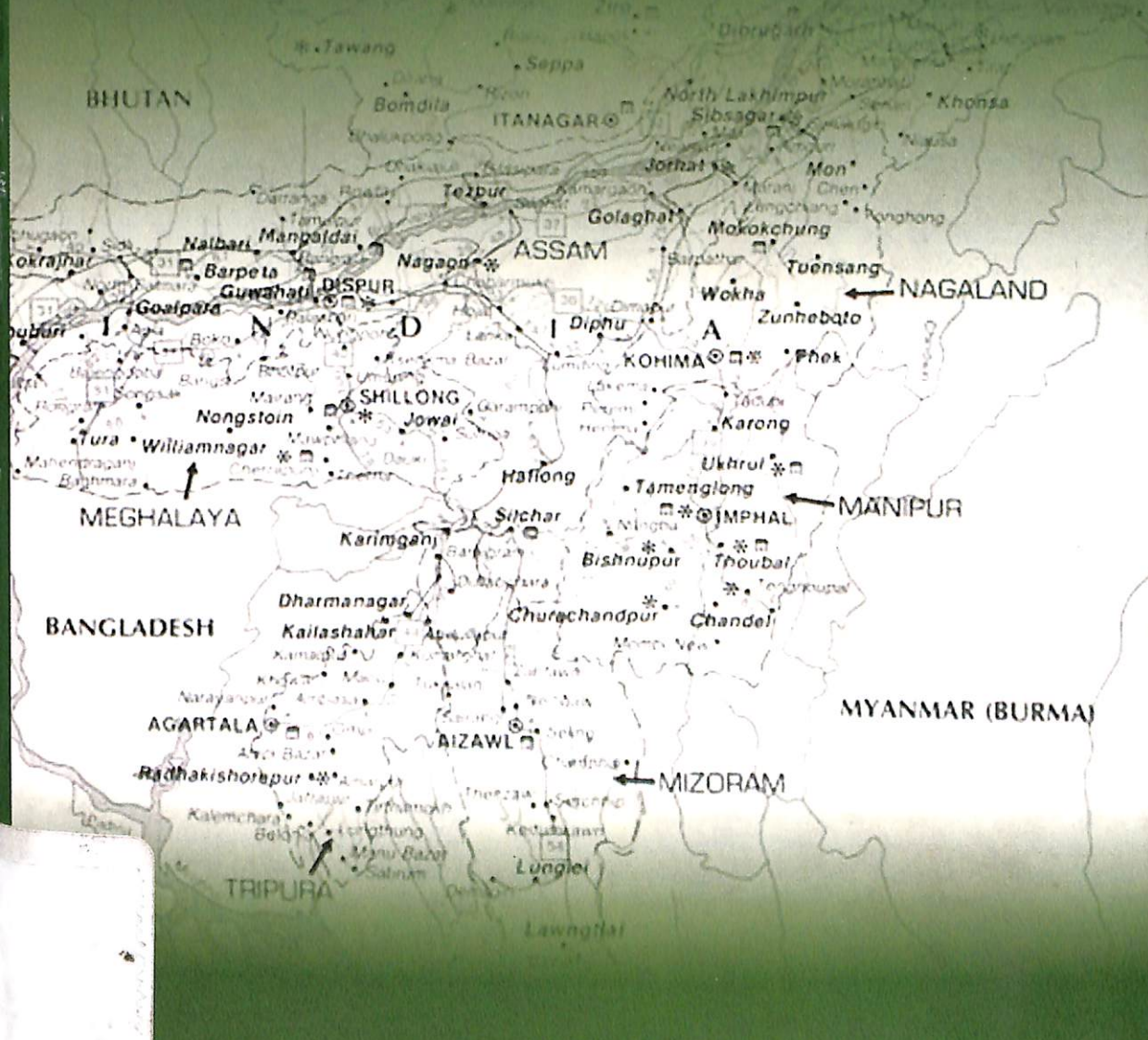


INDIA'S NORTH-EAST

DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES IN A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Edited by
Alokesh Barua



India's North-East Developmental Issues in a Historical Perspective

Edited by

ALOKESH BARUA



MANOHAR



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Preface

This book from its conception to printed stage took a rather long time, which of course was not without sufficient reasons. My entry into the enterprise was partly due to my friends and well-wishers who often encouraged me for such a venture as they felt that the north-east was a much neglected region well worth exploring. Friendly compulsions alone perhaps could not have been so strong a motivating factor to take up the project unless I felt in myself a sense of purpose and also a cause. In fact, as a professional economist I always felt that to find an explanation of the long economic stagnation of the Ahom period (AD 1212 to 1826) was in itself a very fascinating and challenging subject of inquiry. What made things perhaps more challenging and interesting was the continuation of that stagnation throughout the entire British period (AD 1826 to 1947), down to the present day.

