradually threatened by the construction of residence in the periphery of the monuments apart from rampant encroachment. Only through scientific conservation the heritage monuments can be protected for posterity in consonance with the existing rules and acts.

The monument of Purana Qila at Delhi built by Sher Shah Suri, the Afghan warrior, Sher Shah Gate and Khairul Manjil for shall be covered by this bye laws that has been drafted under the National Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (Amendment and Validation) Act, 2010. Till date five national monuments has been covered under this law. Similar steps are required for preservation of heritage sites like the *Charaideo Moidams* or *Momai kata garh* as these are gradually encroached upon by local population. India needs a sound cultural policy for preservation of the historical and cultural environment so that it can open opportunities to the much

debated scheme of *Khandhar Anathalaya* (Adoption centre of Ruined Monuments) is transparently converted into positive action to preserve cultural heritage for posterity.

In Assam 24 archaeological sites has been identified for protection through the Directorate of Archaeology to open a new chapter of state's rich history. The *Momai kata garh* built at the supervision of Lachit Barphukan for protection against the invading Mughal forces in Lankeswar is a rampart that has been encroached upon and needs urgent protection. *Momai Kata garh* dates back to 1671 AD which was linked to the reputed battle of Saraighat where General Lachit Barphukan defeated the Mughals in the naval battle. There are *buruzes* or edges on the *garhs* that were used by the soldiers to hide to launch attack with the *bortops* and cannons. Records state that there were seven *garhs* in total around Guwahati city. These *garhs* can be preserved by the Archaeological survey of India in order to prevent constant encroachment and earth cutting. There are 3 sites in Kamrup, 4 each in Golaghat and Nagaon, 13 in Tinsukia districts. These include the historical *pukhuris* (ponds), *maidams* (burial grounds), mosque of Pub Moitadhvaj Mosque in Dhing Nagaon, and even the site of battlefield of Alaboi.

A number of historic *sagars* and *pukhuris* or water tanks built by the Ahom kings are gradually being filled up for construction activities. Such activities are likely to create artificial water crisis in near future due to heavy depletion of ground water resources. These *sagars* and *pukhuris* are a reminder of the advanced technology applied for water conservation and harvesting to boost up farming and irrigation by the Ahom administrators. These give an

insight into the scientific methods adopted by the Ahom administration in conservation and use of water. The major water tanks or *sagars* are Jaisagar, Gaurisagar and above all Sibsagar that survive till today. Hence construction activities or encroachment on such historic water bodies should be dealt strictly by government by passing such heritage bye laws.

A number of stone bridges called *silshakos* were constructed during the Ahom age as a part of elaborate system of defense including construction of such roads and bridges for swift movement of troops during the battles with the invaders. The Namdang *silshako* in Gaurisagar over the National Highway No 37 is a reminder of architectural marvels of the Ahom period that survive till today withstanding the pressures of time. During World War II British army transported armoured tanks over the bridge remind about the scientific method of construction of the 15th century architects like Ghanashyam Khanikar. Similar bridge in north Guwahati is also still in usable condition. All these monuments need to be preserved for posterity.

The Ahoms and Koches achieved superiority in naval warfare and were able to defeat the invaders by their naval prowess. The decisive victory in the battle of Saraighat is a reminder of this superiority. This meant that there were ports and ship building industries in Assam during that period that were called *Naoghulis* located between Hadira Chowkey in the west to Rangpur in Upper Assam. War boats were built at these special ship building centres called *Naoghulis*. Shihabuddin Talish, the chronicler who accompanied General Mirzumla to Assam

mentions in his chronicle “*Fathiya-i-Ibriyah*” about the existence of these ship building industries and various kinds of boats used by the Ahom navy during that period .Transportation by ferries and boats happens to be the primary mode of transport for the char residents. There is ample scope to learn from the history. Ship building industry can be revived and it can generate employment to a large extent.

The shifting of the minaret of Mosque of Puranigudam popularly known as the Puranigudam Minar is an illustration of a remarkable achievement of conservation of heritage in Assam. This feat was accomplished due to constant efforts of the local population. The Minaret was a heritage monument that was constructed in 1909 by mason from Dhaka under the supervision of a British Civil Engineer by using local items like paste of sticky *bora* rice, eggs, *borali* fish etc usually used by the Ahom engineers in construction of the medieval monuments. The decision of the National Highways authorities to dismantle the monument for expansion of the road led to local resentment and led to a social media campaign to save the monument. A conscious citizen of Jorhat civil engineer by profession shared the information about the availability of technology of shifting of structures. Subsequently a Haryana based Engineering Company successfully shifted to a location of 75 feet from its original place without any damage. This remarkable feat in scientific preservation of history needs to be repudiated across the state.

The latest task of heritage preservation undertaken by the Directorate of Archaeology is the restoration of the

Heritage Police Stations of Assam that has witnessed trial and tribulations of freedom movement of India. Three Police Stations, namely Gohpur, Dhekiajuli and Chatia witnessed participation of people in the “Quit India Movement” on its premises. Gohpur Police Station was established in 1901 located in Biswanath district is one of the oldest Police Stations in Assam. Dhekiajuli Police Station in Sonitpur district set up 1913. The day of 20th September, 1942 was a black day in Assam where eight persons including three women were killed in Police firing at the Dhekiajuli Police Station. On same day Kanaklata Baruah, a flag bearer of the ‘*Mrityu Bahini*’ was shot dead along with Mukunda Kakati at Gohpur Police Station. The restoration works has already been completed by the Archaeology department deserves applause for this work.

There are lately media reports on the neglect of the remains of the first Ahom capital at Kaliamati under Mathurapur Police Station area of Charaideo lies in a very dilapidated condition and needs attention from the by the Archaeology department for restoration as founder of the Ahom kingdom Chaolung Sukafa set up the capital in 1228AD and it remained for next 170 years. Apart from this the *Douls* located in Sivsagar are also neglected and needs further conservation efforts. In a reply to Assembly question the Culture Minister of Assam, Keshab Mahanta stated that there are more than 400 archaeological sites in Assam out of which only 135 are attended the department. The Minister informed in the Assembly that Rs 25 crores has been released for preservation of important heritage sites.

The article appeared in The Assam Tribune on 19-10-2019.

Conservation of historical heritage



Gohpur Heritage Police Station building



Statue of martyr Kanaklata Barua: The brave girl led the Mrityu Bahini while marching to hoist the National Flag at Gohpur Police Station fell to the bullets of British Poilce in September, 1942

Conservation of historical heritage



Shiva Doul in Sibsagar



Ghanashyam's House: Ghanashyam or Ghanashyamuddin Khanikar was the Chief architect of monuments constructed during the period of King Rudra Singha (1665-1714) around Rangpur. Ghanashyam originally hailed from Cooch Bihar in north Bengal was invited by the Ahom king for construction of the monuments.

(12)

Steps for conservation of heritage in Assam

During the last Assembly session “**The Assam Heritage (Tangible) Protection, Preservation, Conservation and Maintenance Bill, 2020**” was passed to protect, preserve and conserve the tangible heritage of Assam. This heritage includes all the material remains such as archaeological sites, historical monuments, artefacts and objects that are significant to a community humans such as satras, monasteries, stupas, namghars, mosques, dargahs or churches which has been in existence of not less than 75 years and have historical ,aesthetic or architectural value that are not covered by the Assam Ancient Monuments and records Act, 1959. This Act has been passed at a time when most of the historic relics and monuments are facing serious threats of factors like unabated construction, encroachment and negligence around these sites.

In order to conserve the relics and monuments it has become necessary to work in a scientific manner so that these sites can become important centres of tourist attraction. In this Act under section 5, one Advisory Committee would be constituted to be chaired by the Hon’ble Minister of Cultural Affairs with the Chief Secretary as the Vice Chairman. One important clause of the Act empowers the Deputy Commissioners of districts to identify any historical relics, artefacts or sites for conservation or that needs restoration with assistance of the officials of Archaeological Survey and Museums. The

District Heritage Committee can submit such proposals to the government that can be enlisted as ‘tangible heritage’.

One of the most significant historical site of Assam are the Charaideo *maidams* that preserve typically mummified mortal remains of the Ahom royalty and nobility. These *maidams* are now facing encroachment covering an approximate area of 578 Bighas .This was the first capital set up the founder of the Ahom dynasty Chaolung Sukafa these burial grounds is located about 60 KMs from Sivsagar town. The tomb vaults resemble that of the Pyramids of Egypt. These *maidams* need scientific conservation for saving the same for posterity. In view of growing threats of encroachment the Directorate of Land Records carried out an extensive survey around the protected area encompassing the *maidams*. If the demarcation is carried out and Management Plan is prepared the Cultural department can submit proposal to the World Heritage Committee (WHC) for making it a “World Heritage Site” (WHS) to be maintained by the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). Various other *maidams* are located across Assam in places like Jorhat, Dibrugarh and Sivsagar are also in need of protection and conservation.

The UNESCO designates the World Heritage sites through ‘The World Heritage Committee (WHC)’ meets every year to announce and add sites in their meeting. Some of the important WHS of India are Taj Mahal in Agra, ancient Nalanda University site in Bihar, Rani Ki Vav in Gujarat, Kaziranga National Park and Manas Wild Life Sanctuary are some of the important World Heritage sites in India. In total 38 WHS are enlisted from India so far.

Currently there are 1052 sites listed in the WHS list. Dossiers for Majuli River Islands were prepared but unfortunately were not submitted in a proper way to the satisfaction of the WHC. Now dossiers are being prepared for Charaideo maidams as well.

The guidelines published by UNESCO are very strict and proposals to be prepared should include the Management Plans for acceptance by the WHC. Any addition into the WHS list directly signifies the historical importance of the place and likely increase in the tourist inflow to those sites. European countries have the largest number of World Heritage Sites as they understood the importance of preservation and conservation of heritage sites. As a part of the economic plan and sustainable development the WHS, it is necessary to follow the 5 Cs for heritage conservation. They are credibility, conservation, capacity building, communications and community participation.

Movable heritage includes various antiquities like coins and manuscripts or *sanchipaats*. The *sanchipaats* written in bark of trees by the great Vaishnava scholars are treasure troves of Assamese literature. One significant aspect of preservation is the ancient *Sanchipaata* in Assam written primarily in the bark of trees. Many of the manuscripts have been preserved in the *satras* of Assam that were written by the great Vaishnava scholars. Digitization of such manuscripts under the National Manuscript Mission is an important step taken by the state government. Recently some manuscripts relating to ancient *tantra-mantras* or magical practices and traditional medicines for which Mayong was once famous for has successfully

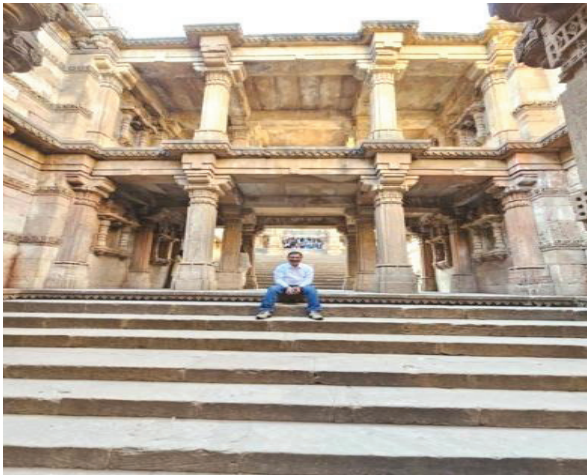
completed a project of restoration ,conservation, digitization of 250 number of valuable manuscripts in the Museum and Research Centre in Mayong in Morigaon district. The Project has been conducted by INTACH (Indian National Trust for Art & Cultural Heritage), Assam Chapter sponsored by Gerda Henkel Stiftung, Germany. Presently the Directorate of Archaeology under the Department of Cultural Affairs is carrying out restoration works in 115 protected sites and Monuments in the state in a phased manner.ASI has already developed 24 parks and site museums to preserve the artefacts as well as to promote tourism. The department has registered 9522 number of antiquities throughout the state as per the Antiquities and Art Treasuries Act, 1972. The Culture Department has listed 862 numbers of satras out of which 219 satras has been given financial assistance as Grants-in-Aid for protection, preservation and development of the institutions.

The Act has accepted that the protected area should have a radius of 50 metre. The perimeter should have been increased up to 200 metres as most of the protected monuments of India has the average radius of 200 metres as per Central Government protection Acts. The District Libraries and Museum can be developed as Resource Centre for such documentation for historical relics and documents found in the district. The digital formatting of the Revenue records is essential to stop the growing. The digital maps can be designed showing the revenue details. Conservation and preservation technology has improved in recent times including use of space and satellite technology to identify the lost sites by laser technology. The lost Inca ruins in South America was identified through this

technology. We have use such latest techniques to identify such lost sites.

Despite then rich legacy of historical heritage, most of the vestiges of history are lost in time due to negligence. The subject of history is being relegated to the background as the younger generations are deprived from the valuable lessons of their past or the legacy that the state or the country has inherited. Many of the historic *garhs* or ramparts built by the Ahoms and Koches as defensive walls against the invaders have been destroyed either by encroachment or by earth cutting. The historic tanks or *sagars* or *pukhuris* constructed by the Ahom swargadeos are gradually facing extinction due to non-conservation. Unless all these important historical sites are enlisted through Acts and Rules we will lose most of valuable treasures of our historical legacy.

This article appeared in The Sentinel on 30-10-2020.



UNESCO World Heritage Site:
Rani ki Vav at Ahmedabad in Gujarat

(13)

Act East Policy: Transforming the connectivity scene in northeast India

The improvement of railway connectivity from India to Myanmar and access to Sittwe port will open up avenues for trade, commerce, employment, economic growth and tourism for the North East India. The land locked region will have access to the seas through Sittwe port.

With the formal inauguration of the Bairabi-Sairang railway line by Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi, Mizoram has entered the railway map of the country. This line will now be extended to the Indo-Myanmar border to have access to the Kadalán Multi-Model Transit Project (KMTTP) at Sittwe constructed by India at Myanmar to access have access through the water route with Eastern and Southern Indian coasts. This is India's largest development initiative in Myanmar. Further a survey has been planned for building a railway line from Sairang to Zorinpui at Indo-Myanmar border covering a distance of 223 KM. Once this line is completed a railway access to Paletwa in Myanmar and then to KMTTP as well as port of Sittwe will be possible.

The project was conceived by New Delhi and formalised in 2008 under the Look East Policy (now Act East Policy), primarily to develop trade between Myanmar and South East Asian nations and counter China's maritime silk route initiative. According to the Ministry of External

Affairs the project was conceptualized to provide an alternative connectivity of Mizoram with Haldia/ Kolkata/ or any Indian ports through Kaladan River in Myanmar. The North East being a landlocked region this port will provide access to the international seas. This project will become the corner stone of Indo-Myanmar economic, commercial and strategic ties. It will also help India in counterbalancing China's growing influence in the region.

The port was developed with assistance of Government of India funded as a part of the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Project (KMTTP) at a cost of \$484 million. One of the geographical advantages for the North East India is that it will link the East coast of India with North Eastern states and the transportation costs of goods between Kolkata and Agartala and Aizwal will decrease by 50 percent. When the port becomes fully operational than it will provide an alternate route for the region to access international sea-routes via the port. Thus it would ease the pressure on the Chicken Neck corridor. The distance of the shipping route in Bay of Bengal from Sittwe to Kolkata port is 539 KMs.

The port has a maximum capacity of 20,000 DWT which will make Sittwe a maritime hub of Myanmar will open unprecedented economic growth in the region as part of Act East policy of the government. The port will developed as a Special economic Zone by India. ASEAN countries will participate in the Sittwe Economic zone (SEZ). The SEZ is planned at Ponnagyun township which 1000 acres of land. It will boost tourism, agriculture and manufacturing along the Kaladan river. The Chinese has

already set up an Economic Zone at Kyaukphu in Myanmar.

The KMTTP comprises of four important sections from India to the Sittwe port via maritime shipping, from Sittwe to Paletwa via Kaladan River, from Paletwa to Indo-Myanmar border via road and from the border to our National Highway No 54 via road that will enter Assam and reach Dabaka in Assam which a part of the East west Corridor connecting NE India with rest of India. Significantly this will form a part of the Multilateral Asian Highway connecting all countries of South East Asia. In this network 69 bridges has been constructed in the region creating better communication facilities for Myanmarese citizens and those travelling from North East India for trading purposes. The extension of India-Myanmar road to the Multilateral Highway connects Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. Sittwe port will connected by Inland Water Transport along the Kaladan river up to Paletwa inland water terminal in Chin state via Kaladan covering 158 KMs .The land route is connected from Paletwa (IWT) to Zochawchhuah (India) and then from Zochawchhuah to Zorinpui and then to Aizawl.

In this context it can be mentioned that the length of the road from Kolkata to Agartala in 1600 KMs and takes more than four days to cover the distance. But with new route through Sittwe to Chittagong and then to Saboom in Mizoram to Agartala will take two days reducing the distance by half along with cost and time.

The Sittwe port falls in Rakhine state of Myanmar which was earlier called Arakan.This region once formed a

part of the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire under Emperor Aurangzeb. It was followed by Mrauk kingdom. From that period the North East India maintained close socio-cultural ties with Myanmar. During the Burmese invasions in the early part of 19th century the torture and atrocities committed by the Burmese army that came to be called “*Maanor din*” in Assam was a tragic period of Assamese history. They imprisoned many Assamese families and carried them to Myanmar. These Assamese communities are still settled in the Rakhine region of the country. In 1826 the Treaty of Yandabu was signed forcing Burma to cede Arakan to British India.

The operationalization of the Sittwe port is likely to enhance bilateral and regional trade between India and Myanmar *vis a vis* South East Asian nations. This port will open up the possibilities for the entire Northeast India to transport its goods to rest of India as well as the South East Asian countries at a much cheaper rate. Earlier the shipping goods have to be carried up to Kolkata port than transported to rest of Europe or South East Asia. A few days ago first cargo vessel MV ITT *Lion* reached from Kolkata port was jointly received by Union Minister of Shipping and Waterways Sarbananda Sonowal and Myanmar’s Deputy Prime Minister Admiral Tin Aung San and inaugurated the port in Myanmar that came to be known as the “Chabahar of the East”.

This article appeared in AWAZ: The Voice, a web magazine published from Delhi on 14-09-2025.

(14)

Need for conservation of heritage

Recently the draft “**National Conservation Policy**” has been released by the Archaeological Survey of India for preservation and protection of historical monuments, archaeological sites and remains of the past. A number of acts and rules have been framed for protection of all ancient and medieval monuments since 1923. The colonial administrators were the first ones to take the initiative in preservation of the heritage sites of India. The new conservation policy has been drafted after almost one hundred years after enactment of an act passed by the British administrators in 1923. There is a need to introspect on what the past means to us today and how we intend to preserve them for generations to come.

The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) was established in 1861 for preservation of all historical monuments and heritage sites in the country. More than 36000 sites are today maintained by ASI in a very sensitive manner out of which 2670 number of such relics has been declared as nationally important monuments. But the irony is that more than 7500 numbers of some buildings remain unprotected so far. Heritage protection has been a state subject for a long period of time till ASI stepped in. It was only in 1997 that Government of India circulated a model Heritage Act for implementation by the states. The reputed NGO Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) has been working on this field since 1997. INTACH is still pressing on getting the Act passed by many state Government including Assam. INTACH has not

been active in Assam even though a chapter exists in the state for quite a long time now.

The biggest tragedy of conservation is that most of the heritage structures all across the country are in a very poor state. Many epigraphs are vanishing at the time of repairing. Many such structures are being encroached upon. Unplanned development in both rural and urban areas is destroying such buildings in name of development. Lack of maintenance by appropriate authorities including the state archaeology or cultural departments shows negligence towards our history and heritage. Many of these heritage landmarks have been damaged due to lack of awareness among the contemporary generations. The defaced figures, relief carvings and wall paintings are now proposed to be cleaned and protected. Hence there is an urgent need to update some of the basic conservation policies.

A recent audit report published by Comptroller and Auditor General of India on ASI for the year 2011-12 has revealed that as many as 92 ‘protected’ monuments have gone missing. The audit report states that ASI does not have the exact data of monuments under its protection. One glaring mistake mentioned in the report states that while notifying the Qutub Complex in Mehrauli, Delhi the Hindu Iron pillar was excluded. In a report placed before the Parliament in 2012 stated that 32 ‘protected’ monuments has gone missing. This list included one relic of Assam as well. The guns of emperor Sher Shah Suri have gone missing in the state. ASI is facing flak for not taking effective steps in preservation or saving the Island of Majuli, the biggest river island in the world. The audit report stated that ASI has not been able to submit a feasible

project report for declaring Majuli a UNESCO world heritage site. The island has been vying for the world heritage tag since 2004. This state of affairs reveals the neglect of the department even in maintenance of a centralised inventory of the monuments in India.

Many historical sites in India are still maintained by trusts, committees or private individuals. The draft policy has come under criticism for not including the non-ASI maintained monuments and that the concept of conservation of bio diversity has also been neglected. These crucial aspects cannot be overlooked and needs to be incorporated in the final draft. Close co-ordination has to be maintained between ASI and the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF), Revenue & Culture Departments, Urban Area Development (UAD) Department and the State Forests department in the contemporary period for preservation of architectural heritage. The draft proposal however does not encourage restoration but intends to stick to the original principle of preserving monuments in *situ*. It was agreed in principle not to disturb the aesthetics of the relics.

The period of Ahom administration in Assam was a golden age for regional architecture. Large number of monuments constructed across the region needs proper conservation by ASI. During a recent earthquake cracks have appeared in the most popular and recognised monument of Assam the Rangghar built by the Ahom king Pramatta Singha (AD 1744-1750). Instantly there was public outcry against ASI for failure to protect the landmark. In order to give facelift to the monument a project by name of '*Amulya Dharovar*' was launched by ASI for Rupees one

crore with funding by National Cultural Trust (NCT) and Oil & Natural Gas Commission (ONGC). Under the same programme ASI is planning for scientific conservation of three more monuments-Talatal Ghar, Kareng Ghar and the group of four *maidams* in Charaideo.

The Ahoms and other regional kings constructed a large number of tanks and water structures in the medieval period. These structures have remained neglected and unattended by government agencies. People are unaware of the historical importance of these historical water reservoir or *beels*. The *Satra* institutions are facing the twin threat of erosion and encroachment. The Culture department has made some land grants for their preservation. The department of Revenue and Land Administration has to be involved in conservation process for prevention of encroachment of the areas under the monuments. But that is not enough and ASI has to formulate strategies to save the Satras, temples and Mazars of Peers. Strong decisions have to be taken in the NCP against encroachment and defacement of heritage.

The heritage buildings of cities like Guwahati, Dibrugarh or Jorhat are still in dilapidated state. Many of the residences of the Deputy Commissioners constructed by the British should be converted into heritage buildings. The heritage buildings of stationing the office of the Commissioner of Upper Assam Division in Jorhat were damaged by a devastating fire recently. Many feel lack of proper maintenance led to such fire outbreak. ASI today maintains 55 such monuments in the state. Lately the Union Ministry of Culture has sent a proposal to UNESCO for inclusion of Charaideo group of *maidams* to include it in

the tentative list of World Heritage Sites in the category of either Group of Monuments or Cultural Landscape. Unlike Guwahati the city of Chennai is taking up the responsibility of maintaining all the heritage buildings. In pursuance of a High Court's order a Heritage Conservation Committee (HCC) has been constituted and subsequently in 2012 the Heritage Act has been drafted but not yet passed. Assam needs a similar committee to not only conserve its historical buildings but also form a body for conservation of all the Satra-institutions in the state.

In the context of scientific conservation we may take a leaf out of George Town, the capital of Penang in Malaysia which was declared a World heritage Site in 2008. The George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI), an NGO similar to INTACH Foundation in India is collaborating with the government in the conservation programme with a large number of activities like cultural mapping, community participation, revival of old cultural art forms, ancient culinary practices, capacity building programmes etc. The NGO is also working for shared space programme for making footpaths, greenery and improving the public spaces such as parks, waterways and urban markets. Funding is done by an agency called Think City Berhad that was set up in 2009. Till date 97 houses been restored and more than 1500 people were provided with training on capacity building. It has disbursed RM 13 million which is 60 percent on conservation of the buildings and 13 percent on improvement of spaces. Guides, manuals, histories depicting the importance of the buildings have been published. Now more people in the town are aware of the past. Singapore city is also preparing for a similar venture. A National Heritage Board has been set up. NGOs

led the Singapore Heritage Society is spearheading the movement setting up a Heritage Vision 2025.

The archaeological heritages are the reminiscence of the living witnessed of the historic era of over thousands of years. The younger generations must be encouraged to know about the past as subjects like history has already been excluded from the school curriculum. Conservation of historical monuments must be made compulsory subject in architecture and civil engineering syllabi. State's historical past has to be encouraged in higher education. Like Tamil Nadu Assam needs a Heritage Act to preserve the past. There must be a Heritage Society like INTACH in every district of the state so that all such historical buildings and art forms can be indentified and conserved for posterity. The convenor of INTACH Delhi chapter is however critical of the proposal and terms that this is not a 'forward looking document' as it does not reflect the developments in conservation philosophy and practice since 1923 published in the Manual of Conservation. He further opines that ASI does not acknowledge Indian ways of preserving and remains stuck in the old colonial policies.

In order to protect the ancient and medieval monuments the Draft Policy proposes to utilise the skills of hereditary craftsmen as they can handle the repairing works of the monuments which can become their source of livelihood. But public are sceptical as to how these masons or stone carvers can excel in repairing works of ancient monuments. Instead experts are of the opinion that highly trained and skilled workers can be utilised for such sophisticated works. Computer-aided technologies have to be adopted in a scientific manner for such repair works. The

new policy further calls for documentation of all maps, drawings, photographs, digital records and field notes for creating documents of interventions. In the draft NCP the ASI officers have not been encouraged to read the ancient or medieval scriptures in the NCP. Normally historians emphasise the need to read all the ancient Pali, Prakrit, Sanskrit or Persian script to understand the inscriptions, epigraphy or palaeography. There is a need to create a highly skill pool of personnel who can decipher the languages that has not been deciphered so far.

The draft “National Conservation Policy for Monuments, Archaeological Sites and Remains” aims not only for conservation of relics but also makes an attempt to be more inclusive and contemporary in approach to conservation and preservation. There is need for meaning full public-private partnership on maintenance of heritage. Columnist Alope Sen in an article in ‘The Telegraph’ stated that “UNESCO have developed and codified what is called the modern conservation philosophy. The main principles are : minimum intervention, maximum retention of material of cultural heritage value, reversibility (so that any errors made today can be rectified later), legibility (meaning replacements must be distinguishable from the original), and sustainability (so that is being conserved can be handed down safely and authentically for future generations)”. Hence conservation is no longer the physical repair and reinforcement of old but is a knowledge-based discipline necessitating the induction of historians and cultural scholars as much as of engineers and technical experts for scientific preservation of heritage for posterity. The proposal of NCP now awaits the approval of Ministry of Cultural Affairs of Government of India.

This article appeared in The Assam Tribune on 30-09-2013.

Conservation of historical heritage

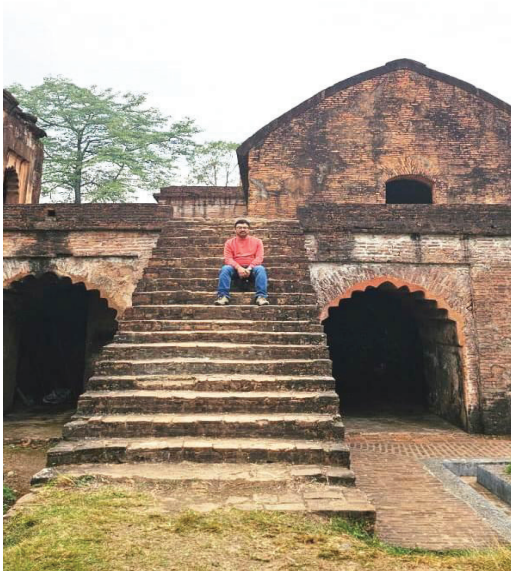


Chariot wheel of Konark temple in Odisha



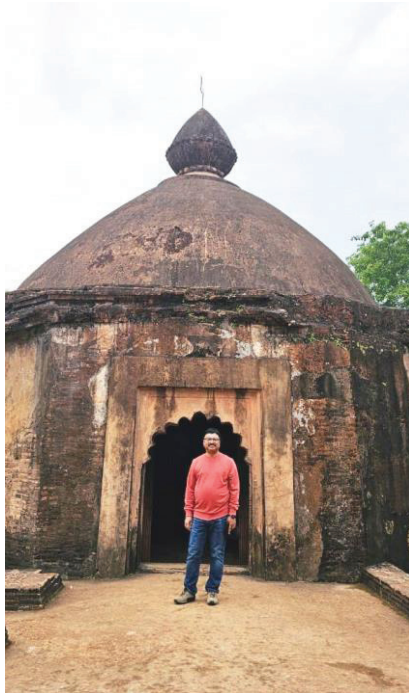
Terra cotta panels on the building of Ghanashyamuddin's
Ghar in Sibsagar

Conservation of historical heritage



Talatal Ghar at Rangpur as it is called in present day Sibsagar was a 7 storied building was a palace and military base of Ahom kings. Most of the buildings were burnt down during Moamaria rebellion in the 18th century.

Conservation of historical heritage



Ahom king's resting room in Talatal Ghar at Sibsagar



Premises of Talatal Ghar at Sibsagar

(15)

Orientalism: A relevant discourse

“Resistance to imperialism does not, of course, only involve armed force or bands of guerrillas. It is mainly allied with nationalism and with an aroused sense of aggrieved religious, cultural, or existential identity. In its pantheon are great warriors like Abdel Qader of Algeria, prophets and priests like the Mahdi and Gandhi, a phalanx of nationalist writers - Tagore, Yeats, Neruda, Aime, Cesaire, Leopold Singhor and dozens of intellectual figures like Marti, Mariategi, Fanon, Cabral and others, whose major role in the creation of an emergent and alternative discourse cannot be minimised”.

The above is an excerpt from an essay titled ‘Third World Intellectuals and Metropolitan Culture’ which is developed as a critique of western culture vis-a-vis the relevance of Third World intellectuals upsurge. The necessity of an alternative discourse has appeared in recent decades following the urgency in countering the distorted images and ideologies propagated by the western media/writers about the Third World that includes the Orient as well. The colonisation of a large number of countries as a consequence of the industrial revolution in Europe had more negative than positive effects. These nations continue to suffer from the tragic legacy left by colonialism. Despite its destruction, imperialism in form of ideologies continue to dominate the writings in once colonised nations.

Even today the west perceives the Asiatic (Oriental) and other Third World civilizations as 'inferior' compared to their so-called 'advanced' (occidental) civilization. The west always sought to represent the Orient as a partial self-image, if not necessarily inferior. Orientalism, we must remember is not rationalisation of imperialism. Scholar Edward argues that – “to say simply that orientalism was a rationalisation of colonial rule is to ignore the extent to which colonial rule justified in advance by orientalism, rather than after the fact”. Inferiorisation of oriental civilization is due to the fact that western authors uphold the 'Eurocentric' vision of the world that no longer holds any aesthetic values.

An in depth and critical study of Asian history would reveal the exotic, unique and aesthetic nature of the Orient. It has a distinct civilizational norm distinguishable from the occident with its own contribute to world history. Therefore, there is an urgent need to refute the superlative ideologies and images created at the behest of Euro centrist school by the upcoming Third World intellectuals holds any aesthetic values.

In his work 'Prison Notebook', Antonio Gramsci says: “The starting-point in critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is... as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory”. The study of orientalism should be an attempt to inventory the traces of an oriental subject, of the culture whose domination has been so powerful a factor in the life of all Orientals. The Third World nations of post-colonial times took an independent line of thinking and writing free from

imperialistic bias so as to assert the existence of indigenous historical tradition and culture and thereby countering the domination of western philosophies. The colonial cultural ambience certainly gave way to an alternative (ideal) model for ideological assessment. Nationalism, for instance became the catchword upon which the Orientalist-discourse was constructed upon. The focus of attention to the Third World nations began roughly from the later part of the 20th century starting with the liberation war in Algeria in 1958 to the culmination of liberation of Saigon (Vietnam) in 1975.

The American literacy theorist Edward Said wrote a remarkable work titled “Orientalism” (1978) that won world-wide critical acclaim. The book marked a significant departure from the earlier works on this field, where he successfully defends the existence of an ‘exotic’ civilization that is unparalleled in world history. He defines Orientalism as “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between the ‘Orient’ and (most of the time) the Occident”. For him, “Orientalism is not mere political subject matter or field that is reflected passively by culture, scholarship or institution....nor is it representative and expressive of some nefarious ‘western’ imperialist plot to hold down the ‘oriental’ world”. The emergence of this new field of polemical study portrays the west from a critical angle”. The work has in fact derived from the ambition of writing a counter history. Said criticises the works of western intellectuals Auerbach and Spitzer to promote his argument. To distinguish Orientalism Said relies on a number of works as he cites “I have found it useful here to employ Michel Foucault’s notion of discourse, as described by him in ‘The

Archaeology of Knowledge” and in ‘Discipline and Punish’, to identify Orientalism. “My contention is that without examining orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand to enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage - and even produce - the orient politically, sociologically, militarily, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period”.

The post-industrial Europe witnessed the emergence of negative fall-out of the industrial revolution in form of Working Class Movement and Luddism throughout Europe. Karl Marx gave a new theoretical dimension by preparing a critique of industrialisation and imperialism. Lenin went on to describe ‘imperialism’ as ‘the highest stage of capitalism’. An ardent critic of colonialism Aijaz Ahmed comments: “The global history of humanism doubtless includes much besides that complicity and it is of course eminently arguable that this narrative of convergence between colonial knowledge and colonial powers simply cannot be assembled in cultural studies as such, because histories of economic exploitation, political coercion, military conquest play the far more constitutive part; those other histories are the once which provide the enabling conditions for the so-called Orientalist-discourse as such”. Here, Mr Ahmed makes a correct observation that colonialism marginalises the importance of cultural history. In true sense, as some westerners perceive, history does not merely deal with politics, administration, and kings (that form their constitutive part) but is also the story of societies in transition. Beside politics, the discipline studies the socio-economic cultural process undergoing rapid transformation both in the Occident as well as in the Orient.

Historical literature created at the behest of colonial administrators were carefully twisted, doctored or distorted to present a blurred-picture of the governed subjects were a historical people who never kept such records of their history and culture. They attributed backwardness of the Orient of Third World for following an irrational culture, lack of modernistic outlook, lack of legal institutions, stagnation of social structure and above all the existence of 'oriental despotism'. But these false ideas propagated by the Euro-centrists does not convey any sense nor do they need refutation. India for instance, always had a rich culture tradition and '*itihasa parampara*' (tradition of history) since time immemorial. Concrete economic and legal institutions came to the sub-continent with Turko-Mughal legacy. Incidentally the British administrative system retained the basic institutions that the Mughals left. Dynamism existed in the societal structure even though social evils often hamper the process.

The racist theories like of 'Aryan origin' about being European origin are pure fabrication devoid of any scientific rational. A sympathizer of Indian culture Max Mueller of Germany represents a new school of thoughts represented by the European Indologists countered the self-proclaimed theories of despotism and backwardness as symbolic of Indian history. The negative assessment as well as misappropriation of Indian past by the Evangelicals and the Utilitarians during the colonial period were aptly challenged. The rejection of materialism became a dominant theme in the Orient which gradually got interwoven into an anti-machine complex, since machine was associated with western domination. Mahatma Gandhi's foresightedness is reflected in encouraging the

adoption of the *Charkha* as the self of self-reliance and pragmatism. Hence, the machine Gandhiji used to disassemble the difference between the materialist-west and the spiritual-east. Further, the ushering of the machine-age in Europe was the cause of underdevelopment in the colonised world.

The analysis of underdevelopment in modern Asia as depicted in Gunnar Myrdal's 'Asian Drama' tends to make use of old theories without adequately considering more recent investigations into the nature of Indian/Asian society and socio-economic dynamism associated with it. On similar lines those with narrow economic concern often resort to the theory of 'oriental despotism' to provide legitimacy to socio-economic backwardness or criteria for under development that does not rest in simplistic generalisations like in Indian society and culture but rather demands a detailed investigation into the very nature of pre-colonial and colonial society in India and elsewhere. Marxist historians E P Thompson, Maurice Dobb and others through their works demonstrate the extent of damage inflicted upon Third World economies through colonisation. The economic decimation of India by British-colonialism is clearly reflected in the works of R C Dutt (amount of exploitation), Dadabhai Naoroji (Un-British nature of colonial rule), Bipan Chandra (Emergence of Economic Nationalism) et al. The colonial empires were built with loot and no plunder of poor countries. So does the logic or theory of underdevelopment lie?

The theory of 'oriental despotism' shaped through European hands who had least knowledge about Asian history was in fact a utopian idea popular in Europe for

long and was revived in the 19th century with reference to Asian past. This was a stereotype created to maintain the distinction between the Orient and the Occident. Prof Romila Thapar explaining the origin of 'Despotism' say that it can be traced back to the Greek and Roman literature, particularly in the descriptions of their traditional enemy -the Achaemenid empire of Persia. Despotism came to be associated with the imperial system and the fabulous wealth of the Achaemenidian court. The evolving political ideas and institutions in changing 18th century Europe, focussed, attention on the question of private property in land, individual rights and democracy coincided with the accounts of travellers in India. In this preview, the discussion on 'oriental despotism' reappeared, even though the concept remained, ambiguously vague in application, in its proper definition.

At this juncture came Karl Marx who formalised this concept into a system of political economy by his theory of the Asiatic Mode of Production .Marx projected it as a static society of village communities totally subject to the kings. Certain notions about village community also evolved from the romanticism relating to early societies and it was perceived as the initial phase in evolution of society .But these Marxian theories are highly exaggerated as no ground realities are taken into consideration. They are challenged, criticised, modified and scrutinised by scholars like Prof. Irfan Habib to present a more empirical picture of the past.

