

NORTH-EAST INDIA

INTERPRETING THE SOURCES OF ITS HISTORY

Edited by

Ranju Bezbaruah
Priyam Goswami
Dipankar Banerjee

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INDIAN COUNCIL OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH

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Preface

It is indeed a matter of great pleasure and satisfaction on our part to have been associated with the efforts of the ICHR to bring to light source materials for the reconstruction of the history of North-East India. The articles incorporated in this volume are selections from those presented by scholars in the National Seminar on Sources of History of North-East India, organized by the ICHR in collaboration with its North East Regional Centre, at Guwahati in March 2002. The seminar was the first of its kind, being devoted wholly to sources of the history of the region.

The Brahmaputra Valley of Assam has a rich tradition of recording the past. The *Kalika Purana* and the *Yogini Tantra*, a large number of inscriptions, the *Buranjis*, the *Carit Puthis*, Memories official correspondences, along with a vast array of oral traditions constitute the major sources for the study of the region. The Barak Valley of Assam, Manipur and Tripura are equally rich in recording the past in one form or another. The Manipuri *Puyas* are immensely important as source material for the reconstruction of the history of the Valley. In reconstructing the history of most of the tribes inhabiting the region in pre-colonial times, one has to depend primarily on oral traditions, though for the colonial and post-colonial periods oral traditions are amply supplemented by archival documents. All these sources are, however, yet to be properly interpreted and compiled to enable scholars to study North-East India's history as part of mainstream Indian history.

The papers presented in the seminar and selections incorporated in this volume are by no means a comprehensive catalogue of the whole gamut of the source-materials for the study of North-East India's past. They merely highlight certain sources chosen by individual scholars. Nevertheless, they represent practically all the states of the region and are ready materials for other scholars to fall back upon. Forty-one papers were presented at the Seminar and twenty-seven papers have been incorporated in this volume. An Editorial Board with Ranju Bezbaruah, Priyam Goswami, and Dipankar Banerjee as co-editors, and J.B. Bhattacharjee, S.D. Goswami, S.D. Dutta as members, screened, scrutinized and edited the papers into their present form. However, the views expressed by the contributors are wholly their own.

We take this opportunity to thank the authorities of the ICHR for entrusting this onerous responsibility upon us. We are also grateful to the officials and staff of both the ICHR, New Delhi, and the North East Regional Centre, Guwahati, for extending to us their support in a variety of ways. Professors J.B. Bhattacharjee, S.D. Goswami, and S.D. Dutta who spared their valuable time in selecting the papers for this volume also deserve our thanks.

We believe that if this volume helps scholars in finding further clues to the sources of the history of North-East India even partially, the purpose of this volume will be amply served.

Editors

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1

Keynote Address

J.B. Bhattacharjee

North-East India is no longer a *terra incognita* in Indian historiography, as many rightly thought it to be till 1960s. Thanks to the efforts of the University, the departments of history, the North East India History Association (NEIHA), and similar organisations and institutions that a large number of historians of the region, including a few from outside the region, have individually and collectively substantially contributed to the various aspects of the history of North-East during the last thirty years. The publication of the five-volume *Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H.K. Barpujari, nearly a decade ago, which integrated the findings of the researches till then, gives a good account of the progress of historical research in the North-East. On an average, at least ten books and more than a hundred substantive papers are now published in a year. NEIHA holds its session every year, and its proceedings are published regularly. The quality of research also can legitimately claim an all-India standard. The need is to sustain the enthusiasm that has been noticed in recent years among the scholars of the region.

Notwithstanding what I have just said, this seminar should be important for a two-fold purpose, viz., (i) to measure the depth and breadth of the use of sources that were identified years ago; and (ii) to share information about the newly-identified sources. I shall particularly expect the reporting of some newly-identified sources, for I always hear young scholars complaining of the paucity of data, irrespective of the theme they initially pick up by their own choice. This

may be primarily because of the limitation of scope of the sources that are used (and they obviously created the gap areas) and because new sources of information (particularly of the pre-colonial period) have not been added for some time. Sir Edward Gait's report on the *Progress of Historical Research in Assam* (1898) listed some important sources which were readily available, and the efforts of the local scholars (K.L. Barua, P.N. Bhattacharya, S.K. Bhuyan and K.P. Singha to name a few) led to the identification of invaluable source-materials in the early decades of the 20th century. Serious reviews of these sources (particularly conventional ones) are found in Vols. II, III & IV of the *Sources of the History of India*, published by the Institute of Historical Studies, Calcutta (1974, 1978 & 1982). These reviews covered the sources which were contemporarily used by the scholars.