Economic compulsions made the north-east region more and more vulnerable to a rising ethnicity, insurgency, chaos and political instability and subjected it to frequent mass movements, violence and terrorism. In response to such social disturbances, the central government has systematically taken recourse to surgical rather than developmental solutions, which prompted the well-known political scientist Sanjib Baruah to dub the Central Government as the 'prime-mover' in the breaking up of Assam.

I realized the difficulty of my task once it became obvious to me that developmental constraints could not be studied in a vacuum. History has to be brought in an essential way since certain constraints have been historically posing as stumbling blocks against generating a development process. The region as a consequence has continued to exist for centuries on a low-level equilibrium trap. And the same constraints seem to continue on to the present times.

This realization compelled me to start the project from the beginning of the Ahom dynastic rule. It is necessary to understand the nature of the constraints that worked historically against development in order to suggest the ways to get out of the mess. I believe that an analysis of the stagnation during the Ahom period will provide us with the

key to understand the fundamental constraints against development. It is beyond one's comprehension as to what prevented the monolithic dynasty that ruled unabatedly for six hundred years to follow a path of development if not for anything else but to become a more powerful country?

By making the canvas so large I made things somewhat problematic for myself. I had to search for scholars and researchers to contribute papers on developmental issues pertaining to different epochs of history of the region. It was not an easy task but I am happy that I received enthusiastic support and encouragement from many people with whom I communicated. It gives me immense pleasure to acknowledge my thanks and gratitude to all those who have responded to my request and written papers for the volume.

My professional debts are many. First of all, I wish to put on record my debt and appreciation for all those who have contributed papers in this volume. I take this opportunity to acknowledge that I have received much encouragement and support from Dr Hiren Gohain, Dr Amalendu Guha, Dr Jayanta Gogoi, Dr Hirnaya Nath, Dr Santanu Roy, Dr H.P. Ray, Dr Sanjib Baruah and my brother Shri Pulakesh Barua in taking up the task. I owe a lot to many others and in particular, I wish to thank my former student Dr Dipankar Sengupta for his many valuable suggestions on the organization of the papers in the volume as well as in editing the manuscript. I am also thankful to Mr K. Varghese for preparing the maps for this volume.

I take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to Dr Joël Ruet as well as to Dr Veronique Dupont, the present Director of the Centre de Sciences Humaines (CSH) for accepting the manuscript for publication and extending the necessary financial support. But for their generous support it would not have come to light today. I wish to thank Attreyee Roy Chowdhury, the current Publications in-Charge at the CSH, for often reminding me of my editorial obligations.

It is indeed a pleasure to acknowledge my thanks to Manohar Publishers for their very meticulous and professional editing of the manuscript and which they have accomplished with utmost care and efficiency.

Finally, a special word of appreciation for my wife Arati and son Imon who had to constantly bear with me for all those years while I was busy working on this manuscript.

Needless to say the editor bears the full responsibility for all the errors, which may remain.

Introduction

ALOKESH BARUA

THE NORTH-EAST: WHAT IT CONVEYS

Should a social scientist enjoy the luxury of waxing poetic? I suppose it has its inherent dangers. It could at times, make him look mischievous or at times, compel him to draw misleading conclusions. So, a poetic conceptualization of the north-east as, 'a rainbow country – extraordinarily diverse and colourful, mysterious when seen through parted clouds, a distant and troubled frontier for all too many'¹ is really empty in its value as an analytical concept to a social scientist. From the viewpoint of a social scientist, the notion of the north-east merely gives one a sense of geography and that is all. A geographical sense has, of course, its own merit; but its usefulness will be limited.

There is no need to emphasize the point that for any meaningful and logical analysis of an economic problem, we are primarily required to assume an entity or a unit of analysis in the sense that we use in economics textbooks. It could be a country, a firm, an individual or a region, which could independently take decisions relating to an economic problem. A geographical entity is not necessarily the relevant economic entity for analysing an economic problem; say appropriate policies for development, unless of course a geographical entity coincides with the relevant economic entity. The north-east as an entity does not satisfy this primary condition.² The condition however gets satisfied for any one state within the north-east as every state enjoys independent economic and political powers

*The author wishes to acknowledge his gratefulness to Dr Hiren Gohain, Dr Dipankar Sengupta and Dr Hiranya Nath for many useful and valuable comments on an earlier version of the paper. The author however is responsible for all errors and the views expressed.

to make such decisions. So, unless these states share a common policy of development or the markets are fully integrated both in terms of mobility of goods and factors, we cannot and should not talk about a common development strategy for the north-east. For, such a common strategy of economic development implies synchronization of policies across the states regarding production, investment and other decisions that affect economic outcomes. This would mean that there has to be certain limits to governmental control over the resources within the jurisdiction of each state and that the states observe such bindings. Since such synchronization is virtually absent, why then does one indulge in any discussion on the development potentials of the north-east? Does one talk about the development potentials of the southern, eastern or the western regions of India in the same way? What is therefore so peculiar about the north-east that one clubs all the states of the region under a single nomenclature? It simply reflects bureaucratic or intellectual arrogance or carelessness in the attitudinal approach towards the north-east, or mere ignorance about the history of the region at the pan-Indian level.

