

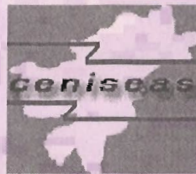
CENISEAS PAPERS

6

**PRE-COLONIAL NORTHEAST INDIA:
A PORTRAIT FROM PERSIAN ACCOUNTS**

FOZAIL AHMAD QADRI

Sanjib Baruah, SERIES EDITOR



**Centre for Northeast India, South and Southeast
Asia Studies**

**OMEO KUMAR DAS INSTITUTE OF
SOCIAL CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT
GUWAHATI, ASSAM, INDIA**

**PRE-COLONIAL
NORTHEAST INDIA:
A PORTRAIT FROM
PERSIAN ACCOUNTS**

**CENISEAS PAPERS
Number 6**

FOZAIL AHMED QADRI

Sanjib Baruah, SERIES EDITOR

**Centre for Northeast India, South and Southeast
Asia Studies
Guwahati, Assam, India**

Copyright © 2004 by F.A. Qadri

Published by

Centre for Northeast India, South and Southeast Asia Studies
Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development
39, Sapta Swahid Path
Dispur, Guwahati-781006
Assam, India

Price: Rupees Thirty Only

Printed at:

Everywhere

Dispur, Guwahati-781006

Assam, India

Cell No.: 98640-82516

SERIES EDITOR'S NOTE

The CENISEAS papers seek to promote the intellectual mission of the Centre for Northeast India, South and Southeast Asia Studies [CENISEAS] (briefly described on the back cover of this publication). This paper by Fozail Ahmad Qadri is a revised version of the paper he presented at a CENISEAS Seminar on April 19th 2004.

History, in recent years, has been a highly contested field in India. Competing readings of the past have shaped major political conflicts. Such contests abound in Northeast India. Indeed for former Governor Lt Gen. S.K. Sinha of Assam, history became 'a weapon to fight militancy'. Since some local intellectuals challenge Assam's historical connection with India, General Sinha took it upon himself to 'prove how wrong they were.' He lamented that, 'while Indian historians speak of the Indus Valley Civilization and the Ganges Valley civilization, they never speak about Assam's Brahmaputra Valley Civilization.' In his efforts to 'make the people of Assam feel proud of their past, and for the rest of India to feel proud of Assam,' the Governor took up projects such as the installation of a statue of the Assamese hero Lachit Barphukan — the symbol of Assam's resistance to pan-Indian imperial formations — in the National Defence Academy and the naming of a gold medal for the best cadet after him. Sinha also took the initia-

tive for naming the Guwahati International Airport after another Assamese hero Gopi Nath Bordoloi.¹

Such contests over the past are quite interesting to analysts of contemporary politics, though the bloodshed is disconcerting. The trouble, however, is that like General Sinha most partisans of these contests are amateur, and not professional historians. For instance even though Hindu nationalists have tried to 'document a pattern of wholesale temple destruction by Muslims,' few professional historians have engaged the issue of temple desecration in 'medieval' India.² Among the reasons why the voice of professional historians is not more assertive in public debates about this period of Indian history is the fact that a lot of the primary sources are in Persian and 'only a small and declining number of people' in India have access to it. According to the distinguished historian Irfan Habib it is not only a large body of Persian material that awaits the historian's scrutiny, there are scattered documents that require systematic collection and much 'local antiquarian and archaeological work' still waiting to be done. With every passing day, writes Habib, 'the evidence on paper, metal or brick or stone is being destroyed.'³

Professor Fozail Ahmad Qadri is one of the few contemporary Indian historians working with Persian sources who have an

1. S.K. Sinha, 'Violence and Hope in India's Northeast,' in K.P.S. Gill and Ajai Sahni (eds.), *Faultlines*. Vol. 10 (January) New Delhi: Bulwark Books and the Institute of Conflict Management, 2002, pp. 18-19.
2. Richard M. Eaton, 'Temple Desecration in Pre-modern India,' *Frontline* Volume 17 - (25) Dec. 9 - 22, 2000 <http://www.flonnet.com/fl1725/17250620.htm>
3. Irfan Habib, 'History and Interpretation: Communalism and Problems of Historiography in India,' http://www.sacw.net/India_History/IHabibCommunalHistory.html

interest in Northeast India. CENISEAS was delighted to invite Professor Qadri to give a seminar in Guwahati on 'Pre-colonial Northeast India: A Portrait from Persian Accounts.' As evident from the lively discussion it generated, the subject clearly is of great interest to people in the region. CENISEAS is very pleased to be able to publish his paper.

Professor Qadri's paper is an overview of Persian sources that can throw light on the history of Northeast India. One of the earliest texts is *Tabāqāt-i Nāsirī* by Minhāj Sīrāj. This general history of Muslim dynasties of Asia including those of India includes an account of Muhammad Bin Bakhtiyar Khalji's invasion of Northeast India in 1205 A.D. Based on conversations Minhāj had with one of Bakhtiyār's associates forty years later Minhāj describes what Bakhtiyar and his associates saw and experienced in the region. Kamarupa of *Tabāqāt-i Nāsirī* included Western Assam and the districts of Rangpur, Rangamati and Sylhet in today's Bangladesh. Qadri draws attention to Minhāj's reference to communities such as the Koch and the Mech and to the conversion to Islam of a Mech chief Alī.

Moving to the Mughal period, Qadri notes that while the early Mughal writings were 'incidental and fragmentary,' seventeenth century onwards the chronicles begin to throw more light on the region. He gives two reasons: (a) increasing contact with the region and (b) the intellectual influence of Arab historiography that considered 'everything related to people and society' worth writing about rather than the court and camp centric view of the Persian tradition of historiography that had influenced earlier chroniclers.

One text that evoked particular interest during the discussion that followed Professor Qadri's presentation at CENISEAS was the *Baharistān-i Ghaybī* by Alā al-Dīn Isfahānī or Mirza Nathan who took a leading part in the Mughal campaigns in Bengal and Assam during the reign of Jahāngīr (1605-1627). The text was discovered by Jadunath Sarkar in 1919 and was translated into English by M.I. Borah, the distinguished Assamese scholar who was Professor of Persian at Dhaka University. The Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies of the Government of Assam published the translation in two large volumes in 1936. Qadri argues that while Jadunath Sarkar gave the title *Baharistān-i Ghaybī* to the manuscript and Borah kept the title, it was in fact not the author Mirza Nathan's original title. In the text there are references to 'the author of this *Iqbāl Nama-i Ghaybī*'. Thus the actual title of the work, Qadri suggests, should be *Iqbāl Nama-i Ghaybī* and not *Baharistān-i Ghaybī*. Qadri's other point that evoked discussion of this text is that while it has been viewed mostly as a source of information on Mughal-Koch and Mughal-Ahom conflicts, it is 'a mine of information' on both banks of Brahmaputra and on some of the communities referred to these days as hill and plains tribes.

Qadri also writes of the significance of *Fathiyah Ibriyah* by Shihāb al-Dīn Tālīsh who accompanied Mīr Jumla during his Assam and Koch Bihar campaign of 1662-63. Apart from being a detailed account of the expedition, this text describes not only Assam and Koch Bihar but other parts of present-day Northeast India as well. It is of particular interest that Tālīsh uses the expression *Āshāmiyān* [Assamese] probably for the first time.

Qadri observes that in using the Persian texts mostly as a

source for Mughal-Ahom conflicts, modern historians of Assam have ignored their importance for understanding other parts of the region. For instance, these texts have some of 'the earliest references to the tribal communities of the region, much before the British imperial officers and ethnographers' became interested in them. It is worth noting that the term used by Tālīsh for what today we call 'tribes' is *qaum* that can be translated as people or community. Thus Tālīsh refers to *Qaum-i Miri-w-Mishmi*, *Qaum-i Dafla*, *Qaum-i Naga*, *Qaum-i Garoh* and so on.

It is our hope that Qadri's paper will inspire interest among a new generation of historians to learn Persian and use it to look at pre-colonial Northeast India through fresh lenses. If that happens we might finally be able to rescue scholarship on the region from the iron-grip of colonial ideas about castes and tribes, languages and dialects.

The Centre for Northeast India, South and Southeast Asia Studies and the CENISEAS paper series have been made possible by a grant from the Ford Foundation.