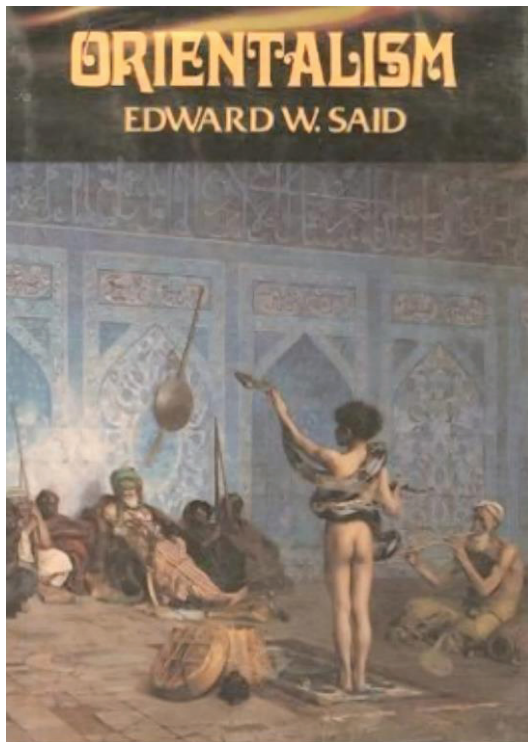
Lately Asian, African and Latin American scholars/intellectuals have achieved certain amount of compatibility and confidence in assessing their respective

civilizations from a scientific-cum-critical plane. Colonialism can never be treated as a 'civilizing' mission as many view. Communalism, playing one caste against another, separate electorates etc. are some of the divisive methods applied by the British in administering India –they are contributions from the occident. Ideologies of Nazism and Fascism originated in Europe itself that left a trail of death and destruction following a full scale world war. But this is not to deny the positive contributions from the occident. Much of the western textualities denouncing the orient has been challenged, modified, overthrown or reproduced by our intelligentsia. No cultural or intellectual development can take purely in an 'autonomous' form. As Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru once indicated that it is through interactive-process, assimilation and synthesis of myriad streams that a civilization can flower. Therefore, one civilization can never be categorised as being superior or inferior in absolutist terms.

Some of those writings strengthen the idea of orientalism are –A.L. Tibrawi, Abdullah Laroui, Anwar Abdel Malik, Talal Asad, Atalas, Fanon, Cesaire, K.M.Panikkar and Romila Thapar even before Edward Said completed his masterpiece 'Orientalism' in 1978. K.M.Panikkar's 'Asia and Western Dominance'(1959)is perhaps the most significant work in this field by an Indian author. As a modern discipline Oriental studies should develop as an inter-disciplinary area of academic knowledge-where historians, anthropologists, sociologists, philologists alike can equally accept as a relevant discourse to research upon in future. To conclude with the words of Swami Vivekananda "To the oriental the world of spirit as the occidental is the world of sense. In the spiritual, the

oriental finds everything he wants or hopes for; in it he finds all that makes life real in him”.

The article appeared in The North East Observer on 29-05-1993.



Orientalist painting on cover page of book
by Edward Said

(16)

Role of Satras in preservation of Assamese culture

The cultural renaissance brought about by Shrimanta Sankardeva laid the very foundation of the Assamese socio-cultural ethos. Perhaps not a single aspect was left out by the reformer in his pursuit to shape the effervescent Assamese culture. The wholesome contribution by the Vaishnava scholar spread across a whole range of subjects like language, literature, music, songs, education, industries, reforms, etc. touched every aspect of life that is relevant till today. The Satras happened to be his experimental ground of the subjects that in the long run became a part and parcel of Assamese life and culture. All these subjects have wide ranging application in everyday life. Hence, the Satra-institution wielded widespread influence upon the evolution of the Assamese society since the medieval period.

The Satras can be the biggest source of inspiration for the youth of the present generation. The biggest thing that the new generation can learn from the great reformer is the thrust towards development of a 'work culture' in the Satras. It was the place where all kinds of industries and crafts flourished five hundred years ago. New architectural and sculptural styles were introduced by the Guru in the construction of the Satras and Nâmghars. Sankardeva worked for the development of cottage industries in the Satras. The handicraft and the handloom industries promoted during those periods are now dying. He was

responsible for introducing a number of musical instruments which were prepared in the institution. Costume designing was an important art. Preparation of traditional Asomiya ornaments started here. But today it is a dying art. Preparation of *mukhâs* or masks is on verge of extinction.

Some materials like *hengul*, *hâtâl*, *neel*, *engâr*, *geruâ-mâti*, popular for ages, are now rare. Artisans are finding it difficult to manufacture traditional items like *xarâi*, *thagâ*, *garudâsana*, *mayurâsana* due to rising costs and huge cost of the raw materials. A traditional item like *xarâi* today comes at a lower cost from other parts of the country. A policy has to be enunciated for preservation of local traditional items. Otherwise a day will come when we will lose our identity.

There are many local items which were produced locally proving the self-dependence of the local artisans, promoted by Shrimanta Sankardeva. Materials made of bamboo like *pâchi*, *kharâhi*, *dalâ*, *kulâ*, *kath*, *châlôni*, *bisoni*, *jâpi*, etc. and that of wood like *safurâ*, *pirâ*, wooden chests, *bar-pirâ*, etc were promoted by the bhakats (devotees) of the saints. Handloom products like *châdor*, *gamochâ*, *dhoti*, *eri*, *mugâ*, *pât*, etc. were produced independently. New dress forms and attires were introduced for performing various dance forms and plays. The presentation of *Vrindâvani vastra* or textile woven by the weavers of Tantikuchi (old name of Barpeta) at his instruction to the Koch king Naranarayan was a glaring example of the work culture that he promoted. Most of the weavers of Barpeta became his ardent followers. Unfortunately today the local artisans are unable to meet

the heavy demand of these products during festive season. We have to depend upon Tamil Nadu for supply of the traditional *gamochâ* to meet the demand.

Another big factor was the cultural contribution of the Satras, which were the centres of excellence. They helped a great deal in evolution of the Asomiya socio-cultural idiom. The language, the literature, the music, the songs, the dance, the plays, etc. gave a distinct identity to the cultural spectrum. The first play composed by the guru titled '*Chinha Yâtrâ*' at the tender age of 19 was in fact the beginning of modern theatre in East India. Culturologist Ratna Ojah is of the opinion that Sankardeva was the first personality to use a stage for performing the play. Significantly, performance of the play was responsible for breaking the age-old caste barriers as persons from various backgrounds - from 'high' caste brahmins to 'low' caste koibartas participated together.

The Assamese language as a popular medium of instruction developed during the medieval period. Shrimanta Sankardeva was the first person in Asom to introduce mass-education. As an educationist, he introduced the *tol* system of education in the Nâmghars and Satras where students were provided with *sâchi pât* (tree bark), *tulâ pât* (cotton-made paper), pen, ink, etc. for reading and writing purpose. Moreover, the *kewaliyâ bhakats* or young bhakats were taught to be self-dependent by producing *sâchipât*, *tulâpât*, utensils out of bell and brass metal, wood-craft, ivory-craft, masks, sculptures, etc. Many of these items are preserved in Satras spread across the North East Region for centuries. The Auniati Satra of Majuli is preserving an ivory comb and mat made by

freedom fighter Bahadur Gaonbura who belonged to the Akhorkatiâ clan.

The Satras played a great role in the social life of the contemporary period. It was not only a place for spiritual solace but a place to shelter the poor and the hungry. The *bhakats* had to earn for their living. Similarly, the Nâmghar set up in the villages for worship became the hub of socio-economic activities and arbiter of local disputes. In fact, it became something like what Maheswar Neog calls “Village Parliaments” run on democratic principles. The banking system of these institutions prevalent for ages is a subject of research. Did any such system exist in any part of contemporary India? The ivory works of Barpeta Satra is another feature of Assamese culture. The preparation of traditional jewellery in Barpeta at the insistence of the reformer continues to flourish till today without any Government patronage.

Today’s youth has to take lessons from these important facets of the reforms brought about for the benefit of the society. Despite potentialities the youth are attracted to secessionist ideologies that are basically aimed at destroying the social-fabric created by such a towering personality.

Sankardeva recognized the dignity of labour and respected the profession of his followers, including the ‘lower’ caste and poor weavers, black-smiths, oil-producers, fishermen, tailors, etc. In lower Asom, in places like Kalijar, Bhabanipur (Barpeta), the Assamese community was formed primarily from ‘lower’ castes like *Teli* (oil-producers), *Châmar* (shoe-makers), *Kumâr* (black-smiths), *Tânti* (weavers), etc. A democratic system in

Barpeta Satra was introduced by Mathura Das Burha Ata who was a Tânti and a follower of Madhabdeva. The Satrâdhikâr of Bhabânipur Satra, Gopal Ata belonged to the Tânti caste. The apparel of Sankardeva was tailored by Chandsai, a Muslim follower. This shows the importance given by the Saint to each section of the society. Many traders also joined his fold. This shows that as a sociologist, Sankardeva strived to form a casteless and classless society. In the matter of dining together, it was stated:

Koibartta kalitâ koch brâhman samasta

Ekelage khâi dudh chirâ kol jata

Sankardeva, as a social reformer, was responsible for creating a casteless and classless Assamese society. He was single-handedly responsible for eradication of a social evil like untouchability which still exists in other parts of India. He emphasized upon child care, respect for the dignity of women, forging of unity among the various tribes, castes and communities and called for maintenance of ecological balance, apart from promoting health and sports. The clarion call for universal brotherhood was accepted by the contemporary society in the making. How unfortunate that today we are divided on numerous lines! Thanks to our politicians for taking us to such a situation! Asom has been bifurcated into several islands on the basis of ethnicity, community, linguistic differences, etc.

Relevance of Shrimanta Sankardeva is much more today, as fundamentalist views taken by some of our obscurantist so-called Hindu and Muslim leaders need to be countered by the liberal and tolerant view preached through his Vaishnavite philosophy or through the message of Ajan Fakir who promoted the Sufi ideology to promote peace

and tranquility in society. If the great Saint would have returned, it would have been ‘mission impossible’ to reform the contemporary society torn asunder by politicians.

The large number of issues discussed (above) has become a matter of research in universities across India and abroad. To popularize the *Satriya sanskriti* or culture, the Satrâdhikârs have to play a pro-active role by involving all sections of the Asomiya society. Recently the State Government distributed grants-in-aid to a number of well known Satras of the State. In this distribution ceremony, most of the *Satrâdhikârs* present and members of *Asom Satra Mahâsabhâ* brought out the concept to construct a Model *Satra* in Guwahati, which will be a welcome feature. Such a noble idea will undoubtedly benefit the tourists and the students interested in knowing about the Satriyâ culture.

Archaeological Survey of India can take some positive steps for preservation of all the heritage Satras spread all across the State. According to *Asom Satra Mahâsabhâ*, there are 915 surviving Satras in Assam (including one in North Bengal). Similarly, the Tourism Department can take up tour-packages to the significant Satras across Assam for the general people. These centres of excellence should inspire the younger generation for ages who will then come to know who Shrimanta Sankardeva was.

This article appeared in The Sentinel on 22-08-2009.



Vrindavani vastra: Textile prepared by weavers of Tantikuchi under supervision of Vaishavite saint and scholar Shrimanta Sankardeva. Prepared in 1567-68 is preserved in British Museum in London. This invaluable textile will be brought to Assam from London by 2026.

(17)

Are we loosing the scientific temper?

In early part of last year the 106th session of Indian Science Congress was held in Jalandhar where outrageous unscientific claims by few academicians and politicians created controversy. The convention attended by Scientists and researchers from more than 60 countries including Nobel laureates where the focal theme was: “Future India: Science & Technology”. Despite all positivity few claims were made by some speakers including the Vice Chancellor Andhra University Prof G Nageshwara Rao that (i) that the Kauravas were born with help of stem cell technologies, (ii) that Lord Rama used ‘*astras*’ and ‘*shastras*’ while Lord Vishnu sent a ‘*sudarshan chakra*’ to chase target like drones, (iii) Ravana had ‘*pushpak vimana*’ and 24 types of aircrafts and (iv) that Theories of Newton and Einstein were wrong and should be taken off school text books. Fictitious claims from a person not less than the rank of a Vice Chancellor of a University has once again created controversy over prevailing scientific temperament in the country.

Mixing science with religious folklore, myths and storytelling is a matter of concern in the intellectual circles on the country. The Science activists has already given rebuttal to what they cite as ‘outlandish claims’ and that it has damaged reputation and heritage of the country. Reputed cosmologist Prof. Jayant Narlikar claims that even the west recognizes the immense contribution of ancient Indian scholars, astronomers, chemists, medics and mathematicians. He further opines that if we start making

outlandish claims, the scientific community of the world will not look up to us as it does now. Bharat Ratna recipient CN Rao says that he refrains from attending such conventions as his presence would endorse such claims and that too in form of young students who attend the Congress. UK based writer Angela Saini in her book “Superior: The Return of Race Science” states that by such outlandish claims about ancient flying machines, they are undermining the truths for their own political ends, and these smacks of “religious nationalism”. This is something similar to what was preached by the Nazis regarding the origins of the Aryan race in Germany. She states that India has a strong base of global scientific history. India is the birthplace of mathematical ideas, metallurgical technologies and birth of sophisticated civilization.

Scientist and industrialist P.C. Ray who presided over the India Science Congress in 1920 wrote a ‘History of Hindu Chemistry’ in 1902 (Vol 1) and 1908 (Vol 2). Philosopher B.N. Seal wrote ‘The Positive Science of the Ancient Hindus’ in 1915. Ancient texts like *Rasa Prakasha Sudhakara* based on experiment and observation. Ironically in recent times the history of science has been neglected by the premier institutions of the country as well as by the Universities as they are still treated as matters of speculation instead of putting them for further research. China has been using the historical sources to prove the existence of scientific spirit even in the ancient period. Indian civilization made the largest number of contribution in the field of philosophy, art, music, literature, astronomy, mathematics, and medicine are renowned world over. In fact Albert Einstein recognized this contribution by saying “We owe a lot to the Indians, who taught us how to count”.

Some of the greatest philosophers who were born in India like *Mimamsa*, *Sankhya*, *Vaisheshika*, *Lokayuta* etc. The richness of our culture is gradually being undermined by a few politicians and academicians by their fictitious and unscientific claims. Mixing scientific facts with fiction and irrational theories has been attempted by many such academicians and politicians for some ideological parochial gains.

India has not produced any Nobel Prize winner in science in last 85 years largely due to the lack of this scientific environment in the country. There is not a single Indian institute of higher learning that figures in the top 100 ranking world universities which reflects the poor quality of education and research. Focus on opening institutions for a degree is killing the innovative spirit of the young scientists. Even 50% of our secondary schools do not have an integrated science laboratory. How do we expect to compete with the best through ‘Make in India’ or ‘Start Up India’ without developing the scientific spirit? India is spending less than 0.6 to 0.7 percent of GDP in the last two decades of its GDP on scientific research which is much lower to nations like USA (2.8), China (2.1), South Korea (4.2) and Israel (4.3) percent as per Economic Survey of 2017-18 tabled in the Indian Parliament recently. It has suggested to redouble the national expenditure on Research and Development (R&D). This is the sole reason that South Korean companies are the most innovative and ruling the world from Samsung mobiles to Hyundai cars.

Spreading of blind beliefs and superstition through the electronic media and WhatsApp has become the order of the day in Assam. Even in the 21st century people are

killed in name of being *dainis* or witches, purely on basis of superstitions. Social worker Birubala Rabha is still fighting against such blind beliefs of witchcraft in lower Assam. Immunization against *Rubella* and measles vaccinations was rumoured to promote infertility in the girls led to protest against vaccination in minority dominated areas of Assam. Dependence on quacks healing the sick is still prevalent in the state. This shows the lack of education as well as the scientific understanding of the beliefs at a time when Indian Space Research Organization has launched *Chandrayaan* to explore the moon.

India has a rich history of scientific excellence. In the Silicon Valley of California in USA Indian software engineers has taken the lead in electronic research. Companies like Google, Microsoft or Apple are headed by Indian origin engineers. The premier scientific institution of the world NASA is dominated by Indian origin engineers. Chinese has learnt the finer nuances of technologies practiced all over the world. Now US is outsourcing its electronic items like laptops to be manufactured in China at a lesser cost. All kinds of electronic items of China are sold all across Asia, Europe and Americas. The National Innovation Council has to be empowered with enough funds like China to see that more patents are issued to the young entrepreneurs and scientists of India. We have to promote intellectual inquiry as well as creative and innovative thinking among the younger generation.

As far as Assamese innovators are concerned in the name of grass root innovator Uddhav Bharali of North Lakhimpur town comes to our mind. He has been awarded the Padmashree this year for designing more than a hundred

small and utility low cost machines basically for the common people, with special focus on agriculture and small scale industries. Had Bharali been born in China he would have been millionaire by now. India needs innovators like Bharali to promote the innovative spirit. There are many such innovations from India that has contributed to the development of R&D in India. Space research is one of them. Tata's Nano car, low cost advanced Hepatitis B vaccine, cheap mobile phones, transportation vehicles is some of the low cost technological innovations that has created deep impact on the Indian society. South Korea, China and Taiwan have shown us how innovative practices have led to new researched products every day.

They are presenting more patents than India. China is going ahead with R&D on 5G technology, automation, 3D printing technology, Artificial Intelligence (AI), drone technology; research on renewable green technologies including production of electric vehicles etc. It is high time that India should take lead in promoting the scientific spirit at the grass root level through the Science Congress and innovation foundation to take India to the future that scholar APJ Abdul Kalaam dreamt of.

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Are we loosing scientific temper?



Padmashree Birubala Rabha (1954-2024):

Social activist who played an important role in ending
witch hunting in Assam



Tata's Semi Conductor plant set up at Jagiroad at a cost of Rs 27,000 crore is likely to boost up the scientific temperament in Assam.

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New dimensions in warfare technology

Operation *Sindoor* launched by India against Pakistan has showcased significant improvements in warfare technology. India could respond and retaliate to the enemies successfully by testing of the new weapons that were mostly manufactured in the country. Conventional warfare has undergone a paradigm shift with this mission proving India's ability to strike with precision and confidence using indigenous technologies with enhanced Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance Systems (ISRS) capabilities. This has not only neutralized threats across the border but also symbolized India's gradual transition from dependent arms importers to a producer of world class defense equipment. These new methods of warfare have given a new dimension to warfare technology.

Many strategist used the term “new age warfare” as it demonstrated on the extensive use of ‘Unmanned Aerial System’ (UAS) developed by Defence Research & Development Organization (DRDO). The UAS penetrated deep into Pakistani territory for taking photographs to provide the clear pictures of the enemy targets for Indian Air Force (IAF) to launch the surgical strikes. Foreign weapon system like Israeli Heron MK-H was used along with indigenously built TAPAS-BH-201 and Rustom II with assistance of ISRS. Quad copters and micro-drones played a crucial role in relaying live feeds and target acquisition data via Army's Integrated Battle Management System (IBMS). India's Integrated Air Command and

Control System (IACCS) has helped the Air Defence System to provide seamless connectivity via Satellite uplinks and mobile platforms. *Akashteer* (Sky Arrow), a defense control and reporting mechanism was developed indigenously by Bharat Electronics Limited in collaboration with DRDO provided digitized command for Army Air Defence. This system integrates the radars, sensors and communication systems into a single vehicle-based framework to detect enemy aircrafts, drones and missiles.

The Air Defence shield has become an important feature of modern day warfare. Radar, control centres, defensive fighter aircraft, ground based air defence missile, artillery and electronic warfare system are such features that were used extensively in today's warfare. Radar technology through satellite is used to detect any enemy launching any Inter Continental Ballistic Missile(ICBM). Air Defence network worked in tandem with the C-3 military calls "Command, control and commitment system". There was extensive use of drone technology in this conflict. Pakistan used Turkish and Chinese made drones against India were easily intercepted and neutralized by India's Air Defence System. India has claimed to have destroyed more than 600 drones flying from enemy territory. Media reports claimed that one Indian drone fell on Rawalpindi Stadium when a cricket match was in progress. Whereas Harop destroyed Chinese made Air Defense System near Lahore. There was no major loss through this attack. Pakistan was using almost 80 percent of the weapons imported from China.

Drones emerged as the newest weapons of choice in warfare. Similar action was seen in the recent Israel-Iran

war, Russia-Ukraine conflict or Israel-Hamas conflict. Indian army has purchased drones worth Rs 295 crores from the private companies. Use of powerful drones like *Nagatra 1 R*, *Kamikaze* or *Switch* were successfully used in the operation. India is gradually enhancing indigenous defense manufacturing capability within the country. Indigenously built Surface to Air Missile (SAM) like *Pechora* and *OSA-AK* were utilized to bring down enemy drones. The self-sufficiency includes having the ability to design, fabricate and assemble defense equipment and systems with negligible reliance on foreign supplies. Historically India has been relying on import of technologies at a very high cost. It has modernized the weapon system that included advanced weaponry and sophisticated weapons system. Military spending has more than doubled over the past decade. In fact there is readiness and commitment towards boosting the nation's defense potential of moving towards *Atmanirbhar Bharat*.

The defense production & export promotion Policy, 2020 and the vision towards self-reliance and export are gradually yielding positive results. Government funding provisions have been introduced in areas like Make-I, Technology Development Fund (TDF) and innovations for Defense Excellence (i DEX) projects. The TDF scheme is executed by DRDO that supports indigenous development by MSMEs and start ups. An allocation of Rs 60 crore has been made under TDF scheme for 2025-26. More than 500 start ups and micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) are working under the aegis of Innovations for Defence Excellence (iDEX) with focus on innovative projects in the defence sector. These positive steps has helped the defence export to hit all-time high of Rs. 23,622

crore for the FY 2024-25 an increase of Rs. 2539 crore or 12.04 percent from the FY 2023-24. Significantly the private sector contributed to Rs. 15,233 crore out the total production. This figure is expected to reach Rs. 50,000 crores by 2029.

According to a Defense Parliamentary Study Committee report published in Decemebre, 2024 it stated that defence export items has been exported to more than 100 countries across the world that included 228 Dornier aircrafts, 155mm advanced towed artillery guns, *Brahmos* and *Akash* missiles, radar simulators, *Dhruv* simulators for ship navigation, *Pinaka* rockets etc. India has developed the hand held rocket launcher called 'Isla system' with indigenous technology. Anti-Aircraft artillery UAVs Electronic warfare it is designed to disrupt, deceive and destroy threats using the power of the electronic magnate spectrum. Electronic warfare is the most used for jamming enemy radar and targeting systems operate both in land and air. The Air Defence College and Centre in Gopalpur in Odisha is upgrading the lab on production of sophisticated UAVs after the surgical strike inside Pakistan. This centre played a critical role in supplying men and machine to forward areas during operation *Sindoor*.

However India is still the largest importer of arms as stated by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). The country still has to bear huge costs for purchase of expensive weaponry from Israel, Russia and France. Russian made S 400 renamed as *Sudarshan Chakra* played an important role bringing down the drones and missiles launched from Pakistan. Sometimes purchase of technology has many drawbacks as these technologies are

not transferred. For example in 1987 India purchased Sikorsky Helicopters from the Augusta Wasteland company of USA. The Company did not transfer the technology and when the company closed down it has become difficult to do any repair or renovation works for these costly flying machines. However The Naval Aircraft Maintenance Centre at Cochin has developed a lab to create indigenous parts to fit into the old aircrafts and make it to a flying condition. Similar steps have to be taken for recently purchased *Rafale* aircrafts as well. If any renovation is required we have to import the parts from France as the technology is unavailable. DRDO and other organizations have to take the lead to develop indigenous technologies under “Make in India” campaign.

For upgrading the warfare technology India has to increase the expenditure as a part of Make in India mission. The defence budget of India is much less compared to that of China or USA. It has to enhance its budget for Research and Development of the defence sector as lately the country is developing significant indigenous technologies. Of late National Security Advisor Ajit Doval addressing students of IIT, Madras highlighted the India’s military capabilities and growing technological prowess in neutralizing threats emanating from Pakistan through Operation *Sindoor* and that no Indian property damaged from enemy drone attack. This proves the success of Indian technology in adverse conditions.

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Conservation of historical heritage



Taj Mahal at Agra: Epitome of Mughal Architecture, Monument that is most widely visited by tourists and highest revenue earner for India.



Red Fort at Agra

Conservation of historical heritage



Panbari Mosque in Dhubri district



Panbari Mosque:

One of the earliest and historic mosques of Assam located in Dhubri district was built by the Sultan of Bengal Nawab Alauddin Husain Shah in 1498

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Reviving the historic Silk Route

The Silk route left a long lasting legacy on the history of Asia and the world. The route touched across several countries left a long lasting impact on not only trade and commerce but also in formation of cities, bazars, migration, pilgrimage, cultural exchanges and spread of Buddhism and Islam into Asian interiors. The route extended more than 4000 miles (6437 KM) passing through interiors of China to the through Persia, Indian subcontinent up to Arabia and Europe. The Asian continent was connected with the west through the traders, pilgrims, monks, soldiers, nomads etc. at various periods of time. The name ‘silk route’ was derived from the lucrative Chinese silk trade to the west. China is now planning to initiate a process to revive the ancient silk route by planning to restore the routes on land as well as sea for enhancing global connectivity.

Did a global connectivity existed in the ancient past? The legacy of silk route is more than 2000 years old. While turning to leaves of history, we have read about the renowned travellers like Marco Polo, Travenier or Manucci travelling from one place to another in search of knowledge. So how did these scholars travel so far and wide? Connectivity was the critical feature in the ancient period leading to expansion of knowledge, ideas, technologies as well as religions. But in course of time many of these routes were lost into oblivion due to development of sea and airways. In fact, the maritime time routes took lesser time and safer to transport goods on a

bulk manner. Now there is growing demand to revive the ancient network of route primarily for inter-border trade and commerce by small traders. It brought together people living close to each other for thousands of years are now separated. More over the route lost importance due to various strategic concerns of nations.

China was in fact opened up to the world through these networks. Several routes developed in course of time. One was northern route and another was the southern route. The south East Asian countries including the Indian sub-continent was touched by the southern route. The northern route passed through the central Asian region touching the countries of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan etc. and entered Indian sub-continent. The route passed through almost all the reputed town and cities of the ancient period like Turfan, Danhuang, Kashgar or Khotan that developed as a result of the silk route. The routes became famous for cultural artery for exchange between the East and West in form of religions, art, languages and new technologies. Prior to 1000AD the exchanges were commonly linked to spread of Buddhism from India to various parts of Asia. This route was significantly responsible for spread of the religion. So, the most significant commodity carried along the route was not silk trade but the spreading of religion of Buddhism into China and Tibet from India along the northern and southern branch of the route.

The Chinese were the first community to introduce the technique of rearing silk worms and weaving of silk clothes in the world. Gradually the technique spread to different parts of the world through various routes including

the silk route and hence the name. It was brought to the northeastern parts of India by the Mongoloid migrants and later by the traders. Silk was an important item of trade between India and China since the ancient period of history. As silk was traded between various communities and traders it came to be known as the “Silk Road”. Many other materials were exchanged like materials, written on paper, silk, leather, wood etc. Technologies were transferred from one place to another. The techniques for manufacturing glass entered China during the 3rd century BC. Paper manufacturing moved out of China to the Arab as well as to the western world. China developed woodblock printing much before Gutenberg press started printing around 700AD. Thus the route became an important path for communication between different parts of East Asia and the west.

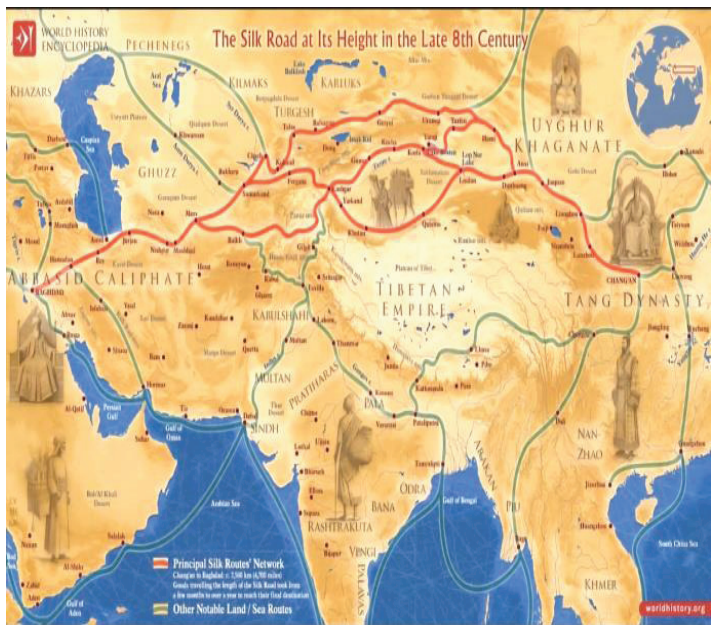
For ages the road has been used by various migrants, refugees, artists, craftsmen, missionaries, even robbers and envoys all across Asia. Connecting more than 56 countries across Asia, Africa and Europe. UNESCO is also planning to revive the road for international cooperation and development. Roads, ports and infrastructure has to be developed by India to improve international connectivity, as it cannot remain behind other countries of the southeast Asian region.

The renewed interest was created for revival of the ancient route not for trade but for tourism as well. In June, 2014 the UNESCO has designated Changan Tianshan corridor of the ancient route as a world heritage site. The tourists would certainly enjoy the romantic oriental mystery of the route. It was through these routes that the famous

travelers Chinese Fahsien (395-414), Hieun Tsang (602-644), Italian Marco Polo, Moroccan Ibn Batuta made their memorable journeys across continents. Among these travelers the name of Hieun Tsang or Xuan Zang is familiar with Assam as the Buddhist scholar visited ancient Kamrupa in the 7th century. He came to Pragjyotishpura (then Guwahati) at the invitation of King Bhaskar Varman of Varman dynasty of Kamrupa. The traveler spent three months in the region and mentioned about it in his travelogue “*Si-yu-ki*”. China opened its doors to the foreign tourists in the 1970s as there are large numbers of heritage sites all along the way that can have potentialities of tourists’ attractions.

There are writings that indicate that a “Sadiya – Yunnan” silk route existed in the medieval period. This was one of the major route of migration of Mongoloids to the northeast region of India. Chinese writer Bin Yang stated that in the 12th century Sichuan and Yunnan in China was linked to Burma or Myanmar and Bengal (including Assam) up to “Ledo” (now in Tinsukia district). The ‘Kolkata-Kunming Highway Initiative’ was one such initiative that was taken by a number of ASEAN countries recently to establish connectivity between Kunming in China with Kolkata. The BCIM (Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar) corridor needs to be developed to enhance trade between the neighbouring countries. The regional trade between the countries rose from merely \$6 billion in 2001 to \$90 billion in 2011. So, India has to aggressively engage itself to promote its commodities in the international market.

The landlocked North East India plays an important role as the region connects India with east Asia. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently said that the new Silk Road linking Central with Southeast Asia will connect markets, business and consumers from the Caspian Sea to the Ganges and beyond. China has lately invited India to jointly build the silk route in inner Asia along with the maritime route. However as far as trade with China is concerned India is still at a disadvantageous position. The country has to improve the quality of its products to find international markets to take advantage of trade and commerce through the silk route in the long run.



Map showing the ancient Silk Route

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Sankardeva's Precepts: Assimilative Aspects

“The peculiar character is not of superseding the two extremes... but of weakening their antagonism and transforming them into harmony.”

This is what Karl Marx quoted in defining the character of the lower middle-class of a society. Even though the remark was made in a completely different situation, it perhaps fits the character of a society that underwent transformation following the spreading of the Vaishnavite movement in Assam. The great Vaishnava saint-scholar-reformer Srimanta Sankardeva created a social upheaval in assimilating the complex web of a fragmented society under one umbrella. Following the principal of “*Nahi bhaktit jati-ajati bichara*”, Sankardeva ventured to establish an egalitarian society in a period of social, economic and political upheaval. We are living at a time when political bickerings are leading to fractionalization of the greater Assamese society visualized by Bishnu Rava into micro-islands of caste, creed, ethicality, religion, etc. It is in such a crucial phase of history that the message of harmony spread by Srimanta Sankardeva gains relevancy on several accounts. Perhaps, as many scholars would argue, his most significant contributions manifested in unification of the Assamese society at the mess level.

Prior to the spread of Vaishnavism, Saivism had taken deep roots in this region. Historian R.S. Sharma is of

the opinion that between the fifth and seventh centuries, many Brahmins received land in Nepal, Assam, Bengal and Orissa as well as in the South. In such times *tantric* texts, shrines and rituals made their appearance. The liberal nature of Saivism invited women and *Shudras* (the lower class), into the ranks of *tantrics*. Similarly, aborigines and tribals in some regions were admitted into the fold of Hinduism. Brahmanism maintained its hold in society prior to the advent of Vaishnavism. The doctrine of incarnations played a crucial role in integrating the fragmented society. Commenting on the social role of incarnation, historian Suvira Jaiswal says: “The doctrine of incarnation played a major role in mitigating regional and tribal separatism and extending Brahmanism to semi-feudal indigenous tribes. The synergism, effected through this doctrine, was sometimes Brahmanical and sometimes popular in character, but to a great extent it was the reconciliation attitude of Vaishnavism which gave the country a kind of social structure all over India”. In Assam, the assimilatory role of Hinduism provided a fertile ground for the acceptance of the universal message of Sankardeva’s philosophy.

Scholar Hiren Gohain traces the genesis of the *Bhakti* movement or Vaishnavism in the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Bagavatha Purana*. Gohain says that “*Bhakti* in these two central texts thus remains ideologically subservient to the interest of the dominant intelligentsia and the ruling classes even in the midst of social crisis. It is yet to turn into a movement of radical social protest against an oppressive social structure. This reorientation comes through the leaven of popular feeling in the work of the *alvar* saints of South India, many of whom belonged to the

lowest strata of society and whose songs were filled with a profound sense of worldly distress and ardent longing for God as friend and redeemer. A later north Indian saying declared that *Bhakti* arose in the South, was then revealed by Ramananda and finally spread and broadcast by Kabir. It was the emotional leaven, with close and deep links with popular feeling that brought *Bhakti* to its influential radical stage.” (Dr Hiren Gohain, *The Labyrinth of Bhakti: On Some Questions of Medieval Indian History: Economic & Political Weekly*, November, 1987)

Sankardeva preached a simple creed that came to be called the *Eka-sarana nama-dharma*. It believed in only one god, i.e. Vishnu manifested as *Krishna-avatar*. It was a form of philosophy where the necessity of a priest or scholar did not arise. The follower, or *bhakta*, is neither ‘high nor low’, neither ‘pure’ nor ‘impure’ in others’ eyes. This *Eka-sarana nam-dharma* spread from the ruling aristocracy to the wage labourers. Sankardeva himself preached: “*Chandala paryanta kari Hari-bhakti-adhikar*” (Everyone down to the *chandala* has the right to love Hari). This form of Vaishnavism threw a challenge to the age-old ‘Brahmanical sacredotalism’ that held a firm grip on the contemporary society. However, scholar Maheswar Neog is of the opinion that “Sankardeva did not venture to pull down caste distinctions, but entertained converts from all castes including tribals and Muslims.” (Sankardeva, M. Neog; National Book Trust, 1967, New Delhi). He stood as a unifying force of the divided medieval social fabric in Assam, which led Birinchi Barua to describe him as “a cementing force”. This was, in fact, the beginning of the formation of a greater Assamese society involving members from the higher as well as the lower classes. A

contemporary *namghosa* witnessing the process of social unification stated: “*Srimanta Sankare par bhangi dila bahe brahmandak bhedi.*” Among his followers were a Garo named Govinda, a Bhot named Jairam, a Muslim named Chandsai, a Miri named Paramananda, an Ahom named Narhari, a Koch named Murari and a Kaibarta named Shriram. He wrote:

*Koibarta Kalita Koch Brahman Samasta
Eke loge khai dudh sira kol jot*

The above statement reveals the introduction of community-dining by Sankardeva to remove caste differentiation among his followers coming from various backgrounds. It appears all were equal within the framework of *Xatriya* culture.

Language was another factor that played an important role in the unification of the Assamese society. The Assamese language slowly replaced the then-predominant Sanskrit literature as the mode of expression, and it was more easily understandable for the common masses. The Assamese version of the Ramayana written by Madhava Kandali in the 14th century is perhaps the oldest specimen of pure Assamese literature. The language developed through centuries of cultural fusion with numerous races and tribes. Early Assamese literature reached its zenith in the 16th century with contributions from Sankardeva and Madhavdeva in the form of religious texts, devotional songs, poetry, dramas, etc. Sankardeva used the *Brajawali bhaxa* or *Brajabuli* which was a sweet mixture of Assamese, Maithili and Hindi, which traces of other elements. This led Dr Suniti Kumar Chatterjee to conclude that “The use of *Brajabuli* or *Brajawali* dialect in Assamese is a case of direct participation in a common

literary life in eastern India.” Then onwards, there was gradual Indianization of Assamese culture through the medium of language. From this perspective, we can understand the broad outlook and universality of this great saint-scholar who introduced us to an all-India culture through his writings. The invaluable contribution from the Vaishnava poets enriched the Assamese language to such an extent that it gained gradual recognition as a national language. Dr Banikanta Kakoti asserts that at a time when political upheavals were destroying the social fabric and language reaching the point of extinction, the Vaishnava scholars not only gave a new life to it, but also made Assamese a nationally recognized language.

In the process of culture integration through popularization of language, the *Xatra*-institutions also played a pioneering role in the socio-cultural unification of the society. These institutions played a crucial role in breaking the remnants of social stratification prevalent in their contemporary society. The *Xatras* not only acted as a place for spiritual salvation but also became centres of various social, political, economic and cultural activities. Apart from spiritual control, Dr Maheswar Neog observed that “This institution might be called the village parliament, that too a parliament run on broad democratic principles. It was the village court, trials of disputes and crimes were held in it, and no one dared to disregard the judgement pronounced by the elders of the village.” Regular festivals in these institutions attracted huge crowds irrespective of caste, creed or religion. Thus, these became the points of socio-cultural-religious interaction leading to integration and communal harmony. The *Raxa* festival was one such regular feature in these *Xatras*. Acknowledging the deep

significance of this annual event, Dr Shivnath Barman writes that: “*Raxlila* is in actually a magical rite based on the fertility cult practised by the under-developed agricultural society.” (*Srimanta Sankardeva: Kriti Aru Kritirtha*, Shivnath Barman; Purvanchal Prakash, Guwahati, 1983). In the words of scholar Banikanta Kakoti, *Raxlila* is “a license festival, generally associated with the agricultural ritual of the primitive people.” In course of time, these institutions became centres of multifarious activities. Dramas, music, dances and numerous cultural rituals were regularly performed in them. Artisans displayed their skills with their crafts. Wood and ivory carvings from the *Xatras* of Barpeta were in demand throughout the Assam. Paintings and other art forms also developed.

The secular and cybernetic spirit of the saint’s precepts is reflected in his sayings: “*Parar dharmak nihinghiba kadachita* (Never hate another’s religion).” Novelist Syed Abdul Malik informs us that Sankardeva wore a white *Mirza* gown that was of Mughal origin, tailored by Chandsai or Chand Khan, his follower. It is also mentioned that the pot the saint used daily was made by a Muslim potter. Some of his followers like Jaihari and Haridas lived in Muslim populated villages. It is said that, following Islamic traditions, Jaihari prayed in a local *masjid* in Mokamar Tal village in Barpeta. Many of his followers came from villages like Bhella, Bhita and Marsa in Barpeta. The local Muslims of these areas paid *guru-kar* (tax in reverence of the *guru*) to maintain the Saundardiya *Xatra* in Barpeta. In fact, there were a number of Muslim *pathaks* who recited the *Bhagavata Gita* in the *Xatra* regularly. Haridas, a blacksmith by profession, wrote a large number

of *zikirs* (Muslim devotional songs) that had similarity with the *nama* compositions of Sankardeva. Thus, the mode of life followed in these villages reflects a unique, secular blending of Hindu and Islamic traditions.