The term, north-east India may have been coined as an imagery to capture the varied and distinctive features of the life and people, the economy and polity, and the political geography of the various north-eastern states of India in contrast to the other regions of the country. But that is, again, not legitimate. The peculiarities that one focuses on, where one talks about the north-east regarding its languages, religions, dresses, customs and racial origins, exist, equally in other regions as well, or even within any state that one may think of. The extent of heterogeneity in the north-east is of subcontinental proportions and this is equally true for any region in India, southern, eastern or the western. Why should the north-east then, require a separate treatment?

THE MAIN ARGUMENTS FOR UNIFICATION

Such difficulties notwithstanding, one shall argue for the need of a concept like the north-east in this paper. What is being objected to, above, is the use of an idea or an image, which is actually, non-existent. Therefore, it has to be created if it is to serve any purpose. Despite manifold variations among the states that comprise the north-east, certain commonly-shared features are their history and geography, their economic structures and the structural changes, if any, that they

have witnessed overtime, and their economic and psychological distances from mainstream India. These factors bind them all together. All the states of the north-east are basically agrarian and industrially backward. They have poor infrastructure and a very high rate of unemployment.³ The consequence of non-development for more than half a century, has led to increasing poverty and destitution in the rural areas of the region. Yet, in the midst of abject poverty and destitution, they have been able to maintain high education and literacy rates,⁴ thanks to the Christian missionaries for their abiding involvement in works of social welfare. Transport linkages within the region and with the Indian mainland are still very primitive in nature. Last but not the least, they all face a very high rate of population growth.⁵ The stagnating economies of the region with agriculture and industry being technologically backward, and an everincreasing population, make it difficult for any democratic government to provide the basic minimum standard of living to the people. In such an economy a government cannot shy away from its responsibility of providing facilities for technological improvement in agriculture and productivity growth. A government however may not discharge its duty if its *time preference* to be in power is very short. In such a situation the society will be subject to violence, chaos, unrest and insurgency of the kind growing in the north-east. The rise of insurgency and various forms of separatist movements and the growth of sub-nationalisms in the north-east can only be explained as the results of governmental failures. Contemporary Bihar is another example. As a consequence, the region has been witnessing various forms of social unrest and insurgency. It is now almost universally accepted among policy makers, that the only long-term solution to the problems of the north-east is through the achievement of rapid and sustained economic development. The commonality of the nature and characteristics of the problems of this region shows that a basic pre-condition for the unification of its markets exists. The following are some reasons for unification.

Firstly, it is virtually impossible for any of the north-east states to industrialize and develop in isolation, due to the limitations posed by the size of the markets. As these states are land-locked and the peculiar topographical features do not allow them to easily expand the markets within, as well as between the states without heavy investment on roads and communication facilities, many modern industries cannot be set-up for want of a viable scale of production. One

obvious way to overcome this difficulty is of course, through *trade*. By trade we mean (a) trade among the north-east states (b) between a state and the rest of India and (c) between a state and the outside world. Interestingly, it is impossible for many of the north-east states to jump to (b) and (c) without (a) because of their geographical interdependence. For instance, only Assam can access the metropolitan markets in Calcutta or Delhi. No other north-east state can do so, without bypassing Assam. Therefore, efficient and reliable transport connections among the north-east states will be a necessary precondition for the expansion of trade with the rest of India. Thus, the unification of the north-east markets will be the first step towards a successful trade-based process of industrialization.

Secondly, because of the above constraint, each of the north-east states must enjoy a sufficiently large home market, in order to be able to compete with their counterparts in the larger metropolitan markets in India and abroad. This is the standard home market hypothesis for exporting. The case for the unification of markets in the north-east is much more compelling towards achieving such a goal in comparison with the other regions of India.⁶ This must be recognized as an important contrast *vis-à-vis* the other regions of India. For, big metropolitan markets unify the regions of the north, south, east and the west, but there are no such markets that unify the north-east.⁷ Fundamental constraints to the development of such markets is, of course, the lack of development itself – but to be precise – development is constrained by the Smithian limitation of markets. Limitation of markets could be a result of history or the lack of transport linkages⁸ and an absence of adequate political and economic relations among these states, will, as be discussed in the next few sections.

Thirdly, while the expansion of the size of the markets provides scope for the division of labour, size of the market alone is not sufficient to reap full advantages from scale economies where such economies may arise from a variety of externalities. In the presence of market failures, synchronization and integration of economic policies among the states, implying an integrated development programme, will be necessary to achieve the optimal allocation of resources. It saves duplication of investment and provides opportunities for vertical and horizontal specialization.