Sanjib Baruah

Senior Fellow and Head

Centre for Northeast India, South and Southeast Asia Studies

Pre-Colonial Northeast India: A Portrait from Persian Accounts*

The generalised classification of Indian historical periods into ancient, medieval and modern, if applied in the northeastern context may lead to many serious historical problems. The transition from ancient to medieval or even to the modern period in the broader Indian context was a gradual process. It must be taken into account that the changes from one phase of history to another has to be analysed not only as a change of political power, i.e., from one dynasty to another but also as an emergence of local dynasties. The change has to be seen and analysed in relation to various areas of life, i.e., economic, political, social, cultural, etc. In all these areas we find significant changes taking place in the northeastern region of India during the period under review. For example, the first phase of the pre-colonial period is marked by the emergence of local dynasties/chieftaincies and the beginning of the second phase witnesses the establishment of Ahom power. The history of northeastern region, therefore, should be divided into pre-colonial (sub-divided into pre-Ahom and Ahom periods) colonial and post-colonial periods. What is implied in the present study is the later phase of pre-colonial northeast India.

* The author is thankful to SAP-DRS, Department of History, NEHU, Shillong for providing secretarial assistance.

The vastness and variety of source material for the history of pre-colonial northeast India has by now been acknowledged. With the changes that have taken place in the historiographical concepts, it has become imperative for a modern historian to tap and utilise as many varied sources of information for the study as possible. This is not a fad with modern research methodology but an essential pre-requisite for understanding the spirit of an age. The concept of history does not now reel round the pomp and panoply of the court; it seeks to study man in relation to his environment, irrespective of any social distinction. The hut and the palace have the same significance in the eyes of a modern historian. For this extended approach of history it is necessary to examine, analyse and utilise all types of source material, which was earlier considered irrelevant or beyond the purview of historians. Unless human activity in a particular period is surveyed as a whole and from all angles and aspects it is not possible to evaluate and understand the life of the people or to have an insight into the spirit of an age. In the present study, however, the scope has been kept limited to the Persian political chronicles as demanded by the organisers of this lecture.

I

The Muslims first set foot in northeast India during the period of rapid expansion of Turkish power. The expedition of Malik Iz al-Dīn Muhammad Bin Bakhtīyār Khalji was an effort in this direction. The expedition, however, proved to be the *Achilles heel* of the otherwise most successful, daring and adventurous person-

ality of Medieval India. The disastrous failure of Muhammad Bin Bakhtīyār inaugurated an era lasting over five centuries during which parts of northeast was, temporarily though dominated and ruled by Muslim invaders. During this period of over five centuries and after numerous historical sources, mostly in the form of political chronicles developed which provide invaluable information helpful in reconstructing history of the region. They supply not only the details of political or military history, but also provide important facts of political and economic geography, social and cultural history and help in fixing the chronology.

*Tabāqāt-i Nāsirī*¹ of Mawlānā Minhāj al-Dīn Abul' Umar Bin Sirāj al-Dīn Jurjānī is the principal source of information about the expedition of Muhammad Bin Bakhtīyār Khalji in the region. Minhāj's account is the only connected and coherent narration of the political and military activity of the period. He supplies an eye-witness account of the stages through which one of the greatest empires of the medieval period had to pass in order to take shape. *Tabāqāt-i Nāsirī* is a general history of Muslim dynasties of Asia, including Hindustān between 810 AD to 1260 AD. The author had great capacity to handle historical data relating to extensive political activity in space and time. Starting from the patriarchs and Prophets he could bring the story down to his own day. More than a mere political chronicle, Minhāj Sirāj was a great scholar well versed in

1. Text edited by Nassau Lees, Khadim Hussain and 'Abd al-Hayy, *Bib. Indica Series*, Calcutta, 1864. English translation: H.G. Raverty, Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, 1881 (reprint), Oriental Book Reprint, New Delhi, 1970, 2 Vols.

religious sciences, inspiring as an orator, calculating and shrewd as a politician, connected with the ruling house of Ghur, impressive as a theologian and possessing statesman like qualities. Along with Sultan Shams al-Dīn Iltutmish and his Prime Minister Nizām al-Mulk Junaidī, Minhāj appears to be one of the founding fathers of the Delhi Sultanat. It is perhaps due to these qualities of him that his eminent successor Diya al-Dīn Baranī remarks that, in the preparation of *Tabāqāt-i Nāsirī* Sadr-i Jahān Minhāj al-Dīn Sirāj Jurjānī has shown miraculous powers².

It was during his sojourn at Lakhnauti in Bengal in the year 1243-44 that Minhāj was told about the dramatic events that had taken place forty years ago. Here he met one Samsām al-Dīn entitled Mu'tamad al-Daulah who had been in the service of Muhammad Bin Bakhtiyār, and from him he gathered his information about Bakhtiyār's exploits in Bihar and Bengal and the tragic circumstances of his death³. Minhāj talks about the tribes of Koch, Mech and Tharu. Interestingly Minhāj provides earliest reference to the conversion of a Mech chief 'Alī by Muhammad Bin Bakhtiyār during his march. This 'Alī conducted Bakhtiyār in the hills of the region. He also provides interesting informations about people, language, religion, land, population, flourishing villages, forts, valour, weapons and methods of warfare and hence, he stands out pre-eminently as a very systematic and discerning chronicle of the time.

2. *Tārīkh-i Fīroz Shāhī*, edited by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, *Bib. Indica*, Calcutta, 1890, p. 21.

3. *Tabāqāt-i Nāsirī*, *op.cit.*, 1, pp. 557-558.

When the Rāi of Kāmrūd (Kamrupa) came to know of the proposed campaign, he sent a message to Bakhtiyār asking him to defer his campaign to the next year, when he offered to help him in the conquest of that area⁴. Kāmrūd or Kamarupa of *Tabāqāt-i Nāsirī* included the western portions of Assam together with the Bengal districts of Rangpur, Rangamati (later during British period added in Goalpara district) and Sylhet. It was first conquered by Sultan Ghiyāth al-Dīn 'Iwaz Khalji, an immediate successor of Bakhtiyār in the year 1226-27⁵. Rangpur is stated to have been founded by Bakhtiyār Khalji during his expedition into Tibet. A seventeenth century chronicler makes it equivalent for Hajo (Koch Hajo), Gauhati and dependencies⁶. Bakhtiyār, no doubt an adventurer *par excellence* combined in himself all the qualities of a great general and a wise statesman. For we are informed by Minhāj that in all the areas he has conquered, he established Mosques, educational institutions (*madrasahs*), *Khānqāhs* or charitable establishments consisting of students' hostels and traveller's guest-houses, founded cities and established, military outposts at strategic points and introduced coinage of money, laid down embankments, constructed roads and bridges⁷.

For fifteen days the army of Bakhtiyār kept on passing through the difficult defiles and passes of the Himalayas. On the

4. *Ibid.*, p. 564.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 594.

6. Muhammad Kāzim, '*Alamgir Nama*, edited by Khādim Hussain and 'Abd al-Hayy, *Bib. Indica Series*, Calcutta, 1865-73, p. 678.

7. *Tabāqāt-i Nāsirī*, *op.cit.*, p. 566.

sixteenth day the army reached the open country of Tibet. The area was well populated and well under cultivation. Ultimately the army reached a strong fort and started ravaging the area. The people of the fort as well the adjoining areas assembled to give battle, which started at daybreak and continued till sunset. Many Muslim soldiers fell on the field. Minhāj writes with awe that all the defensive arms of the host were of pieces of the spear-bamboo, namely their cuirasses and body-armour, shields and helmets, which were all slips of it, crudely fastened and stitched, overlapping (each other), and all the people were Turks, archers, and furnished with long bows⁸. Minhāj's enquiries about Karbattan which was in all probability Kumrikotah in Bhutan, brought him the following information⁹:

- i. Karbattan had walls of hewn stone
- ii. Its inhabitants were Brahmins and Nunis
- iii. The city was under a *Mihtar*, i.e., chief
- iv. In all the cattle market of that city about 1,500 horses were sold everyday.

These were the *Tangan* horses and Bhutan was famous for it during medieval period. In the Bengal and later Mughal cavalry *Tangan* horses were quite popular¹⁰.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 567-68.

10. F.A. Qadri, 'Society and Economy of Kamrupa and Environs in the Early 13th Century As Reflected in the Context of Muhammad Bin Bakhtiyār Khalī's Invasion', paper in M. Momin and C. Mawlong (ed.), *Society and Economy in Pre-Colonial North East*, Part I (forthcoming).