The great cultural *guru* that he was, Sankardeva overcome the social, political and religious anarchy of his time to bind all the races and ethnic tribes with an *enajori* or thread of love to constitute a greater Assamese society. According to Shivrath Barman, the two most important lessons that we should learn from his was, first, his Indianness and, secondly, his invaluable contribution towards the formation of an Assamese society. While being an Indian first and last, he remained an ideal Assamese at heart. Despite repeated persecutions from Bhuyan and Ahom territories, he continued to spread his message of unity and harmony. Consequently, the mighty Ahoms bowed before him, accepting his precepts and patronizing his *Xatras*. Till today, the tradition of *Shankardeva's* philosophy or *mahapuruxia parampara* continues to flow in the life of the Assamese community, irrespective of caste, race or ethnicity. To conclude, I quote a verse that the great saint composed, signifying true assimilation. It reads:

*Brahmanar chandalar nibichari kul
Datat chorato yana drishti ekakul
Nichita sadhuta yara bhoila ekgyana
Tahakeshe pandita bulio sarvaguna*

(He alone is learned and knoweth everything who hath no discrimination between a Brahmin and chandala, who possesses the same regard for the benevolent and the thief who hath the same understanding for the vile and the good).

This article appeared in The Sentinel on 07-05-1995.

Goalparia language through the ages

Goalparia language has a rich traditional value and distinct identity of its own. Due to geographical proximity with North Bengal the language does sound like “Bengali” when spoken. But if we analyse carefully from its philosophical and linguistic viewpoint it appears to be in more proximity to Assamese rather than Bengali language. Many of the scholars are of the view that the literary language used by Shrimanta Sankardeva, Haribar Bipra, Hema Saraswati etc. show close resemblance to the Goalpara dialect. Vaishnavite reformer and scholar Shrimanta Sankardeva was successful in spreading his language-based reform movement in lower Assam solely because of the simplicity of his written language that has close resemblance to the local dialects of western Assam. The language in which the reformer preached was easily understood by the common masses. As a result, the language spread to grass roots level during the medieval period.

The undivided Goalpara region formed an important part of the Koch kingdom where the spoken language came to be called “*Kamrupi*” dialect having no separate identity from the dialect spoken in Kamrupa region. It was only in the 17th century that the language got a distinct identity at the hands of scholars like Sukavi Narayan who composed the famous cultural treatise “*Padma Purana*”, Durgabar, Mankar and others. The Koch king Pran Narayan (1632-65) patronized some of men of letters like Kaviratna Raj Khandam, Shrinath Brahman and

Pranbhrāham etc whose works contributed in formulation of the language. In fact, at a time when Assamese developed as a language revolutionary changes took place in literary scene between the 10th century and 17th century and focus of attention to literacy trends shifted to western Assam. Dr U.N. Goswami in his book *A Study of Kamrupi – A Dialect of Assamese* commented that “up to the 17th century all the centres of art, literature and culture were confined within western Assam and most of the poets and writers hailed from this place, the language of their part also earned prestige”.

The advent of Sankardeva in the 16th century Goalpara brought about significant changes in the language and literary scene in the region. Neo-Vaishnavite movement under Sankardeva spread its wings in the region following monarchical patronage. Strong influence of Shaktāism was reduced and feudalism liquidated to certain extent. At the conspiracy of Brahmanical class, atrocities were committed on his followers by the Ahom administrators. As a consequence, to avoid persecution he moved to lower Assam where he made large number of disciplines and established a good number of well-known *Xatra*-institutions. As troubles erupted again he was compelled to escape to the Koch kingdom. Commander-in-chief of Koch Army Chilarai brought him to Phulbari where Koch monarch Naranarayan gave him royal patronage. Historian P.C. Choudhury states: “Successful propagation of the system of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam, much like the wealth of Assamese literature owes a great deal to royal patronage.” Chilarai who became his discipline built a *Xatra* for his *guru* at Madhupur which flourished to become an important centre for propagation of Assamese culture. At

the request of Chilarai, Sankardeva composed his last drama *Rama Vijay* in 1568.

In his magnum-opus *Kirtan Ghosa* Sankardeva used several words of Goalparia origin. In *Ankiya Nat* also dialects of Goalpara and Jalpaiguri were used. Thus this language played a crucial role in formative stage of development of Assamese literature.

According to Dr Dwijendra Nath Bhakat, an authority of *Xatriya*-culture in western Assam observes through his research that as many as 22 *Xatras* flourished under the influence of Madhupur *Xatra* (Cooch Bihar) spreading across Goalpara district, Cooch Bihar and Jalpaiguri districts of Bengal and Rangpur district now in Bangladesh. Unfortunately all of these *Xatras* are today lying unattended in a dilapidated condition. The influence of these institutions in the medieval period grew so powerful that political and socio-economic power holders like rulers and feudal lords provided political patronage.

During the colonial period the powerful *zamindars* of Goalpara region played an important role in the development of Assamese language. Mechpara *zamindar* Nagendra Narayan Choudhury's close relative Rabindra Choudhury became the president of the reception committee of the 9th Axom Xahitya Xabha session held at Dhubri. A relative of the same *zamindar* Jyotsna Nath Choudhury founded the B.N. College in Dhubri, named after his father Bhola Nath Choudhury and donated Rs. 10,000 to Gauhati University for research work on Goalpara culture. The last *zamindar* of Chapar estate, Nripendra Narayan Choudhury gave land grant to various schools and colleges in Bilasipara town. The present

building of Bilasipara College earlier named Nripendra Narayan Choudhury College was once the residence of the *zamindar*. However, contributions made by the Gauripur estate was the most significant. Raja Prabhat Chandra Baruah established a “*Shiksha Samiti*” to spread education among his subjects and provided merit-scholarship to students like prominent litterateur Chandranath Sharma and Dinanath Sharma. It was the same Chandranath Sharma who, in fact, was the first prominent personality to oppose replacement of Assamese with Bengali as medium of instruction and court language in pre-independent Goalpara. It was the policy of the British administrators with an intention to drive a wedge between the Assamese and Bengalis that Assamese was replaced. Struggle for replacement of Assamese continued till independence.

The rich *zamindars* are accredited for establishment of schools and colleges under their estates. They also financed publication of several well-known works including books like *Social History of Kamrupa* by historian Nagendra Nath Basu and *Kabindra Mahabharat*. A multifaceted personality of Gauripur zamindari Raja Prabhat Chandra Baruah was a front-ranking intellect, educationist, musician, hunter etc. He himself played the *Ditora* and had a great hand in preserving and popularizing Goalpara folk-song that today form an integral part of Assamese culture. Renowned Goalpara folk-artiste Padmashree Pratima Barua Pande is the grand daughter of Raja Prabhat Chandra Barua. However, the contributions of the *zamindars* are never taken into account by nationalist historians for their role they played in history collaborating with the British.

The rich heritage of Golaparia culture has been neglected at the hands of historians and linguists. The Goalpara dialect itself is a rich language drawn from different local dialects. The language or the dialect is called *Deshi bhasa* by the local people. But others describe it as “*Rajbongshi*” language as the prominent Rajbongshi community (men of royal descent) speak the language. According to Grierson, the noted historian, the dialect of western and southern Goalpara in Assam is pure Rajbongshi. The language in its spoken form varies from place to place in Goalpara-region. But Dr Birendra Nath Dutta unlike Grierson and Dr Banikanta Kakti calls it ‘*Goalpara*’ language instead of ‘*Rajbongshi*’ language. But Dr U.N. Goswami argues: “... language is not identical with community. There is no particular language which can be claimed by a community as to be its own”. This *Deshi bhasa* does not have any written language or grammar. But it has close affinity with Kamrup-dialect. Dr U.N Goswami observes: “Before 17th century Assamese literary works were done in the language of lower Assam primarily written by scholars like Hema Saraswati, Madhav Kandali, Mankar Durgabar, Narayan Dev, Shankardeva, Madhavdeva and Bhatta Deva.” The chief patrons of these writers were the kings of Kamatapur, Jayantapur and Cooch Behar.

Dr Birendra Nath Dutta has pointed out in his works that the old form of Assamese language has close resemblance to the Goalpara language and on the basis of this old language we can research upon the formative stages of Assamese language. Today the Goalpara language is already included into the curriculum to Gauhati University. Poet Kasema Khatun of Gauripur took the painstaking work

in compiling the first ever Goalparia language dictionary published recently. The local magazine *Gadadhar* (named after the river *Gadadhar*) published from Gauripur is making sincere efforts in preserving the rich culture and literature of the region. After all, the local traditions of the region will continue to remain an integral part of Assamese literary tradition.

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Goalini *nritya* or dance form: Important aspect of Goalparia culture



Goalini Kushan *nritya* of undivided Goalpara district

(22)

Legacy of hate bulldozes Sufi shrines - (I)

Attack on shrines of Sufi scholars Abdel Salam al-Asmar and Abdullah al-Sha'ab in Libya by religious extremists has received widespread condemnation across the Arab world. There is a growing crisis in the Islamic societies over the tussle between the radicals and the liberals. The Arab Spring has created an atmosphere of democratic and liberal reforms with the fall of the despots. Libya saw the fall of the authoritarian regime of Muammar Gaddafi leading to elections in July this year where the conservative forces were badly beaten by the secular and modern democratic parties. These incidents are seen as desperate attempts by such elements to sabotage the process of peaceful transition to democratic secular modern state.

The attackers bulldozed the shrine of the 15th century Sufi scholar Al-Asmar located at Zliten in Libya along with a historic mosque and a library which are storehouses of valuable manuscripts and literature. Most of the Libyans follows the Sufi teachings and the Salafis (one version of fundamentalists) do not have a mass appeal in the country. A series of Sufi shrines being attacked in recent times in the Muslim nations is a matter of concern for the liberals. In July, this year, again in Timbuktu, the capital city of Mali, a number of such shrines were desecrated by such extremist forces. Timbuktu is also known as the “city of 333 Muslim saints” where there is a large depository of valuable manuscripts and documents in

the libraries. The 17th century Sufi shrine of Pashto mystic poet Abdul Rahman Baba (also called the nightingale of Peshawar), which stood for centuries at Peshawar in Pakistan, was bombed in 2009. Over the past two years, Sufi shrines and their devotees or visitors have become victims of terrorism in Pakistan, Egypt, India, Libya and Mali. This malicious transgression has been viewed as an attack on pluralist Islam.

There is a growing ignorance towards Sufism which was pivotal in spreading the religion across the globe. The fundamentalists' ideologies seem to have overtaken the message of love and tolerance propagated by the Sufis. The message of Sufism is anathema to the Taliban and similar fundamentalist forces, and there is a growing belief that Sufism is a bulwark against Islamic radicalism. Sufism is an open, intellectual and liberal interpretation of Islam. Describing the importance of this ideology, an article by Professor Philip Jenkins of Pennsylvania State University stated that "Sufism is the power that has made Islam the world's second-largest religion, with perhaps 1.2 billion adherents. Where Islamists rise to power, Sufis are persecuted or driven underground; but where Sufis remain in the ascendant, it is radical Islamist groups who must fight to survive."

Today, there are different versions of Islam across the globe shaped by the local culture, traditions, mores and religion of a particular place. But, the two major opposing versions is that one is the mystical version preached by the Sufis, and the other is the orthodox version preached by the likes of Taliban or Al-Qaeda. The orthodox or the fundamentalist movement and, notably, the Wahhabi

doctrine blame all this ills on modernisation and western influence on the Islamic world. Since inception, Wahhabism from Arabia is seen as the progenitors of modern Islamic fundamentalism. Wahhabis, who came to power in the early 19th century, destroyed all the Sufi and Shia shrines in Arabia and Iraq. The Wahhabi ideology seeks to establish of state and societies based on Islamic laws and traditional mores. Wahhabis, fundamentalists, Salafis, Talibans, Tablighis oppose Sufism as the ideology promotes some practices like veneration to the dead saint as idolatry, music and dancing in the shrines as unethical. In the Islamic history, more puritanical Muslims claim that Sufi practices were infections from Christianity and Hinduism, quite alien to the original principles of the religion.

From the very beginning of Islam, music, dance, poetry, language, literature and meditation has been the crucial medium to spread the message of a religion that attracted people from other religion. Music, in particular, attracted people from the other communities to attend the '*sama*' or *qawwali* session in the shrines where devotees are lifted to the level of spiritual ecstasy. Najaf Haider, professor of History at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi, opines that such conflicts are inevitable: "In orthodox Islam, the object of Islam is the worship of God; God is the master and the devotee is the slave. The Sufis argues that God should be worshipped not because He has commanded us but because He's such a lovable being. The cornerstone of Sufi ideology is love, and all traditions are tolerated because anyone is capable of expressing the love of God." The prominent Deobandi

school of thought has always been pro-Sufi in their approach

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Goalparia language through ages:



The preserved building of Bilasipara College located in Dhubri district was once the residence of Nripendra Narayan Choudhury, the last Zamindar of Chapor Estate. He established a number of schools and Colleges here.

Conservation of heritage:



Reconstructed Pharsiporha Masjid at Kacharihat in Golaghat district. Original Masjid was constructed in 1632.

(23)

Legacy of hate bulldozes Sufi shrines -

(II)

A research scholar on Sufism, Richard Maxwell Smith, stated that Sufis, wherever they went and settled, adopted local customs, traditions, culture, language, literature and folk traditions that could easily attract the local population to their *khanqahs* or hospice. They could easily mingle with the local people by their simple life and method of spreading the universal message of peace, love and harmony. Syed Shah Miran or Ajan Fakir who came from Baghdad to Assam was one such dervish who could easily mingle with the local people by adopting the local language, customs, traditions, culture, language and literature and, thereby, composing *Jikirs* and *Jaris* that are invaluable treasure to Assamese history and culture today.

Scholars like Richard Eaton, Katherine P Ewing, Barbara Metcalf, Christian M Troll, Peter Curie, Mohammad Habib through their works has dispelled the age-old theory that Islam was ‘preached by the sword’ or that there was ‘forced conversion by the Ghazis or Islamic warriors’. In fact, Islam grew in those areas where the Sufis set up their *khanqah* which, later, turned into *dargahs* or shrines. Sufism played a pivotal role in spreading the religion in Central, South and South East Asian region from the 11th century onwards. It has to be remembered that the local people were converted to Islam not due to its orthodox ideologies preached by fundamentalist forces but due to Sufism.

Islam spread in those areas wherever the Sufi saints set up their *khanqahs* or hospices. Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya Dargah in Delhi, Sheikh Moinuddin Chisti in Ajmer, Shah Jalal in Sylhet, Baba Farid in Pakpattan, Ajodhan in Punjab (now in Pakistan), Banda Nawaz Gesudaraz in Gulbarga, Hamiduddin Nagauri in Nagpur, Ajan Pir Dargah in Saraguri Chapori, Hazrat Ghiasuddin Auliya in Hajo, Boga Baba in Dibrugarh etc. In this context, Faisal Devji of Oxford University opines that, “In many places, Sufism was the way whole populations expressed their Muslim identity. In South Asia, it was the norm.” This norm appears to be under threat from such extremist forces.

The Sufism led a normal life unlike the ascetics. But, as social reformers, they showed the way towards work culture wherever they settled. Baba Farid, whose liberal ideologies are manifested in the holy book of Sikhs, Gurubani, is said to have persuaded his devotees to practice agriculture and irrigation in the Punjab- Doab region. This saint was responsible for making the region the most productive region of India and Pakistan. Richard M Eaton in his work ‘Sufis of Bijapur (1300-1700): Social Role of Sufis in Medieval India’ (Oxford University Press, 1978), a masterpiece on Sufism, states about Pir , like Gesudaraz of Gulbarga, who was responsible for the creation of a syncretic, secular and popular culture, attracted all sections of the society. The Pir was responsible for the creation of a Dakhini language in the 17th and 18th centuries and popular folk songs called *chakkinama* were composed by him which was symbolic of the prevalent work culture. These were some of the invaluable contributions of Sufi saints all across the world wherever they settled.

It was through the Sufi saints that integration was possible with the non-Muslims. The Sufi scholar, Marc Gaborieu, in his work, 'Saints and their Cults', argue that communal harmony stands ruptured today because the integrative role of the Sufi saints and their *dargahs* has been undermined by the fundamentalist forces. Mysticism was close to secular principles. There were exchange of ideas and social interaction between the Hindus and Muslims. In fact, the Bhakti or Vaishnava Movement in the 14th and 15th century was influenced by Islamic mysticism which came from the lower strata of the society that suffered exploitation at the hands of the higher caste. This unique cultural belief has made Islam an acceptable religion in a Hindu majority nation like India as this ideology accepted the changes and diversity to suit the Indian tradition, culture and local conditions.

A similar kind of vandalism was committed by the Talibans when they were in power in Afghanistan and bombarded the priceless statues of Buddha in Bamiyan inviting international condemnation. These figures that stood from the third and fourth centuries was an infusion of Graeco Roman and Indian style of sculpture and remained untouched for thousands of years by the Muslim invaders who crossed this area from West Asia to invade and occupy the Indian subcontinent. This became eyesore for the pseudo-educated Talibans in the 20th century. They failed to understand that these were not idols but statues that were not worshipped and that these were the last vestiges of history to prove that Buddhism once flourished in the region. Eminent scholar Asghar Ali Engineer condemned the act as "barbaric and unislamic". Bernard Lewis, who has recently written a book 'The Religion and the People' on the Islamic society stated in an interview to the reputed

Time magazine that “Terrorist organization represents a deformation of Islam in the same way as Nazism is deformation of German patriotism.” He also observed that Muslims and Germans are themselves the first and worst victims of such radical ideologies.

By attacking the mausoleums, the religious extremists are giving a serious blow to the concept of pluralism. The monuments are still the symbols of composite culture revered by all sections of the society. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has called for stopping of destruction of such unique cultural heritage sites. The planned destruction of such historical monuments will rob the Muslims of their cultural identity and future generations will remain ignorant about this beautiful philosophy called Sufism. There is an urgent need to preserve and protect such religious monuments worldwide as these are symbols of peace, love and harmony. The world will be culturally poorer if such monuments are allowed to be destroyed by extremist and vandals if they are allowed to have their way.

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Sufi shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya (Garib Nawaz) in Delhi attracts people from all caste and religions

Need to preserve sattras – (I)

Sattras are the symbols of the Assamese cultural renaissance. These pillars of Assamese society played a multifarious role in unifying and the Assamese society together. Sattras and naam ghars established by Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva and his disciplines were not simply places of religious worship but also were centres of excellence for innovative and creative activities as well as learning. In these centres of excellence evolved a whole range of subjects like language, literature, music, dance, art forms, education, cottage and small scale industries and social reforms that touched every aspect of Assamese life, which is relevant till today. Sattras as institutions wielded great influence on the evolution of Assamese society since the medieval period. Unfortunately, most of these symbols of Assamese culture are facing multifarious threats.

There are no proper statistics as to exactly how many sattras exist in India's Northeast. It is estimated that there are about 500 sattras surviving today out of the 1280 that existed during the Ahom period. There are as many as 25 in Bangladesh, three in Bhutan and 39 sattras in West Bengal. Ironically, most of the smaller sattras are facing severe financial difficulties in the running of the institutions. These smaller sattras are now fighting for their survival.

The biggest problem is that of encroachment and erosion. Maheswar Neog in his work *Pabitra Asom* had clearly shown the huge land grants made to the sattras by

the Ahom monarchs. Mayamara Dinjoy sattra received 2,502 *bighas* of Nisf khiraj land, Garpara Mayamara Iin (1806) received 427 *bighas*, Doloi Suba in the Ahom period received 700 *puras* and 242 *bighas* during British rule, Karuabahi in Nagaon in the Ahom period received 1400 *puras* of revenue free land while Barpeta sattra received 379 acres of land. These are a few examples of such large scale encroachment of these historical sites. The Governor of Assam had recently expressed severe resentment against such encroachment and urged the authorities concerned, including the Archaeological Survey of India, cultural and revenue departments to take up an action plan for conservation of the sites. But most of the land of these sattras has been encroached upon, excluding those in Majuli where erosion is the main scourge. Proper policies have to be formulated for preservation and conservation of these heritage sites. Recently, Chief Minister of Assam Tarun Gogoi had paid a visit to Madhupur sattra located in Cooch Bihar after the demise of the satradhikar. This religious centre in north Bengal was the final resting place to Srimanta Sankardev and it was built during the reign of Koch King Naranarayan in the 16th century. There are a number of sattras in north Bengal which require government patronage. In the Bodoland Territorial Areas District (BTAD) areas in the northern bank of the Brahmaputra in Assam, where a large number of sattras are situated, these institutions played a significant role in uniting the ethnic tribes and castes under the fold of neo-Vaishnavism particularly in the early part of the 20th century. But due to various factors, most of the ethnic communities which earlier identified themselves with the greater Assamese culture are gradually moving away from

sattras. This is primarily due to internal problems, chauvinistic attitude, squabbles and flawed policies of the *bhakats* or followers of the Vaishnava fold that has fuelled this disintegration. It is indeed unfortunate, because the sattras not only played a role in religious reformation but also spread socio-cultural understanding among people of all castes, creeds and religions.

As Vaishnavite establishments, sattras played a very significant role in the formation of Assamese culture. People of different castes, creeds, race and religions joined this bandwagon. The disciples of Srimanta Sankardeva included people from various backgrounds. His disciples included Narottam from the Nagas, Gobinda from the Garos, Jayananda from the Bhutias, Madhava from the Jayantias of *Hira* or potters, Srirama from the *Kaibartas*, Chandsai and Jaihari from the Muslim community which proves the broad network that the great reformer developed all across the region. His disciples from different backgrounds set up sattras all across the region. These sattras unified the contemporary society. Most of the priests and *satradhikars* accepted people from various backgrounds into their fold. Yet politicians like Sansuma Khungur Bwismutiary through illogical rhetoric had called for a ban on *Kirtan Ghosa Aru Naam Ghosa* written by the unifiers of a secular society who were above religion, caste, ethnicity, creed or politics during a period that brought peaceful transition from social turmoil.

The Census Report of 1891 states that a large number of tribes were converted to Hinduism at the initiative of the sattras. Nagas, Ahoms, Lalungs, Tiwas, Kacharis, Mikir, Deoris, Chutiyas, Misings, Morans, etc.

were freely converted to Hinduism during the period. Those who took refuge or *sarana* had to let go of some of their food habits and lifestyle at the initiative of the priests. They were forbidden from eating pork or drinking strong liquor. They were also taught cleanliness and correct social behaviour. On acceptance to the fold of Hinduism they were called Sarukoch. Subsequently after passing of two or three generations were converted to Koch. Those who accepted Hinduism changed their name from Kachari to Koch. For taking *sarana*, some of the Koch came to be called Sarania Koch.

One of the most significant policies of uniting the various communities was through the idea of communal dining, which was introduced by the great saint. People of all tribes, castes and religions sat together to dine. It was stated that:

*Koibartta kalita koch brahman samasta
Ekelage khai dudh chira kol jata*

This promoted communal amity among all sections of the society in an age of monarchy. Sankardeva's followers like Madhavdeva, Damodardeva, Mathura Das Burha Ata, Gopaldeva and Niranjandeva helped enrich the Assamese culture, language and literature. The assimilation had started under the Vaishnava and Sufi movements in eastern Assam in the 17th century itself. But Sankardev was later suspected of involvement in political conspiracy against the ruling authority and hence his missionary work had to be suppressed and institutions abolished. But this did not stop the reformer from migrating to lower Assam and moving to Cooch Bihar. But it was during the reign of Ahom king Jayadhwaj Singha (1648-63) that a new cult by

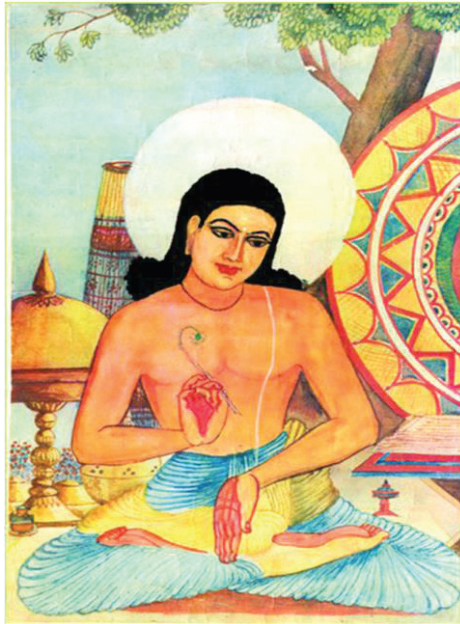
Niranjan Deva evolved and saw the establishment of four great sattras Auniati, Dakshinpat, Garmur and Kuruabahi and under the royal patronage the tempo of proselytizing activities of the Vaishnava preacher increased. More than 400 satras were established during that period. Later, Ahom king Pratap Singha played a greater role in preservation of these sattras by making huge revenue-free land grants to all these institutions which were flourishing at the time.

The sattras not only created a new dimension of work culture but led to a Vaishnava renaissance in various sectors. A new knowledge management system grew in these institutions for dissemination and preservation of knowledge. Earlier, knowledge was confined to an elite class of scholars and was disseminated to the common person at the initiative of Srimanta Sankardeva. This led to revolutionary changes in the evolution of Assamese language and literature. Such was the powerful role of educational empowerment propagated by these institutions that it led to creativity in various cultural fields. In the realm of art and paintings a new style of paintings developed that retained its indigenous identity. Classical dance form or the sattriya nritya was formulated in these institutions. These art forms were subsequently patronised by the Ahom monarchs and Koch chieftains in the 17th and 18th century. Unfortunately, due to negligence, the age old values are facing a threat of extinction as the younger generations are no longer attracted towards these traditional ideologies.

(To be continued)

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Need to preserve sattras:



Painting depicting Shrimanta Sankardeva



Painting depicting Shrimanta Sankardeva with disciples

Need to preserve sattras:



Entrance of Patbaushi Satra in Barpeta



Barpeta Satra Kirtanghar

(25)

Need to preserve sattras – (II)

A new environment of work culture was created among the bhaktas and the local people. These were democratic institutions where works were divided into various functionaries by the internal administration. The hatti puji system of banking introduced by Mathura Das Burha Ata continues till today. These members became expert in various art forms like mask making and also in creating musical instruments like *taal*, *khol*, *negera*, *doba*, *sangkha*, traditional items like *xorai*, *ghanta*, *singhatap*, *manikut*, *chandratap*, etc.

There is ample scope to develop all these traditional items, which are on verge of extinction, into industries. These institutions are treasure houses of various depositories. One valuable depository is the manuscripts or *saanchipaat* (tee bark) and *tulapat* (cotton made paper) written at the directives of the Vaishnava scholars are an important source of history. The books stored in the libraries in the satras are the most valuable contribution of vaishnavite literature. The mural paintings, sculptures, wood carvings and art in many of the important satras are other rich contributions. All the antiques, artifacts, costumes, jewellery, bamboo craft, brass and bellmetal etc. created by the satras are the classical manifestation of Asomiya cultural traditions. These depositories are the rich treasure house of culture and need proper scientific preservation.

The threat of erosion of the main sattras located in Majuli is a matter of concern for the government at a time

when steps are being taken to get Majuli a world heritage tag from the UNESCO in the cultural landscape category. The Moinbari Satra in Barpeta was recently shifted to a safer location near Sorbhog. A large number of such sacred sites are facing encroachment due to lack of maintenance of the management committee. Whereas in many *satras* local farmers were allowed to cultivate on the *satra* land with consent so that the revenue collected from the farmers are utilised for the maintenance of the *satras*. As the smaller *satras* does not have their own fund to maintain or run the institutions, they have to either depend upon donations or on a portion of the revenue collected from the farmers. Some of the richer *satras* are again facing a major threat from robbers.

Today the Assamese are facing a deep identity crisis. Most of the ethnic castes and tribes are moving away from the Asomiya mainstream to develop exclusive identity. After the departure of the great Vaishanava gurus Shrimanta Sankardeva and Madhabdeva, the creation of four *samhatis* further divided the society. However, in recent times at the initiative of some groups some attempts have been made to bring all the communities together. One such programme was ‘*Setubandh*’, which was held in Guwahati recently that played a positive role in highlighting assimilation of a society torn asunder by fissiparous tendencies. Held at the initiative of Shrimanta Foundation, *Noimisha*, *Asomi* the ‘*Setubandh 2012*’ (bridging the gap) promoted the Sankardeva’s cultural traditions. It was portrayed in a very successful manner. Various groups from different communities like Bodos, Sonowals, Adivasis etc. performed *ankiya naat* and *bhaona* composed by Sankardeva in their own language in a very

successful manner by groups from Tamulpur in Baksa district. This plan to bridge the gap that was bonded by Shrimanta Sankardeva about five hundred years ago has indeed yielded positive results.

Proper policies have to be formulated by the government for the conservation and preservation of all the *satras* in a phase wise manner. In 2006 the state government has constituted the *Satra* Preservation Committee which has already identified 862 *satras* for release of financial assistance that has been approved to some of the *satras* had granted some relief to the management committee. In 2006-07 state government sanctioned Rs. 10 crore to some *satras* for preservation and conservation works. It is also heartening to know that in 2010 central government has also sanctioned Rs. 96.65 crore for 135 *satras* in this regard. The cultural renaissance brought about by the *satra* institutions are reminder of the long lasting impact on the socio-cultural spectrum of the Assamese society.

(Concluded)

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Preserving Assamese Culture



Masks on display at Uttar Kamalabari Satra in Majuli

(26)

Neglecting regional history

Expressing apprehension over influence of “alien culture” into Assamese society, historic judgement was recently passed by the Gauhati High Court asking the State Government of Assam to adopt proper syllabi incorporating history and culture of North East India. The order was given in light of filing of a PIL petition challenging the State Government decision to introduce NCERT (National Council of Educational Research & Training) syllabi in to from Class I to VIII. The State Council of Educational Research & Training (SCERT) was advised to discuss the issue with academicians and petitioners for preparation of a “meaningful syllabus”. This judgement has come at a time when the common citizens of the country have expressed their reservations over withdrawal of subjects of history and geography from the school curriculum. Hence there is an urgent need to impress upon the authorities to emphasise the importance of studying History and heritage of all regions of India for the knowledge of our younger generations.

Many educationists feel that blind acceptance of the NCERT syllabi will deprive the newer generations from learning about their local history and cultural ethos. Undoubtedly, the NCERT books are written well, but neglecting the regional perspective will create a void among the minds of the students. What will happen when students will remain in the dark as to who Srimanta Sankardeva was or what his contributions are? Will the alien culture even teach them about their legendary warriors like Lachit Barphukan, Chilarai or Bagh Hazarika?

Younger generations have to instil pride on local socio-cultural traditions. Recently cannon balls dating to Ahom ages were discovered near Chandrapur is an important source of History. Ahom frontier post of Kajolichoki was located in this area must have functioned as an arsenal and was strategically important from the naval and military garrison perspective dating the 17th century Ahom-Mughal clashes including the historic battle of Saraighat. Students if not infused with the idea of studying such a glorious past that evolved through thousands of years will get disconnected with their past. A generation gap is likely to be created if proper introspection is not carried out on the issue.

This significant judgement has come at a time when there is raging controversy over abolishing of subjects of History and Geography from school curriculum. This sense of negligence of studying about the past shows – our ignorance – towards evolution of civilisation and culture. An interesting subject like History as a convention was made dull as it was stuffed with topics like kings, battles and dates. This elitist nature of history-writing and thereby perceiving ‘History from above’ from time immemorial has gradually undergone transformation. The trend of history writing saw changes from the 1980s with the influence of social history of England and France where emphasis was laid on writing history about the common people, peasants, working class, lower caste etc. Hence there was trend of writing ‘History from below’. This shifting of focus has resulted in formation of the Subaltern school of history. This trend of historical research has not yet given due emphasis in North-East India. This has indeed made the subject an interesting discipline. There is a need to understand the history of the common man.

“It is heartening to know that the Central Board of Secondary Education affiliated schools have decided to sensitise the students about the rich cultural heritage of the country by holding various outdoor programmes including ‘Adopt a Heritage’ through which they discuss, organise workshops, seminars, talks, quiz etc to initiate various strategies”

At a time when history as a discipline is fighting a losing battle, the primary institution involved in preservation of our heritage monuments called the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) is celebrating its 150 years of existence. Many heritage monuments are in a dilapidated condition or are encroached upon. The preservation of structures has been given importance by the contemporary generations. The spots where these monuments are situated have become centres of tourist attractions. Recently the government has passed the Ancient Monuments Protection Act. Even though the Assam Ancient Monuments & Records Act was passed in 1959, the conservation process is still a matter of concern. With its financial constraints the ASI is unable to do the best in preservation of 3676 heritage monuments including 59 situated in Assam. ASI is yet to start the survey as per the National Mission on Monuments and Antiquities in order to identify the significant clusters of historical buildings in India.

The discovery of various materials have helped us in shaping the past like monuments, numismatics, inscriptions, written works and various other historical source materials. Assam also has a large number of historical sites that need preservation from neglect, encroachment or destruction. These sources include rock and copper plate inscriptions, ruins of holy sites, *garhs*,

maidams etc *Kanai Barashi Bowa* rock-inscription found in North Guwahati records the defeat of the *Turuska* or the Turks (as the Muslims were thus referred to during that period) in the hands of the local ruler of Kamrupa on March 27 of 1206 AD. From this inscription it became clear that the earliest Muslim invaders were called *Turuska* or Turks in the contemporary period. Even reformer Srimanta Sankardeva referred to the Muslims as *Turuska* in his works and scriptures. Today, most of the sculptural ruins of Assam remain scattered and unattended, which include Daha Parbatia ruins in Sonitpur, Malini Than in Lakhimpur, remain at the ancient site of Surya Pahar in Goalpara or Madan Kamdev in north Kamrup. Comprehensive field studies and research are required to ascertain the contemporary history of the ruins. These places can become places of tourist interest with historical heritage if properly promoted by the government.

The status of conservation is still not very encouraging. Recently there were media reports of construction activities over the historic *Momai Kata Garh* constructed under supervision of Ahom commander Lachit Barphukan. Most of the *garhs* and *pukhuris* including Numaligarh, Landoigarh, Chintamonigarh, Kerimerigarh, Rajgarh, Athaisagar, Rudrasagar, Sivsagar, stone bridges of Dijoi, Dorika and Namdang along with the tombs of the Ahom kings are in a poor shape. This shows the lack of historical sense among the common citizens. In order to preserve all the important vestiges of history the younger generations have to be involved in various projects. The Assam chapter of INTACH foundation can also play an important role in this regard like other states. A database of all the monuments has to be created in the light of the constitution of the National Mission on Monuments.

The Assam government has however taken some positive steps in this direction. Steps have been taken to promote tourism in the historical sites around Sivsagar. This includes Ahom monuments like Rang Ghar, Talatal Ghar, Kareng Ghar and Charaideo maidams. In recent times the tanks and ponds belonging to the Ahom age that has been dug out needs proper conservation.

The important ingredients of regional history like culture, environment, value system, literature etc, need to be incorporated properly in the school curriculum. It is heartening that the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) affiliated schools have decided to sensitise the students about the rich cultural heritage of the country by holding various outdoor programmes including “Adopt a Heritage” through which they discuss, organise workshops, seminars, talks, quiz etc to initiate various strategies through project works to preserve a particular historical monument of their neighborhood. Such remarkable steps will certainly go a long way in preservation of the past for posterity.

This article appeared in The Assam Tribune on 12-03-2012.

Preserving Urban Heritage:



Northbrook Gate known as '*Gateway of Assam*' at Guwahati

(27)

Preserving urban heritage

Ancient Indian civilisation is said to be based on urban-centric civilisation. Being a five thousand year old civilisation, our urban heritage has immense historical value. There is a growing recognition and need to conserve the historical heritage of the urban areas. The rich cultural endowments and traditional sources are symbolic of a tradition that has continued down the ages. In a sense, heritage is more than a record of the past and is in fact becoming an integral part of the urban identity now. City dwellers have recognised that many of the historic areas are in danger of being destroyed in name of development and modernisation. The rapidly urbanising cities along with expansion of space have posed significant risk to all such historical, cultural and natural resources. We have to integrate urban heritage conservation into strategies of socio-economic development.

Some of the oldest cities in the world were seats of cultural and civilisation like Delhi, Bangkok, Cairo, Damascus, Esfahan, Seoul and Yangon. Taking a leaf out of history's pages, it may be stated that the period of Indus Valley Civilisation witnessed the growth of a number of well-planned cities at a time when the rest of the world was living in dark ages. During that period, the Indian sub-continent included Pakistan, Afghanistan and parts of Iran. The Indus Valley Civilisation discovered in 1921 flourished in the west Punjab region of present Pakistan between second and third millennium BC. Well-planned cities like Harappa in Punjab, Mohenjodaro in Sindh, Lothal in

Gujarat that was also a well established port, Kalibangan in Rajasthan and Banwali in Haryana. The town planning and structures of the cities were well ahead of their time and can be compared to any contemporary town as far as planning is concerned.

As a part of the process of heritage conservation *vis-à-vis* urban development, issues like tourism development, revitalization of local economy and local governance comes under consideration. Most of the historical sites and relics or monuments are in danger of being destroyed or wiped out due to negligence from government agencies as well as by the public. The necessity for conservation of heritage buildings and areas was institutionalised by law around one and half centuries back in Europe. In India, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) was instituted by the British government in 1861 that paved way for legislation on conservation of the past. In 1958 the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act was passed empowering the government of India to declare the ancient and historic monuments as having national importance and notify as protected structures all across the nation. Today ASI has identified 3675 centrally protected monuments along with 27 world heritage sites. Even after five years, ASI has not yet started the survey as per the National Mission on Monuments and Antiquities in order to identify the significant clusters of historical buildings in India.

Unfortunately a large number of problems of official apathy, neglect, absence of awareness, etc., in preservation of the monuments have been observed in the entire country. These ancient cities and relics are on the

verge of extinction due to such negligence and lack of historical sense. Recently, there were news reports on the ‘*Gateway of Assam*’ or the Northbrook Gate located at Sukreswar Ghat in Guwahati, leaning towards one side which has raised many eyebrows. Most of the monuments remain unguarded and several have been encroached upon. Most of the ancient sites, monuments and relics have been destroyed by ravages and vagaries, natural as well as unnatural. In comparison we can observe how neglected the history cities like Agra, Lucknow, Gwalior, Murshidabad, etc., are today. Despite the enactment of laws and municipal laws, the administration has not been able to stop unabated constructions within the heritage areas of Tughlaqabad, Mehrauli and Shahjahanabad in Delhi.