Fourthly, all the states border one or the other countries such as Bhutan, China, Burma and Bangladesh.⁹ As a consequence, the

north-east states face two main problems – one, of illegal immigration from neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and Nepal; and two, of the use of the border as an escape route by extremists who seek shelter in the neighbouring country. This is easy since the borders are porous at most points. In order to prevent illegal immigration and successfully control extremism, some degree of political unification among the states is necessary. After all, development cannot take off in an environment of political instability. Such political or administrative unification also implies an increase in the size of the government, which again, would give rise to certain economies in providing efficient governance, collection of revenues and tolls.

A fifth reason for such unification could be to acquire a better bargaining power *vis-à-vis* the Centre. This is particularly important while influencing the central budgetary allocation in a federal economy. For instance, the Assam Movement in the early 1980s had led to a significant increase in the budgetary allocation of development funds to the north-east.

Once that the logic of unification¹⁰ is established, the next question would be, how to go about it. This is a much more difficult question to answer and therefore, what one intends to do in the next few sections, is to examine whether this need for unification has been historically felt or not. We can learn from history about the stumbling blocks in the way of such unification. However, before we address this issue, a brief idea about the anatomy of the north-east may perhaps be very rewarding to further our understanding.

THE ANATOMY OF THE NORTH-EAST

The north-east comprises of seven states, namely, Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Tripura and Assam. Sikkim is also now included as the eighth state within the north-east. But, except for Sikkim, the other states are geographically contiguous and have enjoyed economic and political relationships with each other over centuries. However, we do not have any evidence of Sikkim being on such terms with the other north-eastern states. So, for obvious reasons, we exclude Sikkim from our purview as this book is primarily concerned with developmental issues pertaining to the north-east in a historical perspective. The political history of the region has undergone many changes from the pre-colonial to the colonial

period and the post-colonial period, and as we see later, this makes the problems of the north-east, extremely difficult to comprehend, particularly if one is not quite familiar with the political history of the region. Let us, therefore, gain a preliminary knowledge about the political history of the various components of the north-east.

POLITICAL HISTORY OF THE REGION: A BRIEF BACKGROUND

ASSAM

Assam is in a sense, the fulcrum of the north-east, for which, continuous historical records are available for a fairly long period of time. For the remaining states, historical records are either scanty or are just not available, except for the British period. The availability of historical records for Assam from medieval times, often breeds confusion as to what we mean by Assam, as its very concept has changed historically. Therefore, apart from the definitional problems, conceptual problems arise in at least two important ways: firstly, while determining a historical benchmark in order to conceptualize Assam as a distinct political and economic entity; and secondly, while *identifying* some of Assam's cultural and linguistic affinities with other homogeneous groups. This problem arises because the Assamese language is used synonymously with the state of Assam. The second conceptual issue is relevant and important, in so far as it is binding on the first.

The first problem arises because the name *A-sam* (a Sanskrit word meaning 'unequaled') was originally applied to the Ahoms,¹¹ the Shan invaders from upper Burma but subsequently referred to the country conquered by them, that is, the region east of the present district of Kamrup. The term, however, was later expanded and it included the whole of the Brahmaputra valley as constituted by the British in 1874.¹² On the other hand, the *province* was also known as Pragjyotishpur or Kamrupa in earlier periods. It was known as the former in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and as the latter in classical literature.¹³ The western boundary of Kamrupa was the river Karatoya in Bengal. Thus, it is important to recognize the sensitivity of the term Assam in its historical contexts, as the political boundary of the state has been historically changing. Therefore, an understanding of the politics and economics of the state will be incomplete without shedding light, specifically on its history.

The second conceptual problem arises because the state, Assam, is customarily associated with the language, Assamese. But the Ahoms,¹⁴ from whom the name Assam originated, did not initially speak Assamese.¹⁵ Many scholars at the pan-India level, do not know that the Ahoms spoke the Tai language, which was the official language in Assam for nearly two hundred years. They wrote their *Buranjis* (meaning historical chronicles) in Tai language¹⁶ and even today, there are Ahoms who speak the language. It was one thing that the Ahoms later became Hinduized and gave up their language in favour of the Assamese language, which developed and flourished in a region that lay outside the Ahom dominion.¹⁷

The important political formations in the region, apart from the Ahom Kingdom were the Kingdom of Kamrup¹⁸ or Kamata,¹⁹ the Koch kingdom²⁰ with its capital in Koch Bihar (now in Bengal), the Kachari Kingdom²¹ and the Kingdoms of Jayantia.²² There were other groups of people who may not have been politically formed in the sense of the above, but certainly had distinctive individualities. These were Chutia,²³ Naga,²⁴ Garo²⁵ and Lushai²⁶ along with many others. Thus, in the thirteenth century, two important kingdoms co-existed simultaneously, one, on the western front (the Koch kingdom) and the other on the eastern front (the Ahom kingdom). This was also the time when Assamese literature and culture had developed into a distinctive form through the assimilation of various sub-cultures. The centre of Assamese cultural renaissance was not in Assam, as it was known then but in the western front where the Koch King Naranarayan ruled. The great Vaishnava saint, Sankardeva lived in Koch Bihar,²⁷ where the foundation of modern Assamese literature in its many dimensions was built under his guidance and inspiration. His teachings had a remarkable impact on the assimilative process of different cultures and traditions in the region. This process had given rise to a certain degree of political unification within the north-east, but it had no impact on the unification of markets.²⁸ However, the emergence of a composite culture and political unification within the region had given rise to a somewhat egalitarian social structure in Assam, which as argued by Barua, played the role of a catalyst in the downfall of the Ahom dynasty (see Barua, 'The Rise and Decline of the Ahom Dynastic Rule' in this volume).