After discovering the nature of the tract and finding his soldiers exhausted and worn out by the march, Bakhtiyār consulted his *amīrs*. They advised retreat and suggested an invasion next year with better preparation. When they retreated, not a blade of grass or a stick of firewood was to be found throughout the whole route. The inhabitants had burnt it all, and those who lived in the defiles and passes had moved off from the line of route. During these fifteen days the cattle and the horses did not get a *sir* of food or a blade of grass. The soldiers had to kill their horses and eat them till they came out from the mountains into the country of Kamrupa and reached the head of that bridge. But the bridge was not there, the reason was that enmity had arisen between the two *amīrs* who were left to guard that bridge and, in their discord, they had neglected to watch the bridge and protect the road, and had gone off. The Hindus of Kamrupa country came and destroyed the bridge¹¹.

When Bakhtiyār reached there, he found to his great misfortune that there was no means of crossing the river and no boats were available. Under the circumstances, he had to halt at some place and construct some boats. He found an idol temple in the vicinity and sought shelter in it. This temple was of exceeding height, strength and sublimity and in it numerous idols both of gold and silver were deposited, and one great idol was so large that its weight was by conjecture upwards of two or three thousand *mans* of beaten gold¹².

11. *Tabaqāt-i Nasirī*, *op. cit.*, pp. 568-69.

12. Identification of this Temple has been controversial, while 'Abd al-

Bakhtīyār devised means for obtaining wood and rope for the construction of rafts and crossing the river. When the *Rāi* of Kamrupa came to know of these reverses he issued commands to his subjects so that they came pouring in crowds, and round about the idol temple they began planting spiked bamboos in the ground and wearing them together, so that it was appearing like unto walls. Quickly deciding upon the course of action, Bakhtīyār made a rush to break the fence and reached the open plain. On reaching the river banks he halted with his army. Suddenly some soldiers urged their horses into the river. The water was fordable for a short distance only. As the soldiers rode further, it became impossible to swim and many soldiers drowned. When Bakhtīyār's soldiers reached the mid stream, they all perished. Bakhtīyār and nearly one hundred of his horsemen succeeded with great difficulty in crossing the river¹³.

Bakhtīyār's invasion of the region touched only the fringe of Kamrupa but the next Khaljī, who became the first Sultan of

Salam, the English translator of Ghulam Hussain Salīm's *Riyāz al-Salātīn*, Delhi, 1975 (reprint), p. 67, f.n. 1 is of the opinion that very likely it was the Mahumani Temple in Kamrupa, E.T. Dalton identifies it with the Temple of Hayagrīvamādava at Hajo, Notes on Assam Temple Ruins', *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 1855, p. 10, whereas T.K. Sharma thinks it was the Temple of Madan Kamdeva in the same area. 'The Temple where Bakhtiyār Took Shelter', *Journal of Assam Research Society*, Vol. XII, No. 1-2, 1949. In a recent study, however, both Dalton and Sharma's opinions have been referred without any conclusion, Gajendra Adhikari, *A History of the Temples of Kamrup and Their Management*, Guwahati, 2001, p. 16.

13. *Tabaqāt-i Nasirī*, *op. cit.*, p. 571.

Bengal invaded it directly. Malik Husām al-Dīn Iwaz Khalji, who styled himself by the title of Sultan Ghiyāth al-Dīn 'Iwaz Khaljī invaded Kamrupa inconclusively in 1226-27¹⁴. Notwithstanding the difference of opinion and doubts raised by modern historians¹⁵, Minhaj unequivocally speaks that tribute came from Kāmruḍ: "The parts around about the state of Lakhnauti, such as Jajnagar, the countries of Bang (eastern Bengal), Kamrud and Trihut all sent tribute to him¹⁶."

It seems that the countries mentioned by Minhāj were sending tributes to the Sultan as he has emerged very resourceful at this point of time and had acquired possession of elephants, wealth and treasures, to a great amount¹⁷. His Kamrupa campaign proved fatal because it was at this point of time that Delhi invaded Lakhnauti and 'Iwaz returned to Lakhnauti probably leaving much of his forces in Bang and Kamrud, was defeated imprisoned and later killed¹⁸.

The next mention of Kamrupa invasion and its full occupation, temporarily though, is that under Malik Ikhtiyār al-Dīn Yuzbek, who assumed the title of Sultan Mughith al-Dīn Tughril, in the year 1252. Minhāj writes about the tactics used by the Raja

14. *Ibid.*, p. 595.

15. K.R. Qanungo in J.N. Sarkar (ed.), *The History of Bengal*, Vol. II, Muslim Period 1200-1757, Patna (reprint), 1970, p. 22; Jagdish Narayan Sarkar in H.K. Barpujari (ed.), *The Comprehensive History of Assam, Medieval period: Political*, Guwahati, 1992, Vol. II, pp. 37-38.

16. *Tabaqāt-i Nasirī*, *op. cit.*, pp. 587-88.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 588-89.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 595.

of Kamrupa in getting rid from Tughril:

After he returned from Awadh to Lakhnauti, determined upon marching into Kamrud, and transported an army across the river Begmati. As the Rai of Kamrud had not the power to resist him, he retired precipitately some whiter. Malik Yuzbek took the city of Kāmṛud and possessed himself of countless wealth and treasure, to such an extent, that the amount and weight thereof cannot be contained within the area of record.

After Kāmṛud was taken (possession of), so they related, several times the Rai sent confidential persons (to Malik Yuzbek), saying: "Thou hast subdued this territory, and no Malik of the Musalman people ever before obtained such success. Now do thou return, and replace me upon the throne, and I will send to thee tribute every year so many bags of gold, and so many elephants and I will continue the *khutbah* unchanged, and the Musalman stamped coin as established.

Malik Yuzbek did not become willing to agree to this in any way, and the Rai commanded that all his train, and the peasantry, should go to Malik Yuzbek, and got him to pledge his right hand (for their safety), and buy up all the grain procurable in Kāmṛud, at whatever price he might require, so that the Musalman

troops might have no provisions left. They did so accordingly, and brought up from them all the produce that was obtainable at a heavy rate.

Depending upon the cultivated state and flourishing conditions of the country, Malik Yuzbek did not lay up any store of grain; and when the time of spring harvest came round, the Rai, with the whole of his subjects rose and opened the water dykes all around, and brought Malik Yuzbek and the troops of Islam to a state of helplessness, in such wise, that they were near perishing through destitution that it was necessary to retreat, otherwise they would die of starvation.

They accordingly set out from Kāmṛud with the intention of proceeding towards Lakhnauti. The route through the plain was flooded with water, and occupied by the Hindus After they had proceeded some few stages, they got entangled among passes and defiles, and narrow roads, and both their front and rear was seized by the Hindus. In a narrow place a fight took place in front of the leading rank between two elephants, the force fell into confusion, the Hindus came up on them from every side, and Musalman and Hindus mingled pell well together. Suddenly an arrow struck Malik Yuzbek, who was mounted on

an elephant, in the breast, and he fell, and was made prisoner; and all his children, family and dependents, and the whole of his force, were made captive¹⁹.

More than being a pioneer, Minhāj bequeathed to the posterity of historians the heritage of an all India view in their compilations. Notwithstanding with his shortcomings Minhāj remains our principal source of information. What a blank our knowledge would have remained about the significant events in northeast India before and immediately after the coming of the Ahoms, had not he endeavoured and supplied these informations to us.

II

The generation of historians next to Minhāj continued the tradition of an all India view pioneered by him, eminent among them is Diyā al-Dīn Baranī, who has attracted the attention of all modern writers of medieval India. But there is a shift in the focus as the centre of contact changes from Kamrupa towards Tiperah (Tripura). Writing in 1940's K.R. Qanungo identified the patron Sultan of King Rattan Manikya of Tripura as Sultan Mughīth al-Dīn Tughril (1268-81)²⁰. Tughril was the last and the greatest of the successful Mambuks who had risen from the position of a mere household slave to the independent sovereignty of Bengal in the time of Sultan Ghiyāth al-Dīn Balban (1266-83). He possessed all the characteristic virtues of a Turk, indomitable will, reckless,

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 761-66.

20. J.N. Sarkar, *op.cit.*, p. 58.

bravery, resourcefulness and boundless ambition. Tughril according to Baranī, was assigned the province of Lakhnauti and Bengal by Sultan Balban around 1269²¹. According to Yahya Sīrhindī, Amīn Khan was assigned Lakhauti and Tughril was made his deputy²², a view accepted by Qanungo, who is of the opinion that Amin Khan's name is retained in the list of governors of Bengal rather for the sake of courtesy than for any actual achievement, whereas his more energetic deputy, enjoying the full confidence of the Sultan, had been throughout the *de facto* ruler of this province²³.