In fact, most of the literary and epigraphic sources pertaining to the pre-colonial period (ancient & medieval) were unfolded till 1960s and very little have been added since then. The inscriptions (including the copper plates) were reported in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society* and various issues of the *Epigraphic Indica*, and now available in two excellent compilations (*Copper-plates of Sylhet*, 1967, ed. by K.K. Gupta and *Inscriptions of Ancient Assam*, Guwahati, 1978, ed. by M.M. Sharma). The important archaeological sites were noticed in the reports of Archaeological Survey of India in the colonial period, while Ambari (Guwahati), Pilak (Tripura), Malinithan, Bhismanagar, Balukpung, Ita (Arunachal Pradesh), Bhaitbari (Meghalaya) are among the few sites excavated in post-1960s. The Department of Anthropology, Guwahati University, made an important beginning in the explorations of pre-historic sites in Garo Hills and North Cachar Hills in the same period. The coins of the medieval monarchies were also mostly catalogued in museums and/or reported in numismatic bulletins and in the *Journal of the Numismatic Society* or *Asiatic Society* till 1960s, and only few could be added after that. The Harikela coinage, some later Gupta coins, and a hoard of local coins found at Dhula Padung (all pertaining to an ancient period) are among the post-1960 finds. The chronicles of Assam, Manipur and Tripura are widely used for a long time. The *Prachya Sasannavali* (compiled and edited by Maheswar Neog, Guwahati, 1974) is a source-book which has been found handy by many researchers. Therefore, the fact remains that new sources for the pre-colonial history of the North-East have not come to light for a long time. This seminar may explore the possibility of alternative and supplementary data which can be helpful in filling up the gaps in the political, social and economic history of the pre-colonial period.

The archival records continue to be the main source of information for the modern period. The historians of the region have been using the Assam Archives (formerly Secretariat Record Office), West Bengal Archives, National Archives

of India, and the India Office Library & Records (London). Some scholars have used the District Record as well (though in a very small way). The private papers (particularly those in the Cambridge South Asia Archives, Cambridge and the Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, New Delhi) have also been used by some of our scholars, besides newspapers, records of the political parties, tea, oil, coal and railway companies and the Tea Board, contemporary literature in local languages, and the memoirs, autobiographies and reminiscences of the administrators and freedom-fighters. The missionary papers have of late been found to be very useful. The records preserved in the mission headquarters and archives in England, Italy, Germany and the United States, besides those in India, are being used by the historians. *The American Missionaries and North-East India* (a documentary study, Guwahati, 1986) by H.K. Barpujari is an example of how important the missionary sources for social, cultural, intellectual and economic history are. Similarly, memoirs of some of the early Italian and German missionaries in North-East India (translated and published by the Sacred Heart College, Shillong) are indeed mines of information. The accounts and reports of the British officials, eg Buchanan Hamilton's *An Account of Assam* (1807-14), R.B. Pemberton's *Descriptive Account of Assam* (1840), W.J.M. Mills' *Report on Assam* (1853), W.W. Hunter's *Statistical Account of Assam* (1878), and many others of the kind, have been reprinted more than once and these are still being used by the researchers. In fact, the sources on the modern period are so wide in range and varied that the real problem lies in identifying and handling them rather than the dearth of them. However, the archival records are generally the official versions of events and development and hence, there is always a need for alternative sources of information. The alternatives (to supplement, authenticate or to complement) are also available, provided the researchers are adequately trained and equipped to trap them. As of now, I see need for larger use of district and sub-divisional records for micro-level studies. Unfortunately, these records are in a bad state of preservation and the record rooms hardly provide any facility to the researchers. Similarly, the records of the municipalities and other local bodies and the traditional authorities and educational and cultural institutions should also be explored to supplement the information we get from the official archives. In this seminar, we may discuss these and several other possibilities as we sit down to serious business.