More importantly, the sixteenth-century Vaishnava cult in Assam had led to a cultural unification of Assam with the Indian mainstream in a significant way, so much so that even the Ahoms could not escape its influence. They abandoned their own language and

culture and identified themselves with the Indian mainstream as its tributary. The Koch regime, however, could not survive for long and after the death of King Naranarayan, it broke up into two kingdoms and eventually fell into the hands of the Mohammedans. However, the Ahoms maintained their supremacy and successfully prevented Muslim penetration into the region. Their victory against the Mughals in the battle of Sarighat was decisive. With the rise of Ahom power and the decline of the Koch kingdom, the centre of literary importance during the later period, was shifted to eastern Assam.

Cultural unification, as mentioned above, was not followed by any political and economic unification of Assam with the Indian mainstream. There could perhaps be many reasons for that. However, no serious attempt so far has been made to examine this issue. Taking the evolutionary viewpoint of Ashok Guha (1981), an attempt has been made by Barua²⁹ to put forward a view that there was no compulsion of development during the Ahom rule which was solely responsible for lack of political and economic, unification of Assam with the rest of India. This is of course a contestable proposition and all the contributors in this volume may not agree with this idea.

The organization of the economy, Barua³⁰ argues, did not provide the necessary incentives for maximization of output and generation of surplus. Regions of different cultures, traditions, languages and religions co-existed together without much conflict. However, Assam had to pay a very heavy price for maintaining political independence for so long, as it helped sustain a highly inefficient economic system without the threat of change. The intrinsic desire of the Ahoms to remain in isolation and the easy maintenance of self-sufficiency were responsible for their lack of any outward-looking policies. Their economic interests were not guided by any motive to generate surplus beyond the basic minimum. Political independence insulated the economy from external influences. The effect of such insulation, in later centuries, prevented the region from enjoying the benefits of a better system of economic management, technology and trade with mainland India.

The above arguments that explain why market linkages did not develop with the more progressive areas outside Assam such as Bengal, does not explain what constrained the development of markets within Assam itself. Markets do not grow, on their own, unless there are primitive capital accumulation and expansion of demands. These forces do not exist in a self-sufficient economy

without the intent to follow a military expansionist policy, a strong demonstration effect and population pressure (Guha, 1981). The insulation of the economy as described above, also prevented any demonstration effect from having an impact on the population. Assam, on the other hand, being very sparsely populated and the land being extremely fertile, could sustain itself easily in the milieu of a rural economy.

However, the spread effects of the Vaishnava cult were tremendous in terms of the unification of various regions, tribes and cultures, contributing to the rise of a homogeneous culture. As political segmentation broke certain forms of unification of markets took their place, giving rise to new conflicts of interests. With the incorporation of Kamrup into the Ahom empire towards the seventeenth century, economic conflicts became much more sharpened as Kamrup was, for a long-time, under the control of the Mughals. It was also exposed to the rich culture of Bengal much before upper Assam was. Certainly, it had led to certain forms of demonstration effect on consumption and production. As Kamrup was densely populated, migration of people from regions of higher density to those of lower density, also led to economic conflicts. Maintenance of self-sufficiency seemed no longer feasible. The forces of change contributed to the political unification of people and resulted in a mass uprising known as the Mayamoria Revolt, against the Ahom empire. It had such a devastating impact on the Ahom monarchy that the six hundred-year-old regime collapsed. The appearance of the Burmese and the British acted only as catalysts in the inevitable collapse of the glorified empire.

THE ADVENT OF THE BRITISH

The beginning of an entirely new historical process in which the East India Company played the prime role, followed the end of the monolithic rule of the Ahoms in 1826. The long civil war and the Burmese invasion had completely demoralized Assamese society. The impact of the wars on the population was so devastating, that it had been reduced to almost half of its original strength. People in general, therefore, welcomed with great respite the entry of the British into the political scenario of Assam, marked by complete anarchy, chaos and insecurity. By virtue of being the ruler, the British became the sole owner of large tract of wasteland (in some places) and other valuable natural resources. It was in the interest of the British to

exploit these resources for profit, which resulted in the growth of a large tea plantation sector in Assam. The development of railways and waterways, and the establishment of other productive enterprises such as coal, petroleum and wood manufacturing, etc., were all guided by the sole objective of maximization of profit from the plantation economy. The local village economy and the plantation sector maintained their distance from one another and never converged, such that neither sector had any impact on the other. For instance, the labourers for the tea gardens were mostly drawn from places outside the region, and railways and waterways remained in the periphery of the village economy. The absence of trade between the two sectors did not help in the integration of markets and as a result, the large British investment did not give rise to any backward or forward linkages between the village and the plantation sectors.³¹