Tughril after consolidating his position extended his power up to the modern districts of Faridpur and Dacca and annexed the river tracts of both banks of the Padma as far as Loricol, known as *Arsa-i Bangala*. This political unit seems to be a portion of the bigger geographical unit known as *Diyār-i Bangala* (still unsubdued) for Balban is later reported to have referred to his conquest of *Arsa-i Bangala* by turning out Tughril and to have ordered his son Bughra Khan to rule over *Diyār-i Bangala*²⁴.

Tughril established friendly relations with the ruler of Tippera. In addition, he sought the extension of his power in the tracts of Radha also. Baranī makes a vague reference to Tughril's several enterprises and *Qila-i Tughril* (the fort of Tughril)²⁵. Tughril also

21. *Tārīkh-i Firoz Shāhī*, *op.cit.*, pp. 77-19.

22. *Tārīkh-i Mubārak Shāhī*, edited by Khādīm Hussain, *Bib. Indica Series*, Calcutta, 1931, pp. 40-42.

23. *The History of Bengal*, *op.cit.*, p. 58.

24. *Tārīkh-i Firoz Shāhī*, *op.cit.*

25. *Ibid.*

looms large in the popular tradition of the neighbouring district of Tippera. It is said that Ratan Fa, founder of the ruling family of Tripura sought the assistance of Tughril in ousting his elder brother Raja Fa from the throne. Tughril invaded the country, placed Ratan Fa on the throne and gave him the title of Manikya in return of the Raja's present of a precious jewel²⁶. It is quite probable that the Tripuri-Muslim contact began in the thirteenth century and continued with fluctuating fortunes till the sixteenth century. Evidently on the basis of reports from merchants or ship captain who had visited Bengal, Tom Pires while writing between 1512 and 1515 says that the king is a faithful Mohammadan and speaks of tributary 'heathen' king such as the raja of Tripura²⁷.

III

References to the northeast India in the early Mughal writings are incidental and fragmentary. Abul Fadl in *Akbar Nama*²⁸ mentions the establishment of a defensive alliance with Kuch Bihar, the break-up of the Koch Kingdom, the events of the Koch Mughal war, imprisonment of Raja Parikshit Narayan and Mukarram Khan's expedition to Assam. Medieval Persian accounts are re-

26. *The History of Bengal, op. cit.*, p. 58.

27. *Suma Orientale of Tom Pires*, trans. A. Cortesao, 2 Vols., London, Hakhyt Society, 1944, Vol. I, p. 89; F.A. Qadri, 'The Patron Sultan of King Ratan Manikya', *Proceedings of North-East India History Association*, XXIII, Session, Shillong, 2003, pp. 280-85.

28. Text edited by 'Abd al-Rahim, *Bib. Indica Series*, Calcutta, 1873-87; Eng. Trans: Henry Beveridge, 3 Vols., *Bib. Indica Series*, Calcutta, 1897-1921; Ess Ess publications, New Delhi, 1979 (reprint).

plete with the amazing description of the region. The fatigue and dangers of various expeditions coupled with the climatic conditions and environmental tensions of the pestilential country. The amazing accounts of magic, sorcery and witch-craft was so impressive that even the medieval doyen like Abul Fadl while talking of the prosperous silk industry of the region, never forgets to mention that the people of Kamrupa are good looking and addicted to the practice of magic²⁹.

IV

Seventeenth century is a period of crucial significance in so far Persian writings on northeast India is concerned. There is a definite shift in the perception of Mughal writers, a result perhaps of direct contact with the land and people of the region. This was also the result of a very significant shift in the realm of Mughal historiography. Almost all historians of early medieval India were inspired by Persian/Iranian tradition of historiography where the conspectus was limited to the court and the camp. With Adul Fadl, the conspectus of Arab historiography, where everything related to people and society were included and hence were history of an age, was combined with the Persian concept. Though his acceptance of the Arab tradition was partial and limited³⁰, it greatly affected and inspired future generation of Mughal historians.

29. *'Ain-i Akbari*, Vol. II, Eng. Trans: H. Blochman, Oriental Books Reprint, New Delhi, 1977-78 (reprint), pp. 130-31.

30. K.A. Nizami, *On History and Historians of Medieval India*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1983, p. 153.

The first seventeenth century Mughal writer was 'Alā al-Dīn Isfahānī alias Mirza Nathan³¹. He was an important military officer in Mughal Kamrupa, his father Ihtimām Khan was *Mīr-i Bahr*, in-charge of Mughal naval fleet in Bengal. Mirza Nathan took a leading part in all the campaigns in Bengal and Assam during the reign of Jahāngīr and hence records the history of Bihar, Bengal and the Kingdom of Koch Bihar and Kamrupa for sixteen years from 1608 to 1624 in *Baharistān-i Ghaybī*.

The original manuscript of this work belongs to the *Bibliothique Nationale*, Paris. It was first brought into public notice by Sir Jadu Nath Sarkar, who published some articles on it in Bengali bi-monthly journal *Prabasi*. Later he wrote an article in the journal of Bihar and Orissa Research Society, 1921, giving an account of its discovery and a full table of contents. Sarkar also found that the description of the relevant Persian manuscript in the *Bibliothique Nationale* was wrong. This discoverer gave the title of the work as *Baharistān-i Ghaybī* and the English translator Dr. M.I. Borah accepted the same³². It is curious to know that the author no where calls his work by this name rather in the course of narration he records at two places, 'and the author of this *Iqbāl Nama-i Ghaybī*', which amounts to suggest that the actual title of

31. Later he received the title of Shītab Khan from Jahangir and was a descendant of Shaykh Salīm Chishtī of Agra. Afzal Hussain, 'The Family of Shaikh Salim Chishti During the Reign of Jahangir', *Medieval India: A Miscellany*, AMU, Aligarh, Vol. II, 1972, pp. 61-69.

32. Published in 2 Volumes by the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Government of Assam, 1936 and now in reprint, Guwahati, 1992.

the work is *Iqbāl Nama-i Ghaybī* and not *Baharistān-i Ghaybī*³³.

But the work, since its discovery in 1919 and translation into English in 1936 has been in vogue with the title of *Baharistān-i Ghaybī*. This is not exactly a work of history rather a memoirs of Mirza Nathan but at the same time of rare historical value, though the author seems to have lacked the serenity that characterises the behaviour of a scholar with critical acumen. All the events and details revolve round the personality and activities of Mirza Nathan³⁴. Its discovery was no doubt an epoch making achievement for the reconstruction of the history of pre-colonial northeast India³⁵. Regrettably almost all prominent users from the discoverer to translator and later scholar have seen *Baharistān* only as a source of information for Mughal-Koch and Mughal-Ahom conflicts. It is a mine of information for the history of both north and south banks of Brahmaputra and equally about some of the hill and plain tribes of this region. It still awaits a more close and careful scrutiny. I must submit here that I have made some move in this direction³⁶.

In the early 20's of the seventeenth century Mirza Nathan

33. Book II, Chapter 1 of the English Translation of *Baharistān-i Ghaybī*, *op.cit.*, pp. 264, 720. The translator in the index casually gives the glossary of *Iqbal Namah* as 'a name of this present work', p. 885.

34. Q. Ahmad, 'Mirza Nathan', *Historians of Medieval India*, Habibul Hasan (edited), Meenakshi Prakashan, Meerut-New Delhi, 1968, p. 75.

35. M.I. Borah, *op.cit.*, Introduction, xxi.

36. 'Garo Factor in Mughal North East Frontier Policy', *Readings in the History and Culture of the Garos: Essays in Honour of Milton S. Sangma*, Mignonette Momin (edited), Regency Publications, New Delhi, 2003, pp. 113-19.

was wandering in the areas adjacent to the Garo Hills as three chapters of his account - Chapter VII of Book II and Chapters III and IV of Book III is predominantly related to this region³⁷. Nathan remained in the plains of Garo Hills for considerably long time attacking, persuading, subjugating and admonishing the rebels. The movement of Mirza Nathan appears to be quite hectic during this period. It all started with what he calls, 'the apathy of the Eighteen Rajas (*Hizdah Raja*)', towards Mirza Nathan and other Mughal officers. There is a complete confusion regarding the name and territories of these Rajas or chiefs as there is no systematic account available except for the fact that all were chiefs of their respective areas and not always paid tribute to the Ahom ruler though kept him in high esteem, as the next writer have us believe³⁸.