Due to such rapid destruction of the historic buildings, laws were enacted in 1992 to create a ‘prohibited building zone’ with a radius of 100 metres and extended to 300 metres ‘regulated building zone’ around monuments of national importance. But the public is still not aware of such laws. In 2010, Indian Parliament enacted the National Monuments Authority. In 2010, the Ancient Monuments & Archaeological Sites & Remains (Amendment & validation) Bill was passed through which no land can be encroached within a perimeter of 100 metres of protected monuments without clearance from the ASI. There is a penal provision of jail for two years or a fine of Rs. 10,000 as penalty for violation of the law. Non-government organisations should come forward in making people aware of all these legal provisions for saving the past for the future.

Unlike India, most of the conservation areas in European cities have been included in the UNESCO designated world heritage cities. Italy has ten cities with this tag including Florence and Rome. Even New York city has 29,000 listed buildings. In United Kingdom there are as many as 9000 'conservation areas' whereas fifty-five percent of the construction budget of the country is spent on conservation of historical buildings which are recognised as a major source of economic resource as these promote tourism, foreign exchange and bring with it pride, employment and prosperity. The private home owners of the country have to seek permission from authorities for changing the colour of their private buildings. The National Trust set up for the purpose of conservation in UK has as membership of around 20 lakh people. On the contrary the INTACH (Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage) foundation has a country wide membership of 7000 all across India. This shows our lack of concern for our heritage. Despite the existence of ASI for more than 150 years, India does not have a heritage conservation policy till date.

We can learn a great deal from Japan's process of conservation of heritage. The country has maintained all its historical buildings and temples for thousands of years in a very good condition. The temple down of Imai-cho where the Syonenji temple is located has more than 80 per cent residential houses and maintains the ambience of the Edo era that flourished between 1597 and 1868. The European cities have launched a project called SUIT which means Sustainable development of Urban Areas through an active integration within the towns. It aims to provide developers, planners, heritage architects, environment management

experts all combined together for development of urban areas. European city sites have taken these issues seriously by taking up plans in a multi disciplinary approach comprising of architects, conservationists, urban planners, landscape planners and designers, craft guilds, civil society groups, archaeologists, engineers and business man to ensure effective conservation. So, we have a socio-cultural obligation on educating our younger generations with history, heritage, value system, literature and cultural ethos. Infusing the sense of history is essential for the youths to know about their past; otherwise alien culture will devour them.

Urban heritage forms an important part of the living and breathing space. A visit to the city of Kolkata with its historical monuments including the Victoria Memorial, National Library, etc., shows that the important hallmarks of one of the oldest cities of India are conserved pretty well. The good news is that the Ahmedabad Municipality has started a conservation department manned by a multi-disciplinary team of government and non-government officials including historians, planners, architects, urban designers, transport planners, etc., who are sensitive to history and heritage. Many states have passed laws for protection of monuments. The Kerala Municipalities Act passed in 1994 has a provision empowering the urban local bodies to notify an area to control new constructions and consist special architectural guidelines for such buildings. Through this act Kerala is successfully preserving the fort area of Thiruvananthapuram which was once the spiritual capital of the Venad kingdom and subsequently the seat of power of Travancore kingdom since the capital was shifted from Padmanabhapuram in the

18th century. Similarly the Kerala Panchayat Raj Act of 1994 provides a similar power for the building of rural areas. The preservation process has been successful involving departments like Town & Country Planning, Directorate of Archaeology, Architects and Conservationists. Similarly, Tamil Nadu has passed the Tamil Nadu Heritage Commission Bill 2012 to frame guidelines on conserving structures not protected by the ASI or the state archaeological department. The Assam Municipal Act should also have such an amendment for protection of the historic buildings which have been encroached upon and are decaying due to neglect.

The UNESCO-led Indian Heritage Cities Network (IHCN) was set up in 2006 to coordinate between various agencies in Indian cities over sustainable socio-economic and cultural development of the historic cities of India. The IHCN is working for sustainable development through policy advice, capacity building, good practice exchange, awareness raising, technical assistance and the facilitation of partnerships. In its first meeting at Jaipur the network discussed various issues and ideas related to preservation, management and sustainable use of heritage in 22 cities of India. None of the cities of Assam finds a place so far in the network. The network is planning to incorporate a heritage cell in all the municipalities of India, formulate heritage rules and regulations, organise festivals and heritage works.

The Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) a flagship programme implemented by the Ministry of Urban Development has recently acknowledged the importance of urban heritage. Now, there is a conscious effort taken by the planners to integrate

heritage studies and planning with city development plans in all important cities of India. The ministry of urban development has also taken steps to formulate bylaws for protection of heritage buildings and heritage areas. Conservation plans and projects have been initiated in all the urban heritage sites including archaeological sites, remains, ruins and monuments protected by the ASI as well as unprotected sites and buildings. Here urban heritage refers to “the built legacy of the city’s history and includes protected and unprotected monuments, individual and group of buildings of archaeological architectural, history and cultural significance, public spaces including landscapes, parks and gardens, street layouts defining identifiable neighbourhoods or precincts which identify the visual, spatial and cultural character of the city”. So, let us all join hands for conservation of the urban heritage in a purposeful manner for our future generations.

This article appeared in Seven Sisters Post on 29-08-2012.

Preserving of Urban heritage:



Syonenji Temple, Tokyo

Is it ‘the Time of the Assassins’?

“Today’s culture reiterates what each of us learn from our own experience. It presents the world as a collection of fragments and episodes, with one image chasing and replacing the one before, only to be replaced itself the next moment... only very few leaving footprints on the memory track. Problems demanding attention are born – together with the popular concern they give birth to.”

The above extract is a part of Zygmunt Bauman’s new collection of essays titled *Life in Fragments*. The excerpt clearly reflects the fast-changing socio-cultural process in the contemporary age. What was pure and pristine in the past is how constantly changing and replacing one cultural trend with another. But what is this cultural process? Having its own connotation, culture for the youth is film, music, art, drama, theatre, etc., for sociologists and anthropologists, it is a way of life whereas for intellectuals, culture has been ideally perceived as “a process of human protection in certain absolute or universal values”. It is high time for us to look into the very nature of contemporary trends of cultural processes, keeping in view the debate whether traditional dynamism still persists today, or whether there has been cultural degeneration.

Many critics tend to agree that there has been some kind of cultural degeneration that is promoting fictionalization, isolation, division and fragmentation of the Indian societal fabric as far as unified composition is

concerned. If Assamese culture, vis-à-vis Indian culture, is carefully examined, we may conclude in general terms that we are indeed inhabiting a world full of “a collection of fragments and episodes” as expressed in Baumant’s essay. For illustration, let us take the case of Assamese nationality. All our historians agree to the historical fact that the greater Assamese nationality was formed only after taking in all sections of the population irrespective of race, caste, religion, ethnicity or language, etc. Myopic political deliberations recognized Assam into seven fragments, on the basis of ethnic or linguistic composition. However, vestiges of solidarity of the greater Assamese mentality survive till today.

Let us take up the issue of language. The Assamese language continues to be the *lingua franca* among the various tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Similarly, Nagas spoke Nagamese spoke in Nagaland has close similarity with Assamese. This reflects the age-old harmonic conjunction created by a language popularized in the sixteenth century by reformer Srimanta Sankardeva. D.N. Charavarty wrote an article: “The tribal solidarity is best expressed in the traditional system of community service which is known by different names among different communities. The customary practice of *sauri bandha* or collective service prevalent among the Assamese protects even the poorest from the privation of being homeless because the entire village comes to build the house of the poor and to harvest the crop of the window or the minor. Similar customs and practices are prevalent among all the tribes. The Mizos have their *Knatlang* and *Thang limeina* which ensures comradeship and nurtures the art of living together. The idea that while the individuals in a

community live for the community, the community also has the responsibility to look after the individual in his hour of distress has so much influenced the way of life and the mental outlook of the people of this region that class or caste hatred or exploitation has been virtually non-existent among the majority of the tribes and communities.” These vestiges reflect the purity and broad nature of our socio-cultural ethos that has withstood the vicissitude of time.

Unfortunately, the political administration today is constantly failing to bring equitable socio-economic development among the ethnic and non-ethnic population, leading to distrust and unrest. Our historical experience shows that years after the formation of new States from greater Assam due to reorganization of the north-eastern States in 1971, the dreams and aspirations of the common people remain unfulfilled. If there are Kuki vs Meitei, Meitei vs Bishnupriya clashes in Manipur, then there is the Khasi vs Garo clash in Meghalaya. The Army has to be permanently stationed in Manipur and Nagaland to combat terrorism. The long-standing boundary dispute between the north-eastern States also countries to linger on, without any concrete solution.

Lately, our political administration, bowing to ethnic assertion, has been offering autonomous rule for ethnic tribes and communities. These acts will promote further division and isolation, rather than bring in cultural unity. The creation of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous District Council has proved beyond doubt that autonomous bodies cannot solve regional aspirations even within the framework of a State. Experience has shown that the formation of states purely on the basis of linguistic or

ethnic majority has produced miserable results. In this context, Bauman's words are relevant when he states "... with one image chasing and replacing the one before, only to be replaced itself the next moment". If fragments are these images, they will keep replacing one after another images which will themselves be replaced by others someday. These aspects require the serious attention of our intellectuals, social scientists and politicians so as to revive the age-old amity that has always been the hallmark of our society.

The largest chunk of our population that takes an active interest in the promotion of culture is our youth. On one hand, they take an active interest in organizing and participating in all cultural activities and on other hand, they boycott examinations, indulge in mass copying or take up criminal activities that directly destroy the educational atmosphere. A right-thinking society would have condemned such unethical practices, but our guardians remain silent spectators. Frustration due to growing unemployment has been attracting the youth to militancy and politics. Hence, the youth-politics of today is promoting a narrow, feudal and fundamentalist outlook. The failure of our youth to adopt a scientific outlook is a dangerous trend on the negative side.

The *chanda* culture of demanding donations in the name of celebrating festivals is gradually becoming a bitter pill for the Assamese community to swallow; a precedent set by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) in the days of the Assam Movement. Festivals are celebrated on the lines of cheap *filmi*-culture. Film songs and dances dominate the Bihu stage. Folk songs, folk art and crafts

hardly attract the younger generation, whereas artists like Moghai Oja (*dhulia*) are on the verge of extinction.

Once, on visit to Assam, Mahatma Gandhi remarked that “Assamese weavers wove gold on their looms.” But what a pity today that *gamosas*, *rihas*, *mekhelas*, etc., are no longer manufactured in Assam due to dearth of raw materials, but in distant Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu. This is simply because we are not socio-economically or culturally conscious. In this context, the words of sociologist Raymond Williams are pertinent when he states: “Culture is a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour.”

Now, let us take up the case of cultural denigration as an all-India phenomenon. A section of the Indian intelligentsia seemed to be worried about the so-called “cultural invasion” destroying the privacy of Indian homes in the form of satellite television. Urban society is said to be badly affected by the vulgar and explicit images and ideas of the West. MTV is said to be leaving a bad influence on the youth. Hence, it has been repeatedly argued that western culture is directly corroding the base of Indian culture. Such a hypothetical presumption is not only speculative, but also ridiculous. Is Indian culture so fragile that Western culture can destroy the country’s civilization, and historical, traditional and cultural foundation?

If we carefully examine the media-industry it will be revealed that satellite TV hardly reaches 20 per cent of our population, whereas our rural folk prefer watching Hindi films to watching films that are alien to them. In fact,

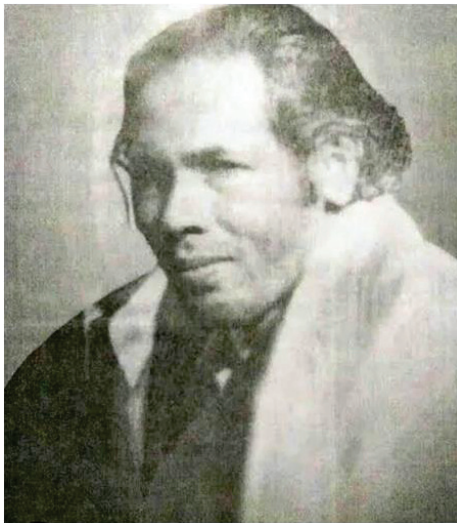
Bombay-made films promote vulgarity, violence, rape, eroticism, etc., leaving a bad influence on our predominantly illiterate and ignorant masses. The latest trend of depicting colleges as havens of romance has gone uncriticized by guardians, intellectuals and the media alike. Aesthetically-portrayed American serials on cable TV are far better than many Indian films. If we look at the positive side of cable TV, news from the BBC, sports from *Prime Sports* or serials from *Star Plus* are better than film-oriented programmes telecast by Indian networks. After all, people who live in glass houses should not throw stones at others. Cultural magazines like *Surabhi* shown on Doordarshan can only teach us more about our rich cultural heritage, stressing the message of unity amidst diversity.

There are a number of governmental bodies, apart from the State Government itself, like the Archaeological Survey of India, the Indian National Art and Cultural Heritage, the North East Council and the North East Zone Cultural Heritage Centre in the North-east, that are devoted to the protection and preservation of our cultural heritage, but not much seems to have been done in this respect. Mass participation from various organizations including non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should come up to stem the rot of degeneration.

There is no denying the fact that modernity has fast invaded the lifestyles of all the people. At the altar of modernity, however, some of the old customs and practices have been given up. This has to be checked by our youth; as we have to prevent the process of modernization from degenerating into blind Westernization. The only answer to political disintegration, extremism, secessionism and

separatism is to create a joint cultural platform of the seven sisters states, and hold festivals where ethnic and non-ethnic populations should participate equally. These may be held annually, in different places, from time to time. Regular workshops to promote folk art and crafts should be organized for preservation and development of all cultural traits. It is cultural homogeneity that has given rise to the concept of a unified nation and nationalism based on common cultural and civilizational traits. Fragmentation of the cultural bonds will prove “united we stand, divided we fall.” Therefore, if cultural degeneration goes unchecked, it will indeed be what a French poet has called in some disdain “the time of the assassins.”

This article appeared in The Sentinel on 03-09-1995.



Pioneer of Assamese culture:

Moghai Oja or Moghai Baruah (1926-1978) Nagaon district under Assam: Musician and drummer who popularized the *Dhol*.

(29)

IS threats looming large over India

The recent terrorists attack at Gurdaspur in Punjab by the Pakistani militants proves the vulnerability of the country from external threats. It has been gathered by the intelligence sources that the militants underwent training under the ISI and the Islamic State at Indo-Myanmar border. This has raised an alarm for the security forces in the North-east India. The threat of the Islamic State or Iraq and Syria or ISIS, now also called IS, is looming large as it is repeatedly designing attacks on India in near future. According to one security expert, the attack on India remains what he calls the 'holy grail of South Asian jihadis'. The radical outfit is gradually drawing worldwide attention for its ruthless violence, barbaric atrocities and inhuman acts on those who do not endorse their ideology. The brutal face of terror unleashed by the Muslim fundamentalist organizations has become a serious threat to world peace.

Even though the IS now controls a large part of Syria and Iraq, its ideology is spreading far and wide through the social media all across the globe. This ideology is gradually attracting the Muslim youths all across the world including India. The waving of the ISIS flags by the Kashmiri youths as a part of a protest rally is a reminder of this growing trend that needs to be addressed urgently. Intelligence reports state that a number of Indian youths, attracted by the spurious ideology, are planning to go to Syria and Iraq via Turkey to fight along with the IS. The social media networks are making lucrative offers in

joining the organization. Recently, a young engineering student of Mumbai Areeb Majid, who managed to go to Syria to become an ISIS fighter, was caught by the National Investigation Agency on his return to India after receiving gunshot wounds and allowed to return for receiving medical attention. He was accompanied by three accomplices and was reported dead after surviving aerial bombings by the US forces. He was inspired by the jihadi contents of the ISIS on the Facebook and turned extremely religious at his own will.

The dehumanizing implications of the Islamic State, the massacre of students by Taliban in Peshawar, the barbaric action of Boko Haram in Nigeria or dastardly killing of the staff of the *Charlie Hebdo* by the al-Qaeda sleeper cells in Paris are some of the incidents that have rattled both the non-Muslims as well as the common Muslims all around the world. The rise of this extremist version of Wahabi and Salafi movement has opened up public debate all across the globe as to whether this was the religion preached by Prophet Mohammad centuries ago. Starting with the rise and fall of Osama bin Laden, every right thinking person thought that Islamic terrorism will die a natural death. But it did not happen and is rather expanding beyond all its limits. The growing radicalization of the Muslim youths is a growing cause of concern and almost all Muslims travelling elsewhere are looked with suspicion. A introspection is the need of the hour from the right thinking Muslims worldwide.

Many thinkers argue that the western military interventions in Iraq, Libya and Syria have caused the emergence of the IS. Whereas other thinkers are of the opinion that growing radicalization is due to area specific

factors. It has to be remembered that a large section of the Muslims living in the democratic and secular countries like India, Malaysia or Indonesia, who practise their religion peacefully within the legal framework is not largely attracted by such ideologies. But the deprived Muslim youths of the migrant communities of Europe faced with frustration and unemployment are now largely influenced and participating in the jihadi activities. One British-born ‘Jihadi John’ is now a well-known IS militant who has mastered the art of slitting the throats of foreigners.

Recently, the Union Home Ministry held a meeting with the DGPs of seven NE States including Assam to discuss about the intelligence reports of the IS threat to several States of India. One such report stated that few youths from Telangana, Maharashtra and Karnataka are planning to move to Iraq for fighting along with the jihadi forces. They were intercepted by the police officials. An advisory has been issued to these States to treat the radicalized youths with extreme sensitivity. Security agencies like the Intelligence Bureau and Research & Analysis Wing have advised the police to take help of the community leaders and clerics to de-radicalize the youths apart from keeping surveillance and strict vigil over the social media.

The newer generations must be thoroughly brainwashed about the perilous intensions of these terrorists groups who are hell bent on death and destruction. Such regressive ideologies such as justifying rape and slavery show the lack of knowledge of what Islam is all about killing and carrying out suicide attack are not sanctioned by shariat for human dignity in neither sanctioned by the Quran nor by the Hadiths. These anti-social acts were

abolished by Prophet Mohammad during his lifetime for the creation of a civilized eastern civilization way back in the 7th century. The prophet himself had to bear intolerable and inhuman acts at the time of preaching the religion; yet, he never asked his followers to resort to retaliation.

The Buddhist statues of Bamiyan in Afghanistan were bombarded and destroyed after the Taliban took power. These remarkable statues stood witness to history for thousands of years. It was through his place that a large number of Muslim kings, soldiers, saints and reformers reached the Indian subcontinent. None of them ever thought of destroying the historical icons for centuries. Now the IS has started destroying the relics and monuments of thousand year-old civilization like Palmyra that once guided the world through their intellect and rationalism.

Gross misinterpretation of the holy Quran and the Shariat by these ideologically-networked jihadists has instilled fear and apprehension in the minds of the common citizens. Prominent Muslim organizations, seminaries and clerics in India have not only rejected the declaration of a caliphate and the ISIS but also categorically declared their activities as un-Islamic. The anti-human, anti-freedom, anti-modern jihadi ideology that preaches hatred towards infidels devoid of any progressive socio-economic agenda can ever solve any burning problem faced by the human society today. To counter the growing radicalization, the community leaders and clerics have to create awareness among the youths against the jihadi propaganda with that of liberal, tolerant and scientific version of Islam.

The article appeared in The Assam Tribune on 07-08-2015.

(30)

Preserving our Heritage

There is a common saying that a conscious nationality is one that preserves its history and culture consciously for posterity. Unfortunately, Indians are not as conscious as the Japanese and the Chinese when it comes to preserving the cultural past. The dilapidated condition of the ancient monuments reflects the lack awareness in preserving our historical heritage.

Cotton College is in the news because the move of the authorities to bring down the old hostel buildings has drawn flak from well-wishers. Sentiments associated with the historic buildings have given birth to the thought that these heritage buildings should be preserved for posterity. It is because of the lack historical consciousness that not a single city in India, vis-à-vis Assam, has been able to get the world heritage tag, whereas, a small country like Italy has 25 'world heritage' cities. Countries like Cambodia, Japan, Italy, Germany, England boast of a large number of heritage sites that have become important tourist spots. In recent times, number historical monuments in India have got the 'heritage' tag. Towns of Sibsagar and Tezpur can claim a spot in the heritage map for their historical importance if properly canvassed. The only ray of hope is the island of Majuli which has been nominated as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO at the initiative of Archaeological Survey of India.

Majuli, the largest river island in the world, is fighting to find a place in the World Heritage Site list

subject to the fulfillment of certain conditions set by the World Heritage Committee (WHC), which is an organ of the United Nations Educational, Scientific & Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The island has been nominated in the category of 'cultural properties'. Unfortunately, WHC returned the proposal with a request to submit some additional information. In this regard the Archaeological Survey of India and State Government have to take a number of steps, including furnishing more information on the *xatras* and the geography of the island. A management plan has to be formulated and a risk preparedness strategy has to be implemented to save the island from erosion in future.

The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) is responsible for maintaining most of the heritage monuments of India. It is looking after more than 5,000 monuments spread across the country. ASI has found out that most of the monuments are in a dilapidated condition due to neglect, vandalism, human encroachment and erosion of the structures. Today a number of associations and NGOs are coming forward to assist ASI in maintaining these structures. India has the unique distinction of having 27 monuments including the Taj Mahal, Sun Temple, ruins of Hampi in the list of World Heritage Monuments declared by UNESCO.

The Indian National Trust for Arts & Culture (INTAC) has urged the Archaeological Department of Assam to preserve 14 monuments of the State for their historical importance. The Trust has also suggested the department to constitute a Heritage Commission, as in Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal, to generate public

awareness on preservation of these invaluable heritage monuments.

The Government of Assam has a responsibility to protect and preserve the State's heritage monuments as per the provisions of the Ancient Monuments & Archaeological Sites & Remains Act, 1958 and the Art & Antiquities Act, 1972. The state has to take adequate steps for proper preservation of sites like Ambari, *Kanai Barashi Bowa* inscription, ruins of Madan Kamdeva and Dirgheshwari or old Cotton College building that can be developed as sites for tourist attraction.

Last year Oil and Natural Gas Commission (ONGC) created a controversy by carrying out a seismic survey near the 300-year old Rang Ghar, the symbolic heritage of Assam. Cracks appeared in this oldest amphitheatre of Asia, directly or indirectly, due to the survey carried out by the company. It was built during the time of Ahom king Pramatta Singha (1744-1751). Unfortunately, the resistance that should have been put up was not seen, though the All Tai Asom Students' Union had called a 100-hour ONGC *bandh* in Sibsagar. Despite being a 'preserved' monument, the Archaeological Survey of India responded late. ASI later informed that the ONGC survey was carried out 2.5 km from the monument, i.e. outside the notified zone. As per the Ancient Monument and Archaeological Sites and Rules, 1959 any activity within 300 metres of an ASI monument is prohibited. By merely apologizing before the public and granting Rs. 1 crore to the Chief Minister's Relief Fund, ONGC cannot absolve its responsibilities towards preservation of heritage

in the State. It should play a proactive role in restoring the charm of the oldest amphitheatre in Asia.

The State Government has taken some steps to preserve the *sanchipaat* or manuscripts available in *xatras* across the State. These manuscripts were composed on palm leaves and paper pulp by vaishnavite saints and poets. The Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) is doing a commendable job in preserving as many as 4,396 manuscripts on *sanchipaat*, 259 on paper pulp, 1,892 on paper and one on palm leaf. There are still 44,000 manuscripts lying in the libraries of the *xatras* and with individuals which need scientific preservation. The *Brindabani vastra* which was developed under the guidance of Gopal Tanti, an ardent follower of Shri Madhabdeva, is now preserved in Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Steps should be taken to bring this piece of Assamese heritage back from England. The heritage building of Cotton College in Guwahati has to be preserved also.

Sankardeva Kalakshetra has taken the significant steps to preserve traditional Assamese music. An archive has been created in the cultural centre that will preserve traditional Assamese music, including *borgits*, *zikirs*, *loka git* etc. The Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts (IGNCA) has taken up the initiative for documentation of the various historical documents like *sanchipaat* available in the *xatras* across the State. A digital archive will be prepared for preservation of valuable documents for posterity. The Centre is also drafting a proposal for a National Electronic Manuscripts Library and a Digital Preservation Policy.

In a country like Italy urban planners consult archaeologists at the time of expansion of their cities in order to maintain a close relation between the modern and the old. But this methodology of architectural planning is not followed in any of the Indian cities. Unfortunately, a subject like history has been dropped from the school syllabus by the Education Department. What do we expect our children to learn about the past when the subject is sent to oblivion? History is not just about kings, battles and dates but about the society's transition. To conclude with the words of John Stubbs, the vice president of field projects at the World Monuments Fund, who recently delivered the first Pupal Jayakar memorial lecture on World Heritage Day on April 18, 2009 – “Without heritage, the world would be a boring place”.

This article appeared in The Sentinel on 06-09-2009.



Digitization of Sanchipaat in progress in Nagaon district

Protecting our archaeological heritage

India, it has been said, has only geography and no history. This preposterous statement was justified on the ground that while India was dotted with archaeological reminders of its past, Indians displayed little sense of history or a appreciation of their heritage, pride of their ancestry. This was what reputed historian Arvind N Das once opined describing the little respect that the Indians have towards their past. This sense is clearly reflected in the apathy of the authorities concerned towards preservation of our heritage. The Archaeological Survey of India in a report submitted to Parliament through the Culture Minister in 2005 stated that "... with rapid urbanisation, construction of multi-storied residential and commercial buildings and implementation of development projects, the archaeological sites are in danger of being wiped out if proper steps are not taken immediately". Time has come to respond to the challenges posed by various factors in order to preserve the heritage for posterity before this endangered priceless architecture is lost.

Unauthorised constructions and encroachments are threatening even the birth place of Mahatma Gandhi at Porbander in Gujarat. The ancient capital of Vijayanagara at Hampi and Jaipur city are also facing similar problems. Ancient historic cities of Ujjain and Kancheepuram have been made uninhabitable due to growing population. The walled city of Delhi or Shahjahanabad are now unfortunately notified as slums with crumbling structures. Recently the Parliamentary Standing Committee headed by

Sitaram Yechury submitted a report to Parliament on disturbing facts about the destruction of our archaeological heritages. In the report, the Committee stated: “The case of vanishing of our monuments is a dangerous process which if not controlled in time may lead to a situation where we will be left with only a few monuments as symbols of culture and traditions. Vanishing of monuments should be stopped with all resources at our disposal”. The Union Cultural Affair Minister has admitted that as many as 249 such historical sites were encroached upon including Sher Shah Suri’s tomb at Sasaram in Bihar, Shivaji’s forts of Sidhudurg, Solapur and Raigarh in Maharashtra.

In Assam, the *maidams* or the burial grounds of the Ahom period at Charaideo are under threat of encroachment. Charaideo is the capital of the Ahom kingdom set up by the first ruler Chaolung Siu Ka Pha in 1253. In the state, important *Sattras*, *Dargahs*, *Devalayas*, temples and other religious institutions have been encroached upon, as repeatedly highlighted by the media. Most of the *sattras* in Barpeta are also gradually being encroached upon. Similarly, land belonging to *dargah* of Hazrat Ghiasuddin Auliya in Hajo and Syed Shahanur Dewan at Bhella in Barpeta has been infringed upon. Thousands of *bighas* of land made through *pirpal* and *devottar* grants by the kings no longer exist. In recent times, stakeholders of the ancient *devalayas* are also gradually selling their existing *devottar* land due to financial hardships. Yet we are doing very little to save these valuable heritage structures and granted by the royal families. After all we have already done disservice to the state by wiping out history from our school curriculum.

Population explosion, increasing human habitation in the form of urbanisation, commercialisation and development are the three primary causes of decay of these monuments. We need to formulate a policy to preserve all these historic sites for posterity. Maintenance, beautification, security and promotion needs to be outsourced to private agencies or NGOs for better preservation. These sites should be improved by adding lighting facilities for viewing at night or along with visitors' galleries and libraries to provide information about the structures. Annual cultural festivals are held every 74 year at sites like Khajuraho and Chidambaram to attract tourists.

INTACH (The Indian National Trust for Art & Cultural Heritage) is one such foundation that has been constantly working for preservation of historical sites. The organisation is involved in the documentation of the monuments and is assisting in formation of heritage laws. It has been able to create awareness and make the common people conscious about their heritage and culture. This NGO has signed an MOU with several states including Sikkim, the only state from the North eastern region. The Assam chapter has already been opened but is yet to take any active role in preservation of monuments in the state. In recent times, UNESCO has come forward to create the Indian Heritage Cities Network (IHCN) in order to preserve the heritage values of these cities. Governments in states like Delhi have taken up restoration works on the monuments themselves.

Unlike India, most European heritage cities do not permit haphazard construction of buildings. Ancient monuments have been well protected for centuries in all the

cities due to planned maintenance and efforts to preserve their rich culture. Prague, once the capital of the now fragmented Czechoslovakia has managed to preserve its architecture dating back to 9th century AD. Most of the European countries including Germany, Austria, Venice, Greece, Italy, Hungary, etc, have taken adequate steps to preserve most of their heritage properties in a scientific way. German archives are also well preserved that even literature of the Shakespearean era are available for research today. All these issues need to be addressed through Master Plan. Unfortunately, unlike the European Master Plan, Indian architects have no place for heritage structures in their scheme of ideas and designing. Our architects need training to infuse modernity with tradition as prevalent in places like Bhutan, Japan, China, Malaysia or Thailand. A visit to any of these countries will reveal how these countries have preserved their heritage for showcasing to visitors.

In Assam, there are a few interested groups who have taken up steps in this regard. Recently, seven advocates of Mangaldai town played a positive role in pressurising the government in saving six heritage buildings of Mangaldai town that includes the Mangaldai Treasury Office and Bungalow of the Deputy Commissioner, both built in 1852. At the initiative of these conscious advocates all these monuments will be preserved as per section 3 of the Assam Ancient Monuments and Records Acts in 1959. Other buildings include the court of the chief judicial magistrate constructed in 1889, Circuit House in 1852, the police station built in 1930 and the Mangaldai Higher Secondary school building of 1903. A number of idols discovered at Deopahar in Numaligarh have recently been

added as historical sites after the construction of the Numaligarh refinery near the site. The Archaeological Survey of India is responsible for maintenance of a number of important monuments of the Ahom period in the state.

However, the Archaeological Survey of India through the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1959 failed to enforce preservation of the sites and monuments in a proper way. The Act was amended in 1992 to make a prohibited zone in a radius of 100 metres and 200 metres of regulated prohibited zone around the protected monument. But the amendment did not help the cause. Subsequently, the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (Amendment and Validation) Act, 2010 was passed by Parliament. This Act will help preserve protected monuments by preventing construction around these structures. The new act calls for creation of a National Monuments Authority (NMA) to see preparation of comprehensive maps of 3675 centrally-protected monuments and protection to an area of around 300 metres radius of the monuments. The grading and classification of all these monuments will be carried out by the NMA. Moreover the Act imposes penalties for causing damage, alteration and misuse.

The Assam government enacted the Assam Ancient Monuments and Records Act in 1959 to save the ancient monuments of the state. The *Kamrupa Anushandhan Samiti* set up in 1912 is about to complete a century for its existence and has played an important role in preservation of old records. Archaeological monuments are now major tourist attractions all across the country, including Assam. There is an urgent need to preserve and maintain these age

old structures which are primarily lying in ruins. The restoration of all Ahom-built monuments at Sivasagar has led to an increase in tourist-inflow in the district in recent times. Thanks to the ONGC which has sanctioned Rs. 1 crore for preservation of the historical monuments constructed in the medieval period by the Ahom kings in upper Assam. In 2009, ONGC signed an understanding with the National Culture Fund to take up conservation projects for restoration of art, culture and heritage. Similar steps are required for preserving the *satras*, *devalayas*, *mazars* in the state. There is also an urgent need to save the relics of the Kachari (Dimasa) kingdom in North Cachar Hills at Maibong, perhaps the most ancient relics in the state.

In a Global Conference on Conservation of Heritage in Delhi last year, the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh sounded a word of caution that: “One must not get trapped into this binary choice between development and conservation of heritage. The two must go together. We need strategies and policies that facilitate such a walk on both the legs”. Hence development and conservation of heritage must move together. It is indeed our national duty to save our heritage from further destruction due to lack of awareness towards history and culture. To sum up we can say that heritage is a legacy from the past and is a gift for the future and we must give respect as it is the source of inspiration for the generations to come.

The article appeared in Seven Sisters Post on 12-07-2012.

Protecting our archeological heritage



Stone chariot at Vittalla Temple in Hampi, Karnataka



Tomb of Sher Shah Suri at Sasaram, Bihar

Preserving our achaeological heritage

Visit to Cheraman Juma Mosque



The Cheraman Juma Mosque located at Kodangallur in Kerala is one of the earliest Mosques built on Indian soil after arrival of Arab traders to Malabar coast in 629 AD during the lifetime of Prophet Mohammed. The local king Cheraman Perumal was converted to Islam utilized local masons to build a Mosque without any idea of a design during that period. On completion the structure appears to be similar to local Hindu temple.

The unique feature is the oil lamp common to temples was placed right in the middle of the praying area and the flame has been burning continuously for centuries that welcomes visitors irrespective of religion, caste or creed.

Renaissance in Assam

The 19th century was a period of change in the social, economic, political and cultural scene of India. A historic movement was the transfer of political power to the British creating spontaneous changes in every sphere. One such significant change was the exposure of the country to western ideas and influences due to the spreading of English education. It was period when the East met the West. The conscious move towards a modern outlook developed among the rising educated Indian elites particularly in Bengal. This class took a leading role in bringing about a socio-cultural and religious resurgence in India during this period which gave birth to the renaissance in India. Influences of this renaissance from Bengal reached Assam through the rising Assamese educated class.

This renaissance would not have been possible had the Indians not been exposed to western education. But education was given little priority by the colonial administration at a time when modernization of the education-system was essential. The government expenditure on items on the education sector was meagre, and common mass remained deprived of even elementary education. The British system of education was introduced with the sole motive of manufacturing a class of native gentry who could be 'loyal' towards their colonial masters. It was British statesman, Thomas Babington Macaulay's Minutes on Education in 1835 that established English as the dominant language of education in India. However, Macaulay himself pointed out the objective of the Minutes

clearly when he stated, “We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us, and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, English in tastes, opinions, in morals and intellect.” This class nurtured to form zamindars or landlords; lawyers, merchants, small planters, government officials, clerks and various others who depended on the government for livelihood. It was this class that became the front-runners of this intellectual movement.

Whenever we talk of resurgence in Bengali the name of Raja Rammohan Roy comes to our mind as he is the one who created such a progressive environment in that State that a large number of traditional issues underwent reformation. Issues like sati or widow-burning, female-infanticide, child-marriage, women’s education were given due importance. Reformers like Debendranath Tagore, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Haji Mohammad Mohsin, Abdul Lateef, Amir Ali and others through their social work left a deep impact on society. At the initiative of Raja Rammohan Roy the Hindu College was established in Calcutta in 1817. It was from this college that Henry Virian Dorazio led the Young Bengal Movement.

A large number of socio-religious associations like the *Brahmo Samaj* in Calcutta, *Prarthana Samaj* in Maharashtra, *Arya Samaj* in Punjab, etc. paved the way for reforms. A series of caste movements particularly in South India, and the Ahmadiyya and Aligarh Islamic movement in North India brought modernization amidst traditionalism in the social fabric. Sweeping reforms in England like the Catholic Emancipation Act (1829), the Reform Bill (1832),

the Abolition of Slavery (1833), The New Poor Law (1834) left deep influence on the educated elite.

At the initiative of the Assamese educated class this cultural resurgence spread to Assam. The Assamese intellectuals mostly educated at Calcutta created an environment for reformation. Humanism and rationalism were given priority. Religious universalism already existed in Assam since the medieval period. The tolerant and liberal society took roots under the Ahom-administration when the gradual process of 'assimilation' started, and significant contributions came from social reformer and scholar Shrimanta Sankardev, a Vaishnava saint who started the Vaishnava movement in the region. Unlike other parts of the country casteism was least rigid whereas child-marriage, sati *daha* system or female-infanticide was not prevalent. Therefore, a fertile ground was already laid out for the propagation of the reformistic ideals in the State. Due to liberal religious beliefs the reforms, were primarily targeted towards the removal of superstitions, social evils, unscientific customs and traditions that were a hindrance towards promoting modernization.

The socio-political scene during the early 19th century was that of chaos and anarchy. The Ahom administration was on the decline, the Moamoria-Vaishnava sect raised the banner of revolt at a time when epidemics and the ruthless invasion of Mans from Burma had shattered the economic and political machinery in the region. It was during this period that Capt. Welsh led an expedition into Assam and forced the Mans to accept defeat, and return to their native country. The expedition came as a relief for the people of this region. With the

signing of the 'Treaty of Yandabu' with Burma in 1826, Assam formally came under the British rule.

Despite a chaotic atmosphere a silent revolution in various socio-cultural fields manifested itself. Assam being a part of the province of Bengal, Bengali remained the official language. Between 1836 and 1872 Bengali continued to remain the official language instead of Assamese without much public opposition. Only few individuals like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan who himself wrote in Bengali being educated at Calcutta opposed the move. As Assam had to fight for her language it gave birth to a literary-based 'renaissance' in the State.

During this period the Baptist Christian Missionaries came to the North-east to preach Christianity from the United States of America, headed by Reverend Nathan Brown (1807-86) and Miles Bronson (1812-93). Both were scholars who were responsible for laying the groundwork for spreading the Assamese literary movement by publishing the first journal-cum-newspaper *Orunudo* (The Dawn) in 1846. Commenting on the motive of the publication historian H.K. Barpujari stated "The primary intention of the publication was propagation of Christianity, but the literary value has tremendous importance as ample knowledge like science, history, geography, news and views gave a new insight to the general readers." These missionaries set up a number of elementary schools in Assam. Influenced by the writings of Bengali writers, the Assamese intellectuals also took up writing in various publications in Bengal, and contributed a great deal in the popularization of the *Orunudo*, for removal of social vices, superstitions, and advocated to adopt a scientific approach

to daily life. Reverend Nathan Brown after learning the Assamese language published a treatise titled *Grammatical Notices of the Assamese Language* in 1848 from Sibsagar.