Like the Ahoms, the British were also not interested in the development of the village economy of Assam for of course, quite different reasons. The Ahoms could not perceive the need for development, as there were no strong compulsions for it. The British were not interested because they did not perceive any benefit from it. The growing market for tea was entirely outside Assam. The requirement of labourers for the plantation sector could be met by hiring them at a much cheaper price from outside the province. Since the marginal productivity of agricultural labourers was much above the wage paid to the contractual labourers brought from outside the region, it was, therefore, natural for the planters to hire labourers from abroad.³² However, there was a significant difference. While Assam remained completely insulated from any outside influence during the long rule of the Ahoms, the annexation of Assam by the East India Company had broken down that insulation and with that, began the process of economic and political integration of Assam with the Indian mainstream. When the British rule ended in 1947, Assam became a full-fledged state of India and the process of cultural, political and economic integration with India was complete.

There was yet another important difference between the Ahom rule and that of the British. The advent of the British into the political scene of Assam, contributed to a much sharper political integration of the hill regions. The hill and other linguistic regions were incorporated within the domain of British rule and the hills were brought under the same administrative system. As a result, the geographic scope of the British Assam was very different from that of the Ahom Assam. In consequence of this integrative process, the earlier comple-

mentary relationship between the political and cultural affinity has been eventually broken down. With the successive divisions of Assam after Independence, what is left today, is in essence the *Ahom Assam*. Complementary relations have thus, become re-established. The Ahom kingdom, which Sanjib Barua has described as the cultural heartland of modern Assam,³³ roughly corresponds to the five districts of the *Brahmaputra Valley*,³⁴ namely, Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur, and portions of Sadiya Frontier Tract.³⁵ Could we then, following Sanjib Baruah, logically accuse the Central Government as being the prime mover of the break-up of Assam?

THE HILL DISTRICTS OF ASSAM IN 1947

Apart from the Brahmaputra valley, the hilly areas of the state of Assam, as defined immediately after Independence were the present states of Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh. Obviously, these states did not have their present identity of independent states at the dawn of India's Independence. These states were the integral parts of undivided Assam in 1947,³⁶ that was essentially the British province of Assam except for Sylhet,³⁷ which went to Pakistan (now in Bangladesh) after the Partition of India in 1947.³⁸ The British came to rule in this region in 1826 after the decline of the Ahom dynasty,³⁹ that had ruled in Assam for a period of over six hundred years. However, as discussed above, the pre-colonial Ahom Assam⁴⁰ was not the same as the British province of Assam. As mentioned above, the pre-colonial Ahom Assam was essentially the Brahmaputra valley. Only during the colonial period did the British expand the scope of Assam by annexing the surrounding hill regions. Yet, these hill areas being contiguous to the Brahmaputra Valley, they might have had certain forms of economic and political interaction with the Ahom kingdom. It is, therefore, important to understand the relation of the Ahoms and the British with these hill states.

THE NAGA AND THE PATKAI HILLS: NAGALAND

The Ahom rule was bounded on the north by a range of mountains inhabited by the Bhutanese, Akas, Duflas and Abors. On the east, there was another line of hills inhabited by the Mishmis and Singphos and on the south were the Garo, Khasi, Naga and Patkai hills. The Patkai range on the south-east has been the permanent abode of

the aboriginal Nagas. They belong to a diversity of tribes, each speaking its own language⁴¹ and calling itself by a distinctive name, but collectively known as the Nagas. Their habitat extends along a large portion of the Brahmaputra valley, from the Kapili river on the west to the Buri-Dihing on the east, bordering Nowgong, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur. The Ahoms had never subjugated the Nagas.⁴² The general tribal policy of the Ahoms was in fact, not to subjugate them. So they paid no taxes to the Ahom King but they accept his sovereignty and obeyed some of his commands.⁴³ This policy of non-interference paid very high dividends to the Ahoms in the sense, that they were able to enjoy uninterrupted sovereignty for more than 600 years.