Mirza Nathan's interaction with the Garos is borne out by the fact that despite his continuous flight, outrageous wars and suspicion towards the people of the region he was able to recruit 4000 Garos:

From there (Amjunga) he (Nathan) marched to the foot of the hill of the Garos (*Gāruān*) who were hill people.... He (the Mirza) arrived there and pitched his camp. When all their chiefs came and submitted, he gave *robes of honour* to three of them. After their pacification they said thus: 'it will be better if you stay here for another day and night, so that we may recruit

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Fathiyah Ibriyah* (MS) f. 50a.

four thousand *paiks*. Mirza Nathan in order to utilise this opportunity, halted there for another day and night. Taking those four thousand hill-men in his company, he marched from that place and attacked the fort of Rangajūlī³⁹.

Although in the above statement Mirza Nathan categorically call the 4000 Garo recruits as hill-men but in a subsequent narrative he calls them four thousand *paiks* of the country of Lāmdānī⁴⁰, which suggests that these Garo recruits were plain and not hill Garos as the Garos who had settled in the plains⁴¹ of Susanga were known as *Lāmdānī Garos*, i.e., Garos of the plain. Garos formed the numerous tribal group in the pargana of Susanga⁴². Here again we find that the zamindar of Susanga Raja Raghunath whose territories covered the north-eastern border of Mymensingh district, was closely associated with Satrajit in his services to the Mughals. He submitted to the Mughals to seek their help in recovering his family who had been kept in confinement by the Kamrupa king Parikshit Narayan. When this was accomplished, Raghunath rendered long and devoted service to the Mughal cause in Bengal, Arakan and Kamrupa, participating in campaigns and sometimes also in administration⁴³.

39. *Bahāristān-i Ghaybī*, *op.cit.*, Vol. II, p. 528.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 567.

41. Maharaja Bhupendra Chandra Sinha, *Changing Times* (Autobiography), Anthropological Survey of India, Calcutta, 1965, p. 124.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 140; *Bahāristān-i Ghaybī*, *op.cit.*, Vol. I, p. 40 and Vol. II, p. 807; 'Abd al-Hamīd Lcahorī, *Pādishāh Namah*, Vol. II, p. 65, *Bib. Indica Series*, Calcutta, 1867-68.

The numerous hill chiefs, majority of whom were opposed to the Mughal presence in the region quite often challenged Mughal authority. Shumarooed Kayastha who created great problems for the imperial army at Amjunga and Rangajūlī, Mirza Nathan had to follow him with fire and sword before he was killed in an encounter⁴⁴. The Mirza out of rage calls him a knave, probably he was the real brain of the rebel elements in the Koch region⁴⁵. The four thousand Garos were recruited basically at the time of the siege of Amjunga and Rangajūlī the strongholds of Shumarooed Kayastha. Parsurām was active and mobile in Sanbor, Solmari and parts of Rangdan. Kayastha and his son Tanaha in the Rangdan region were notorious for their turbulence. Minor refractory characters were Kanwal Raja, Bamun Raja and some others whose territories defy identification. At the time of attack on Rangajūlī, while raiding the adjacent village, a Muslim chief named Jamāl Khan was also brought as captive. He took the lead in bringing the hill tribes into subjugation and one of the rebel chief named Jānkara who did not yield, was brought alive through him as a captive by the despatch of a regiment. This opened the eyes of many others⁴⁶.

Sporadic references to the cases of armed conflicts or changing sides by the Garos can easily be discerned from the accounts of Mirza Nathan. To deal with such incidents and occurrences the Mughals had made elaborate administrative arrangements. The

44. *Bahāristān-i Ghaybī*, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 566.

45. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 215.

46. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 530.

political geography of Mughal Kamrupa, for instance, included the parganahs of Karaibari, Jamina, Mechpara and Habraghat, where the Mughals first established their authority. This highly strategic area was under the jurisdiction of a *Karorī*⁴⁷. The basis of Mughal rule in the region was essentially military, the objective being revenue collection, suppression of local insurrections and conduct of *Kheda* operations for the capture of elephants. There was a military governor, the commander (*Sardār*), who appointed *thanedārs* in military outposts at strategic places for suppressing insurgents and rebel officers. He had an assistant who combined the offices of the revenue collector (*Dīwān*), pay-master (*Bakhshī*) and news reporter (*wāqī'a Nawīs*). Communication with Bengal were maintained by a strong flotilla (*nawwarah*) that was also used to suppress rebellion in the riparian areas⁴⁸.

Revenue matters always occupied an important place in Mughal administration. Mirza Nathan mentions the revenue settlement made by Mīr Safī, the *Dīwān* and *Bakhshī* of the territory of Kamrupa⁴⁹. He made changes in the assessment of revenue in the parganahs. He started the innovation of charging the allowances for the archers on the rent-rolls of the *ryots*. He divided the *parganahs* into two types: one entrusted to the *Karorī* (state-official) and the other to the *mustājīr* (tax-farmers). The latter enhanced the revenue for their own benefit and expanses.

47. *Karorī* was a Mughal revenue officer responsible to collect one crore *dām* (Mughal currency). This shows that the *Karorīs* were controlling a vast revenue and administrative areas.

48. *Bahāristān-i Ghaybī*, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 507.

49. *Ibid.*

All this caused much dissatisfaction and unrest and the *Dīwān* was removed to counteract the sedition which had its origin in the enhancement of taxes on account of the paiks and archers⁵⁰. This is a very significant mention as it shed light on the rather brief and somewhat unsuccessful attempt to introduce Mughal revenue arrangements in the region.

Kamrupa was annexed to the Mughal empire under Jahangīr in 1613. Jahangīr fondly mentions in his *memoirs* the visit of Lachmi Narayan, Raja of Koch Bihar who presented 500 *muhrs* (gold coins) and received a dress of honour and an ornamented dagger from the emperor⁵¹. Later the Raja was given a horse and is mentioned as paternal uncle of the Raja of Koch, whom I (Jahangīr) have now given the territory of Koch⁵². It was perhaps the time when Raghu Dev had ousted Lachmi Narayan. The Raja was also presented four rings, viz., ruby, cat's eye, emerald and sapphire and an Iraq house before he was allowed to leave for his home⁵³.

The historian of the next reign 'Abd al-Hamīd Lahorī narrates as hinted earlier the treatment of Raghunath, Raja of Susanga and his family by Parikshit Narayan. It was found that Parikshit has not behaved so submissively as Lachmi Narayan of Koch Bihar,

50. *Ibid.*

51. *Tuzuk-i Jahāngīrī* (Eng. Trans.), Alexander Rogers and Henry Beveridge (edited), Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi (2nd edition), 1968, Vol. I, p. 443.

52. *Ibid.*, Vol. III, p. 2.

53. *Ibid.*

hence in the 8th regnal year of Jahangīr upon his appointment as governor of Bengal Islam Khan annexed Koch Hajo and Kamrupa. An expedition was prepared and sent to Assam which proved abortive. Baldev, brother of Parikshit Narayan fled to Assam and with the help of the Raja of Assam invaded Koch Hajo when Mīr 'Abd al-Salām was in charge of Koch Hajo and was also looking after *Kheda*⁵⁴.

In the 9th year of Shahjahān's reign in 1636 great reinforcement were sent to 'Abd al-Salām and after so many battles and the rains decreased, the Mughal army became victorious in November 1637⁵⁵. The subjugation of Koch Hajo and Kamrupa appears to have been thorough. There is no information of any new trouble having broken out till 1658, when Shahjahan fell ill and the war of succession followed, then only the fissiparous tendencies came to the surface in the north eastern frontier.

Muhammad Kāzīm's '*Ālamgir Namah* provides the early ten years account of Aurangazeb's reign, for accounts of Koch Bihar, Kamrupa and Assam, it is largely based on *Fathiyah Ibriyah* of Shihāb al-Dīn Tālish⁵⁶. Since the latter was a news-writer and the former royal chronicler, Muhammad Kāzīm being in advanta-

54. *Pādshah Nāmah*, *op.cit.*, p. 68.

55. *Ibid.*

56. Khādim Hussain and 'Abd al-Hayy (edited), *Bib. Indica Series*, Calcutta, 1865-73. A very short and incorrect summary of Assam and Assamese based on '*Ālamgir Namah* was published in *Indian Antiquary*, Vol. XVI, pp. 222-26 and by Vansittart in *Asiatic Researches*, Vol. II.

geous position incorporated the informations on north east *in verbatim* from Tālish's writings. It is quite visible to any careful reader of both. Moreover, Kāzim portrays a big canvass and Tālish concentrates only on northeast India. It is also a fact that Tālish compiled his accounts in book form much later.