Several writers writing in the journal projected a solution to the growing economic retrogression of the State and favoured development of agricultural sector and industrialization, as in England. At the efforts of some progressive Assamese men like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua and Hem Chandra Barua a new atmosphere of rationalism, humanism and reformation was created in Assam. Anandaram contributed an article entitled *Assamiya Lorar Mitra* in 1849 where he tried to create an awareness on different aspects of the society and dispel the belief that the Assamese were incapable of writing and reading. Bengali remained the official language as in schools and courts, the progress achieved in the State was found not only lethargic but highly defective as well. In 1853 when the Sadar Judge of Calcutta A.G. Moffat Mills visited the region he noticed these anomalies. In his report "A Few Remarks on Assamese Language" in 1858 he noted, "... an English youth is not taught Latin until he is well-grounded in English, and in the same manner an Assamese should not be taught a foreign language until he knows his own." Anandaram Dhekial Phukan pleaded before Moffat Mills to reinstate Assamese in schools of Assam. The Baptist missionary also raised the voice of protest against the imposition of Bengali. During this period remarkable works were published to popularize the Assamese language. Hem Chandra Barua completed two remarkable works *Grammar of Assamese Language* in 1856 and *Hemkosh Abhidhan* in 1900 to enrich the literature. Gunabhiram Barua's *Assam Buranji* written in Bengali in

1884 throws sufficient light on Assamese history and culture and he also completed the first Assamese biography *Anandaram Dhekial Phukan Jivan Charitra* in 1880. Hem Chandra Barua brought out a newspaper *Asom Bandhu* which ran for sometime whereas Gunabhiram Barua edited the literary journal *Asom Bandhu* from Calcutta. The establishment of a literary organization *Axomiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* by the talented Assamese youths pursuing studies in Calcutta in 1888 was an important landmark in the history of Assamese literature. This association was the precursor to Axom Xahitya Xabha.

The monthly journal *Jonaki* (Moonlight) started publication from 1889 becomes the unofficial mouthpiece of the literary organization. Literary luminaries Lakshminath Bezbarua, Chandra Kumar Agarwala and Hem Chandra Goswami came to be revered as ‘*trimurti*’ or trinity of this renaissance period. They were strongly influenced by the contemporary renaissance in Bengali literature particularly on specific aspects like romanticism, creativity, simplicity and realism. Bolinarayan Bora’s magazine *Mou* (Honey) published during this period also advocated reforms on a scientific basis. Such journals, magazines, books, newspapers, etc. carried the message of this socio-cultural resurgence and took up social-commitment in promoting the reforms.

Western ideas and influences broke the conventional barriers of traditional habits and mores age-old customs and social fabric through the reforms. For example eminent intellectual Lakshminath Bezbarua in his collection of essays titled *Mor Jiban Suworon* observed his father Dinanath Bezbarua did not object to the new haircut

of his western educated son ignoring the conventional custom of keeping a small pig-tail (*tikoni*) usually practised by the Brahmin caste. Historian Benudhar Sharma in his essay collection *Arghavali* stated that for taking forbidden food and drink, prominent personalities like Govinda Barua were excommunicated from the society. Similarly intellectual Hem Chandra Barua was made an outcast for advocating widow-remarriage. Poet Kamalakanta Bhattacharya was declared a *Mleccha* (outcast) for taking beef, marrying a widow and removing the sacred thread or *Laghuna* worn by the Brahmin caste. Even though such minor self reformation were not revolutionary it created an impact for society to open up. Unfortunately, due to the paucity of educational facilities to rural areas, the gradual reformation process remained confined to a small coterie of rich-urban class.

Much of the social reforms in the 19th century India, were concentrated on the removal of suffering and disabilities of women. Social evils like sati or self-immolation of widow on her husband's funeral pyre and female-infanticide, speak of their miseries. Unlike other part of India, fortunately in Assam these heinous customs were not prevalent and women led a more or less free life. As in Bengal no effort advocating widow-remarriage was made. Intellectual Jaduram Barua not only supported this system but he himself married a widow. Gunabhiram Barua and Hem Chandra Barua supported the passing of the Hindu Remarriage Act in 1856 at the initiative of Raja Rammohan Roy. Dibeswar Neog in his writings pointed out that Gunabhiram Barua attended the first widow remarriage in Calcutta, studied Bengali dramas like *Bidhava Bibaha* by U.C. Datta and *Bidabha Manoranjan* by R.M. Mitra which

influenced him so much that he composed the first Assamese play *Ram Navami Natak* supporting the system and he himself married a widow and got his daughter remarried after the death of her first husband. In his valuable work *Bibaha Paddhati* (Assamese Marriage system). Hem Chandra Barua strongly supported widow remarriage. Today widow remarriage is a common phenomenon in Assamese society.

Women's education remained a neglected sector throughout history. It was only the boys from aristocratic sections of society who could pursue education at home or move to Calcutta for higher studies. In such a period higher education or sending girls abroad for education was unthinkable. There was a general belief that it is next to impossible to find a suitable groom for a highly-educated girl. Unlike Bengal, no intellectual came forward to take active initiative like Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar to propagate the necessity of female education. Nevertheless there were signs of progress. Haliram Dhekial Phukan wrote anonymous letters to newspapers in Bengal to create awareness in this field. *Orunudo* took up a progressive role publishing write-ups favouring female writers. A positive direction took shape when American missionaries took the initiative and set-up schools in the following places at the initiative of Ms Cutter at Sadiya in 1837, Ms Brower at Sibsagar in 1840, Ms Bronson at Nagaon in 1843 and Ms Barker at Guwahati in 1850. Besides imparting education in these elementary schools lessons were given on sewing, knitting, weaving and various domestic works. By 1880 the number of elementary school for girls increased considerably indicating good progress. However, the public interest was lacking as most of them felt that education to

women would not yield any long-term goals due to factors like marriage.

The educated class took up several issues centering around social evils and worked for their eradication. In his satirical writing *Bahire Rang Chang Bhitare Kua Bhaturi* (Externally colourful internally rotten) Lakshminath Bezbarua exposed the social evils prevalent in society particularly those relating to irreligious acts of the priests. Lakshminath Bezbarua through his satirical essay also attacked the social vices. One such vice that came under attack was opium addiction. Opium cultivation introduced in Assam at the behest of British tea-planters left a bad-impact of Assamese society as more and more people got addicted to this drug. Such was the magnitude of addiction, that the British administrator. Whiting in 1858 remarked “An opium-eater now is not an exception, but one who does not take is an exception.”

Introduced with the sole aim of earning profits as in China, the product was exported to countries in the Far East. Despite opposition, the government in 1844-45 introduced *abkari* or government opium in Goalpara. In some places like in the Lakhimpur district revenue extracted from opium exceeded land-revenue when the trade remained a government monopoly. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan suggested to the government to stop the trade on *abkari* opium and put restriction on poppy-cultivation. In his literary satire *Kaniyar Kirtan*, Hem Chandra Barua expressed the bad-affects of opium-consumption. When the Royal Commission on opium came to Assam, Gunabhram Barua and others demanded a total ban on its cultivation. The newspapers gave a clarion call for the anti-opium movement. Patriot Maniram Dewan

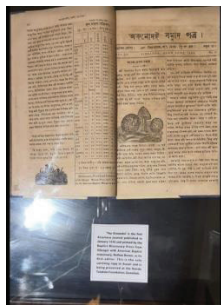
submitted petitions to A.J. Moffat Mills on the issue. The *Jorhat Sarvajainik Sabha* led by Jagganath Barua however despised immediate ban on opium as they felt that it would make the addicts turn on to more harmful spirited liquor. Interestingly enough the Royal Commission found nothing wrong in the opium policy of the government ignoring the bad impact the drug was having on the society. In the region no organized movement was launched in the late 19th century. It was during the struggle for independence in 1920s that *Kani Nibarani Sabhas* were organized until a total ban on the drug was achieved.

Unlike other parts of India, slavery was prevalent in the north-eastern region since the time of Ahom rule. As physical labour was emphasized by the Ahom administration through the *paik*-system many from economically poor sections of society became slaves to the aristocrats and bureaucrats who were called *lagua-lukchou*, *bandi-betis* etc. Sometimes prisoners of war, criminals etc. became slaves. Under the *paik*-system a free person who becomes penniless mortgages himself for a loan and was called a bondsman or *bandha* a form of slavery. The *marakia* class voluntarily placed themselves under the protection of the gentry. Some slaves served their masters generation after generation. Slaves could be bought or sold at a fixed price. Slaves even became items of export. James Mathie the collector of Darrang refers to extensive kidnapping of children of these regions to be sold as slaves to merchants of Sylhet, Rangpur and resold to zamindars of west Assam and Bengal. However, British administration brought about a gradual emancipation of slavery at the insistence of local intellectuals. In 1829, the government of Bengal prohibited sale of slaves for non-payment of debts.

Captain Adam White estimated that there were slaves numbering 11,000 in Kamrup alone whereas by 1843 the figure moved to more than one lakh slaves. However due to rising protests slavery was abolished in 1843 under Act-V of the Abolition of Slavery Regulation.

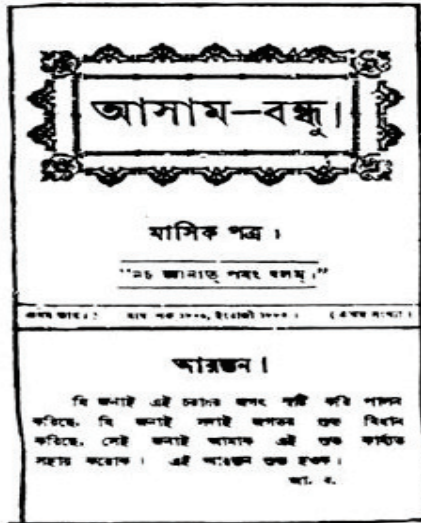
The middle-class despite adhering to westernization did not discard all traditional moves, values, customs, beliefs and habits. The socio-cultural reformation became a form of self-defense to reassess the age-old culture from a critical but scientific angle. The new changes in administration created fresh consciousness towards patriotism and politics exemplified by the sacrifices of Piyali Barphukan and Gomdhar Konwar. Political associations were formed during this period like *Assam Desh Hitaishini Sabha*, Assam Association, *Sarvajainik Sabhas*, Assam Branch of Indian National Congress, etc. which created a congenial atmosphere for the struggle against imperialism. Ultimately, it was the same educated class which joined by the rest of the society armoured with Gandhian nationalism fought the imperial forces and brought independence to the nation in 1947.

This article appeared in The Sentinel as Part-I on 21-09-1996 and Part-II on 28-09-1996.



**Display of copy of *Orunudo* at Brahmaputra
Heritage Center in Guwahati**

Literary renaissance in Assam:



Assam Bandhu published from 1885.

First Editor: Gunabhiram Barua



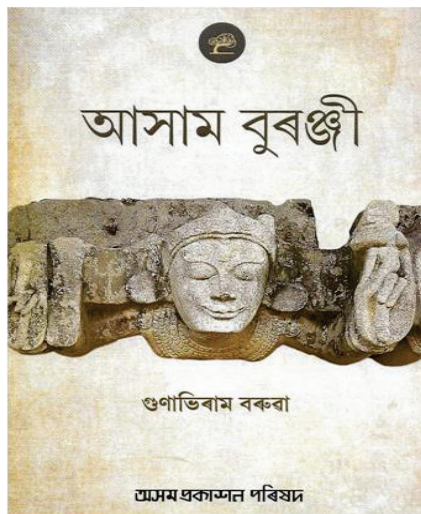
Lakshminath Bezbarua (1868-1938):

Pioneer of *Jonaki* Age literature

Literary renaissance in Assam:



Gunabhiram Barua (1834-1894):
Pioneer of Assamese literature



Assam *Buranji*: A history written by **Gunabhiram Barua** published in 1887 that became a school text book.

(33)

The forgotten hero of 1857

A large number people have left their indelible mark in Assam history. But, a majority of these legendary figures still remains shrouded in mystery. One such eminent personality is Lukie Senchowa Baruah.

It was only in 1977 when freedom fighters Bhadrakanta Phukan and Suren Kumar Phukan brought before the world a picture of this legend. Recently, prominent historian Rafiul Hussain Baruah has brought out a small booklet, '*Bidrohi Lukie Senchowa Baruahar Sandhanat*' (2012). In the work, he has thrown new light on the man who is little known to the people despite being a close associate of martyr Maniram Dewan.

After much research, the author found out that Baruah belonged to the Ahom royal family at Kakojan, Jorhat. He was the son of Mohidhar Senchowa Baruah and Padmabati, who was popularly known as Padumi Aai (mother). His mother happened to be the daughter of Ahom king Jogeswar Singha (1821-25). The Doloni Khat or the estate located in Saruchorai Mouza of Jorhat was given along with dowry by the king to Mohidhar Baruah's father.

The Kakojan playground and the Kakojan Higher Secondary School are located in the land donated by Baruah's family. The Senchowa Pukhuri (pond), named after him, near the school was dug at his initiative.

Baruah held a responsible post in the Ahom administration during the early and mid 19th century. The Senchowas were responsible for upkeep of the *sen chorai*

(hawks), whose fight was a source of entertainment for the Ahom kings. A lot of families belonging to the Senchowa clan have settled in villages of upper and north Assam. However, the title of 'Senchowa Baruah' is quite rare. It was probably Ahom king Gadadhar Singha who created the post and conferred the eldest son of Bandar Barphukan with the title. Since then, the title remained an important post for the Ahom royal lineage. The administrative officials retain utmost importance at all level of the administration.

The mid- 19th century was a period of political turmoil when the royal authorities, including the Mughals in North India and Ahoms in Assam, challenged the rule of the East India Company with the help of Indian sepoys (troops) recruited by the colonial ruler. As a patriotic person with royal lineage, the entry of the British colonialists to the motherland infuriated Baruah and he, and his contemporaries, hatched a conspiracy to expel the foreigners from the soil of Assam, even when the nationalist movement had not yet begun. He was closely associated with Maniram Dewan, who participated in the famous 'Sepoy Mutiny' of 1857.

Through the treaty of Yandabu in 1826, the British had annexed Assam into the colonial empire. But, people were unhappy with such an arrangement as it led to the economic exploitation of the region in form of revenue enhancement. Maniram Dewan, who was very ambitious, was the revenue Sheristadar (record-keeper) and an advisor of the Ahom king Purandar Singha (1832-38), became hostile to such exploitative policies of the colonial administrators. He vehemently opposed the British policy of opium cultivation in Assam as the society was gradually

destroyed with the introduction of this intoxicating drug. He faced administrative difficulties and economic hardships in establishing private tea gardens. Dewan was also against the desecration of the maidams (royal tombs) which he said were valuable treasures. So, he planned to reinstate the former native Ahom king Kandarpeshwar Singha to the throne by dislodging British rule from the state. Baruah helped Maniram Dewan in realising his goals.

The first step of Dewan to attain his goal was filing a complaint before AG Moffat Mills, the judge of the Sadar Court in 1953, on the aforementioned issues. But the judge dismissed the petition as a 'curious document' from a 'discontented subject'. Then, on behalf of the Ahom royal king king Kandarpeshwar Singha, he petitioned – in Kolkata on May 10, 1857 – to the British administrators for restoration of Ahom rule in Assam.

During that period, the Sepoy Mutiny started and spread across North India with an intention to restore Mughal rule. Dewan saw it as a golden opportunity to restore Ahom rule under Kandarpeshwar Singha. Hence, he decided to take up armed insurrection with the aim of overthrowing the British from the state.

He was supported by influential leaders like Urbidhar Barua, Mayaram Borbora, Chitrasen Borbora, Kamala Charingia Barua, Mahidhar Sharma Mukhtiar, Ugrasen Marangiakkhowa Gohain, Deoram Dihingia Barua, Dutiram Barua, Bahadur Gaonbura, Sheikh Farmud Ali, Madhura Koch and Lukie Senchowah Baruah. The conspirators were also joined by British sepoy Subedar Sheikh Bhikun and Nur Mohammad after Kandarpeshwar

Singha promised to give them a double raise if the Britishers were overthrown.

All the rebel leaders met at the residence of Sheikh Bhikun on August 29, 1857, at Nogora. There they planned a march to Jorhat for reinstating the Ahom king on Durga Puja of that year. They believed that once Jorhat was liberated, Sibsagar and Dibrugarh could also be liberated soon. But the British uncovered the plot before it could be executed. All the leaders were arrested. Maniram Dewan was arrested in Calcutta and lodged at Alipur Jail and later transferred to Jorhat. He and Peoli Phukan were publicly hanged on February 26, 1858, as they identified as the kingpin of the plot.

Most of the leaders were imprisoned, or some were given life sentence or sentenced for 14 years to Cellular Jail in Andaman Islands. Kandarpeshwar Singha's mukhtear Madhu Mallik got life imprisonment, Nilakanta Cholahara Phukan, Farmud Ali were also jailed. Mayaram Borbora (14 years imprisonment), Kamala Charingia Baruah (14 years imprisonment), Ugrasen Marangiakhowa Gohain (life imprisonment), Dutiram Barua (life imprisonment), Sheikh Farmud Ali and Bahadur Gaonbura were also imprisoned. Subsequently, at the prayer petition of Dutiram Baruah's son Priyalal Baruah and Bahadur Gaonbura's son Maniuddin, their fathers were freed from prison on September 19, 1863. No doubt, Dewan and his associates failed in their uprising, but the valour, patriotism and martyrdom became a source of inspiration for the society.

As a part of the punishment, all the estates belonging to Baruah were confiscated by the colonial administrators. After the seizure of property, his wife

shifted to Doloni Khat or Rajakhat. Even the entire land of the Saruchorai Khat was confiscated, except 18 bighas, which was left for them to earn their livelihood. It was here that she settled with her son Naroram Senchowa Baruah. Some official records state that Padmabati was given 'opium allowance' at the rate of Rs. 60, not for her livelihood but to purchase opium for the Ahom royal family members. It was part of the British policy to destroy the Ahom royal families by encouraging them to consume opium, rendering them physically, mentally and politically weak.

Not much is known about the return of Lukie Senchowa Baruah from the Andaman Islands. He was freed and returned from Andaman by the same ship as Dutiram Baruah and Bahadur Gaon Bura. Many of the rebels lost their lives during imprisonment. Some are of the opinion that he jumped from the ship when it was about to reach Calcutta port. But many believed that he swam to safety and reached Assam from Calcutta. His wife was informed that he died after jumping from the ship in Bay of Bengal. Many theories did not round on the issue, and it is a matter of historical research and investigation. People of Jorhat did not believe that Luki ever came back from the Andamans. In the meantime, there was transfer of power from the East India Company to the British Crown. During this period, all the five rebels sent to Andamans were pardoned by Queen Victoria through a proclamation and hence were able to return to their native land. Some of the natives of Golaghat are of the opinion that Baruah once again tried to raise the banner of revolt against the British rule, in association with Marangiakkhowa Gohain. He waited for the proper opportunity, but was not successful in the long run.

Return of Baruah is still shrouded in mystery. But Rafiul Hussain Baruah informs us that some Muslim families of Golaghat claim that they are his descendents. One such claim came from freedom fighter and tea planter Khasnur Ali Ahmed of Barhola. The author opines that he too belonged to that family and that Luki never revealed his actual name after returning to Assam. He returned to live clandestinely so that nobody recognised him and married a Muslim lady of royal lineage at Kacharighat in Golaghat. He was given the Pulibor Doloni in his dowry after his second marriage. He accepted Islam as his religion and took to farming for running his livelihood. He had a son named Gela Baruah. Gela Baruah's son Burhan Ali became a freedom fighter who strongly opposed British rule in Assam. He was indeed the symbol of Hindu-Muslim unity and secularism.

This article appeared in Seven Sisters Post on 30-08-2012.



Hieun Tsang (602-664 AD):

Chinese Buddhist Scholar visited India through the Silk
Route to India via Assam

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Remembering the legendary Ahom General - Lachit Barphukan

At a time when we are celebrating the year long celebration of the 400th birth anniversary of the 17th century Ahom general Lachit Barphukan, the Chief Minister of Assam has recently written letters to his counterparts in other states requesting them to include a chapter on this historic and iconic figure in the syllabus of the schools and colleges in their states. The shining legacy of valour and patriotism of the legendary warrior would contribute to the spread of patriotic ideals among then youths and inspire them to dedicate themselves to the service of the nation. His valorous leadership led to the decisive defeat of the Mughals at the battle of Saraighat in 1671 that registered a unique space in annals of history of Assam.

Lachit was the son of a legendary administrator Momai Tamuli Barbarua, the first Barbarua or Governor of upper Assam and commander of the Ahom army under King Pratap Singha. As an administrative reformer he made arrangement of works for all the public under their rule. Momai Tamuli Barbarua developed the *Paik system* creating ranks for various officials. Land allotment was made for each member rendering services to the state in times of war. Extensive land survey was carried for this purpose. He took to nation building and reorganisation of the state by setting up model villages for the first time in Assam. Momai Tamuli also strengthened the *garhs* or earthen palisades of Rajgarh and Lahdoigarh. He was

awarded the title of 'Barbarua' by the king for the services rendered to the state.

Lachit was born in difficult times when Mughal General Mirzumla invaded Assam and went up to Garhgaon to capture the Ahom capital for some time. General Nawab Mirzumla occupied Guwahati on 4th February, 1662. Then the army moved forward and occupied Kaliabor and subsequently captured the Ahom capital of Garhgaon on 17th March, 1662. This event was no less an insult and injury to Ahom pride and valour. The Ahom king Jayadhwaj Singha had to flee from the capital to take refuge in the neighbouring Naga Hills. The king had to wait and plan something strategic to throw out the Mughals.

However the advantageous situation for the Ahoms came when the monsoon arrived in Assam the rains and floods created undue situation for the Mughals who were not familiar such weather. It created hindrance in movement of the troops to move in and out of the capital. The looted valuables and gold could not be stored safely by the commanders. After staying in the Ahom capital for a few months Mirzumla and a large number of his men were affected by various diseases like malaria and pneumonia and was compelled to conclude a peace treaty with the Ahoms which came to be called the treaty of Ghilajarithat concluded on 23rd January, 1663. By this humiliating treaty Ahom king Jayadhwaj Singha had to give a large number of gifts to the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb apart from giving his daughter and the princess of Tipam Namseng Gabharu popularly called Ramani Gabharu to the Mughal royal palace. On attaining her age of marriage she was married to Aurangzeb's son Azam Khan who was appointed as the

Governor of Bengal and she came to be called Rahmat Banu Begum.

After Nawab Mirzumla left Garhgaon, the Ahom king took steps for reorganisation of the army due to disastrous defeat at the hands of enemy forces. During the time of king Chakradhvaj Singha, Atan Buragohain was given the responsibility of reorganising the army. Lachit was appointed as the Barphukan to command the army. All the small and big ships were renovated or newly manufactured to fight the enemies. The cannons and bortops were manufactured along with ammunition. These arms in the arsenals were prepared by the Muslim experts who took the knowledge from the Mughals. Expert warriors and archers were brought from the hill tribes like Jayantias, Khasis, Dimasa, Nagas and the Darrangis to engage with the enemy. There was gradual reoccupation of the places that were occupied by the Mughals including Panikhaity, Tatimara, Kajali, Kharguli, Itakhuli as well as north Guwahati.

The reoccupation of these strategic locations by the Ahom army and violation of clauses of the Treaty of Ghilajarighat angered the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb and sent a heavy force under Ram Singh, the general and the king of Amber in Rajasthan and Rashid Khan in 1666. His expeditionary force included 1500 *ahadis* (gentlemen troopers), 500 *burkandazes* (imperial artillery men), 30,000 infantrymen, 21 Rajput *thakurs* (chieftains), 18000 cavalry, 2000 archers and shieldmen along with 40 warships. Attacks were made at Sukreswar, Ashwaklanta, Jayduar, Umananda, Itakhuli, Kharguli and Neelachal hills. All the strategic locations were fortified by the Ahoms.

When the Mughal forces reached the outskirts of the city the Ahom commander Lachit Barphukan was caught unaware. He made hurried preparation to protect the city from the enemies by constructing earthen palisades or *garh* to fortify the fortress of Srighat or Saraighat near Amingaon on north bank of the river Brahmaputra. Eventhough the general gave the responsibility of construction to his maternal uncle, but he failed in his work due to laxity. This compelled the Barphukan to punish his own uncle by beheading him. A famous patriotic connotation is used in favour of Lachit Barphukan who is said to have said “*Deshotkoi momai dangor nahoi*” which meant “My (maternal)uncle is not greater than my motherland” while beheading his uncle as punishment. This connotation is not supported by any contemporary evidence but continues to inspire the Assamese community till today.

Prior to the battle of Saraighat, the Ahoms and Mughals clashed at Alaboi hills. In this battle the Ahoms allied with the Jaintias, Garos, Nagas and the Rani of Darrang. Atan Buragohain commanded the forces on the northern bank while Lachit himself commanded the southern bank. Atan harassed the Mughal army with *dagga judha* (guerrilla warfare) periodically, in the lead up to the battle. In the meantime, there was a fiercely fought skirmish at Alaboi, where the Ahoms faced a major reversal with around 10,000 Ahom soldiers massacred. This tragic battle was fought on 5th August, 1669. So king Udayaditya Singha sent a force of 20,000 to assist Lachit in his battle against the Mughals. This battle was a great learning experience for the Ahom for their future battles.

In the famous battle of Saraighat that followed in 1671 fought near Pandu on river Brahmaputra the Barphukan's army triumphed because of the bravery and courage shown by his soldiers in the naval battle despite the fact that the Barphukan was seriously ill. His able confidante Bagh Hazarika and Laidhon Khan fought by his side to win the battle. Bagh Hazarika was the commander of the Garhgaon unit and Laidhon Khan was commander of the Kaliabor unit. Lachit Barphukan single-handedly led the Ahom force to victory over a much larger Mughal army. It was one of the greatest military victories ever.

Today Lachit Barphukan's name is equated with great warriors of India like Shivaji and Maharana Pratap. Educated in humanities, military skills and scriptures he was initially given the position of Soladhara Barua or the scarf bearer of the king, then commander of Simalugarh Garh, also became the Ghora Barua or in charge of royal stables and Dholakaxaria Barua or the Superintendent of royal household guards to King Chakradhvaj Singha. He came to limelight when he successfully recovered Guwahati from the Mughals in 1667 for which he was presented with the *Hengdang*, the gold plated sword. Subsequently he was honoured with the title of 'Barphukan'. Today the Lachit Barphukan gold medal is awarded to the best passing out cadet at the National Defence Academy. This is a fitting tribute to the brave warrior and a brilliant military strategists.

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Statue of Lachit Barphukan

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Undo the Neglect of History

“It is commonplace that Indians do not have the sense of history. The impurity with which we treat the signs and symbols of the past and the Philistinism that underlines our approach to historical artifacts are daily reminders of how we neither take pride of our ancestry nor hope for our progeny.”

This is what noted columnist Arvind Das observed in an article in a leading metropolitan daily, indicating the ignorance of the past by Indians. It is indeed true that we are gradually growing disinterested in our past, unlike the Japanese or the Chinese. The recent decision of the Assam Education Department to abolish history and geography from school textbooks (so as to amalgamate these subjects under social studies) has come under heavy criticism from all historians of the country. Prominent intellectual and activist Deven Dutta has severely criticized the role of educationists in abolishing a subject like history from the school curriculum as it will alienate the young minds from their past, culture and heritage.

It was the scene of history that prompted leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru to write *History of India* and the joint efforts of Nehru and Dr B R Ambedkar that prompted them to accept the ancient Ashoka Chakra (the wheels of righteousness), adopted by Emperor Ashoka, as an integral part of the national flag. Likewise, they also adopted the lion capital of Sarnath as the national emblem. But the words of righteousness (*Satyameva Jayate*) no longer

attract the contemporary generation, even though the Buddhist ideas are still revered in China, Japan or Sri Lanka. The Buddhist priests have maintained the writings of genealogists from a very early period. These are useful sources of information to history. Even in the case of Assam, Buddhism became an important religion for the ethnic communities of the region during the ancient period and yet there is no history that highlights the practice of that religion before being abhorred by Tantricism.

The Ashokan pillar edicts remained undeciphered till the early part of the 20th century. Later, Britisher James Prince deciphered the edicts and the use of Pali in writing about the ways of *Dharma*. The rich culture and civilization of the Indian subcontinent have been able to attract the attention of millions of tourists visiting the country every year. We seem to forget that India was one of the earliest cradles of civilization in the world. Travellers like Alberuni, Ibn Batuta, Marco Polo and Hiuen Tsang visited and appreciated the high quality of education imparted in India, particularly in subjects like mathematics, astronomy and astrology. In the ancient period, universities of Nalanda, Taxila (now in Pakistan), Vikramshila and Ujjaini were the best in the world. Students from all over the world came to study in these institutes. Nalanda, in fact, can be considered the oldest university in the world.

In recent times, the discipline of archaeology is gaining importance as historians feel that the subject will help us understand the past in a scientific way. The discovery of various materials have helped us in shaping the past with sources like monuments, numismatics, inscriptions, written works and various other materials.

Assam also has a large number of historical sites that need preservation from neglect and destruction. These sources include rock and copper plate inscriptions, ruins of holy sites, *garhs*, *maidams* etc. The *Kanai Barashi Bowa* rock-inscription found in north Guwahati records the defeat of the *Turuska* or the Turks (as Muslims were referred to during that period) in the hands of local ruler of Kamrupa on March 27 in 1206 AD. The inscription made it clear that the earliest Muslim invaders were called *Turuska* or Turks during that period. Even reformer Srimanta Sankardeva referred to the Muslims as *Turuska* in his works and scriptures. Today, most of the sculptural ruins of Assam remains are scattered and unattended. These include Daha Parbatia ruins in Sonitpur, Malini *Than* near Silapathar, remains of Surya Pahar in Goalpara and Madan Kamdev in north Kamrup. Comprehensive studies and research are required to ascertain the contemporary history of the ruins. These sites can also be promoted as places of tourist interest.

The art and science of construction of the *maidams* is also an interesting subject for research that has been neglected so far. *Maidams* were the burial grounds of Ahom kings and important royal officials. These *maidams* can be compared to the pyramids of Egypt. The tombs of Gadadhar Singha (1618-1696) and Rudra Singha are significant (1696-1714). Like the *maidams*, the study of the *garhs* built during the Ahom period is equally important and significant. The *garhs* (walls) built to protect the region from foreign attacks bear an important testimony to history but are still neglected by archaeologist. Mamai Kata Garh near Guwahati, destruction of Numaligarh in Golaghat and Vaidya Garh in Rangia happen to be one of the earliest

sources of history of Assam. Historian Edward Gait was of the opinion that the earliest Muslim invaders entered through Kumarikata region of Tamulpur civil sub-division. During that period, king Arimatta constructed a *garh*. There are 30 such *garhs* in Assam, including in Dibrugarh. All these historical structures, if renovated, can become a source of tourist attraction particularly from the Southeast Asian countries.

Cannon balls dating to the Ahom period that were recently discovered near Chandrapur, are an important source of history. The Ahom frontier post of Kajolichoki located in this area must have functioned as an arsenal and was strategically important from the naval and military garrison perspective during the 17th century Ahom-Mughal clashes including the historic battle of Saraighat. The Ahom navy preferred Kajolichoki to Hajo to fight its enemies. It was here that the legendary Ahom commander Lachit Barphukan fought with the Mughals, apart from Tantimara, Sonapur and Joyduar. Military accounts can be rebuilt on the basis of these discoveries that can make an interesting read on the war strategies of the past. The Indian Council for Historical Research should (ICHR) sponsor research on these valuable subjects through regional universities to prevent these subjects from losing their glory in the future.

It was from the 1980s that history saw new research in subjects that we left untouched since time immemorial. Creation of socio-economic history in England and the Annales school of France shaped up the “subaltern” stream of writing history. If history was traditionally stories of kings, dates and battles, then it was called “elitist”. The subaltern stream laid stress on unsung heroes or the

common mass like peasants, workers, tribals, Dalits and women who remained unrepresented in history for ages. This stream came to be called “history from below”. All these developments have opened up new vistas of understanding about the past. Academic scholars of Assam and the rest of the Northeast have a large number of historical sources that can throw light on the subaltern class. Neglect of tribal history and culture is responsible for ethnic assertions in the Northeast. Prominent sociologist Dr Mrinal Miri blames economic development and globalization for wiping out ethnic history that generally followed oral tradition for ages. Most of the tribal communities do not have written history till date. So, emphasis should be laid on including tribal history in our syllabus. The Northeast chapter of the Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR) has to take initiatives in encouraging research scholars to study the lost ethnic history.

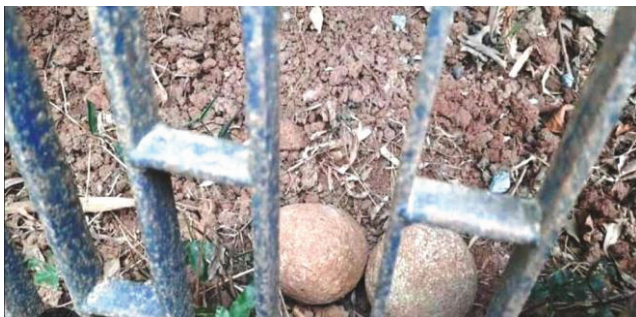
Surveys carried out by television channels clearly reveal that today’s generation does not know much about their past and about the icons who built the Assamese society and culture. So, doing away with subjects like history and geography will further alienate the present generation from their past. In fact, we are yet to develop a proper socio-cultural history of Assam. A historian by profession, Dr Amalendu Guha, says that “no historian till date has properly analysed the real nature of politico-economic transition occurring through the medieval phases of Assamese history”. He terms the earliest period of Assamese society as “tribalism” when tribal oligarchies dominated the political process. The Ahom *buranjis* are one such source that can open up invaluable information about

the rich past of the Ahom period. The elitist bias that continues in Assamese history needs to be reviewed by our scholars. We have to display our sense of appreciation of heritage and pride for our ancestry.

After all, history must inspire the future generation.

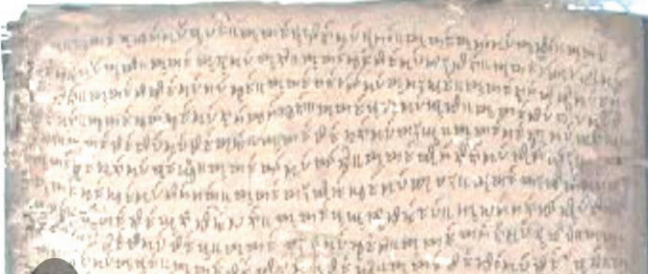
This article appeared in The Sentinel on 11-10-2009.

Historical sources of Assam

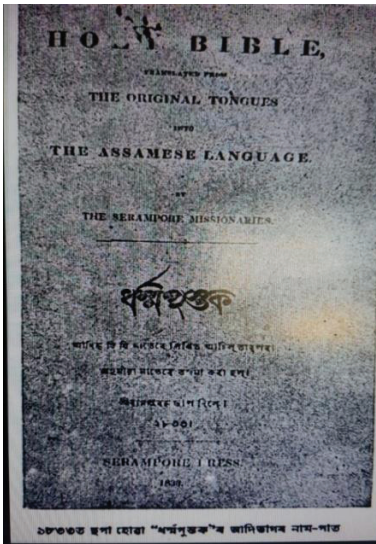


Kajalichaki - The military outpost of Assamese soldiers located near Panikhaity

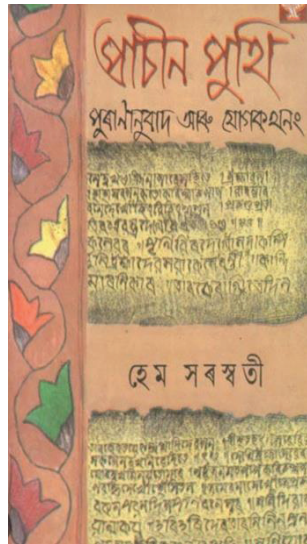
Historical sources of Assam



Buranjis written in Tai-Ahom script



The first printed material in Assam 'The Holy Bible' published in 1813 by Baptist Missionary Dr. William Carey. It was translated into Assamese in 1833 by Atmaram Sarma.



Oldest Assamese literature used by scholar Hema Saraswati

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Alarming trend of attacks on creative freedom

The recent assault on Bollywood film director Sanjay Leela Bhansali by members of the Karni Sena at Jaipur on the ground of distorting a historical figure has once again shown how forces are abetting intolerance in society. The director was shooting his new movie *Padmavati* based on a fictional character created by Sufi poet Malik Mohammad Jaisi. The ground of attack was the so called distortion of undermining the valour and sacrifice of the Rajput queen named Rani Padmini of Chittor or Padmavati as in the film. There is a growing trend of intolerance of right wing groups like the Karni Sena in giving a new twist to some of the historical facts to suit their own version of history. This is one such episode of these forces who want to rewrite history with a tinge of saffronization.

The Karni Sena was angered by the so-called dream sequence where Padmavati and Alauddin Khilji were shown romantically. However, the film unit has clearly ruled out such a sequence in the film. In a similar incident, there was protest by this same group over the shooting of Ashutosh Gowariker's movie *Jodha Akbar* in 2008. They stated that the movie portrayed Jodhabai, the daughter of Bharmal of Amer. They claimed that she was the daughter of Maharaja Udai Singh of Marwar and was married to Akbar's son Salim alias Jahangir and that Mughal king Shah Jahan was her son. They are unable to understand

what is fact and fiction. On an earlier occasion also, director Sanjay Leela Bhansali was criticized for ‘inaccurate’ depiction of Peshwa Bajirao in his film *Bajirao Mastani*. This unnecessary criticism by some elements reiterates how the past is used to legitimize the present in order to polarize the people on religious lines for political exigencies. Now it has become a trend to oppose any kind of creative freedom whenever a historical figure is depicted in a film.

The subject of history has become the new battleground for Indian politics. The quest for exclusive identity of a particular ground of religion, caste or ethnicity has resulted in demand for rewriting of history to suit their own needs. Such attempts to reconstruct the past on various lines have led to distortion and fabrication of historical facts established through various historiographical sources. Even though the essential requirement of the discipline is the pursuit for truth and understanding the past, but it has become the matter of settling to establish one community’s superiority over the others by one sided evidence. In recent times, the writings on history have become the target target of fundamentalist organizations of India. The ‘saffronization’ of Indian history by the Sangh Pariwar is one such instance of distortion of historical facts. The Sangh Parivar targeted the NCERT (National Council for Educational Research & Training) school text books time and again as they understand that the histories taught through those books have been a major influence on the way the Indians look at India.

According to historian Irfan Habib, queen Padmini of Chittor was not a historical character at all and that her

story is a fiction conceived and created by the 16th century Sufi poet Malik Mohammad Jaisi in 1540 in his famous poem called 'Padmavat' which was written in Awadhi script. In the fiction there was the character of Alauddin Khilji and Rana Rattan Singh. There was no such truth in the characters as to when Alauddin Khilji was in Chittor back in 1303, he ransacked Chittor city and that he was accompanied by Sufi saint Amir Khusrau. But there was no mention of *Padmavati* in his writings. Even contemporary historians including Gauri Shankar Ojha from Rajasthan does at not mention anything about the queen. Legends are created in history in both historical and fictional forms. Even Anarkali was one such fictional character from the Mughal periods created by Abdul Halim Sharar of Lucknow which gain popularity in the Bollywood blockbuster *Mughal-e-Azam*.