It was not the British policy either to absorb it,⁴⁴ perhaps. But the differential attitude in the policies towards the tribals between the Ahoms and the British, arise from the fact that while the Ahoms were no colonial power,⁴⁵ the British were. So, from a colonial perspective, the British saw their political interest in subjugating the Nagas and in 1866, they resolved to take the possession of the region and formed a new district with the headquarters located at Samaguting. Later, in 1878, this place was abandoned in favour of Kohima.⁴⁶

THE GARO, KHASI AND JAINTIA HILLS: MEGHALAYA

THE GARO HILLS

The Garos live mainly in the region west of the Khasi hills. The Ahoms had really nothing to do with the Garos of the interior hills. They had some contact with the Garos who lived in the vassal states on the extremities of Assam in the south bank of the Brahmaputra.⁴⁷

The British brought the Garo Hills under their administration and was it administered as a part of Goalpara from Rangpur. Goalpara was separated from Rangpur and made a new district in 1822.⁴⁸ The Garo hill was made a separate district in 1869,⁴⁹ with its headquarters at Tura.

THE KHASI AND JAINTIA HILLS

The Jaintia king ruled two entirely distinct tracts of regions, namely, the Khasi and Jaintia hills inhabited by the Khasi tribes, and the plains region, south of these hills, north of the Barak river, in Sylhet

district.⁵⁰ The early history of the kingdom is obscure. Their interaction with other political formations in the region began around the middle of the sixteenth century when the Koch King Naranarayan defeated the king of Jaintia.⁵¹ The Ahom King Rudra Singh attacked the Jaintia king during the early eighteenth century, but did not annex the kingdom.⁵² In continuation with the Ahoms's general policy towards the hill people, King Rudra Singh returned the kingdom to the Jaintia king.⁵³

On 15 March 1835, the British took possession of Jaintiapur.⁵⁴

THE LUSHAI HILLS: MIZORAM

The present state of Mizoram was called by the British 'Lushai Hills' and the people lived there were called Lushai. By an Act of Parliament of India 'Lushai Hills' was renamed as Mizo district of Assam on 1 August 1954. People belonging to different ethnic groups live in Mizoram but all of them now identify themselves as Mizos. According to Lehman (1963) the Lushai are Northern Chin. Before they entered into the region, various tribes known as Kuki inhabited the region. The Ahom Kingdom had hardly come in contact with the tribes living in the Lushai hills.

The Lushais came to this frontier in 1840 and drove the Kukis into the plains of Cacher. The British brought the hills under their administration. The southern portion of the hills was first administered by the Bengal government and the northern by the Chief Commissioner of Assam. But on 1 April 1898, the two tracts were merged into one and placed under the Assam administration.⁵⁵

THE AKAS, ABORS, DUFLAS, MIRIS MISHMIS AND SINGPHOS: ARUNACHAL PRADESH

The Akas live in the hills to the east of the Bharari river in Darrang district. The Duflas live in the hills situated between the Bharari river on the west and the upper course of Somdiri on the east. The Abors occupy the hill region between the Dihong and Dibong rivers. The Miris live in both the plains and hills. The Mishmis occupy the hills to the east of the Abor region. The Singphos are found in the upper Buri-Dihing and in Namrup.

THE OTHER REGIONS: CACHER, MANIPUR AND TRIPURA

Cacher

On 14 August 1832, the British annexed Cacher⁵⁶ (excluding Karimganj subdivision) which included Cacher and the North Cacher districts of Assam, parts of Nowgong (Hojai-Davaka area) in Assam, Dayung-Dhansiri valley in Nagaland and the Jiri Frontier area in Manipur.⁵⁷ Silchar was made its headquarters. It was in charge of a superintendent, who was subordinate to the Commissioner of Assam. In 1836, it was transferred to the Dacca division.

The ruling tribe of the state was Dimasa,⁵⁸ which belonged to the Bodo⁵⁹ family of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic sub-family. There are legends that the Kacharis once ruled in Kamrupa, but in due course of time, they settled down in the Sadiya frontier. Thereafter, they shifted to Dimapur, now in Nagaland. There were frequent conflicts between the Kacharis and the Ahoms, and the Dimasa Raja, Khorapha, was defeated by the Ahoms in 1526. As a result, the Dimasa capital was shifted to Maibong in the North Cacher hills. The Ahoms were busy fighting the Mughals and so they avoided any confrontation with the Kacharis. The Ahom King Rudra Singha had forced Cacher and Jaintia to pay tribute to the Ahoms, but the Rajas of Cacher did not pay tribute for long. Of course, Cacher and Jaintia, both became partners in King Rudra Singha's confederacy against the Mughals. The clashes between the Ahoms and the Kacharis continued till they were both annexed by the British.