The shift among the Persian writers, in their understanding of northeast India is gradual. There is ample extent literary proof from seventeenth century which can be put forward with evident pride:

It's trees are fully loaded (and fruits that they prefer; *Al-Qurā'n* VI-20) and its' streams (where from they get no aching of head nor any madness; *Al-Qurā'n* VI-19) are redundant in savoury. It's openness provides the sight of the people with un-burnt collyrium. Its extensiveness gives the delicate ones damned by sorrow, a pleasing delight. Its meadows are just like the splendour of paradise and promotes one's comfort. It's greenery as if a heaven on earth⁵⁷.

That is how a Mughal observer writes about north east India in the early 1660s. An accomplished writer and a keen observer of men and environment, Shihāb al-Dīn *nom de plume* Tālish accompanied Mīr Jumla as a *wāqia' nawīs* (news writer) during the former's Assam and Kuch Bihar campaign 1662-63.

57. Shihāb al-Dīn Tālish, *Fathiyah Ibriyah*, photoprint, MS. No. 573, Khuda Baksh O.P. Library, Patna, f. 2a.

He was in constant attendance of the Mughal General and was not only an eye-witness but actually shared all the fatigues and dangers of the expedition. Tālish wrote an accurate and detailed account of the expedition and description of not only Assam and Koch Bihar but of the major parts of present northeast. Its economy, geography, landscape, people, customs, manners, weapons, methods of war-fare, bravery, prowess, hardiness, enterprising nature and skills. The author named the work as *Fathiyah Ibriyah*, i.e., victory and admonition as the Mughals gained victory and also learnt lessons from their expedition⁵⁸. Given a choice, I would personally prefer to call it Triumph and Disaster as it is more appropriate.

There are several manuscripts of this work in various libraries of the world. The Bodlain Library manuscript contains the history down to the month of Sha'bān 1076 A.H./1666 A.D.⁵⁹. This is unaccountable since the date of compilation 1073 A.H. is distinctly given at the end of this as well as some other manuscripts⁶⁰. Perhaps it is the continuation of Tālish's account of his complete history of Bengal down to the conquest of Chittagong by Shā'ista Khan in 1666⁶¹. Other copies of the manuscripts are in British Museum⁶², India Office⁶³ (now British Library), three copies in

58. Tālish records that since the victory in Assam also admonished the Mughals, he gives such a title, *Ibid*, f. 3a.

59. Hermann Ethe, *Bodlain Library catalogue*, No. 240.

60. *Catalogue of the Arabic and Persian Manuscripts at the Khuda Bahksh Oriental Public Library*, Vol. VII, Indian History, Patna (reprint), 1977, pp. 82-85.

61. J.N. Sarkar also holds the same view, *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 1906, pp. 257-67 and 1907, pp. 405-25.

62. Charles Rieu, *British Museum Catalogue*, London, 1884, Vol. I, p. 266.

63. Hermann Ethe, *India Office Library Catalogue*, London, 1903, No. 341-43.

Khuda Baksh Oriental Public Library, Patna⁶⁴ and two in Asiatic Society of Bengal⁶⁵.

No adequate single volume study of the work in English has so far been attempted, even the original Persian still awaits standard critical edition⁶⁶. Individuals like Elphinston⁶⁷, Elliot⁶⁸, Blochman⁶⁹, Gait⁷⁰ and Jadu Nath Sarkar⁷¹ have included portions of *Fathiyah Ibriyah* in their works. An Urdu translation of the work was done by Mir Bahadur 'Alī Hussainī⁷² and a French version of the same by T. Paive⁷³.

The work is divided into a *muqaddimah* (prolegomena) and two *maqāla* (chapters).

Prolegomena - Causes of the march of the imperial army into Kuch Bihar and Assam.

Chapter I - Khān-i Khānān's march against Bhim Narayan and conquest of Kuch Bihar.

-
64. *Descriptive Catalogue of Khuda Baksh O.P. Library, Patna, op.cit.*
 65. Vladimir Curzon, *Concise Descriptive Catalogue of Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, 1924.*
 66. Md. 'Abd al-Rahman made an edition for M.Phil degree from Department of History, Manipur University, Imphal, 1990, but it is full of errors.
 67. *History of India*, 5th edition, p. 60.
 68. *History of India as told by its own Historians*, Allahabad, 1969 (reprint), pp. 265-69.
 69. *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol. XII, 1871, pp. 63-101.
 70. *A History of Assam*, Guwahati, 1992 (reprint).
 71. *Journal of Bihar and Orissa Research Society*, Patna, Vol. I, part 2, 1915, pp. 179-95.
 72. *Tārīkh-i Ashām*, Calcutta, 1809. It is extremely rare now.
 73. Published from Paris, 1845.

Chapter II - Conquest of Assam. This forms major portion of the work and after conquest of Assam, it is further divided into five sub-chapters.

1. Description of the length and breadth and special features of the kingdom of Assam and the manners and customs of the Assamese.
2. Description of Lakhaugarh and the fleet and the occurrences of sufferings.
3. Description of the epidemic diseases and outbreak of famine at Gargaon and Mathurapur.
4. Description of the clearance of way and end of famine and pestilence.
5. Accounts of the Peace Treaty and deliverance of the Muslims from the cruel climate of Assam.

The account ends with the death of Khān-i Khānān Mir Jumla on Wednesday, the 2nd of Ramadhān 1073 A.H./1663 A.D.

Fathiyah Ibriyah is a unique work of its kind. The approach of Shihāb al-Dīn Tālīsh is literary and one event leads to another. All aspects covered have been given equal treatment. Never before and after any of the Medieval Persian writer provided so clear and categorical account of the region. It provides a rare insight into the history and culture of the region and unfolds the panorama of socio-political and economic activities. Tālīsh has attracted almost all modern writers on pre-colonial north east as a historian who wrote under the Mughal aegis. H. Blochman pub-

lished an analysis of the work in *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal*⁷⁴. Thirty-four years later Jadu Nath Sarkar wrote a corrective to Blochman's analysis⁷⁵. A decade after that some 19 folios of the works he translated as *Assam and the Ahoms in 1660 A.D.* and admits that its accuracy is confirmed by the native *Buranjis*⁷⁶. On the physical feature of the country and the manners and character of the Ahoms before they had been completely Hinduised, he (Tālīsh) is a valuable contemporary witness. These are exactly the points on which the native *Buranjis* are silent, concludes Sarkar⁷⁷.

Tālīsh uses the expression Assamese (*āshāmiyān*) for the Ahoms, he begins his account of the length and breadth and special features of the kingdom along with manners and customs of the Assamese with full geographical description:

Assam is a wild and dreaded land of abounding danger. It is inhabited on both sides of the river Brahmaputra and in the north east of the province of Bengal. The river Brahmaputra flows through it from the east towards the west. The length of Assam, west to east, from Gauhati to Sadiya is about 200 *kos* of standard measurement. It's breadth north to south, from the hills of the Garos, Miris, Mishmis, Daflas and Landas⁷⁸ to the mountain of the Naga tribe is seven

74. *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal, op.cit.*, Vol. XII.

75. *Ibid.*, 1906 and 1907.

76. *Journal of Bihar and Orissa Research Society, op.cit.*, p. 179.

77. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

78. According to geographical location it should be Akas. This is a mistake of scribe in the manuscripts.

or eight days journey by guess. It's southern mountain touch lengthwise the hilly regions of Khasia, Kachhar and Gonasher⁷⁹, and breadth wise the hills inhabited by the Naga tribe. It's southern mountains adjoin lengthwise the lofty ridges of Kamrup (Namrup)⁸⁰ and extend breadth wise the high hills of the Dafla and Landa tribes. The land on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra is called *Uttarkol* and on the southern bank *Dakhinkol*. Uttarkol stretches from Gauhati to the home of Miri and Mishmi tribe, and Dakhinkol from the kingdom of Naktirani to the village of Sadiya.

From the village of Koliabar to the city of Gargaon houses and orchards full of fruit trees stretch in an unbroken line and on both sides of the road shady bamboo grooves raise their heads to the sky. Many varieties of sweet-scented wild and garden flowers bloom here. From the rear of the bamboo grooves up to the foot of the hills there are cultivated fields and gardens. From Lakhugarh to Gargaon also, there are roads, houses and farms in the same style and a lofty and wide road (*āl*) has been constructed up to Gargaon for traffic. (ff 25b-26b.)