In course of time, some events become imbued with cultural meanings, which is more to do with politics and less with history. *Itihaas parampara* or the tradition of history in the Indian subcontinent has been followed from the ancient period onwards. The oral tradition also continued from such ancient period by an elite literate class. But the written form of recorded histories, which mostly were narratives or eulogies of the kings, came from writings of Muslim historians from the medieval period. With the entry of the Mohammedans into the subcontinent with the historiographers and narrators to record the contemporary events, such written sources became important sources of historical accounts. But for the first time, it was the British scholars who properly compiled Indian history from their point of view.

Only after the arrival of the British, the writing of history started in India. Those who wrote history were basically army officers and administrators of the East India Company. But these were written with their own perspectives. As a consequence, many issues were twisted, falsified and misinterpreted to suit their style of administration. There were no native writers during the 1800s. These books became the standard textbooks for a long period of time and were prescribed for teaching by the later day examinees of the Indian Civil Service and the Indian Army. As a part of the process, they communalized the history. The communalization of history started at the hands of such colonial administrators. The RSS and the Sangh Parivar learnt these lessons that the British historians left for them.

There is an increasing trend of intolerance over the depiction of historical figures in the films. The political right wing forces want to ban the cultural freedom of the artistes from expressing themselves. Such attempts of assaulting artists in the name of preserving exclusive ideology are unacceptable as it means curbing the freedom of expression. Art forms like films and dramas promote harmony and universal brotherhood by drawing inspirations from history and are no way connected in promoting any political agenda. The promotion of the idea of living in harmony in a secular society through different creative art forms is the need of the hour when the nation is going through a period of predominance of secessionists ideologies.

This article appeared in The Assam Tribune on 27-02-2017.

(37)

Corporate adoption of heritage monuments

The decision of the Centre to engage a private company for maintenance of the iconic Red Fort to develop the tourist amenities as a part of the Adopt a Heritage scheme has generated controversy all across the country. A pact has been signed by the Ministry of Culture and Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) with Dalmia Bharat as a part of adoption of the historic fort which is being seen as an attempt to 'privatize' or 'hand out' the heritage sites in the country. The Assam Tourism Development Corporation had similarly taken a step to hand out the Kaziranga National Park and the Ahom-built monuments at Sivasagar to Jungle Travels India Ltd, a decision that had led to an uproar in the State.

The project '**Adopt a Heritage**' that was started in September last year plans to entrust private sector companies and individuals for the development of tourist amenities in heritage sites. These parties would become 'Monument Mitras' and adopt the sites under corporate social responsibility (CSR). The basic amenities would be provided to the visitors and would also look after the operations and maintenance of the amenities. The ASI has selected 93 monuments for the project to be leased out through bidding. On the one hand, there will be online bidding and on the other hand, it is not clear how they would follow CSR activities on their own. The large companies can maintain the sites through CSR activities alone without government funding. The way the bidding

process has been invited online for the companies been mired with controversy. It has flouted the norms laid down in various rules and Acts connected with conservation or preservation of the historical monuments. One such Act is the Ancient and Historical Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1951. This has created confusion in the minds of the historians and archaeologists.

The Union Ministry of Culture had to come out with a clarification that the pact with the private sector companies was “only for the development, operations and maintenance of tourism amenities in and around the Red Fort. It envisages limited ‘access’ to the non-core areas and that ‘no handing over’ of monuments is involved”. The pact further gives Dalmia-Bharat the rights to sell tickets and charge visitors for commercial activities in side which will be decided by a committee involving the company along with nominees from the Ministry of Culture and ASI (Archaeological Survey of India). Reputed historian Irfan Habib finds the scheme “flawed”, suggesting that the Government should have experimented with the lesser known historical structures and not the iconic Red Fort. The Indian History Congress (IHC), the largest body of professional Indian historians, has expressed concerns over the terms of agreement. The IHC has demanded an impartial review by the Central Advisory Board of Archaeology or other body of experts as the Dalmia group does not have the expertise for preservation the great historic monuments. The ASI was established in 1861 for preservation of all historical monuments and heritage sites in the country. In total 3,686 sites are today maintained by the ASI out of which 2,670 relics have been declared as nationally important monuments. But the irony is that more

than 7,500 historical buildings remain unprotected so far. These critical sites require public-private partnership model for improvement. Heritage protection has been a state subject for a long period of time till the ASI stepped in. It was only in 1997 that the Government of India circulated a model Heritage Act for implementation by the States. The reputed NGO, Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), has been working in this field since 1997. INTACH is still pressing on getting the Act passed by many State governments including Assam. INTACH has not been active in Assam even though a chapter exists in the State for quite a long time now. Non-involvement of INTACH in this bidding process is surprising.

The public-private partnership model has been followed for maintenance of many heritage sites unlike this adoption process for quite a long period till date. Several companies have been assigned to conserve the monuments since 2009 through the National Cultural Trust. The ONGC has been involved for renovation of the Ahom era monuments in Sivasagar. When a few years ago cracks appeared on the historic icon of Assam, the Rang Ghar in Sivasagar after an earthquake, there was a public outcry against the ASI for their failure to protect the monument. In order to give a face-lift to the monument, a project by the name of '*Amulya Dharohar*' was launched by the ASI for Rs. 1 crore with funding from the National Cultural Trust and ONGC. Under the same programme, the ASI has carried out scientific conservation of three more monuments – Talatal Ghar, Kareng Ghar and the group of four *maidams* in Charaide. The ASI today maintains 55 such monuments in Assam. In order to protect the ancient and medieval monuments, the draft '**National**

Conservation Policy for Monuments, Archaeological Sites and Remains' proposes to utilize the skills of hereditary craftsmen as they can handle the repairing works of the monuments which can become their source of livelihood. But the public are sceptical as to how these masons or stone carvers can excel in repairing works of ancient monuments. Instead, experts are of the opinion that highly-trained and skilled workers can be utilized for such sophisticated works. Computer-aided technologies have to be adopted in a scientific manner for such repair works. The new policy further calls for documentation of all maps, drawings, photographs, digital records and field notes for creating documents of interventions.

The draft National Conservation Policy aims not only for conservation of relics but also makes an attempt to be more inclusive and contemporary in approach to conservation and preservation. The main principles are: minimum intervention, maximum retention of material of cultural heritage value, reversibility (so that any errors made today can be rectified later), legibility (meaning replacements must be distinguishable from the original), and sustainability (so that what is being conserved can be handed down safely and authentically for future generations). Hence, conservation is no longer the physical repair and reinforcement of old but is a knowledge-based discipline necessitating the induction of historians and cultural scholars as much as of engineers and technical experts for scientific preservation of heritage for posterity. So, unless the expertise of the ASI and INTACH is utilized for conservation of heritage monuments, 'adoption' of heritage is not only unfeasible but also untenable.

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Neglect of tribal culture - (I)

Historian Edward Carr once remarked that history is less the story of individuals than the social forces. The conventional approach in writing history lay too much emphasis on great individuals like Ashoka, Akbar or Gandhiji. Significantly in recent years the centrality of the discipline has shifted from the 'elitist' bias to the ordinary masses. These ordinary masses constitute a capable social force whose destiny also guided the entire historical process. The old concentration on politics has receded in the face of a new concern with social structures, demography and popular mentalities. History, therefore seems, is no longer just the story of great men: it is everymen's story – of the subalterns like peasants, minorities, families, criminals, the working mass and above all the tribals. Like the Marxists, the newly emerging "Subaltern school" of history is giving due emphasis on the reconstruction of tribal history and literature that has been neglected since time immemorial.

It should be noted that the term 'tribe' is used to distinguish people so socially organized from 'caste' and should not convey a sense of complete isolation from the mainstream of the Indian socio-cultural ethos. In the formative phase of a civilization in the north eastern region the tribal traits strongly influenced the mainstream Assamese cultural ethos. Anthropologists have made detailed studies on how well ethnic folk tradition, rites-rituals, sociological-behaviour, literature, arts-crafts, song-dances left an indelible mark on Assamese culture.

Unfortunately, the modern historians have neglected the ethno-centric view of Assamese history, thereby failing to provide adequate coverage on co-joining the missing-links between ethnic and mainstream history. As a consequence one-sided versions of history were propitious enough to create racial and chauvinistic undertones. A few writers went a bit further to condemn and vilify the history of the Bodos, the Kacharis, the Koches, the Chutiyas and others. Such fabricated and stereo-typed interpretation of the past virtually promoted a great deal in rupturing the age old cohesiveness of our societal fabric that we witness today.

It would not be out of place to mention that no historian till date has not been able to properly research on the real nature of the socio-economic transition occurring in this region throughout the ancient and medieval phases of Assamese history. Renowned economic historian Dr Amalendu Guha however terms the earliest period of Assamese history as “tribalism” when tribal oligarchies dominated the Brahmaputra valley. These oligarchies more or less resembled the ancient Indian republics called *janapadas* (territorial republics) of the sixth century BC.

These *janapadas* assimilated a large number of tribal chieftains and autochthonous. The tribal oligarchies in Assam attained political status in course of time. The formation of political units juxtaposed with assimilation of various race, class and tribes under single platforms in different areas. Many theories has been put forward regarding the tribal origin of several ancient republics like Kamarupa, Davaka, Kadali, Hidimba and Tripura that still await academic research.

Many scholars tend to perceive the dynasties like the Bhauma-Naraka line as of Indo-Mongoloid origin. The first three Hinduised ancient dynasties were said to be of Bodo origin. The names of Narakasur and Banasur suggest that such dynasties might have had Hinduised-tribal origin, Dr SK Chatterjee in the work "*Kirata Jana Kriti*" claims that even famous Bhaskar Varman was a tribal-Neo-Hindu. This might be an exaggeration, even though the ethnic background of the Varman dynasty cannot be fully denied. Being the eldest inhabitants, the Bodo-Kachari clan formed a large chunk of the population in the Brahmaputra valley. Despite formidable existence this clan gets meagre importance in our historical literatures. On similar lines many unknown tribes get marginalised importance, even though their contribution to the socio-economic process in this region is undeniable. Is it sensible enough to elude such historically-significant groups and forces from our history chapters? The tribal chiefdoms bordering Kamrupa also get marginalised references. Barring doubtful reference to one Brihadrava, not a single copper-plate inscription mention of any tribal individual. Above all, some historians with prejudiced view conceived that Assam was alienated from the rest of India during the interregnum between the fall of Kamrupa and the consolidation of the Ahom rule; at a time when some tribal kingdoms dominated the political process in the region. Such distorted notions have already created dangerous and divisive tendencies.

The Ahom administration from the 13th century brought about far-reaching changes in the socio-politico-economic domain of Assam. Their support base depended upon tribal solidarity and in turn their policies retained most of their tribal traits. The Ahoms successfully broke the

social barrier so as to admit people of diverse origin to assimilate under their socio-political fold. Numerous tribes could be peacefully brought under their administration. In order to protect the tribal feudatories from other enemy powers, monarch Pratap Singha evolved the system of paying “*posa*” – a kind of payment or tax as a part of providing protection. In return the monarch exempted them from an equivalent amount of taxes payable to the government.

(To be continued)

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Bagarumba dance of Bodo community



Traditional dance of Karbi community

(39)

Neglect of tribal culture - (II)

The Ahom government maintained a deliberate policy not to interfere in the internal affairs of the tribes and never attempted to absorb their land. But this harmonic ambience built up for centuries were obliterated by the British colonial policies. All the integrative factors of medieval history needs re-orientation and re-emphasis to construct a purpose-oriented history of the said period.

The neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam left an indelible impression upon the tribals along with the non-tribals. Reformer Shrimanta Sankardeva being expelled from the Ahom Kingdom, gained foothold and patronage of the Koch king Naranarayan. Liberal principles of egalitarianism preached by the great reformers attracted a large number of tribals to join this creed. Some of these tribals became bhaktas of whom some were later promoted to the rank of Saranias. Thus, many ethnic-minorities became full-fledged members of the Assamese society. Historians till date has failed to analyse in detail about the assimilative aspects of this new culture created by the neo-Vaishnavite movement. Besides adopting Hinduism, many ethnic-communities transformed themselves into Assamese peasants like Bodos, Koches, Rajbangshis, Rabhas, Moran, Motoks etc. Even though the state-apparatus attracted some Hinduised sections of the tribals, some Bodos and other tribes remained isolated, thereby confined to jungle areas to pursue primitive lifestyle. As a result, since inception, the Assamese community/ nationality suffered a serious setback (Dr Sujit Chowdhury “Assam: genesis of the

present ethnic crisis”; The North East Times: 23 & 24.4.91).

The 18th century is reputed to be one of the most turbulent phases of Assamese history. The ushering of the modern period in the late Ahom period witnessed rebellions against the royal authority, the Burmese depredations and epidemics devastated the general condition of region. At this situation Captain Welsh’s expedition to Assam became a rescue act bringing relief and stability amidst chaos and confusion. In the late 18th century the policies followed by the Ahom administrators were despotic and antagonistic to tribal interests. The Moamaria Vaishnavas, who carried the banner of revolt were said to be of Bodo extraction. The Moamaria satras effectively converted the tribal people into peasants as well as devoted Vaishnavas. The Ahom monarchy failed to provide patronage to such a crucial movement of cultural integration, asserts Dr Sujit Chowdhury. These and other factors contributed in the alienation for the tribal population from the mainstream. Furthermore colonial policies like the Inner Line restrictions drove a wedge between the people of the plains and the hills preventing age old interaction. Even the seeds of later chauvinism were sown by the British.

Very little attention has been paid to the history of tribal movements during British rule. Prof. Sumit Sarkar is of the opinion that the British legal conceptions of absolute private property eroded traditions of joint ownership (like the *Khunkatti* tenure in Chota Nagpur) and sharpened tensions within tribal society. Christian missions were active in many tribal areas, particularly in the North East region bringing education and some promise of social

ascent, but often provoking reactions. Indian history has a long tradition of fierce tribal resistance to oppressive colonial policies in various parts of India, transforming their relationship with the forest, they inhabit. The colonial government usurped the forest land and place severe restrictions on access to forest products, forest land and village common land. Above all, it refused to let cultivation shift to new areas. The revolt of the Munda tribes in the Chottanagpur plateau under the leadership of Birsa Munda during 1899-1900 is a historic one. The Munda chiefs had to struggle against the destruction of their system of common land holdings by the intrusion of *jagirdars*, *thikadars* (revenue-farmers) and merchant money lenders. (Bipan Chandra ed., India's struggle for Independence: 1857-1947; Delhi, 1988). Prof. Sumit Sarkar mentions the revolt of the Kacha Nagas of Cachar in 1882 that attacked the Whites under a 'miracle worker' named Sambhudan who claimed that his magic had made his followers immune to bullets. This significant revolt in the North-East has not been researched extensively. Similarly several other rebellions like that of Manipur, Jaintias, Khasis etc await academic study.

History stands witness to the fact that the people irrespective of caste, creed, racial or tribal affiliations joined the struggle for freedom against colonialism by uniting under one platform. During the non co-operation movement the determined and concerted action shown by the Kacharis of Boko, the Miris of Sibsagar and the Daflas of North Lakhimpur functioned as disciplined workers still remain the neglected chapters of the freedom struggle in Assam. Names of Nidhiram Rajbangshi of Goalpara, Kamala Miri of Rangamati (Dergaon), Rani Guidulu of the

Nagas also cannot be rubbed off. Even though the colonial policies to certain extent obliterated this harmonic conjunction between various tribes and non-tribals. When history can teach us of mutual co-existence, why cannot this survive today? The Assamese identity is itself under a serious dilemma, as to the question of, who is an 'Assamese', is it the Assamese-speaking middle class solely or does it include the original ethnic inhabitants also? How much tribalism exists in the Assamese cultural ethos? Does the migrant population constitute a significant part of Assamese population or are they mere vote-banks for politicians? All these queries require historical exploration to refute all claims of polarisation and division. We have indeed failed to create a cohesive unit that could be appropriately termed a "greater Assamese Community" circumbing all sections of the population.

Therefore only a realistic interpretation of the past by the application of the 'subaltern' approach will certainly help in finding solutions even to the problems of self assertion, ethnic-unrest and secessionism as well. To conclude with the words of eminent historian Dr S.K. Barpujari - "Historians have a great responsibility in making the people of the region as well as of the country aware of the need of proper study of the historical basis of the problems confronting the region in the general back ground of Indian history".

(Concluded)

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Preserving invaluable saanchipat

Recently, Kapil Sibal, the erstwhile Minister of Human Resource Development of Government of India, made an important announcement regarding incorporating a chapter on Vaishnava scholar and social-reformer Shrimanta Sankardeva into the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) textbooks used by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE). This has been welcomed by the people of Assam. This is a significant development as it would place the greatest spiritual leader of Assam in a higher pedestal in the socio-cultural spectrum of India. Students in rest of India will now learn the multifarious contribution of the saint who created socio-cultural and literary renaissance in the region. During his age, literature was written on bark of trees called *saanchipat*. The NCERT text should also highlight these manuscripts that are important source of history and culture. Scriptures on *saanchipat* are among of the most important sources of history of medieval Assam.

Saanchipat literally means the bark of *Agar* tree (wooden pulp), which is normally found in upper and middle Assam. Manuscripts on these barks were used as the basic material during the medieval period for recording various aspects of religion, history, culture, literature and art. The Vaishnava scholars used these for recording various religious literatures. They are rare sources of information on various phases of history of Assam recorded by the scholars. These documents are still preserved in many *sattras*, temples, museums, universities as well as

households. *Sattra* are the major custodian of these manuscripts. These invaluable treasures of cultural heritage of Assam need scientific preservation for posterity.

A large number of these documents have been lost due to lack of proper conservation, especially in flood-affected Majuli. The government should immediately intervene and take steps for collection of these valuable sources from every nook and corner of the state and categorise these sources as “national treasure”. These invaluable materials can be utilised by researchers. Many obscure historical events are expected to come to light once these documents are deciphered by researchers.

Manuscript writing is a tradition maintained in Assam from ancient period of history. From the mid 15th century, Vaishnava scholar Shrimanta Sankardeva and his disciple Madhabdeva, along with other followers, spread the Vaishnava renaissance all across the region. Through various cultural idioms, the message of universal brotherhood, love and social harmony was propagated to attract the masses towards neo-Vaishnavism. Literature such as *borgeet* (devotional songs), *geet* (songs), hagiographies, *pada* (verses), *bhatima* (eulogies), *nata* (drama), poetry, as well as Assamese prose were written mainly on *saanchipaat* and tula-pat by the Vaishnava scholars. *Saanchipat* scripts are written in form of pages or layers and were put together in form of books, called *saanchi puthi*. These manuscripts are stored at *sattras* across the state through traditional methods.

There are basically two broad methods of preservation of the *saanchipat* in the *sattras*. One is the *chang ghar* method – keeping the manuscripts in wooden

boxes close to the roof in the cooking house for protection from termites, humidity and fungus. The second method is the herbal treatment with herbs like neem leaf, turmeric, black pepper, clove, cinnamon, ginger, camphor, eucalyptus, citronella oil and sandal oil. Precious works like *Hastividyanirnava* (treatise about elephant catching and its treatment), *Chitra Bhagavata* (illustrated *Bhagavata*), *Kirtana Ghosa*, *Kalika Purana*, *Yogini Tantra*, written on such material, were well prepared and preserved in a very scientific manner through such traditional methods of conservation.

Manuscript writing laid the ground for a vibrant cottage industry in the medieval period, where various artisans were involved in collection of barks to polishing or finishing to writing. *Khanikars* (penmanship), *likhaks* (writers) and *patuas* (transcriptors of illustrated manuscripts) were involved in this process. In fact, a new school of painting developed during that period. But the fact that none of the art historians have taken up research on the subject seriously till date is matter of concern in the academic circle. Art lovers of the state have a responsibility to understand and explain this school of painting to interested tourists visiting the state.

Recently, there was a newspaper report concerning one rare *saanchipat* script, collected from Ashim Sarma of Golaghat that was deciphered by scholars. It revealed a much unknown chapter of human trade in Assam the 13th century, when the Ahom kings ruled in upper Assam. The script, written in *Brajawali*, *Devnagari* and *Sanskrit*, wherein there was mentioned the sale of a girl named Jamu to a person named Bikash for one silver coin and 14 *toka* at

Pati Darrang Mouza, which now falls under Darrang district (earlier under Kamrup district). The girl was sold by her own brother, Binandai Eshad, in presence of their parents and *pancha sabhasad* (five village elders) with their signatures on the document. It is speculated the girl was sold either for human sacrifice or to work in king's palace as a slave. During that period, human sacrifice was a common feature of the Kamakhya temple.

Thus one such document could open new areas of research on sale and purchase of humans and human sacrifice, which is still a hidden chapter of Assamese history even though it was believed that the early Ahom monarch, while ascending to the throne, attended human sacrifice ceremony at the Kesaikhaity temple. If the *saanchipat* across the state are digitised and made available to historian a new facet of Assamese history can be revealed. New history can be reconstructed if all the manuscripts are compiled and deciphered in a scientific manner in a central place like the Shrimanta Sankardeva Kalakhetra in Guwahati.

For preservation of the manuscripts, a pilot project for digitisation of rare manuscripts was started in 2000 at the initiative of the National Archives of India, in collaboration with the Department of Science & Technology and National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore. Under the project, manuscripts like *Bhagawadgita*, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* were digitised and stored in CD format.

The Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts (IGNCA) has also taken up a nation-wide project for such digital preservation of manuscripts and is digitising

manuscripts in Assam also. Shrimanta Sankardeva Kalashetra and the National Mission for Manuscripts have set up a temporary field laboratory for digitisation of *saanchipat*. The Manuscript Resource Centre (MRC) and Manuscript Conservation Centre (MCC) have been established for this purpose specifically. The institution has under taken research works as part of the mission for preservation of the *saanchipat* in a proper manner. All the documents will be digitised, indexed and documented with details for preservation as a part of this ambitious plan.

The Kalashetra has been identified as the centre for preservation, restoration, promotion and development of the historical and cultural heritage of Assam. Funded by IGCNA, the project receives Rs. 27 lakh per year to collect the manuscripts from various sattras, temples and individuals for their preservation. Till date, more than 50 manuscripts have been collected and preserved in Kalashetra. The work started from 2008-2011 with 18 youths, comprising conservationists, manuscriptologists and paleontologists, were engaged for the collection process. The collected manuscripts have been examined by an expert team, headed by eminent Vaishnava scholar and ex-Vice Chancellor of Dibrugarh University, Keshabananda Deva Goswami.

Recently there were media reports that the centrally funded project under National Inscription Mission (NIM) is feared to have come to a halt after a new Secretary of Kalashetra took charge in 2010-11. The Secretary is reported to have failed to understand the importance of the significant work. Also, despite the availability of funds with

the Central government, the process of preservation is said to have been scrapped.

This is very unfortunate for a state where emotions of the people run high and yet this important project of preservation has been neglected by our cultural affairs department. Moreover no clarification has been issued on the matter by the authorities. The people of the state have the right to know why the project was scrapped. Even the IGNCA has not been intimated on scrapping of the funds. This sheer negligence by the authorities shows poor respect to the heritage of the state.

Assam is fortunate that two important manuscripts *Chitra Bhagavata* and *Ratnamala Byakaran* written on *saanchipat* has been selected as the National Treasure of India by the Government of India and are properly preserved in the archive of Krishna Kanta Handique Library of Gauhati University. Two other manuscripts of the Library, *Lava Kushar Yuddha* and *Sachitra Bhagavata*, were displayed at the World Book Fair at Frankfurt in Germany in 2006-7. Some of the departments like Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti, Directorate of Archives, Department of Historical & Antiquarian Studies, Guwahati, as well as Sankardeva Kalashetra should take the initiative in a co-ordinated manner so that common people could have access to the treasures of the state after proper preservation.

The Archival Cell of Krishna Kanta Handique Library of Gauhati University has been working for the preservation and conservation of all such manuscripts. The digitised copies of more than 2000 manuscripts have been completed under the National Mission of manuscripts and the library has made the CD formats available for scholars.

Therefore systematic digitisation and cataloguing of all the *saanchipat* will certainly save the materials. These source materials for the study of the past will throw new light into the history of Assam for an unknown period. The Director of Archives should create a state archives in the Sankardeva Kalashetra so that all these source materials can be conserved for posterity. Future generations should be made aware of these invaluable source materials of Assam's history that reflect the literary renaissance in the state.

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Sanchipaat paintings of Majuli

(41)

Remembering the India-China War of 1962 - (I)

“If we had the foresight, known exactly what would happen, we would have done something else... What India has learnt from the Chinese invasion is that in the world of today, there is no place for weak nations., we have been living in an unreal world of our own creation.”

This was what Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru stated in the Rajya Sabha session of the Parliament in 1963 after the Chinese invasion of 1962 followed by India's humiliating defeat. The defeat indeed made us realise that there is no place for weak nations. Through these lessons learnt today India has built up the third largest army in the world. Nothing much is known in detail about the invasion of China into North and North East (NE) India in 1962. At a time when we are commemorating the 50 years of the Indo-China conflict it remains a matter of mystery. As no post mortem of the conflict has been done so far, the only inquiry report that has depicted the details of the war and the failure of the Indian strategy in combating the enemies has not seen the light till this day.

It is not necessary for the nation in general and the North east in particular to know where our failures lie when a powerful state like the United States of America (USA) has made all the records available for public relating to disaster in Vietnam or in Iraq? Despite passing of 50 years, people of India are not still unaware of the circumstances and reasons that led to India's defeat.

The popular belief stands that China betrayed India's trust and attacked Ladakh and North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) region prevails so far even though the reality the facts are stated to be different.

Unpublished inquiry report:

The Government of India conducted an inquiry into the war and the report remains a classified document in military archives. But is there any logic to categories the report as a "classified document" for such a long period of time.

As per Public Records Act any "classified public record more than 30 years old should be made available to any bonafide research scholar but subject to such exceptions and restrictions as any be prescribed". The report submitted by Lt. Gen Henderson Brooks and Brigadier PS Bhagat in 1963 was presented to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and a couple of Ministers that remains "Top secret" till date. But the government made a statement in the Parliament on May 10, 2012 that the Report of the Operations Review Committee on the 1962 war will not be published following an order of March 19, 2009 by a Bench of the Central Information Commission as it is likely to have a security bearing on army's operational strategy in the Northeast and deployment of forces along the line of Actual Control.

The North East India is indignant to know the facts behind the invasion and the subsequent humiliating defeat for the safety of life and property of the future generations. The Chinese threat still looms large due to army buildup on our Northern and Northeastern borders. Further, some of

the militant groups of the Northeast are taking refuge in the bordering areas of China.

Hence, there is a need of an open debate on the issue for greater interest of the region. A useful book on this war was written by author and historian Neville Maxwell titled “**India’s China War**” published in 1970 provides the details of the war in an elaborate manner drawing materials from unpublished files and reports available with the government and army authorities.

Many inferences were said to be drawn from this classic book as it is said to contain parts of Brooks-Bhagat inquiry report. However official history of the Government of India (1992), declassified documents available with China and USA and huge amount of research by military experts, analysts and strategist reveal startling facts about the war.

The Intelligence Bureau (IB) Director BN Mullick also failed to provide any intelligence output on the Chinese aggression. He further misled the political leadership. The second most important factor was the ill-preparedness of the Indian army which was ill-equipped as well as there was little or no military presence in the NE region.

Thirdly, China wrongly believed that India was going to seize Tibet in future after providing political asylum to the Tibetan leader Dalai Lama.

In the age of explosion of information, everyone has the right to know of the failures of the military and government so that such mistakes do not occur in future. The USA is a leading state that makes every strategic

blunder public whether it is USA Marines torturing the prisoners at Guantanamo bay or their failure in Iraq.

Diplomacy & reasons of Chinese aggression:

One of the most significance reasons was the failure of the Indian foreign diplomacy that failed to solve the border issue despite growing discontent from the Chinese side. AG Noorani in his book “India-China Boundary Problem: 1846-1947 History and Diplomacy” published in 2010 stated that Nehru’s stubbornness led to the war.

It was Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Defence Minister Krishna Menon’s arrogant belief that they would solve the crisis and the Northern neighbour would not dare to attack a country like India despite following the ‘Forward Policy’.

The ‘Forward Policy’ called for establishing posts in the disputed areas often behind the Chinese posts since 1954 invited Chinese wrath. Nehru was confident as he believed that India, backed by both US and Soviet Union, had no fear of attack from the Chinese side. This policy was opposed by several Indian Army officers as they believed that they were not adequately prepared to face the Chinese forces in the frontiers.

In 1959-60 Lt. Gen. SPP Thorat, GOC-in-C Eastern Command had made an appreciation that the threat perception from China in the Eastern frontiers was ignored by the Army HQ as well as by the Defence Minister and it was not even brought to the notice of the Prime Minister. Instead of listening to the appreciations, the top army brass by the Prime Minister and the Defence Minister they were

replaced by submissive officials who would carry out his orders directly.

After India's independence and the departure of the British colonialists, the Sino-Indian border was left undefined. From the 1860s the British colonialists occupied a large stretch of land of China measuring approximately 33,000 sq km including Aksai Chin area of Ladakh and Northern parts of Samdurang Chu in Arunachal into Northern India following Francis Young husband's expedition.

Hence, after independence these stretch remained as part of India despite Chinese claims. The McMohan line demarcated by the British in 1914 after signing of the Simla Convention between India and Tibet was never accepted by China.

(To be continued)

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India China War of 1962



War hero of 1962 war
Rifleman
Jaswant Singh
Rawat who was
martyred at the
Battle of Nuranang
in November, 1962

(42)

Remembering the India-China War of 1962 - (II)

After India's Independence and the departure of the British colonialists, the Sino-Indian border was left undefined. From the 1860s, the British colonialists occupied a vast stretch of China's land measuring approximately 33,000 sq km including the Aksai Chin area of Ladakh and northern parts of Samdurang Chu in Arunachal Pradesh following Francis Young husband's expedition. Hence after independence these stretches remained as part of India despite Chinese claims. The McMahon line was drawn by the British in 1914 to demarcate the boundary between India and China after signing of the Simla Accord. This line was never accepted by China.

The Forward Policy was launched by the defence ministry for occupation of posts north of the McMahon line. China took a serious exception to this aggressive approach demonstrated in the serious clash at the Longju and Kongka Pass in October, 1959 which was engineered by the then Intelligence Chief BN Mullick and Chief of Army Staff BM Kaul. Proactive aggressive patrolling along the Line of Control created tensions. By August 1962, about 60 posts were set up under the very nose of the Chinese forces. One was Dhola post which was subsequently attacked by the PLA during the war. There was decision to drive the Chinese off the Thagla ridge which was also subsequently attacked.

The army authorities were taking decisions sitting in the head-quarters without assessing the ground realities. Since August 1959, the Chinese authorities had been complaining that the Indian forces crossed the McMohan line. No clarification was given to the Chinese authorities on this matter. This led to border clashes in these places. Chinese premier Zhou Enlai wrote to Prime Minister Nehru proposing that both sides withdraw troops up to 20 km from the Line of Actual Control along the border. But the Indian government rejected the proposal outright. These factors infuriated the Chinese authorities and prompted them to attack those posts that they had claimed for a long time.

Due to cultural affinity, China has a historic link with the Northeast. The Chinese residing in the bordering areas always maintained cordial relationship with their relatives across the border. Recently, a programme on China on the Discovery channel showed that the women folk of the Gulong tribe of Yunnan province of China wore tattoos on their noses to look ugly so that enemy tribes do not carry them away as booty. A similar practice prevalent among the Apatani tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. The Monpas had relatives across the borders and often crossed over to meet their relatives till the British colonialists drew the demarcating line. The Chinese still believe that the cultural affinity and common history of the people are invariably linked with the region. The political leadership at New Delhi never tried to understand these crucial issues involving NEFA which is recognised as Southern Tibet by our northern neighbour. The claim over Aksai Chin in Ladakh is due to the traditional route passing from Xinjiang province of China into Tibet for historical and commercial interest. These issues could have been solved

diplomatically instead of concentrating on military build up to counter Chinese threat. Hence it has become regular practice of the Chinese authorities to oppose to the visit of Indian Prime Minister or any VIP visit to the region and particularly to Arunachal Pradesh whereas when any citizen from Arunachal Pradesh or Kashmir seeks visa to visit China, then the document is denied in the ground that these regions are part of that country.

An official history of the conflict was published by the ministry of defence in 1992 titled “The History of the Conflict with China, 1962” where the reports point to the fact that an ill-equipped, ill-prepared Indian Army, not well trained in mountain warfare like the Chinese, had to take on the superior PLA. In fact Gen KS Thimayya, the Chief of Army Staff (COAS) wrote in seminar magazine in 1962 that: “I cannot even, as a soldier, envisage India taking on China in an open conflict on its own; would never hope to match China in the unforeseeable future. It must be left to the politician and diplomats to ensure our security”. This has led us to ask whether anything has changed even 50 years after Gen Thimayya made that statement in 1962. It’s very unlikely. The infrastructural development require revolutionary changes in this strategic location as China is way ahead of us in this respect. There was a growing fear in Chinese minds that India was planning to occupy Tibet as the Tibetan unrest of 1959 was seen as an Indian conspiracy. Above all granting political asylum to Tibetan spiritual leader Dalai Lama further fuelled the wrong impression. As China was left with no other option, it attacked India at the eastern as well at the northern frontier. Some of the issues that have remained unresolved till today need to be addressed cautiously. These issues include

political asylum to Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile in India, China's non-recognition of Sikkim's merger with India, the nuclear test of Pokhran in 1998 and non-recognition of status of Arunachal Pradesh and Ladakh.

The War and its aftermath:

On October 20, 1962, China launched a pre-emptive attack along the borders with little resistance from the Indian troops in the eastern sector. The Indian and Chinese forces were involved in a series of clashes along the border between October 10 and November 20, 1962. In the eastern theatre, the Dhola post was overrun. Fighting took place and Tsang Dar fell on October 22, Bumla on October 23, Tawang, the head-quarter of the 7th Infantry brigade fell on October 24, Walong fell on November 13 as well as Aksai Chin in western theatre. On October 24, Beijing offered a ceasefire and withdrawal of troops on the condition that India should agree to open negotiations on boundary settlement. But Prime Minister Nehru refused and sent a reply on October 27 rejecting the proposal.

India launched a counter attack on November 15. The Indian Army had no clear indication of Chinese strength mobility or tactics. It was short of weapons, artillery, tanks, equipments and even winter clothing and shoes. As there was no proper communication or road network, limited supplies reached the frontline as they had to be sent by air. Even today the road network is in a deplorable condition, particularly during the winter months. Finding no other alternative, Nehru wrote two letters to US president John F Kennedy requesting support of the US Air force in fighting the Chinese. The letters were delivered

between November 15 and November 20, 1962. But the American President rejected the proposal as they were preoccupied with the Cuba. However on November 21, the Chinese authorities declared unilateral ceasefire and India lost extensive territory. In the end, both sides withdrew their troops 20 km from the new boundary lines on December 1, 1962.

After overrunning Bomdila by November 18, the PLA approached Tezpur spreading panic and confusion among the common people. Most of the families packed their belongings and headed towards Bhumuraguri, the ferry ghat (dock) on the north bank of river Brahmaputra to cross over to the south bank. As there was not much transport, people had to walk down to the dock where the Kalia Bhomora Bridge stands at the moment. English or Scottish tea planters of the area were asked to be repatriated. Most of them took chartered flights to Calcutta. Panic prevailed on the southern bank at Nagaon. Lack of adequate information during those days created further panic. There were contingency plans to blow up the tea garden factories in the event of Chinese invading Assam. In one of the first things that the Tezpur administration did was to burn down currency notes in the State Bank of India. Bundles of notes were piled up in the main branch compound and burnt. Coins were dumped into a pond.

Announcement was made by the local administration that the PLA had overrun Bomdila and therefore the people should dig trenches for themselves. However, the Chinese stopped about 50 kms short of Tezpur and retreated immediately as they feared that their supply line might be cut-off if they entered into the interior

of the of the plains. The scar of the government abandoning the people of Assam is clearly reflected in Nehru's statement "My heart goes out to the people of Assam" leaving the region at the mercy of the PLA.

The 1962 war left a deep scar on the Indian psyche. Many soldiers sacrificed their lives. Even today the Indian Army are not familiar with the terrain of Arunachal. It took four days, in a joint operation by the army and the locals, to recover the body of the state's chief minister Dorjee Khandu after his chopper crashed near Tawang.

Conclusion:

The horrors of the 1962 war will linger on but we have to move forward. However, in recent times there has been a marked improvement in the bilateral relationship between the two Asian giants through trade and commerce starting with opening of the Nathu La Pass in Sikkim. On June 21, 2012 Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited China and met the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao where both the leaders met to extend their strategic and military relations. They set a goal of increasing bilateral trade to US\$100 billion by 2015.

As economic superpowers, both countries have to move forward together through mutual understanding and peaceful co-existence. The volume of trade between the two countries comes to around US\$40-50 billion annually, China has become India's largest trading partner and trade will continue to grow in the future.

(Concluded)

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Remembering the Indo-China War of 1962



Tawang War Memorial:

Built in memory of soldiers who laid down
their lives in Indo-China War of 1962



Bumla Pass at India-China
border in Arunachal Pradesh



Nathu La Pass at India-
China border in Sikkim

ISIS disapproval of Sufi ideology

The dastardly attack on the Rawdah Sufi mosque in Bir al-Abed in the Sinai peninsula is the deadliest terrorist attack by ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) in Egypt's modern history. This ghastly event has shocked the entire world as such an incident took place in the secular country of the Middle East. Attacks on Sufi shrines and mosques by the Islamic militants show their intolerance towards the most tolerant, liberal and mystical version of Islam. The jihadi groups are regularly attacking shrines to express their disapproval of this mystical version of Islam. It is high time to examine why the Sufism is relevant to the contemporary context when the distorted understanding of the religion at the hands of these fundamentalists are attracting the misguided youths across the globe through the social media.

The attack on Sufi shrine of Lal Shahbaaz Qalandar at Shehwan in Pakistan recently when a musical session called *dhamaal* was in progress by the ISIS has once again raised the dichotomy between orthodox and liberal Islam. The assassination of Pakistani Sufi qawwal Amjad Sabri or the Bangladeshi bloggers who wrote against these obscurantist forces are illustrations of growing intolerance towards Sufism. Most of the oriental historians agree to the view now supported by the western scholars that Islam spread successfully across the non-Islamic world within a century due to the Sufi reformers who acted as the harbingers of upgrading the local culture and traditions by setting up *khanqahs* or hospices.

Hajo and Soraguri Chapori are such two places from where Islam was spread by the Sufi saints with their message of peace and universal brotherhood. Like other Sufi dervishes Ajan Fakir and Ghiasuddin Auliya promoted local culture, tradition, language, literature and music. Music was one of the ways to preach and popularise the religion in medieval period of history is now vehemently opposed by the fundamentalists. *Zikirs* and *Qawwalis* rendered by these great reformers that attract the local communities to the hospices irrespective caste, creed or religion. These shrines are revered by people are different background and stand as symbols of syncretic and secular side of Islam.