I have emphasised on several occasions that in the North-East we should explore non-conventional oral sources as an alternative and/or supplementary to the conventional recorded sources, and for this, we might interact with sister disciplines in social sciences like social anthropology, sociology and socio-linguistics for interdisciplinary study of social forces and social development and take

advantage of the tools and techniques of field research in those disciplines. The oral sources (folklore, folksongs, beliefs and superstitions, ceremonies, hymns, ritual practices, and those of the kind) are always important for peoples' history (or history from below) as they reflect on the problems, needs and aspirations of the masses at various points of time. The oral history societies in Britain and the United States have done excellent work in developing methodologies for research in oral history. In the North-East, these are particularly important because most of the communities in the region were in pre-literacy in the pre-colonial period and the languages were reduced to writing only in the later years of the 19th century or even after that. Therefore, the conventional recorded indigenous sources are not accepted for the earlier period. Aware of this predicament, the British officers did a commendable job in recording and compiling the oral traditions of the various tribes in the North-East. E.T. Dalton's *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* (1872) and monographs like Gordon's *The Khasis* (1907), Playfair's *The Garos* (1909), Mutton's *The Angami Nagas* (1926) and *The Sema Nagas* (1928) or Mills' *The Ao Nagas* (1928), to name only a few of those great works of the monographers, contain so many tales and traditions which are important for historical analysis. Some excellent collection of folklore have been brought out by our own scholars since 1950s. S.N. Barkakati's *The Folktales of Assam* (1956) and P.D. Goswami's *Ballads and Tales of Assam* (1960) are indeed outstanding collections with scholarly interpretation in unique literary style. Some oral history projects and a large number of Ph.D. and M. Phil. dissertations in the School of Social Sciences at NEHU have yielded excellent results in reconstructing the history of the North-Eastern tribes. May I recommend to this seminar that the oral history of North-East India is taken up more seriously by us.

Finally, I need not repeat the words of the great historians to remind ourselves that the interpretation of a source is as important as the source of information, and this integral segment of the historians' craft, calls for rigorous training in historical method. R.G. Collingwood called the history constructed by excerpting and combining the testimonies of different authorities a 'scissors-and-paste history' and he said, "it is not really history at all, because it does not satisfy the necessary conditions of science" (*The Idea of History*, CP, Oxford, 1993 edition, p. 257). As we talk of the sources, the interpretation of those will legitimately deserve our attention in this seminar.

2

On a Coin of Jaintiapur

S.K. Bose

Numismatic evidences constitute important source-materials for the reconstruction of the history of the Jaintia kingdom.

The origin of the Jaintia kingdom remains a matter of conjecture and inference.¹ The terrain was bounded on the east by the rivers Keerowah and Kapili, separating it from Cachar. To the north, the Kapili drained into the Kallang, the latter segregating the Jaintia kingdom from Assam. The state of Khyriem was to the west, and this western boundary then diverted south-easternly to reach Surma river, which found its southern border except in the region of Satbak Purgana.²

No one knows what united the Syntengs, or the inhabitants of Jaintia Hills under one king. This is quite unlike their neighbours in the hills – the Khasis – who had adopted a democratic system to elect Chiefs to rule their petty states.³

The keys to the past being very few, the story of the Jaintia kingdom has so far been reconstructed on the basis of the history narrated traditionally, the chronicles of the Ahoms and the Koches, a few copper-plates of the late medieval period and most importantly, a limited number of coins struck by the Jaintia kings.⁴

An earlier reference of Jaintiapur has been made in the revenue assessment of the Mughals. Todarmal, the Revenue Secretary of Emperor Akbar, had assessed the collection from the Jaintia plains to 27200 *dam* (Rs. 680/-). However, whether

the Jaintias were at all under the Mughals is debatable. Blockmen opined that neither Jaintia nor Tripura could be conquered by the Mughals.⁵

In 1835, when the British annexed the Jaintia kingdom, it spread over an area of about 650 square miles. Lieutenant Fisher, in a report in August 1822, however, limited the size to 545 square miles.