On Climate:

Surfaces of fields and gardens are made so level in that country that the eyes cannot find the least elevation or depression upto the extreme horizon. Uttarkol

79. Goneshar Hills near Garo Hills is meant.

80. Here also the scribe has mistaken Namrup for Kamrupa.

has greater abundance of cultivation and population but as there are more inaccessible strongholds and defensible central places in Dakhinkol, the kings of Assam have fixed their abode in the latter.

The climate of the inhabited and un-inhabited places on banks of Brahmaputra suits natives and strangers alike. But at a distance from the river, the climate agrees with the natives, while it is rank poison for the outsiders. It rains for eight months and even four months of winter are not altogether free from it⁸¹. In the winter the diseases of cold and moisture attend outsiders with greater intensity than the natives.

The air and water of its hills are destructive and deadly poison to natives and strangers alike. Its plains by reason of their being girt round by hills, tend to breed melancholy and fear. The trees of its hills and plains are exceedingly tall, thick and strong. Its streams are deep and wide and both those that contain pools and those that do not are beyond the range of numbering. Many kinds of odorous herbs and fruits of Bengal and Hindustan grow in Assam.

We saw here certain varieties of flowers and fruits both wild and cultivated, which are not to be met within the whole of India. The cocoanut and *nim* are rare but pepper and spikenard and many species of lemon are

81. Elsewhere in the account referring to Mir Jumla and his army being surrounded by water due to rain, Tālish in a sombre mood writes that; being imprisoned by water is harder than being in chains (*Qayd al-mā' ashadda min al-qaid al-hadīd*), f. 2a.

abundant. Mangoes are full of worms but plentiful, sweet and free from fibre though yield scanty juices. Its pineapple are very large, delicious and rich in juice. Sugarcane is of the black, red and white varieties but so hard as to break one's teeth. Ginger is juicy with large spurs, delicate, fibreless and stimulative in taste. *Panialah*, a species of *āmlah* is so tasty and delicious that men of refine taste prefer it to plum. (ff. 26b-27b.)

On Economy:

The chief crop of the country is rice (*shālī/sālī*), but thin and long varieties are rare. Wheat, barley and lentil are not grown. The soil is capable, whatever they sow or plant grows. Salt is very rare and difficult to procure.

Large and well-built and well-proportioned elephants abound in the hills and wilderness. The deer, elk, nilah, fighting ram and partridge are plentiful. In the city of Gargaon we saw small cage-like enclosures, surrounded with strong and lofty poles very firmly planted and having doors on opposite sides. When enquiry was made as to the purpose served by them, the people replied, "The king has some elephant drivers in his service who rub a certain grass on the body of a female elephant and take them to the pasture of the rutting wild elephants; and those wild animals as soon as they smell the scent of the grass helplessly follow the female. Then the drivers lead the female elephant inside the enclosure and the wild elephants too enter after her and are captured.

Gold is washed from the sands of the river Brahmaputra. Ten to twelve thousand Assamese are engaged in this employment and they pay to the Raja's government one *tolah* of gold per head every year. But this gold is of low standard of purity, a *tolah* of it fetches only eight or nine rupees. It is said gold can be procured from the sand at all places on the bank of Brahmaputra but the only people who know how to gather it are Assamese.

The currency of this kingdom consists of conch-shells (*cawrie*) and rupees and gold coins stamped with the stamp of the Raja of this country. Copper-coins are not current. The musk-deer and elephant are found in the hills inhabited by the Miri and Mishmi tribes which lie in the east of Assam on the *Uttarkol* side at a distance of eleven days journey from Gargaon. Silver, copper and tin are also extracted from the hills of the same tribes.

The musk-deer is also found in the hills of Assam. Its navel is larger than large grain of gram, finely coloured and fragrant. The aloe-wood, which grows in the hills of Namrup, Sadiya and Lakhugarh is heavy, coloured and scented.

If this country is administered like the Imperial dominions in all likelihood forty-five lakhs⁸² of rupees would be collected from the revenue paid by the ryots, the price of elephants caught in the jungle and other

82. Jadu Nath Sarkar without any reason translates forty to forty five, where as the MSS very clearly speaks forty-five lakhs.

sources (*sair-i mahsūlāt*). It is not a custom in this country to charge any land-tax (*kharāj*) from the cultivators, but in every household one man out of three has to render service to the Raja and if there is any delay in doing what he orders no other punishment than death is inflicted. Hence, the most complete obedience is rendered by the people to the biddings of their Raja.

Once in a year by order of the Raja a party of Assamese used to go for trade near Gauhati on their frontier, they offered gold, musk, aloe-wood, pepper, spikenard and silk-cloth and returned after bartering there for salt, saltpetre, sulphur and certain other products of India which the people of Gauhati need to convey there. (ff. 28b-29b.)

On Muslims of Assam:

Once Hussain Shāh, a Sultān of Bengal, entered Assam with 20,000⁸³ foot and cavalry and innumerable boats and the Raja leaving his kingdom fled to hills. Hussain Shah then returned to Bengal, leaving his son with most of the troops to occupy the country. When the rainy season arrived and the roads became closed, the Raja came down from the hills to low country and surrounded Hussain Shah's son with the help of his subjects, who had professed submission to the latter.

83. Mr. Blochman has wrongly put 24,000 in his *Notes*.

And the unfortunate prince and the troops⁸⁴ soon becoming weak due to lack of food, were slain or captured. It is said that a body of the inhabitants of this country who bear the name of Musalmāns are descended from the captive soldiers of that country.

Muslims who had been taken prisoner in former times and had married here, their descendants are exactly in the manner of the Assamese and have nothing of Islam except the name. Their hearts are inclined far more towards mingling with the Assamese than towards association with Muslims. The Muslims too had come here from Islamic lands, engaged in the performance of prayer and fasting, but were forbidden to chant the call of prayer (*azān*) and publicly recite the words of God (*Qur'ān*).⁸⁵ (ff. 29b, 32b-33a.)

While Mughal-Ahom conflict has received considerable attention from modern historians of pre-colonial north east on the basis of both Persian writings and local *Buranjis*, it is a matter of great surprise that the other minor groups within Assam, Kamrupa and in the contiguous areas have been marginalized⁸⁶. Mughal writ-

84. Simon Digby, 'The fate of Daniyal, Prince of Bengal in the Light of an Unpublished Inscription', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. XXXVI, No. 3, 1973, pp. 593-601.
85. In this context the efforts of Shāh Milan alias Azān Faqir appears quite genuine. F.A. Qadri, 'Sufis and the Process of Islamization in Pre-Colonial North East India', in F.A. Qadri (ed.), *Society and Economy in Pre-Colonial North East*, Part II (forthcoming).
86. Even S.N. Bhattacharya in his otherwise excellent work, *A History of Mughal North East Frontier Policy*, Calcutta, 1929, Delhi (reprint), 1996 is silent about these groups.

ers have left enough interesting and matter of fact information about various tribal groups of the region both in hills and plains. These are in all probability the earliest references to the tribal communities of the region, much before the British imperial officers and ethnographers became interested in the hill tribes of north-eastern region of India. Tālish records that there are innumerable number of smaller chiefs in the hills and plains of Assam and around it. Most of them are tributary and have received the title of Raja (*Khitāb-i Rajgī*) from him⁸⁷.

The expression used by Tālish for the tribal people of Assam is *qaum* (tribe), for instance, he uses the expression *Qaum-i Miri-w-Mishmi*, *Qaum-i Dafla*, *Qaum-i Landah* (Akas or Ankas) in the context of present day Arunachal Pradesh. *Qaum-i Naga* and *Qaum-i Garoh* and so and so forth for other groups. The hill and plain people can easily be distinguished as for hill people expression like *Sakna-i Jibāl*, *Sakna-i Kohistan*, *Maskuna-i Jibāl* and *Muttawattinīn-i Jibāl* all meaning hill-dwellers have been used. Hills and hill people were considered strategically important, no wonder, therefore, why the Mughals in the Treaty of Ghilajorighat in January 1663 demanded from *Dhakhinkol*, the territories of Naktirani, Nagas, Beltola and Dimapur. It is here in the course of writing treaty stipulations that we are told about the Garos:

The territories of Naktirani is adjacent to the Garo Hills (*Kohistan-i Garoh*). Garos are group of valiant men who are gentle by nature ... and the hill of this tribe (*qaum*) is contiguous to the hills of Karaihari which is part of the imperial territory⁸⁸.

87. *Fathiyah Ibriyah*, *op.cit.*, f. 26b.