The Sufi movement started in India along with the Bhakti movement by the Vaishnava reformers in medieval period where both trends absorbed the finer practises from each other. Now after centuries have passed the new Talibans, Al Qaeda or ISIS has taken the lead to destroy this syncretic tradition of Islam. The recent researches on Sufism by scholars like Spencer Trimingham, Richard M.Eaton, Kathreen P.Ewing, Barbra Metcalf, Peter Currie and a host of historians has empirically proved that it was the Sufi movement that was primarily responsible for spread of Islam across the globe in course of a few centuries dispelling the age old British historian's theory the Islam was thrust upon the common masses in India '**by the sword or the ghazi warrior**'. The research of these scholars proved that Islam grew in those areas where the Sufis settled by building their hospices all across the world repudiating the theories of the European historians.

Most of African Muslims who converted to Islam retained their aboriginal traditional rituals, customs and practices even today .This was the beauty of Sufism that Sufi saints never disturbed the local customs, mores, habits, language, culture or traditions as these practices continued despite their conversion to Islam. Recently the World Sufi Forum, the first of its kind attracted the largest gathering of the Muslims from all over the world was held at New Delhi expressed this growing concern towards intolerance in Islam all across the world.

Unfortunately the growing radicalisation of the youths has resulted in death and destruction all across the globe. The brutal face of terror unleashed by the ISIS militants in places like Kabul, Medina, Nice, Dhaka, Baghdad, Brussels, Istanbul, Paris, Peshawar or USA has become a serious threat to world peace. The killing of people of the same religion while praying in a mosque can never be justified. They are intellectually blank in their approach opposing music, education for women, praying in shrines that they consider as idolatry or even anything scientific or rationale in nature. The misunderstanding of the religion led to destruction of historical vestiges in many parts of the world that once guided the world through wisdom, intellect and rationalism. The Buddhist statues of Bamiyan in Afghanistan were bombarded and destroyed in Afghanistan after Talibans took power. Similarly the ancient city of Palmyra and the artefacts of the ancient civilization were destroyed and looted by the ISIS. These invaluable historical relics stood there as witness to history for thousands of years .It was through this area large number of Muslims kings, soldiers ,saints and reformers reached the Indian sub-continent but none of them ever

thought of destroying the historical icons for centuries were undone in a few months of time.

The barbaric and inhuman acts of ISIS against their so called enemies are no less than the fascism preached by Hitler against the Jews. The core of the problem of justification to such violence lies in the Salafi or Wahhabi ideology which is the foundational ideology of Saudi Arabia. This puritanical version of Islam through gross misinterpretation rejects tolerant and pluralism as an ideology. The Gulf States used its enormous oil wealth since the 1970s to preach this highly puritanical version of Islam all over the Islamic world but with strong fundamentalists' undertones. Unfortunately despite being pure form the ideology this school of thought preaches hatred towards so-called non-believers, including Shias, Yazidis, Kurds and non- Wahhabi Muslims and holds democratic forms of governments responsible for all the horrible wars of the 20th century. The attacks launched across the globe in name of al Qaeda or ISIS was not familiar till the last part of the 20th century. This same ideology has been responsible for prohibiting the Saudi women even from driving vehicles till last month. Nobel laureate Malala Yusufzai has to face bullets simply for promoting education of children in Swat valley of Pakistan. All these retrogressive versions at the hands of pseudo-educated *mullahs* has destroyed liberal and rational thinking (*ijtihad*) allowed by the Prophet Muhammad in his days.

The Ottoman Empire accepted this version of Islam that led to Islamic renaissance in the Middle East. Arabian philosophies, art, culture, music, sciences, chemistry, mathematics etc flourished and were patronised by the

kings of the empire. This was the golden period of Islam generally referred to as renaissance of the Arab world. Reforms have always been integral part of Islam. The scientific law of jurisprudence or *ijtihad* is based on reasoning found in Sufi philosophies. Murder, suicide, beheading or bombings are never prescribed by Islamic shariat law, which are now being grossly misinterpreted to suit their own end.

Hence, there is an urgent need of reciprocating to such lurking danger by intellectuals and organisations from the Muslim society. Unlike many western countries it appears that local interventions and timely counselling on these misguided youths who get their inspiration from the social media needs to be reformed otherwise more attacks in Europe and the Islamic world may become more frequent.

Note: The attack on the Sufi mosque was the deadliest in history of Egypt that killed 305 people on 27th November, 2017.



Dargah of Ajaan Pir in Sibsagar

The Jihad within Islam

Another holy month of Ramadan has been just passed by culminating with celebrations of *Eid ul Fitre* among the global Muslim community. The *Eid* prayers or *salat* is completed with a *dua* or prayer for universal peace and harmony. Despite the quest for peace and harmony, the Islamic community continues to suffer from the rise of violent form of terrorism in name of Islam. The widespread death and destruction by the terrorists has opened up public debate all across the globe as to whether this was the same religion preached by Prophet Mohammad centuries ago. The terror attacks across the globe whether in Europe or in churches in Sri Lanka are highly condemnable. The growing radicalisation of the Muslim youths is growing cause of serious concern. Jihad in name of Islam is the biggest threat to worldwide peace.

The frequent terror attacks has made the Muslims feel themselves implicated in global events. The rise of the terrorists groups like ISIS was not motivated by any religious ideology but by bad and corrupt governments, unequal power relations between the countries and global inequalities. Many thinkers are of the opinion that growing radicalisation is due to area specific factors. In most of the European nations there is a sizeable section of Muslim population of North African origin. All the North African countries were once under colonial rule. Large sections of Muslims of these countries migrated to former colonial masters in search of livelihood. The rampant unemployment and growing ghettoization of the Muslim

communities In Europe are the breeding grounds for terrorist activities. The youths coming out of these ghettos have joined the ISIS forces in Syria and Iraq.

Simultaneously on the positive side we have witness the presence of a large section of Muslim football players of migrant North African parentage representing almost all the European countries. All these sportspersons belong to the North African migrants who in course of time settled in these nations in Europe. Football has united the colonies of North Africa that exports footballers to the European circuits. This is a pragmatic way to promote universal peace and harmony. Recently Liverpool under the captainship of Egyptian footballer Mohammad Salah lifted the UEFA Champions League Trophy for which Salah was praised uniting both the races with a sentimental song that welcomed the team to Liverpool:

“If he scores another few

Then I’ll be Muslim too...

If he’s good enough for you,

Then sitting in a mosque, is where I wanna be

Mo Salah-la-la-la-lah! Mo Salah-la-la-la-lah”.

Whereas the other section of this migrant community feels that they are deprived of their equal rights as well as getting marginalised and alienated. The downfall of the utopian idea of reviving the “Caliphate” by ISIS in Syria and Iraq has come at a huge cost as it led to the loss of more than 2, 50,000 lives, damage to property and displacement of population proves the instability in the Islamic world with oil rich Gulf countries are watching the

events as mute spectators. These countries have been directly responsible for rise of these groups of Gulf countries for their partisan geopolitics and alliance with the USA. Further they are funding the terrorist organisations particularly in Pakistan. Hence the United Nations Organisation (UNO) has to play a positive role in bringing peace and harmony in the region and start the process of deradicalisation of the Muslims youths.

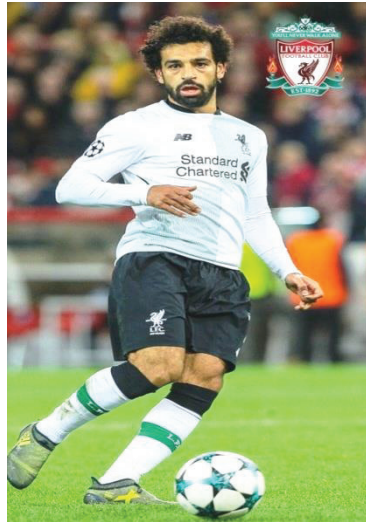
ISIS is a group might have been neutralised in one part of the world, but the biggest problem is that the narrative of the caliphate is still relevant and the internet happens to be main vehicle for radicalizing the Muslim youths in the 21st century. This was manifested by the Church bombings on Easter Sunday in Sri Lanka. Now they may shift to more guerrilla warfare tactics. The lone wolf syndrome will be pursued with renewed vigour if not checked now. Sleeper cells need to be identified as there are intelligence reports of existence of such cell in India also. Disruptive technologies will turn out to be most dangerous.

Unfortunately Gulf countries headed by Saudi Arabia have been promoting the regressive ideology of *Salafism* and *Wahhabism* to promote hatred on the infidels needs introspection. These oil rich states since the mid-1970s has been propagating the highly puritanical and orthodox version of Islam that led to formation of groups like Al Qaeda and Talibans. The hatred against the infidels has been turned as hatred against US and allied forces for military intervention in states like Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. Hence the launch of holy war or Jihad against the so called infidels.

As a part of world peace initiative the Islamic organizations should target all the world wide Charity organisations that send money for poor people reach the hands of terrorist to buy weapons. Pakistan has been given ‘grey listing’ by the international Financial Action Task Force(FATF) for money laundering and diverting charity funds to the terrorist organisation for carrying out proxy war in India and Afghanistan. Such gross misuse of money meant for the poor as *zakat* are being diverted for killing people. Kashmiri youths are gradually joining these terror outfits by taking training in places like Balakot that has become launch pads for attacks on Indian soil. Controlling and dismantling terrorist infrastructure is not enough. There are more than 25000 Madrassas in Pakistan that are promoting radicalism through the likes of Hafiz Saeed and Azhar Masood with active collaboration of ISI. These institutions has been teaching the Afghans to become fundamentalist (Taliban), *fidayeen* or suicide bombers and Kashmiris to become so-called *jihadi azaadi* fighters. Unless these infrastructures are reformed or destroyed India and the region will continue to suffer.

Radical ideologies have to be countered by promoting the scientific version of Islam that promote harmony and universal peace. Sportsman like Mohammad Salah has become the unifying force for decline of racism in Europe. To counter the growing radicalisation the community leaders has to create awareness among the youths against the *jihadi* propaganda with that of liberal, tolerant and scientific version of Islam. The idea of the notion of East Vs West has been created to promote the rift by a section of the intellectuals in a misnomer. Hence, Nobel Laureate from Pakistan Malala Yusufzai has

rightfully stated that the concept of East vs West is a misnomer and such dichotomy never solves the problem of terrorism and hence rethinking is required.



Mohamed Salah, Egyptian International Footballer



A Madrasa in Pakistan

(45)

Is music prohibited in Islam?

The appeal issued by a few Muslims organization prohibiting a musical programme featuring Assam's teenage singing sensation Nahid Afrin has opened up widespread protest across the country. The call was made on the ground that musical performance is "unIslamic" and goes against the Shariat laws. Such an appeal by a few section of the society in name of religion has come as a surprise to the liberal and tolerant Assamese society. Such an attack by theologians on freedom of expression is not only perceived as a retrogressive step but also as acts of cultural terrorism. These dictats against creative freedom are made without placing a rational debate on the subjects. This issue has once again opened up the age-old debate of whether music is permissible in Islam.

The passing of judgments of what is "Islamic" or "unIslamic" seems to be abused again and again at the hands of fundamentalist groups like the Taliban, Al Qaeda or ISIS is done with an ulterior motive. The misinterpreting the Shariat has become common these days at the hands of pseudo-educated Taliban and ISIS. It is surprising to find that no counter narrative is created by the liberal theologians who believe in peaceful co-existence. Yet these orthodox people remain silent when it comes to growing crime against women or child marriage. Misguided youths in the state has to loose their lives due to spreading of venomous "*jehadi*" ideologies at the behest of such fundamentalist elements .Hence such fatwas or illogical judgments should be countered by the scientific

explanations available in the Hadiths and religious texts on application of music.

Nowhere in the holy Quran is it mentioned that music is prohibited in Islam. Eminent Islamic scholar Dr. Zakir Naik states that the holy Quran nowhere states that music is not permissible in Islam and that there are a number of *hadiths* that purports that the Prophet Muhammad allowed and listened to music and that decent dancing is permissible. There is an instance that on an Eid day when two small girls were playing tambourine and singing in praise of the martyrs of Buath at the residence of the Prophet when he was lying down in his cot, at that moment prophet's follower Abu Bakkar arrived on the scene and asked the girls to stop playing the tambourine. But the Prophet allowed the girls to continue to play music saying "Leave them Abu Bakkar, for every nation has an Eid (festival) and this day is our Eid". Shaikh-ul Islam Dr. Tahirul Qadri in a Youtube clipping clearly stated that when the Prophet at the time of Hijrat moved from Mecca to Medina. While approaching Medina with his friend Hajrat Abu Bakkar, the local Muslims called Ansars played music and sang the famous Islamic song "*Talaa El- Badru Alayna*" (The full moon has come upon us). Thus there are many such events where music was played in presence of the prophet.

All the prominent Islamic scholars are of the view that all kinds of actions done maintaining decency are accepted in the religion of Islam. Unfortunately, many holy verses are twisted and reinterpreted by the likes of the Taliban and Al Qaeda to suit their style of governance or interpretation. It has to be borne in mind that those songs

and dances are prohibited that incites debauchery, indecency and sin. Imam Ash-Shawkani in his book “*Nayl Al-Awtar*” stated that “The people of Madinah and those who agreed with them from among the Zahiriyyahs and the Sufis maintain that singing is permissible, even when it is accompanied by a musical instrument such as the lute or flute”. There is a *fatwa* that supported the use of music in the religion given by the Grand Mufti and Shaykh of Al-Azhar, Shaykh Jadad-al Haq Ali that reports that the Prophet and many of his companions (*sahaba*), their successors (*tabiun*), the great leaders of the schools of jurisprudence and law used to listened to music and attended musical events which were not accompanied by vices and prohibited acts. However there are a few texts that talk about prohibition of music when it was abusively used by the infidels (non-believers) where playing involved sexual activities by the women. Many texts however states music and dance in an indecent form is not permissible as much as alcoholism, drugs, sex and violence etc.

Few years ago a Pakistani film named “*Khuda Ke Liye*” depicting a critique of the “*jehadi* ideologies” featured one of the messengers of Islam named Prophet Dawood, the role being enacted by Naseeruddin Shah showed how music was allowed in Islam for ages even by a prophet. When one of the prophets of Islam practiced music and researched on the subject how these Maulanas can misinterpret the subject simply for the sake of their generation being destroyed if they listened to vices like music? Yet they remain silent on alcoholism, drug abuse, child marriage, domestic violence etc rampant in Muslim society. Hence this is nothing less than abuse of the religion.

A society evolves in course of time by amalgamation of a large number of forces leading to growth of a civilization. The Arabic or the Saracenic, Mesopotamian or Babylonian civilization of the Middle East witnessed the rise of a sophisticated civilization with development of arts, sciences, philosophies, culture, music, literature and a whole range of intellectual pursuits. This formed the basis of the growth of the Arabic civilization. Islam grew on the very foundations laid down by these civilizations. The Arab rulers patronized all these forms of art, literature, language, science, chemistry, astrology, astronomy, agriculture, irrigation methods, mathematic etc from the very beginning unlike the European civilization.

In fact all the classical Greek treatises on all subjects including science, culture, art, mathematics, astronomy, astrology etc. that were lost for ages were rediscovered and translated by the Arab translators to reach western civilization. Most of the European intellectuals of contemporary period Greek scholar like Socrates or Galileo or Copernicus were attacked for their radical views of the time as their concepts tend to hurt the religious sentiments. There was no Roman emperor like Nero in the Arab world to ban music. Yet Islamic world is now witnessing rising of Nero-like figures all across the globe. So in a way we can say that perhaps there is no society in the world that does not follow music.

It has to be understood that when Islam spread rapidly across the Asian and African sub continents, the local customs, traditions, art forms, music, language, literature were allowed to be continued without any restrictions. Almost all the newly converted tribal Muslims

all across Asian and African nations continued their tribal customs and traditions till today. Adaptability or indigenization was biggest factor is acceptance of the nascent religion all across the globe. Classical Islamic music was patronized by the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties. The First musician of Arab world was Ibn Misjah who is often honoured as the father of Islamic music. Abbasid caliphate set up 750AD centering Baghdad became the leading musical centre in the Arab world. Those periods were said to be the golden age for Islamic music. Prof. Anderson Sutton stated in journal “Inside Islam” that Islamic music is not only allowed but is also a huge part of the popular culture in Indonesia that happens to be the largest Muslim country in the world. *Qasidas* or eulogies in praise of the almighty is another form of music popular among the followers of Sufistic traditions. One of the most popular versions of Sufi dance form is the whirling dervishes of Turkey. Islamic music influenced the Moorish culture of Spain that spread through the Berber Almoravids (rulers of North Africa and Spain in the 11th and 12th centuries).

The Sufi movement in the Indian sub continent through Sufi dervishes became popular among all sections of the Indian population. The Sufi saints set up *khanqahs* or hospices through which they spread the message of goodwill and universal brotherhood. The saints believed through music, poetry and dance they can establish communion with God. The local inhabitants were so attracted towards such popular cultural practices that they were easily attracted to the Islamic ideology during those periods. *Qawwali* that originated in the hospices subsequently became very popular among the common

masses irrespective of caste, creed or religion. The *samaa* sessions in evening at the dargah or shrine of Pirs like Hajrat Nizamuddin Auliya in Delhi attracted a large Hindu and Sikh crowd and gradually they were attracted toward the religion and converted themselves. Almost all the Sufi saints across were great literary scholars, singers, composers, litteratuer, reformers, humanists all combined into one to spread the message of Islam like the Vaishnava saints by their sweet voice, words of wisdom, their literature as well as their music.

Sufi philosophy permeates all across the south Asia in different genres of music. The *Sufiana kalaam* is still popular all sections of music fraternity. *Qawwalis* subsequently transformed into a form of Hindustani classical music. *Ghazals* were one such genre of Sufi music. These were songs of intoxication and yearnings, which use the language of romantic love to express soul's longing for union with the divine. *Qasidas* are another genre that is sung in praise of the illustrious teachers of the Sufi brotherhood to which the musicians belong. Omar Khayyam an ardent follower of Hajrat Nizamuddin Auliya invented the classical musical instrument of sitar. There was gradual evolution of the Indo-Islamic culture with invention of sarod, sarangi, tabla etc. during the Mughal period.

The syncretism and secular culture popularized by all these Sufistic traditions have come under attack time and again from such retrogressive minded individuals or Taliban like organizations who wants to show their false pride by declaring such illogical fatwas. In Sufistic traditions and orders music is an integral part of the process

of *Zikr* or *dhikr* (remembrance of Allah). Similarly the *Zikirs* and *Zaris* composed by Hajrat Ajaan Pir have enriched Assamese language and literature. So we must stand together for Nahid Afrin so that she wins the hearts and minds of the Indian people through her vocal chords. After all, music does not know any boundaries irrespective of caste, creed or religion.

This article appeared in The Assam Tribune on 24-03-2017.



Qawwali forms an important part of Sufi music in Indian sub continent



Nahid Afrin: Talented Assamese artist

(46)

Significance of the Arab Spring

The event of self immolation of an unemployed youth Mohammad Bouazizi on 7th December in 2010 as his fruit vending cart was confiscated by the Tunisian Police in the town of Sidi Bouzid ignited a wave of protest against poverty, social exclusion and corruption in the North African nation. This unprecedented peaceful uprising from Sidi Bouzid led to such a mass protest across the country where approximately 75 percent of the citizens of Tunisia participated leading to resignation of the authoritarian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. This historic change ignited the biggest mass uprising in modern history of the Arab world from North African nations to west Asia. The uprising represented a significant challenge to authoritarian rule across the Arab world. This was followed by the peaceful protests and demonstrations in a number of Arab countries that was defined by the global press as the “Arab Spring”. There is growing liberal democratic discontent by the common people demanding liberal democratic reforms across many countries in many places including Myanmar. This popular movement towards setting of democratic institutions is indeed a matter of political renaissance. Many historians perceive this as the most important challenge to such despotic rule since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The protests were followed by the beginnings of democratic institution building. Tunisia and Egypt conducted elections which were appreciated by the western as well as by eastern worlds. Freedom of expression has gained momentum in many Middle Eastern societies. The

fall of dictators likes Moammar Gaddafi of Libya and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt or authoritarian regimes in Bahrain and Yemen brought about political reforms. Tahrir Square in Cairo city of Egypt became the epicenter for common people's demand for bread, dignity and social justice and thus became the symbol of this Arab spring. The country where 15 million common citizens participated in the uprising is still in a phase of transition and where elections were recently held bringing the Islamists to power. The situation is still tense in Syria where Syrian forces are battling the Free Syria Army backed by the majority Sunni sect that has faced discrimination for ages. The minority Alawite government of the al Assad family is ruling Syria for more than four decades is facing a serious civil war where a large number of people have been killed.

In the post colonial period secular regimes were set up in the Arab world that came to power on the wave of Arab socialism from North Africa to west Asia to restore Arab dignity through modernization and social justice. These regimes had strong nationalistic and anti-colonial sentiments but none of the rulers had shown any desire to set up democratic institutions in their countries on the long run. As a consequence the common citizens were frustrated with the regimes that stayed in power for a long period of time. Hafez al Assad of Syria stayed in power for more than 40 years with his son now ruling the state, Muammar Gaddafi stayed in Libya for 41 years till his assassination and so did Hosni Mubarak in Egypt who has recently been tried by court or Abdullah Ali Saleh in Yemen. Moreover as far as geopolitics is concerned the United States of America and the Western nations forming the NATO alliance has been playing a dubious role in supporting these corrupt

regimes in some parts of the Arab world to safeguard their own interest. These despots accumulated enormous amount of wealth through corruption and privatization of public assets. This was further accentuated by spiraling food prices that rose sharply in 2010-11. A number of food riots took place in Asian and African nations. The common citizens of these countries have been vehemently opposing the NATO allies for their presence in the region in name of strategic alliance in lieu of access to oil and gas. Despite rich natural resources the citizens of these countries face widespread poverty, extreme economic inequality, despotic and exploitative rule, and above all inability to keep pace with emerging economies of the world despite oil and gases resources. In such a situation let us examine whether this Arab Spring that has called for democratic changes will be successful in their endeavour to bring changes in the Islamic administrative structure.

The western thinkers have the tendency to view the developments in west Asia from a different perspective. Harvard Professor Samuel Huntington in his controversial book 'The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order' published in 1996 is an example of treating Islamic society and civilization as radically opposed to the morals of western civilization. The clash of the civilizations was seen as one between radical militant Islam versus liberal western world. There was widespread criticism of such ideas emanating from so-called western theories of an oriental despotic world. However US President George Bush Jr. and Barack Obama dispelled this notion of East versus West clash. Such thinkers tend to treat Islam to one driving concept '*jihad*' rather than focusing on pluralistic traditions of *ijtihad* or logical interpretation that can often

make the platform for democratic forms of debate and dissent in Islamic societies. The concept of *shoora* or consultation in the holy Quran justifies the concept of democracy is prevalent in the Islamic society. The Quran specifically states “And those who respond to the call of their Lord ,and are constant in their prayer ,and whose rule is in consultation among themselves, and who spend on a common needs out of what We provide for them”. Thus it is clear that Islam endorses democracy as consultation is possible only by eliciting the popular will through universal franchise.

Many of the Islamic principles emanating from the Holy Scriptures can be interpreted as the fundamentals of democracy. But these principles seem to have evaporated at the hands of despots till the recent times. Prophet Muhammad himself practiced democratic principles. The constitution of Medinah is stated to be the first constitution in the world. Concepts like *shoora* (internal consultations), justice, strictures against imposing faith, *ijma* (consensus), *ijtihad* (independent interpretive judgment) and assertions of equality are some of these values that proves that Islamic principles are democratic. The religion is flexible enough to accommodate changing social, political and cultural characteristics. It has co-existed or subsumed with dictatorship or totalitarian regimes to full fledged democracies. In this context it may be reiterated that the fundamentalists like al Qaeda or Jehadis rejects democracy on the grounds that it derives sovereignty or authority from the people instead of Allah. But most of the scholars agree that Islamic state should strive for establishment of a democratic system with Islamic jurisprudence, legislative, legal and moral content.

In an article ‘Arab Spring over, Islamists, Generals and Old Regimes battle for power from Tunisia to Syria’ in the ‘Times’ by Tony Karon states that “the Arab awakening is a tale of three battles rolled into one : people against regimes, people against people and regimes against regimes”. Many western thinkers had a wrong notion that Islam does support the principles of ‘democracy’. Democracy has flourished in Turkey, Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh or Algeria. Muslim societies have democratically elected governments. Iran is another example of Islamic Republic where political leaders are democratically elected .Iranians enjoys higher standards of life, a higher status for women, a high rate of literacy and more personal freedom in comparison to Saudi Arabia. Turkey adopted the liberal version of Islam as a cultural force. The nation has creatively interpreted and moulded Islam in tune with modernity. Similar attempts are made in Malaysia and Indonesia. Tunisian ideologue Rachid al Ghannouchi who stayed in exile for 22 years supports the diversity of ideological currents. Cleric Sheikh Yusuf Qadrawi argues that Islamic laws support the idea of pluralism, multi-party and civil democracy.

Scholars like Bernard Lewis has however warned that western style democratic institution may not be accepted in the Arab world. In many nations open, fully tolerant secular societies or adoption of western systems may not be acceptable to the Arab world. This must be the reason that the Islamists have won elections in a number of countries as soon as the elections were held. The concept if ‘Islamist’ was developed in the 10th century by Abu al Hasan al Ashari (873-935) which was constructed based on political reading of Islam in history and textuality. Now this

concept was developed in the 20th century against the backdrop of capitalism and communism. It is mentioned in the principles that it is the primary duty of a Muslim to strive for the establishment of an Islamic state. There are two clear concept of the Islamic state with the Islamist discourse. One would be liberal populist where the civilian ruler derives his power from the people's endorsement. This view is supported by liberalists like Hasanul Banna, Hassan al Hudaibi, Mustafa al Sibai, Rachid al Ghannouchi (Tunisia) and several others who are the Moderates, whereas another section supports the radical and fundamentalist version of a theocratic state. This idea is endorsed by Abul Ala Maududi, Syed Qutub, Mohammad Abdussalem Faraj, Saeed Hawa, Fathi Yakun and others. According to the fundamentalist ideology the leader derives his authority from God. But some authors states that in places like Egypt, Syria, Yemen and Libya the most significant rivalry is unlikely between Islamists and pro-democracy secular forces but might be between mainstream Islamists and Salafists.

Hence, the spring may not have led to revolutionary democratic transformation but shall certainly accelerate the process of democratization of the institutions. Citizens will have their say unlike earlier times. Constitutional and political reforms will be seen in the process in near future. There is also a wrong belief that individual freedom is not permissible in Islam. *Ijtihad* has been hijacked by the *ulemas* and the *ulemas* who themselves took responsibility to issue *fatwas* at their own whims and fancies. Women enjoy freedom in a very few Islamic nations. Islam has empowered women even in the 7th century by way of widow remarriage and property rights. Sisters of Islam, a

Malaysia – based women's organization has been campaigning for a more liberal interpretation of the Quran so that they can enjoy for rights and freedom denied to them for ages. Now more than 60 percent of the country's workforce comprise of the women. Political scientist Mervat Hatem coined the term "state feminism" to signify Egyptian advocacy for women's rights. Sociologists like Mounira Charrad and Deniz Kandiyoti further stressed to link women's rights to state policy. One of the significant aspects observed in the spring was the transmission of ideas and information among the youths through the social networking sites as the press in these countries are controlled by the government. The youthful activists used technology to share ideas and tactics that aimed at a common goal of personal dignity and responsive government. Ideas emanating through the social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter spread the ideas all across the globe even though the pattern of protests varied from country to country. The spring thus received global support through the internet.

The revolutionary upsurge was spontaneous and there was no organized movement, recognisable leadership or clear strategies perspective like the Bolshevik Revolution of 1911 the revolutionary waves in Europe between 1848 and 1889. Youths, activists, trade unionists, professors, lawyers and common people participated in the uprising. The large scale participation of the women is an important development dispelling the notion that Arab women remained under the veil without freedom. Even in the recently concluded London Olympics, Saudi Arabia and Yemen sent their first female athlete to compete in the Games. This is a remarkable change in the Arab society.

Now political reforms have been undertaken by most of the nations for women's participation in political representation as in Iran or Afghanistan. This pan Arab awakening will certainly change the existing perception that policies are likely to change once democracy flowers in the Arab world.

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Protester holding Egyptian national flag at Tahrir square in Cairo



Tunisian protesters demonstrates beneath a poster of Mohamed Bouazizi-the man who sparked the Arab Spring

Attack on Sufi shrines condemnable



Dargah of Sufi saint Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti at Ajmer



Dargah of Sufi saint Khwaja Nizamuddin Auliya '*Garib
Nawaz*' at Delhi

Attack on Sufi shrines condemnable

Attack on Sufi shrines of Sufi scholars Abdel Salam al Asmar and Sidi Abdulla al Sha'ab in Libya by religious extremists has received widespread condemnation across the Arab world. There is a growing crisis in the Islamic societies over the tussle between the radicals and the liberals. The Arab Spring has created an atmosphere towards democratic and liberal reforms with the fall of the despots. Libya saw the fall of authoritarian regime of Muammar Gaddafi leading to elections in July this year where the conservative forces were badly beaten by the secular and modern democratic parties. These incidents are seen as desperate attempts by such elements to sabotage the process of peaceful transition to democratic secular modern state.

The attackers bulldozed the shrine of the 15th century Sufi scholar Abdel Salam al Asmar located at Zliten in Libya along with a historic mosque and library that are storehouses of valuable manuscripts and literature. Most of the Libyans follow the Sufi teachings and the Salafis (one version of fundamentalists) does not have mass appeal in the country. A series of Sufi shrines has been attacked in recent times in the Muslim nations is a matter of concern for the liberals. In July this year again in Timbuktu, the capital city of Mali a number of such shrines was desecrated by such extremist forces. Timbuktu is also known as the “city of 333 Muslim saints” where there is a large depository of valuable manuscripts and documents in the libraries. The 17th century Sufi shrine of Pashtu mystic

poet Rehman Baba (also called the nightingale of Peshawar) which stood for centuries at Peshawar in Pakistan was bombed in 2009. Over the past two years Sufi shrines and their devotees or visitors have become victims of terrorism in Pakistan, Egypt, India, Libya and Mali. This malicious transgression has been viewed as attack on pluralist Islam.

There is a growing ignorance towards Sufism which was pivotal in spreading the religion across the globe. The fundamentalist's ideologies seem to have overtaken the message of love and tolerance propagated by the Sufis. The message of Sufism is anathema to the Taliban and similar fundamentalists' forces and there is growing belief that Sufism is a bulwark against Islamic radicalism. Sufism is an open, intellectual and liberal interpretation of Islam. Describing the importance of this ideology, in an article by Professor Phillip Jenkins of Pennsylvania State University stated that "Sufism is the power that has made Islam the world's second-largest religion, with perhaps 1.2 billion adherents. Where Islamists rise to power, Sufis are persecuted or driven underground; but where Sufis remain in the ascendant, it is radical Islamist groups who must fight to survive."

Today there are different versions of Islam across the globe shaped by local culture, tradition, mores and region of a particular place. But the two major opposing versions is that one is mystical versions preached by the Sufis and the other is orthodox version preached by the likes of Taliban or Al Qaeda. The orthodox or the fundamentalist movement and notably the Wahhabi doctrine blame all these ills on modernization and western

influence in Islamic world. Since inception Wahhabism from Arabia is seen as the progenitors of modern Islamic fundamentalism. Wahhabis who came to power in the early 19th century destroyed all the Sufi and Shia shrines in Arabia and Iraq. The Wahhabi ideology seeks to establish of state and societies based on Islamic laws and traditional mores. Wahhabis, fundamentalists, Salafis, Talibans, Tablighis oppose Sufism as the ideology promotes some practices like veneration to the dead saint as idolatry, music and dancing in the shrines as unethical. In the Islamic history more puritanical Muslims claims that Sufi practices were infections from Christianity and Hinduism, quite alien to the original principles of the religion.

From the very beginning of Islam music, dance, poetry, language, literature, meditation has been the crucial medium to spread the message of a religion that attracted people from other religion. Music in particular attracted people from other communities to attend the *sama* or *qawwali* sessions in the shrines where devotees are lifted to the level of spiritual ecstasy. Najaf Haider, Professor of History at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi opines that such conflicts are inevitable: "In orthodox Islam the object of Islam is the worship of God; God is the master and the devotee is the slave. The Sufis argue that God should be worshipped not because He has commanded us but because He's such a lovable being. The cornerstone of Sufi ideology is love, and all traditions are tolerated because anyone is capable of expressing love of God". The prominent Deobandi school of thought has always been pro-Sufi in their approach and the leading scholars had the license to transmit four Sufi orders. The Deobandis have

also published commentaries on classical Sufi texts including the *Mathnawi*.

Sufi stream is the most tolerant, secular and syncretic version of the religion is gradually undermined by fundamentalist forces needs serious introspection. The shrine of Hajrat Nizamuddin Auliya in heart of Delhi attracts people from all religions even today. Bengali Hindus, Sikhs, Hindu women from south India are regular visitors come to pray at the shrine. They believe in the supernatural healing powers at the blessing of the Pir. For many Hindus the *dargah* was the substitution of the idol. The dargah was associated with intellectual and literary activity from the 13th and early 14th century. There were intellectual renaissance in form of development of Urdu language and literature, qawwali, shayeri, ghazal etc. at the initiative of the Pir who excelled in several fields as reformer-literature, language, music, organizing Zikir sessions, social reforms, organizing festivals to promote harmony etc. that continue to prosper till today. The regular *Qawwali* sessions, holding of *Shayeri*-session, *Ghazals* etc attracted huge crowd to the shrine. The annual *Urs* ceremony of the saint is a major feature of Delhi's socio-cultural traditions for centuries. There were no restrictions on any caste, community, religion, class or ethnicity in praying, singing or dining together. The Sufis like Nizamuddin Auliya were the savior of the masses who provided charity freely. This must be the sole reason that many people were converted to Islam at their own will.

A research scholar on Sufism, Richard Maxwell Smith stated that Sufis wherever they went and settled adopted local customs, traditions, culture, language,

literature and folk traditions that could easily attract the local population to their *khanqahs* or hospice. They could easily mingle with the local people by their simple life and method of spreading the universal message of peace, love and harmony. Syed Shah Miran or Ajaan Fakir who came to from Baghdad to Assam was one such dervish who could easily mingle with the local people by adopting local language, custome, traditions, culture, language and literature and thereby composing *Jikirs* and *Jaris* that are invaluable treasure to Assamese history and culture today. Scholars like Richard Eaton, Katherine P.Ewing, Barbra Metcalf, Christian M Troll, Peter Currie, Mohammad Habib through their works has dispelled the age old theory that Islam was ‘preached by the sword’ or that there was ‘forced conversion by the *Ghazis* or Islamic warriors’. In fact Islam grew in those areas where the Sufis set up their *khanqah* which later turned into *dargahs* or shrines.

Sufism played a pivotal role in spreading the religion in Central, South and South East Asian region from the 11th century onwards. It has to be remembered the local people were converted to Islam not due to its orthodox ideologies preached by fundamentalist forces but due to Sufism. Islam spread in those areas wherever the Sufi saints set up their *khanqahs* or hospices. Hajrat Nizamuddin Auliya in Delhi, Shiekh Moinuddin Chisti in Ajmer, Shah Jalal in Sylhet, Baba Farid in Pakpattan, Ajodhan in Punjab (now in Pakistan), Banda Nawaz Gesu Daraz in Gulbarga, Hamiduddin Nagauri in Nagaur, Ajan Pir is Saraguri Chapori, Hajrat Ghiasuddiin Auliya in Hajo, Boga Baba in Dibrugarh etc. In this context Prof. Faisal Devji of Oxford University opines that “In many places, Sufism was the way whole populations expressed their Muslim identity. In

South Asia it was the norm". This norm appears to be under threat from such extremist forces.

Sufi led common life unlike aceanics. But as social reformers they showed the way towards work culture wherever they settled. Baba Farid whose liberal ideologies are manifested in the holy book of the Sikhs "*Gurubani*" is stated to persuade his devotees towards agriculture and irrigation in the Punjab Doab region. This saint was responsible for making the region the most productive region of India and Pakistan. Richard M Eaton in his work "Sufis of Bijapur(1300-1700):Social Role of Sufis in Medieval India"(Oxford University Press,1978) a master piece on Sufism states about Pir like Banda Nawaz Gesu Daraz of Gulbarga who was responsible for creation of a syncretic, secular, popular and culture attracted all sections of the society. The Pir was responsible for creation of a '*Dakhini*' language in the 17th and 18th centuries and popular folk songs called '*chakkinama*' were composed by him which was symbolic of the prevalent work culture. These were some of the invaluable contribution of Sufi saints all across the world wherever they settled.

It was through the Sufi saints that integration was possible with the non-Muslims. Sufi scholar Marc Gaborieu in his work "Saints and their cults" argue that why communal harmony stands ruptured today is because the integrative role of the Sufi saints and their dargahs has been undermined by the fundamentalists' forces. Mysticism was close to secular principles. There were exchange of ideas and social interaction between the Hindus and Muslim. In fact the Bhakti or Vaishnava movement in the 14th and 15th centuries was influenced by Islamic mysticism came from

the lower strata of the society that suffered exploitation at the hands of the higher castes. This unique cultural belief has made Islam an acceptable religion in a Hindu majority nation like India as this ideology accepted the changes and diversity to suit the Indian tradition, culture and local conditions.

Similar kind of vandalism was committed by the Taliban when they were in power in Afghanistan when they bombarded the priceless statues of Buddha in Bamiyan inviting international condemnation. These figures that stood from the 3rd and 4th centuries was infusion of Graeco-Roman and Indian style of sculpture remained untouched for thousands of years by Muslim invaders who crossed this area from west Asia to invade and occupy the Indian sub continent became eyesore for the pseudo-educated Talibans in the 20th century. They failed to understand that these were not idols but statues that were not worshipped and that these were the last vestiges of history to prove that Buddhism once flourished in the region. Eminent scholar Asghar Ali Engineer condemned the act as 'barbaric and unIslamic'. Bernard Lewis who has recently written a book "The religion and the People" on the Islamic society stated in an interview to the reputed Time magazine that "Terrorist organization represents a deformation of Islam in the same way as Nazism is deformation of German patriotism". He also observes that Muslims and Germans are themselves the first and worst victims of such radical ideologies.

By attacking the mausoleums, the religious extremists are giving a serious blow to the concept of pluralism. The monuments are still the symbols of

composite culture revered by all sections of society. UNESCO (United Nations Educational Scientific & Cultural Organization) has called for stopping of destruction of such unique cultural heritage sites. The planned destruction of such historical monuments will rob the Muslims of their cultural identity and future generations will remain ignorant about this beautiful philosophy called Sufism. There is an urgent need to preserve and protect such religious monuments worldwide as these are symbols of peace, love and harmony. The world will be culturally poorer if such monuments are allowed to be destroyed by extremist and vandals if they are allowed to have their way.