Traditionally, the Jaintia subjects in the plains maintained a dynastic list of their rulers. Such a list is also recorded in the Ahom and the Koch chronicles. One such list was shown to the author by the last descendant of the Jaintia royal family, Rajkumari Ira Devi. She reportedly received it from the Royal priest, late Chandra Kumar Deshmukhya.⁶ Such recordings could have been relied upon to construct a political history of Jaintia. Unfortunately, these do not bear dependable dates. In the given circumstances, late Jaintia coins seem to stand out as reliable documents to determine the royal lineage.⁷

However, a major problem in dating Jaintia rulers in this fashion is that most of the Jaintia coins are anonymous.⁸ Unless supported by other corroborative evidence, the exercise remains a matter of some doubt.

The dynastic list mentioned above starts with Parbat Rai Brahman. According to Gait,⁹ Parbat Rai might have extended the Jaintia kingdom towards the plains some time in the early 16th century. Unfortunately, no coin of Parbat Rai has yet been discovered.

An undated coin, with the legend *Sri Rupesya Banadasthan Jantapuramka Saupradhana* on the reverse, has recently been discovered.¹⁰ From the translation of the legend, it appears that this particular coin was dedicated to the most handsome chief and ruler of the forest land and Jaintia inhabitants; thereby probably referring to Lord Shiva.¹¹ The basis for such a reference is a temple of Lord Shiva near Muktapur, built by king Borgohain I of Jaintiapur. The priest of the temple was one Rupanath; and the temple as well as the image of the Lord were alluded to by the same name.¹² As Borgohain had dedicated his kingdom to Rupanath and his consort Jaintesvari, no separate land was earmarked for the maintenance of the temple.¹³ It may be conjectured that this very piece might have been issued by him. In that case, Borgohain I may be regarded as the first Jaintia king to have minted coins.

According to *Darrang Rajvansavali*, written after Naranarayana invaded Jaintiapur (c. 1563/1564), the Jaintia king was killed and his successor was banned from striking coins in his own name, but could do so in the name of Jaintiapur.¹⁴ Gait viewed that this story may perhaps explain why so few Jaintia coins bear the name of the king in whose reign they were struck. The king is simply described on the coins as the most illustrious ruler of Jaintiapur.¹⁵ A few

historians, however, opined that the *Vansavali*, being a late work, may not be entirely reliable as a source of information on Jaintia coinage.¹⁶

On the basis of the Jaintia coins noticed so far and other reliable information available, we may accept the following chronology of the Jaintia rulers:

<i>Name of the king</i>	<i>Year of accession</i>	<i>Event-related year recorded¹⁷</i>	<i>End of the rule</i>
Parbat Rai	?		
Borgohain I	?		
Vijay Manik	1575		
Dhan Manik			1612
Yaso Manik		1618	1633
Chota Parbat Rai	1633		1640
Yasmat Rai	1640	1658	1660
Man Simha	1660		1669
Pratap Simha	1669		1670
Lakshmi Narayana	1670		1703
Ram Simha	1703		1708
Jay Narayana	1708		1731
Borgohain II	1731		1770
Chatra Simha	1770	1778	1782
Jatra Narayana	1782		1785
Bijay Narayana	1785		1790
Ram Simha	1790		1832

Information about a number of gold and silver coins were reported at Kolkata during the 1970s, however those were, possible not genuine; hence not taken into consideration.¹⁸

Gait has mentioned about a coin issued by one Jai Simha. The legend on the obverse reads, *Sri Sri Hara Gouri Charana Parayana* and the reverse, *Sri Srim Jai Bhupalasya Sake 1585*.¹⁹ This piece is similar to any Jaintia coin both in fabric and style, though it is difficult to say with certainty that Jai Simha was a Jaintia ruler. No corroborative information in this regard has surfaced so far and he has not been mentioned in any chronicle. The Mughal general, Mir Jumala, was in Assam during Saka 1585 (AD 1663). It is possible that during that period of turmoil, Jai Simha had occupied a portion of Jaintia and struck his coin.²⁰ The

above-mentioned coin was found with other Jaintia coins.²¹ Interestingly, during 1663, the Jaintia king Man Simha had attended the coronation of the Ahom king, Chakradhvaja Simha.²² Jai Simha might have seized this opportunity for some political gains.