88. *Ibid.*, ff. 77a-b.

Immediately after the treaty of Ghilajorighat visit of Raja Dimarua's mother in the camp of Mir Jumla is recorded:

Mother of Raja Dumuriya (Dimarua), who is most prominent and distinguished amongst the zamindārs of *Dakhinkol*, which is now appended to the imperial territory, call on the *Nawāb*. She presented a huge elephant chain and apologised to the *Nawāb* that due to serious illness, her son is unable to move and hence missed the opportunity to call on the *Nawāb*. She was presented a gift and a *robe of honour*⁸⁹.

Prior to Mir Jumla's march to Gargaon the Raja had already made an excuse:

Raja Dumuriya (Dimarua) who is one of the subordinate of the Raja of Assam submitted through its nephew, presented an elephant chain and requested for pardon on the pretext of illness. He deputed his nephew in the *Nawāb's* camp⁹⁰.

It was during this march that Makardhaj, the Raja of Darrang joined Mir Jumla: "Makardhaj, the Raja of the country of Darrang, a subordinate of Raja of Assam joined the *Nawāb*, presented two elephant chain and received *Khil'at* (robe) and joined the *Nawāb* in his march⁹¹."

After the death of Makardhaj, his mother and son visited Mir Jumla, she requested that her grandson be accepted as Raja:

89. *Ibid.*, f. 80b.

90. *Ibid.*

91. *Ibid.*

She too was felicitated with a *doshāla* and three pieces of brocade (*abresham*). Makardhaj's son who was hardly eleven or twelve years of age was given a well decorated golden dagger (*Khanjar-i morasa*) and the *Nawāb*, by his own hand put the *tika* of kingship (*Qashqa-i Rājgī*) on his forehead⁹².

Mir Jumla's officers established matrimonial relations with the Garos, which led to the formation of *Momin* clan. There is a strong tradition based on Garo folk-tales that two sisters *Aje* and *Gilje* married Muslim officers from Bihar with the surname *Momin* and therefore, their descendants took up this surname and ever since a separate clan of *Momins* emerged among the Garos⁹³. The author of *Folktales of the Garos* on whose authority Milton S. Sangma has referred to the *Momin* officers of Bihar, but has mistaken these officers from the *Momin* community of Bihar. There is such community in Bihar and elsewhere no doubt. But the officers of Mir Jumla did not bear the surname *Momin* rather as proper names. Our authority mentions two *Momins*, one was Muhammad Momin Beg, a naval officer incharge of Mughal flotilla (*nawwārah*)⁹⁴. Another person was Muhammad Momin, who was a news-writer (*wāqia' nawīs*)⁹⁵ and hence a colleague of Shihāb al-Dīn Tālish.

After the Mughal occupation of Gargaon while referring to the flight of the Raja of Assam, a very interesting piece emerges

92. *Ibid.*

93. Milton S. Sangma, *History and Culture of the Garos*, Books Today, New Delhi, 1981, p. 143.

94. *Fathiyah Ibriyah*, *op.cit.*, f. 35a.

95. *Ibid.*, f. 42a.

about the Nagas, an information which the British ethnographers noticed much later:

The Raja had first intended to fly to the Naga Hills, but for the fear of the Mughal might the Nagas refused him asylum. The Nagas live in the southern mountain of Assam, have a light brown complexion, are well built but treacherous. In number they exceed Yājooj and Nājooj (*Qurā'nic* people of treacherous nature) and in hardiness and physical strength resemble 'ādiyan (an ancient Arabian tribe). They go about naked like beasts and do not mind copulation with their women in the streets and markets, before common people and chiefs. The women only cover their breasts and say it would be absurd to cover those parts which everyone might have seen at the time of birth. But this was not the case with the breasts, which since then had formed and should, therefore be covered. Some of their leaders call on the *Nawāb*, they wore black hip-cloth above which they wore quilt (*gūdrī*), round their head they wore a belt of boar's tusks allowing their black hair to hang down the neck. Their chief weapon is the short mace (*zuhīn*). (ff. 34a-b.)

Like-wise talking about the Miris and Mishmis, Tālish records with appreciation and amazement:

The way these people (Miris and Mishmis) live resembles the way of Assamese. Their women are generally better looking than the women in Assam.

They dread matchlocks, and say, a matchlock is a thing that makes a great noise, and does not stir from its place, whilst a child issues from its womb that kills a man. (ff. 28a-b.)

The Daflas had been notorious to the Ahom rulers and were famous for creating problems for them, Tālish observed this serious problem as well:

Though most of the hill-dwellers (*mutawattin-i jibāl*) do not pay tribute to the Ahom rulers nor are they his vassals but respect him as a superior. But the Daflas never do even that and whenever get an opportunity, come down to the plains and ravage Ahom territory. (ff. 26b.)

The mere reading of *Fathiyah Ibriyah* will immediately give a vivid impression of the actual history of the time, in effect immediate insight into the character of the transactions related therein. It needs less processing than other varieties of historical evidence before they can be made to yield intelligible history.

V

Riyāz al-Salātin of Ghulām Hussain Salīm is the only work on medieval Bengal. No separate history of Bengal was written in Persian before it, which mixes facts with fiction and is incorrect in details and dates⁹⁶. Salīm was from Zaidpur in Awadh migrated to Maldah in Bengal, and held the post of *Dāk Munshī* or Post

96. English translation by Abdus Salam, first published 1903 and now a reprint, *Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delhi*, Delhi, 1975.

Master there, under Mr. George Udny, who was at that time Commercial Resident of East India Company's factory at Maldah. On the behest of Mr. George Udny, Salīm completed his work in 1788⁹⁷.

In the absence of any other Persian account of Bengal, the *Riyāz al-Salatin* becomes the only and ultimate source for the history of Bengal-Kamrupa and Assam relations during fourteenth-sixteenth centuries, particularly for the various expeditions by the Sultāns of Bengal into the region. Both Ghiyath al-Dīn Iwaz in 1227 and Malik Yuzbek in 1257 had failed to retain Kamrupa. Hitherto unsubdued, Kamrupa proved to be a fertile land for Sultan Shams al-Dīn Ilyās Shāh (1342-58). It was ruled at this time by a weak ruler Indra Narayan, a bold attack in 1357 laid Kamrupa at the feet of the Sultan of Bengal. Likewise the inconclusive campaign of Ghiyath al-Dīn 'Azam Shah, who wanted to take advantage of the conflict between Sudangpha (1397-140) and the Raja of Kamta, Rukn al-Dīn Barbak Shāh's expedition under Shāh Ismā'il Ghāzī in 1474, 'Alā al-Dīn Hussain Shāh's invasion in which his son prince Dāniyal and the entire army perished and Nusrat Shah's expedition to Assam and war with Tipperah, *Riyāz al-Salatin* is the ultimate Persian source. Notwithstanding its confusion and sparing nature in significant details, its best corrective, however, is the *Buranjis*, which compliments it at times and in some way is equally confused and sparing in significant details.

VI

Throughout my discourse, I have depended on ready-made facts from historical data, it has been called the writing of history

97. *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

from authorities, and has appeared to be the 'common sense' theory of history writing. Professor R.G. Collingwood defines it:

According to this theory, the essential things in history are memory and authority. If an event or a state of things is to be historically known, first of all someone must be acquainted with it; then he must remember it; then he must state his recollection of it in terms intelligible to another; and finally that other must accept the statement as true. History is thus believing someone else when he says that he remembers something. The believer is the historian; the person believed is called his authority. . . . This doctrine implies that historical truth, so far as it is all accessible to the historian, is accessible to him only because it exists ready-made in the ready-made statements of his authorities. These statements are to him a sacred text whose value depends wholly on the unbrokenness of the tradition they represent. He must on no account temper with them. He must not mutilate them; he must not add to them; and, above all, he must not contradict them. . . . The authority may be garrulous, discursive, a gossip and a scandalmonger; he may have forgotten or omitted facts; he may ignorantly or wilfully misstated them; but against these defects the historian has no remedy. For him, on the theory, what his authorities tell him is the truth, the whole accessible truth and nothing but the truth⁹⁸.

98. R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (revised edition), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1994, pp. 234-35.

To understand pre-colonial northeast India, therefore, there is no better way than to dive into the writings of Persian chroniclers that began with Minhāj Sirāj – a tradition that Mirza Nāthān and Shihāb al-Dīn Tālish completed with infinite labour and learning. It is a revelation of northeast Indian life as seen through the eyes of Persian writers.