Note: The shrine of Sidi Abdulla Nasr al Shaab is located at the Libyan capital of Tripoli was partly destroyed by the conservative Salafi Islamist and Shine of Abdul Salaam al Asmir is located at Zlitan located 160 KMs south east of Tripoli .Both these were partly destroyed in the last week of August, 2012.

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Attack on Sufi shrine at Zliten in Libya in March, 2012

(48)

Tablighi Jamaat congregation in COVID time

The Tablighi Jamaat (TJ) congregation at Nizamuddin Markaz (centre) has committed an unmitigated disaster by emerging as the “largest known viral vector” of corona virus in South Asia including in India. The international gathering that took place between 13th and 15th March with a huge number of participants when the entire globe is fighting the virus menace. The negligence and irresponsible attitude of the Amir (chief) Moulana Saad Kandalawi has endangered the lives of many of the followers along with those who came in contact with them. Now participants are testing positive for COVID 19 right from Andaman and Nicobar Islands to Kashmir to Assam because of the gathering. Few of the elderly Tablighis have already lost their lives in Telengana and there is every likelihood the fatalities will increase in days to come. TJ has put the entire Muslim community under shame as the media is filled up with hate messages depicting the Muslims as ‘corona *jihadis*’ or ‘human bombs’ at a critical time when the Prime Minister of the country has called for social distancing with a nationwide Lockdown.

Despite being an organisation that has followers all across the globe TJ remained unaware of the declaration of global health emergency on January 30th by World Health Organization. In mid-February the virus has spread its tentacles in South East Asian countries. It is matter of astonishment why the leadership did not cancel the event

that included participants from COVID 19 affected countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand or Brunei. Delhi government on 13th March prohibited any gathering of more than 200 people under the Epidemic Diseases Act. At a time when Saudi Arabia authorities have already closed down the Qaaba Sharif in Mecca and Medina mosque by fully sanitising the holy places. There is every likelihood of cancellation of Hajj pilgrimage to be held in July this year because of the menace .Whereas Kuwaiti administration has modified the *Azaan* (call for prayer) to pray at homes (*al salatu fi buyutikum*) (pray in your home) instead of coming to masjids (*hayya alal salah*) (come to prayer) for social distancing. Yet the obstinate organization continued its activities with a blind belief that no disease can harm them.

An audio-tape has been circulated in the social media containing a message from Maulana Saad invoking the Tablighis stating ‘Don’t pay heed if they ask us to lock down mosques’ and that “There is no better place to die than a mosque”. Further he warns that corona virus is an expression of Allah’s wrath because of sins of mankind. This shows the blind adherence to faith that has no rational or scientific explanation. Is there any Quranic treatise that says the best place to die is a mosque? Subsequently when the entire blame was fixed on the Maulana and his associates with the filing of FIR he backtracked and a separate audio tape surfaced asking the followers to pay heed to government orders when it was already too late leading to the unprecedented crisis all across the country.

The biggest problem the Assamese Muslim society is facing is that liberal and intellectual sections who donate

liberally to the organisation do not speak a word against the retrogressive activities of the Tablighis. The unemployed youths, married individuals and elderly persons join the Jamaatis in name of reforming the society. After attending such congregations and training sessions they are brainwashed to become so called 'true Muslims'. One thought is to view non-believers as object of hate, keep beard, forcing wives to distance themselves from the men folk through the *purdah* and wearing *burqah*. The tentacles of the Tablighis are gradually spreading across the liberal Asomiya society that never knew what *purdah* or *burqah* was till the later part of the 19th century. In course of time several principles in offering *namaz* (prayer) or reading the *khutbah* (sermon) has been modified by the Tablighis to suit their own needs.

Initially the TJ movement was confined to Barak valley in Assam but has subsequently spread across the state. The list of corona positive cases and those under quarantine that returned from the congregation belong to districts like Golaghat, Dibrugarh, Nagaon, Morigaon, North Kamrup and districts of lower Assam. The Tabligh is attracting most of the rural youths who are either unemployed or refuge to join agricultural or allied activities. As they are provided with the best of accommodation and fooding for several months during *chillah* (on mission) making them aloof from developing any skills or creating a work culture. This makes the idle youths attracted to fundamentalist and orthodox ideologies in day to day life. Unknown followers are allowed by the masjid communities to stay in the masjids with accommodation and fooding facilities. They denounce the liberal, tolerant and syncretic philosophies of the Sufi saints

who played the most significant role in formation of the Islamic society in India and South East Asia. Unfortunately the Markaz headquarter is situated adjacent to the Dargah of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya (popularly called *Garib Nawaz*) that is frequented by more Hindu devotees than the Muslims pilgrims. The ideologies of the saint are directly anti-thetical to that of the Tablighis.

Islamic revivalism started by the Tablighi Jamaat in 1926 never say anything to burning issues in the Islamic society like growing crime, alcoholism, drug menace, child marriages, child labour, child nutrition, mortality rates of child and mother, birth control, education, women and child welfare and any other social issues. They turn their blind eye to all these crucial issues that are seriously affected Islamic society. These issues should have been included in the training programme to the followers and they refuse to come out of their medieval mindset. Take the example of immunization issue under Mission Indradhanush few years ago. They were involved in invoking the people not to get child immunized as they made a fake propaganda that ruling party in power is going to make their daughters infertile by such method. They still do not believe in treatment by medicines but healing by *dua* (prayer) and *jora-phuka* (religious recitation for healing) practised in Middle Ages.

It remains mystery as to why these crucial issues are side-lined by such a world renowned organization involved in reforming the Islamic society when the entire nation knows unless these issues are taken up seriously than the community will continue to suffer in future. Huge number of followers in USA and European nations fund

these congregation through charity and *zakats* meant for the Muslims who live under extreme poverty. Such wreck less expenditure has never been subjected to any auditing or accounting as Maulana Saad who lives a luxurious life with blessings from political bosses.

Going by the Quranic verses the TJ has created an unpardonable crime against humanity as Prophet Mohammad in one of the verses in the holy Quran has asked the disciples to offer prayers at home in times of plague or epidemics. The sect refuses to follow the scientific approach to religion and continues its propaganda based on medieval beliefs of the 14th century following the age old archaic fundamentalist *Wahhabi* doctrine that refuse to believe any rational or scientific thinking. They are taking the society to the quagmire of dark future that provide cannon fodder create Taliban or terrorist like Osama bin Laden or Abu Bakkar Al Baghdadi.



Tablighi Jamaat during Covid 19 epidemic. The Jamaat came under serious criticism due to congregation at covid times.

Colonial Loot of Artefacts

India was once called '*sone ki chiriya*' or the '*golden bird*' for its riches and prosperity before the British colonized and exploited the country. The exploitation by the colonial power has gone to such an extent that it became a poor and devastated country before they left in 1947. Parliamentarian and author Shashi Tharoor in the book "Age of Darkness" reflected the magnanimity of the economic and financial loot of India. The British exploitation was termed as the "drain theory" by British Member of Parliament Dadabhai Naoroji who estimated that India's share of world GDP fell from 27 percent in 1700AD to mere 3 percent by the time the British left India. However this plunder was not confined to natural resources alone but also the fact that a huge volume of historical and cultural artefacts of the continent was looted by the colonialists.

In a research recently conducted by the Columbia University Press it is estimated that they have stolen treasures worth \$45 trillion from India. India had a great economy in the later Mughal period. Large numbers of items were exported all across the world. India enjoyed a 25 percent share of world global textile trade in the early 18th century. But following the wars with the Indian kings and princes Britishers eyes fell on the rich treasures of India. These came to be called 'spoils of war'. The invaluable historical treasures were looted by the colonial powers from the Asian and African continents where they ruled for centuries. The plunder started when East India Company

was given permission to trade in India. But international laws do not allow such stealing or looting from any country.

In order to reclaim the cultural heritage that were stolen or were taken before the end of the colonial rule steps has been initiated by some of the NGOs and Associations in India. Many of the colonial countries like Germany and France have restored some of such historical artefacts taken from the colonies in Africa. Inspired by such reciprocal attitude by some countries and NGO named **India Pride Project** (IPP) was launched in India with an objective to guide the global networks of Indian activists and art-lovers to find the lost heritage and return the antiquities that was allegedly stolen from India by the colonial powers. The claim for restoration of the historical artefacts has been the subject of debate across the European Universities. Following such a debate Netherlands decided to return all the stolen art to Sri Lanka and Indonesia.

The British Museums are filled up with the loot from the colonies including India. The world famous Kohinoor diamond is now embedded in Mother Queen's crown. The *Kohinoor* (mountain of Light) diamond fell into the hands of the Persian invader Nadir Shah along with his loot included the Peacock Throne. Subsequently it reached the powerful Sikh Maharaja of Punjab Ranjit Singh whose successors could not hold the kingdom as they were defeated by the British culminating in annexation of the kingdom in 1849 and the invaluable diamond passed into the hands of the British that was taken to England. Large number statues of Gods and Goddesses were also taken to England proudly displayed in the Museums across Europe.

Sword of Tipu Sultan is today exhibited in British Museum. Tippoos tiger at Victoria and Albert Museum, Sultanganj Buddha statue, Amravati marble etc are some of the most valuable treasures preserved England. While on visit to India by the then British Prime Minister David Cameron was requested to send back the Kohinoor diamond and then his reply was that if all the Indian artefacts were returned than the British museum would turn empty.

One estimate states that ninety percent of the cultural treasures of Africa sub-continent were stolen by the colonial powers. Now many nations of particularly that of African sub-continent have urged **the International Heritage Committee** to ask the colonial powers that owes those reparations for the centuries of oppression and looting. These countries want the colonial powers to return the priceless artefacts of historico-cultural significance. One of the most important repository of Egyptian civilization is the famous Rosetta stone. Egypt has been demanding the return of this stone that records one of the earliest forms of writings in civilization. Berlin museum stores the 3500 year old stolen bust of Queen Nafertiti of Egypt. Recently however Benin bronze treasures of the culturally rich kingdom of Dohomey were returned by the French government as gesture of goodwill. These included totems, sceptres and scared doors from the royal palace of Aboma. French troops took them to between 1892 and 1894. Britain had handed over some of the artefacts that were taken during the British military expedition in southern Nigeria in 1897.

Now the irony is that the international museums of Europe are reluctant to lose the valuable treasures collected

from the colonies. The museums will lose their charm, attraction and visitors once the artefacts are repatriated to their owners. Another legitimate issue is whether the repatriated items would be safe in the new locations as these are preserved in climate-controlled conditions in the Museums. Tropical climate with high humidity in the ex-colonies may damage the items if not conserved scientifically. This was the reason the state government of Assam could not bring back the *Vrindavani vastra* from the British Museum even for temporary exhibition in the state without proper expertise.

In post-independence period many instances of stealing and smuggling of valuable treasures have taken place from India. IPP has successfully recovered a large number of smuggled artefacts from the hands of the smugglers who operate in international markets in selling of such heritage artefacts that fetch huge money from buyers. Recently the NGOs recovered a 16th century *Nataraja* statue stolen from India. A number of international smugglers like Subhas Kapoor are responsible for smuggling and selling of such statues. The Australian galleries have returned a couple of statues worth \$5 million. The IPP team has recovered 200 statues of religious idols from a band of thieves of Jaipur worth \$984000 when they tried to sell it in international market.

Hence the ownership of the stolen artefacts will remain a contentious issue unless it is taken up in proper forum. Through dedicated and negotiated approach many of the artefacts and ancient images have been returned by European nations to the African nations. Like many countries India does have a Heritage Protection Committee

for conservation and preservation of all forms of historical artefacts. Scientific conservation and preservation are essential for survival of the historical artefacts which are now well preserved in the European countries. India needs to form a body that can work in consonance with the IPP to take up the issue of return of historical artefacts from the European Museums. In 1970 UNESCO convention has already enacted provision that prohibits and prevents illicit import, export and transfer of ownership of cultural property and there is a UN resolution No 2347 on protection of cultural property.

This article appeared in The Assam Tribune on 22-05-2022.



Sword of Tipu Sultan displayed at British Museum in London



The Koh-i-Noor diamond adorns the British crown

Construction of Assamese Identity

Today the great Assamese middle class forms an important part of the social structure of Assam. This class evolved from the colonial period. This educated class that forms the fulcrum of the Assamese society. The British created system of administration created this elite class to suit their needs in running the administration for their convenience. The legacy of evolution of the educated class that can be defined as intelligentsia in colonial period took the constructive role in the development of the Assamese identity and the language. The role this class played during the later part of the 19th century is significant from the historical point of view. Lord Macaulay in his minutes on education laid the objective on formation of this elite class.

It was difficult for the British scholars and administrators to determine the identity of the Assamese due to convergence of various races, ethnicity or caste backgrounds. On these works Historian Edward Gaité commented that “Both are far from complete”. Gaité in his scholarly work “A History of Assam” cites “...in the plains, large section of the population, like that of Bengal, are of mixed origin (but) there are numerous tribes who are almost pure Mongolians and the examination of their affinities, in respect of physique, language, religion and social customs, which other branches of the same family forms one of the most interesting lines of enquiry open to ethnologists.” He used philological and ethnographical consideration to determine racial affinity.

Historian Gaité opines that the Ahoms, Rabhas and Kacharis abandoned their tribal language when they were brought under the fold of Hinduism, the priests used the Assamese language as it was considered “language of higher civilization”. It was considered an Aryan language of a higher civilization. The immigrants who newly arrived from Bengal, Orissa and Bihar became an important section of the Assamese society as they came for livelihood and settled here permanently. So Gaité was of the opinion that those who spoke Assamese became “Assamese”. This was how a linguistic based nationalism evolved in Assam. Assamese *jati* was fostered by the sense of conscious realization of the collective identity of a group of people with a distinct language and culture with affinity in dress, food habits or religious festival. During the anti-colonial struggle the Assamese nationality evolved to come a common politico-social umbrella as a united front to lead the struggle for Indian independence.

After the annexation of Assam by the British after the Treaty of Yandabu in 1826 the province came under colonial rule till 1872. Many of the intelligentsia blessed the Britishers for saving the province from Burmese depredations. After the incorporation of the Bengali speaking district of Sylhet into Assam from Bengal Presidency in 1876 created internal dissensions in the Brahmaputra valley. Assamese language received a great boost when American Baptist Missionaries brought printing machineries to Assam for the first time in 1836. In the same year the colonial administrators replaced Bengali language in place of Assamese as the official language in courts and educational institutions. The magazine ‘*Orunodoi*’ became

a platform for rallying public opinion in favour of Assamese language and the missionaries.

Rev. Nathan Brown and Rev. Miles Bronson were the vanguards of the movement of restoration of Assamese language by printing the first Assamese periodical '*Orunudo*' in 1844 from Sibsagar. The Assamese intelligentsia tried to educate the masses standardizing the Assamese grammar and language and attempted to reinstate Assamese in courts and schools in place of Bengali. They wrote articles on edification of the Assamese published in the '*Orunudo*'. Moffat Mills wrote letter on the sad state of education in Assam because of the medium of instruction being a foreign language.

The Missionaries submitted a report "Report on the Assam Mission at the close of the Year 1851 with the Minutes of the First Meeting of the Assam Baptist Association, Sibsagar, 1852" as quoted by Prasenjit Choudhury in his work states that if the Assamese were to be recognised as the official language for all the tribes, it would make communication with the common people and educating them much easier for the Missionaries. This was described by many as 'linguistic nationalism' due to the assertion of identity through a language. Prasenjit Choudhury states that linguistic nationalism is a 19th century phenomenon which appeared with the inception of the *Oxomia Bhaxa Unnati Xadhoni Xobha* (Society for promotion of the Assamese language) in 1888. The *Gyan Proyadini Xobha* was found in 1857 in Nowgong under the patronage of Anundoram Dhekial Phukan and Gunabhiram Barua. In 1872 the *Oxomiya Xahitya Xobha* was set up in Calcutta and in 1888 the *Oxomia Bhaxa Unnati Xadhoni*

Xobha was started with the objective of bringing about total development of Assamese language.

Europeans believed Assamese were ‘ahistorical’ people without sense of history. But little did they realise the existence of the ‘*buranjis*’ or the historical chronicles were conserved for ages by the Ahom royal families. They were compiled by the duly appointed officers in Tai Ahom dialect. But it was Edward Gait who discovered that such histories have been preserved by the Ahom rulers for centuries. He went on to remark that “They were endowed with the historical faculty in a very high degree and their priests and leading families possessed.” The literal meaning is ‘store that teaches the ignorant’ where *bu* ‘ignorant persons’ *ran* ‘teach’ and *ji* ‘granary or storehouse’. Historian Surya Kumar Bhuyan is one of the earliest translators of these *buranjis*. Earliest histories were written by Kashinath Tamuli Phukan (1844) and Gunabhiram Barua (1884).

The British had a confusing view about the Assamese language and thought it to be a dialect of Bengali language. There was a hidden agenda of playing with the Bengali language against Assamese language as a part of the ‘divide and rule’ policy that manifested in the concept of partition of Bengal in 1905 known as the ‘Grouping Movement’ in Assam. A British officer clearly wrote in the Asiatic journal that ‘*divide at impera* should be the motto of our Indian administration’.

The western educated intelligentsia was mostly educated in Calcutta as there was no college or universities in Assam during those period. Dhaka was another centre of learning where Assamese youths pursued higher education.

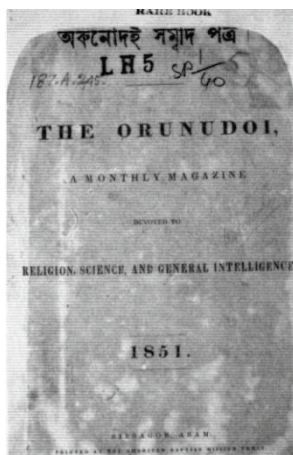
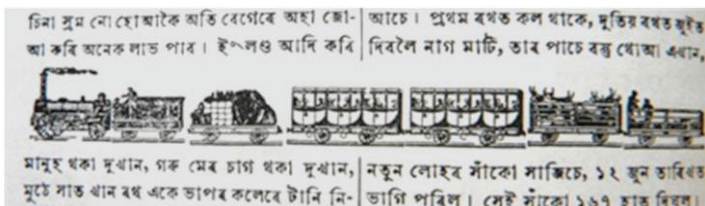
They were the ones who created this historical consciousness about a new emerging identity. This emerging historical consciousness evolved to contest the colonizer's belief that it lacked history. The compelling need of the day was to construct a new nationalist historiography to challenge the colonizer's hegemonic imagination. It was only in the middle of the 19th century that the new bilingual Assamese elite or the intelligentsia started the project of creating a modern standardized Assamese language to make it suitable for the modern purposes. Around this time periodicals, journals, newspapers, magazines with the growth of the printing presses and publishing houses. This gave the mother tongue a new shape and flavour. *Orunudo* (1846), *Oxom Bilaxini* (1871), *Oxom Mihir* (1872), *Oxom Darpan* (1874), *Oxom News* (1880), *Oxom Bandhu* (1885), *Mou* (1886) etc.

Two of the most prominent intelligentsia were Anundoram Dhekial Phukan and Maniram Dewan whose voices heard by AJ Moffat Mills who submitted a report in 1854 explaining the situation of contemporary period. Anundoram remained loyal to the British for his western outlook whereas Maniram Dewan remained loyal to the Ahom royal aristocracy, who sacrificed his life by participating in Sepoy rebellion of 1857. Various literary clubs and associations were formed in second half of the 19th century to promote the language. This contributed to the growth of linguistic nationalism through the Assamese intelligentsia. The relentless efforts of Anundaram Dhekial Phukan, the American Baptist Missionary, Gunabhiram Barua and Hem Chandra Barua in promoting the Assamese language paid fruitful dividend when on April 19, 1873

Assamese replaced Bengali language in all educational institutions and courts in Assam.

This article appeared in The Assam Tribune on 07-09-2021.

Orunudo: The first Assamese journal



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Orunudoï & the Dawn of Literary Renaissance in Assam

It is often imbibed that evolution of Assamese nationalism was based on linguistic nationalism. Language and literature emerged as the major factor for the Assamese cultural nationalism. The genesis of linguistic based identity to Assamese identity can be traced back to the second half of the 19th century when linguistic identity evolved through a long process of standardization of Assamese language and literature. Multiculturalism was core of the Assamese identity and the process of amalgamation under the Ahom rule all the caste, creed or ethnic tribes started using the language as the linguafranca as the means of communication. Language became the vehicle for assimilation and evolution of Assamese societal fabric. Assamese literature got a definite shape at the time with the publication of the first Assamese journal *Orunudoï*. The journal has now completed 175th anniversary of its existence that laid the path towards the dawn of Assamese literary renaissance.

The first printing press in Assam was set up by the American Baptist Missionaries who came to Assam at the request of Captain Francis Jenkins, the Commissioner of Assam for preaching Christianity among the common people. Following this Nathan Brown (1807-1882) and Oliver Cutter (1811-?) came from Calcutta to Sadiya to set up the first Printing press in 1836. They carried with them the materials of the American made printing press after an arduous journey for months together by Brahmaputra river

to reach Sadiya. They published printed books in Assamese, Khamti and Singphou languages for sometime. But due to ill health and repeated attacks by the hill tribes and remoteness of the location the missionaries were compelled to leave to a better location. They came to Sibsagar where they set up the Sibsagar Mission Press in 1843 .The first Assamese monthly journal *Órunudoí* was published by the press marking a historic chapter in Assamese language and literature in 1846.This started a literary revolution in literature and cultural sphere in the coming years.

Till then education was still at a nascent stage as a very few elite class could take to education and that too by going to places like Calcutta and Dhaka. No school, college or University was set up till the later part of the 19th century in Assam. This slow progress of education could not create a large inquisitive class of people who could read this path breaking journal. It was a period of economic backwardness, social instability and cultural upheaval in the state .Whereas the newly created middle class was more attracted to Bengali language as most of them were educated in Bengali language. But with publication of this journal the common people gained access to the information about the world outside the state. Even though the basic aim of the press was to spread missionary activities, but Nathan Brown and Oliver Cutter took up the responsibility of opening up the education sector. After their arrival they set up the first school in Sadiya in 1837. It was reported that the local boys showed their enthusiasm towards studies. The press in Sibsagar met up with the shortage of Assamese text books. Historian HK Barpujari

also informs us that Nathan Brown and Oliver Cutter set up school for girl's education in 1840.

However by that time a middle class imbibed with the spirit of western thought and ideology emerged in Guwahati city. The Guwahati Seminary was started in 1834 which subsequently became Cotton Collegiate School. As there was shortage of text books for the students stalwarts like Maniram Dewan, Haliram Dhekial Phukan, his son Ananda Ram Phukan, Gunabhiram Baruah, Hem Chandra Barua and Dinanath Bezbarua took the responsibility to produce the text books. By the end of the 19th century a few Assamese students studying in Calcutta were affected by the Bengal Renaissance. The pioneers of Assamese literature, culture and society like Lakhi Nath Bezbarua, Chandra Kumar Agarwala, Hem Chandra Goswami, Padmanath Gohain Baruah, Satya Nath Bora, Kanak Lal Baruah are some of the stalwarts of Assamese literary movement. They created the Assamese Literary Society in 1872 which was later named as *Asomiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* (ABUSS) in 1888.

The Missionaries worked hard for re-establishing Assamese as the official language after the Colonial government imposed Bengali in 1836 significantly in the same year of setting up the printing press. Missionaries like Nathan Brown and Miles Bronson (1812-83) repeatedly confronted with the colonial administration to convince them that Assamese is not a dialect of Bengali language but a separate language altogether that has its own literature, culture and history. They attained success when Assamese was recognised and re-introduced as official language in 1873. Being the first editor Nathan Brown wrote to his associate in 1850 about the success of the journal - "The

Orunudo has been considered by the Mission as one of the most powerful instrumentalities for gaining access to the minds of the Assamese....we found it to succeed beyond our expectation”.

Orunudo carried news from all across the world, translations of the old Ahom *buranjis*, creative literary pieces, about science and social reforms. All the progressive ideas were promoted. They resorted to the standardization of Assamese literature which was provided by Hem Chandra Baruah in his dictionary “*Hemkosha*”. It also became a platform for rallying public opinion in favour of Assamese language as Nathan Brown and Miles Bronson forcefully advocated for re-introduction of Assamese language against the growing influence of Bengali language.

Orunudo was followed by the ‘*Jonaki*’ age of literature. The journal published from 1889 took the lead as the mouthpiece of the ABUSS for the following objectives (i) collect and reprint the old Assamese manuscripts (ii) circulate Assamese language literature to all education institutions in Assam (iii) impose correct grammar and linguistic system (iv) translate the important works of Sanskrit literature (v) write books on history, language, culture, literature and social aspects of Assam (vi) to fill up the void in Assamese literature and text books.

Many of the cities of upper Assam rose into prominence as they played an important role in promotion of Assamese language literature that included Dibrugarh and Jorhat that became the bases for Tea industry promoted by the colonial administrators. Finally at the influence of *Orunudo* the local intellectuals took up the lead to publish another journal for benefit of then Assamese society.

Hence, *Assam Bilashini* was published in 1872. The third printing press was set up by the Satradhikar of Ainuati satra of Majuli in 1871 with the assistance of the local people. Incidentally Ananda Ram Dhekial Phukan set up the Calcutta New Press in Calcutta in 1856.

The origins of modernity in Assam can be traced back to the intellectuals who contributed in their intellectual and radical ideas through these journals for transformation of Assamese society affected by the ideas of Bengal renaissance. It heralded a new era for Assamese literature. To conclude with the words of Ananda Ram Dhekial Phukan who considered *Orunudo* as a historic document for consolidation of Assamese nationalism and he wrote in 1855 “Long will the rising generation have to cause to be thankful to the Missionaries for their timely efforts to preserve the language and literature of their country”.

This article appeared in The Assam Tribune on 06-12-2021.



Hem Chandra Barua (1836-1896):
Prominent writer who compiled the first Assamese
Dictionary *Hemkosha* and a social reformer

Re-conquest of Hagia Sofia

In July, 2020 the weekly congregational Jumma prayers were performed at the historic Hagia Sophia Museum turned into mosque for the first time after 85 years. The iconic monument is located at the centre of Istanbul city was a Museum until it was reconverted to Mosque with a ‘sovereign decision’ of Turkish government following a Court’s order to restore its status as a mosque. This 1500 year old UNESCO World Heritage Site turned into a religious place of worship has raised hue and cry all across the world. The move has come under criticism from religious and political leaders worldwide.

This is perceived as a part of populist politics played by the present President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan ignoring all the global appeal to keep it as a Museum. In a way Erdogan is reversing 100 years reforms of the father of modern Turkey Mustapha Kemal Atatürk and reverting to romantic Ottoman Islamic past calling it as “resurrection of Aya Sophia”. The President has taken the help of religion to promote his political strategy. Historic figure Ertugrul is the father of the founder of the Ottoman Empire, Osman I misspelt as Uthman or Ottoman is romanticised. A Television serial titled “*Resurrection Ertugrul*” loosely based on life and deeds of Islamic warrior Ertugrul has been highlighted. In recent times this serial has become widely popular all across the Islamic world promoted this growing mood of revivalism among the Turks.

The Turks had a glorious history with the rise of the Ottoman Empire that ruled from the 12th century up to the 20th century. They were the brave warriors who fought with skills and courage against the Mongol hordes that depredated from the East and the Byzantine Empire from the west from the Asia Minor region. They were able to extend their empire beyond the Byzantine lands and even reached up to Vienna. Hungary and the Balkans also came under Ottoman control making it one of the largest empires during those periods. They had to deal with the Crusades from Europe as well. The city of Constantinople was built by Byzantine emperor Constantine, the Great who made Christianity the official language of the Roman Empire and hence got the name of the city. The construction of Hagia Sofia started in 532AD during the reign of Byzantine Emperor Justinian I, the ruler of Byzantine Empire. It was built to become the seat of the Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church and remained for more than 900 years. Relics of the saints were buried in the Gardens of the monument whereas the frescos depicting Christ, Mary and the disciples are and saints on the walls that could be seen till today.

In 1453 Constantinople fell to Sultan Mehmet II's Ottoman forces, the Hagia Sophia was ransacked and turned it into a mosque. The city was renamed as Istanbul by the Sultan and became the greatest city in the world. Mustapha Kemal Ataturk, the great hero and father of modern Turkey on 29th October, 1923 founded a secular Republic. A man with modern vision Ataturk decided to keep religion out of politics. One of the first important decisions he took was to remove the unnecessary religious symbols in order to promote secular ideals of a state

including replacing Madrassa education with modern and western education, banning of *hijab*, enfranchisement for women etc. In one of his first moves he converted the Hagia Sophia Mosque into a Museum in 1935 and opened it for the public. Seen as a benevolent dictator Ataturk abolished the Caliphate or Khilafat held by the Ottoman ruler led to protest all across the world including India.

Religious monuments were seen as symbols of authority during the medieval period all across the world. There are many examples in Europe on conversion of mosque into churches particularly with the decline of the Moorish culture in Andalusian peninsula in Spain that remained under Muslim rule for a long time. The Grand Mosque of Cordoba constructed in 784AD was converted into a Catholic church in 1236 when the capital of Spanish Umayyad caliphate fell to the Christians. By the end of the 15th century the last enclave in Spain was lost by the Muslims. Since then a number of grand mosques were converted into churches. A number of similar mosques in Seville, Cristo de la Luz, Ias Tomerias or Toledo were converted. In India also during the contemporary period a similar stand was taken by the Muslim conquerors when a large number of temples (in many cases dilapidated) were destroyed and mosque erected over the base of the structures. This has led to disputes like the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute.

Turkey was one of the most secular among the Islamic countries. The Kemalite reforms created a modern European culture apart from following the liberal Sufistic version of liberal Islam. The Sufistic dance of the whirling *dervishes* form represents the secular culture in the country.

In 1950 Turkey became a Democratic Republic but over the years Erdogan has turned the nation into a dictatorship. Erdogan's conservative Islamist party (AKP) had been agitating for converting Hagia Sophia into a mosque and was made an electoral issue since 2002. Religion was given more importance than economic issues vexing the country for a long time. He wants to project himself as the leader of Islamic world. Hussain Abdul-Hussain writing in Arab News states this as "Converting Hagia Sophia into a mosque is part of Erdogan's dream of imperial dominance in name of Islam". He has already built a larger mosque that he inaugurated few months ago in the city. The Blue Mosque is another mosque that accommodates a large number of devotees. Hence it is only a symbol to satisfy his voters to project the 'golden past' instead of promoting economic development and solving the unemployment crisis.

Liberal Turks are already divided over the issue. The renowned Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk states that this beautiful landmark of Istanbul - Hagia Sophia is a symbol of Byzantine, Ottoman and Turkish periods of history and should have remained a Museum for the visitors. He is critical of Erdogan for changing the secular character of the Republic. The World Council of Churches has urged the President to revise his decision. Pope Francis has said that he has been 'very saddened' by the conversion. The World heritage Committee of UNESCO will take a decision due to this change in character of the historic monument. The monument may remain open to the public but probably rules will change once it is converted into a full-fledged mosque.

This article appeared in PRABAH: A souvenir published by CM Hostel Alumni Association on occasion of 4th Annual General Meeting of CM Hostel Alumni Association on 15-05-2022.



The Hagia Sophia, Istanbul



Mustafa Kemal Atatürk: The father of Modern Turkey

(53)

Charaideo Maidams: Bid for UNESCO tag

Charaideo Maidams - the mound burial system of the Ahom royalty known as the “Pyramids of Assam” is vying for the UNESCO World Heritage Site tag. The Government of India has accepted the proposal submitted by Assam, and recently nominated the necropolis for the prestigious UNESCO tag. This is indeed good news for Assam as it was the sole nomination to the UNESCO this year. The relic is stated to have met all the technical requirements of the norms set by the UNESCO. Till date, the Northeast does not have a single site in the category of Cultural Heritage, even though Kaziranga and Manas National Parks feature in the Natural Heritage category.

Lying at the foothills of the Patkai ranges, Charaideo is situated about 400 km east of Guwahati. It was the first capital of the Ahom dynasty founded by Chaolung Siu-Ka-Pha in 1253. This city remained as the Ahom capital for more than 137 years. The word ‘Charaideo’ is derived from three Tai Ahom words ‘*Che*’, ‘*Rai*’, ‘*Doi*’. ‘*Che*’ means city or town, ‘*Rai*’ means to shine and ‘*Doi*’ means hill. In short, it meant “a shining town situated on a hill-top”. Charaideo is home to more than 90 royal burial mounds that are under the protection of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). A buffer zone has been created removing encroachment on land measuring 754.51 hectares. This proposal for the UNESCO was prepared with technical collaboration of the ASI under an initiative of the Chief

Minister. The entry has come at a time when Assam vis-a-vis India is celebrating the 400th birth anniversary of legendary Ahom commander Lachit Barphukan who defeated the Mughals in the famous battle of Saraighat. The Maidams are compete examples of the mound burial tradition of the Ahom royalty, nobles and elites. The mortal remains of the members of Ahom royalty were buried with their paraphernalia. The Maidams are made of five architectural components *garbha* (underground chamber), *tai* (vault), *Ga-maidam* (body of the maidam or the mound), *chow chali* (roof), *garh* (wall) and a narrow strip of open land with cobbled stone edge for soft land scaping. These are found scattered across upper Assam from Jorhat to Dibrugarh where the Ahoms had their sway. These mounds have one or more chambers in a vault. The top portion is covered by grass. On top of the mount, there is a pavilion known as the *chow chali*. A low octagonal wall surrounds the mound with an entrance. Maidamia officials were given the responsibility of taking care of the vaults, There is a tradition of writing history or *buranji* by the Ahom kings. The Chungrung Phukan was given the responsibility of writing the canonical texts, recording the materials used for construction of the Maidams. Various materials were used for construction of the Maidams. From the 13th to 17th century, wood was the primary material, but from the 18th century, the Ahoms adopted the Hindu traditions of cremation and began entombing the cremated bones and ashes. From the 18th century onwards, stones and burnt bricks of various sizes were used for the inner chambers. The building materials used for the construction were bricks and stones blended by a mixture of black pulse,

molasses, duck eggs, soul and Bar- ali fish, lime and smaller stones.

The first proposal to nominate the Charaideo Maidams was sent by the Central Government in 2014 and enlisted in the UNESCO website since then. But the nomination could not convince the WHS why the site needs a heritage status. Hence a fresh proposal has been submitted with proper justification.

The Phukan also documented the number of labourers, duration of work, offerings made for the rituals. The ceremony rituals were elaborate and conducted with great pomp and gaiety reflecting their hierarchy. Paiks were deployed for construction of the Maidams. The Ahoms ruled Assam for more than 600 years during the medieval period until the annexation of the territory by the British in 1826 after the conclusion of the Treaty of Yandaboo. The royal dynasty had great builders and architects and constructed a large number of monuments (*ghar*), forts (*garh*), temples (*doul*), water tanks (*pukkuri*), canals, road (*ali*), bridges (*sako*) and many others spread across the State. They left an enduring legacy to enrich the historical heritage of Assam. The Ahoms consider themselves as the descendants of God, and hence call themselves not kings but ‘Swargadeo’ (lord of heaven) having divine powers. They believe that they descended from heaven on a golden ladder. After their death, it is believed that they ascend to heaven to join their ancestors. So special provisions are made in the vault where all worldly needs including *paandaan*, *sorai*, furnitures, ornaments, utensils of regular use, etc., are also stored. Till date, 386 Maidams have been

explored in Assam. The term ‘Maidam’ is derived from the Tai word ‘*Moi*’ meaning ‘that which rots and ‘*Dam*’ means ‘spirit of the dead’. So it means the place of burial where bodies rotted.

Despite shifting of the capital multiple times by subsequent Ahom kings including to Chargua, Bokota, Garhgaon and Rangpur, the first capital remains symbolic and the ritual centre of power due to the respect for the founder Siu-Ka-Pha and considered most sacred by the Tai Ahoms. This historically important site was facing encroachment covering an approximate area of 578 bighas. In view of growing threats of encroachment, the Directorate of Land Records carried out an extensive survey around the protected area encompassing the mounds. Now, a Management Plan is prepared by the Cultural department that can submit proposals to the Central Government. Various other Maidams, located across Assam in places like Jorhat, Dibrugarh and Sivasagar, are also in need of protection and scientific conservation. According to the World Heritage Society (WHS), it is necessary to follow the 5 ‘C’s for heritage conservation credibility, conservation, capacity building, communications and community participation. The operational guidelines published by the UNESCO are very elaborate and proposals have to be prepared including the Universal Value of the project for acceptance. The WHS evaluates the nominations received from the countries under various categories that must have outstanding universal value and should meet at least one out of 10 selection criteria mentioned in the operational guidelines.

The first proposal to nominate the Charaideo Maidams was sent by the Central Government in 2014 and enlisted in the UNESCO website since then. But the nomination could not convince the WHS why the site needs a heritage status. Hence a fresh proposal has been submitted with proper justification. Maidams of 14 Ahom kings have been included in the dossier. Today, the UNESCO web-site enlists 52 sites of India in the tentative list of nominations. Any addition in the WHS list directly signifies the historical importance of the place and will likely lead to increase in tourist flow to those sites.

The UNESCO team will visit the historic site in September 2023 for verification and later take a decision on giving heritage tag to the site during the 24th session of the General Assembly in March 2024 at Paris.

N.B. Charaideo Maidams has already been recognised as UNESCO World Heritage Site declared in the 46th Session of the World Heritage Committee that held its meeting in New Delhi from 21st to 31st July, 2024. The Maidams has been inscribed as the 43rd World Heritage Property of India. This marks a significant milestone as it is the first cultural site from the Northeast to be included on the prestigious list.

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UNESCO World Heritage Site tag given to Charaideo
Maidams

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mahmood Hassan originally hails from the town of North Lakhimpur in Lakhimpur district of Assam. After completing his graduation in History (Honours) from Ramjas College under Delhi University in 1989 he did Post Graduation in History with specialization in Medieval

Indian History from Arts Faculty of Delhi University in 1991. While pursuing his M.Phil. in East Asian Studies he was selected for Assam Civil Services in 1992. After serving in a number of places in lower Assam he successfully completed his tenure as the Director of Char Areas Development, Assam and Director of Assam Minorities Development Board under Welfare of Minorities & Development Department of Govt. of Assam. Then he was promoted to the rank of Additional Secretary and posted in Environment and Forest Department of Govt. of Assam.

After serving in Environment and Forest Department for a couple of years Mr. Hassan was transferred and posted at Administrative Reforms & Training, Pension & Public Grievances Department where he was promoted to the rank of Secretary in the same Department and later was promoted to the scale of Commissioner & Secretary before being nominated to the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) cadre in 2025 and is presently posted in the same

Department as Secretary in IAS cadre and continuing in the same post till date.

As a well-known writer he contributes articles to *The Assam Tribune* and *The Sentinel* and other periodicals regularly.

He has written a book on travel experiences titled *ENCHANTING BHUTAN*.