The author has recently noticed an unusual two-rupee Jaintia coin of Borgohain II. This coin was found at Raha, in the modern Nagaon district in Assam, along with two more rupee coins of Ram Simha II (AD 1790-1832). Raha is not far away from Phulaguri, north of Kallang where, with the consent of the Ahom king, Pratap Simha, the Jaintia king Yaso Manik, organised a fair.

This was the first attempt made by a Jaintia ruler to initiate a commercial contact between the two kingdoms.²³ In fact, this region had three passes, viz, Gobha, Neli and Khala, connecting it to the Jaintiapur kingdom, which were utilised by the traders. Most interestingly, Borgohain II had actually travelled to the boundary near Raha at the end of AD 1768. He retreated when the Ahoms misunderstood the aim of such a venture and placed a cannon at their border.²⁴

The two-rupee coin mentioned earlier may be described as below:

Metal-debased silver, size-round, diameter-30 mm, weight-14.7 grams, legend-Sanskrit, Scrit. Asamese-Bengali, denomination-two rupee, date-Saka 1653.

Obverse— In double circle with dots in between, a crescent with a dot inside at the top within the double circle, a *trisula* (trident) flanked by two human figures (Nandi and Bhringi ?), as well as a group of four dots in square shape above the legend, musket on left and sword on right, the legend flanked by a dagger and dots near the inner circle, a six-pointed star, a Hindu representation of six seasons at the bottom of the legend. The legend runs in four lines—

Sri Sri Sri
Va charana ka-
Mala madhuka-
Rasya

Reverse— A double circle with dots between, and horizontal line above the last line of the legend, two rows of five dots, one each above and below the legend, first line flanked by dots arranged in a triangle; two dots at right and half portion of the flower at left of the second line.

The legend runs in four lines—

Sri Sri Ja-
Yantipura Pu-

Randarasya Sa-
Ke 1653

Rhodes has recorded at least three one-rupee coins of Borgohain II weighing 7.54, 7.32, and 7.12 grams.²⁵ These coins bear between twelve and thirty-two dots. The two-rupee coin under discussion has thirty two dots. It is a debased silver coin. From the appearance of the earlier Jaintia coin, it can be concluded that the process of striking debased coins began from the period of Borgohain II and reached its peak during the reign of Ram Simha II. Use of debased metal in striking Jaintia coins was the result of a system by which the right to mint coins was sold by the ruler to the highest bidder. Two coins bearing the date 'Saka 1712' were sent to the Assay Master, Calcutta Mint in AD 1836. The findings show the value of the said coins according to the Company's standard, as 3 annas and 4 annas 3 pie only.²⁶

It is recorded that Borgohain II was the first Jaintia king to have experimented to introduce quarter-rupee coin. As such, a two-rupee coin by the said ruler might have been a part of his experiments. This was certainly an attempt to raise his revenues, as the king used to receive most of the revenues in kind.

With this unique piece, till date, altogether three varieties of denominated coins have been noticed in the eastern part of our country, the other two being the two-rupee coin of Radha Kishore Manikyā of Tripura (AD 1897) and the ten *tanka* coin of Jalal-ud-din Muhammad Shah, Sultan of Bengal, struck in AD 1420.

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13. *Ibid.*

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15. E.A. Gait, *op. cit.*, p. 243.
16. J.P. Singh, "Jaintia Coins and Koch Tradition: An Examination", *N.I. Bulletin*, London, May 1988, pp. 112-5.
17. Based on either chronicle or copper-plate.
18. Rhodes and Mitchiner, "A Series of Forged Coins from North-East India", *Numismatic Circular*, London, March-April 1981.
19. E.A. Gait, *op. cit.*, p. 245, Pl. XXIV, No. 18.
20. Author's Jaintia, *op. cit.*, p. 199.
21. *JASB*, 1895, p. 245.
22. A. Choudhury CX, *op. cit.*, Part 2, Chapter IV, p. 12.
23. Lakshmi Devi, *Ahom-Tribal Relations*, Guwahati, 1968, p. 109; *Jayantia Buranji*, (Bhuyan S.K. Ed.) pp. 17 and 168.
24. Lakshmi Devi, N. 23, p. 133.
25. N. Rhode, *The Coinage*, *op. cit.*, p. 127.
26. *JASB*, 1895, p. 243.