Manipur

Each of the seven states have had their own historical evolution, more or less in an isolated environment, ruled by their own inhabitants. They have, however, had diplomatic relations occasionally, with other neighbours of the north-east. A reliable and continuous historical account, is unfortunately, not available for many of these states. For instance, we know of Manipur since the times of the *Mahabharata*, but its long, independent existence remained in obscurity until a powerful kingdom, led by Gharib Nawaz⁶⁰ sprang up in its place in 1714.⁶¹ The subsequent history of Manipur was essentially a history of its conflicts with the Burmese. Gharib Nawaz waged a series of successful wars against the Burmese and captured many of

their towns. However, due to internal wars within the ruling elite, the dynasty eventually collapsed and as a consequence, the country was overrun by the Burmese in 1755, and again in 1758. The Burmese permanently annexed part of it. In 1762, the Manipuri King Jai Singh negotiated a treaty with the British Government for the recovery of the lost provinces, but the British could not do much for the King and the negotiations broke off. A fresh invasion by the Burmese took place in 1765 in which Jai Singh was defeated. But with the help of the Ahom King Rajesvar Singh, he was once more seated on the throne in 1768. Jai Singh died in 1799 and his sons succeeded him. However, the Burmese once again attacked Manipur, but this time the British intervened and expelled the Burmese from the land forever through the execution of a treaty known as the Yandabo Treaty on 24 February 1826. Gambhir Singh, the son of Jai Singh, was put on the throne of Manipur and the Treaty of Yandabo confirmed his position as Raja. Raja Gambhir Singh died in 1834 after which, continuous disorder prevailed in Manipur. In 1891, the British occupied Manipur, but decided that it would be ruled by the natives. Chura Chandra, a youthful scion of a collateral line, was placed upon the throne. During his rule, numerous reforms were executed. The land revenue administration was carefully revised, better judicial tribunals were introduced and the old system of forced labour was abolished. The boundaries of the state were defined and a cart road was opened from Imphal, the capital, to Kohima in Nagaland. The Raja was, however, only a formal head because the Resident of his *darbar* was a member of the ICS who was responsible for the administration of the hill tribes living within the state and for all matters of revenue and finance. The British Government, subsequently ruled Manipur from Assam.⁶²

Tripura

As regards Tripura (also known as *Tipperah*), the Ahoms had no relation with them till the year 1710.⁶³ In 1710, the Ahom King Rudra Singha sent an embassy to the Raja Ratna Manikya, soliciting his aid to a confederacy of the rajas and zamindars of Bengal which the King of Assam was organizing at that time to overthrow the Mughals from their power. But King Rudra Singha died shortly after. So, this part of the region was never under the Ahom ruler. However, the King of Tripura accepted the Koch suzerainty in 1540.⁶⁴

THE STATE REORGANIZATION COMMITTEE: 1955

The State Reorganization Commission in 1955 had initially recommended the merger of Manipur and Tripura with Assam,⁶⁵ but it did not happen. While recognizing the political independence of these states for long, the Committee had suggested the merger on the plea that such small units were not 'administratively viable'. Curiously, enough, the Committee also noted on the other hand, that 'its (Manipur's) economic development will be retarded if it is merged in Assam or in West Bengal or in the hill districts'. The State Reorganization Committee also had considered the possibility of creating a separate hill state, consisting of the Naga hill districts (now Nagaland), Garo, Khasi and Jaintia hills (now Meghalaya), Lushai hills (now Mizoram) and United Mikir and North Cachher hills (now a district in Assam). However, while the Naga National Council wanted independence from Assam and India, and sought to remain aloof from the proposed hill state, the United Mikir and North Cachher hills and the Mizo (Lushai) hills were not in favour of a separate hill state. The only hill district comprising the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia hills were in favour of a separate hill state. Considering these divergent views, the Commission concluded that the formation of a hill state is neither feasible, nor desirable in the interest of the tribal people themselves. It had thus recommended that the hill districts should continue to form part of Assam. Finally, the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA, now Arunachal Pradesh) was constitutionally a part of Assam, but the Commission has suggested that the governance of this area be entrusted to the President of India, acting through the Governor of Assam.

Over the years, new states had been carved out of Assam by the Central Government, the prime mover, as described by Sanjib Baruah (1999), in the break up of Assam and consequently the creation of Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh as new states of the Indian Union.⁶⁶

AN OVERVIEW: WHAT THIS VOLUME IS ALL ABOUT

The present volume is not intended to deal with the political and social history of the north-east. There are a fairly good number of books, both at the scholarly and popular levels on the subject.

But what is lacking, is a comprehensive, analytical research on the economic history of the north-east. Historians of repute, such as Amalendu Guha and H.K. Borpujari did pioneering research on the economic history of the north-east, particularly in the colonial period. However, serious research has hardly been attempted to examine post-colonial development in its relationship to the colonial and pre-colonial periods. In explaining today's underdevelopment, one has to strive to explain why the 600 years of monolithic rule by the Ahoms did not give rise to any process of development in the region. One of the major factors that help development is political stability and the Ahoms had very successfully provided that to the people of the region. Similarly, why could Assam not take off from a massive investment in the plantation economy by the British during the colonial period? Coming to the more recent period, we observe that the region has received a massive amount of central funds under a variety of projects but it yet did not trigger off any industrial growth worth mentioning. Perhaps, there historically existed certain key constraints to development, which may be sociological or economic. There is, however, no work that pertains to explaining the nature of these constraints and how to overcome these for the development of the north-east. This lacuna is often felt both at the regional and pan-Indian levels, when one is confronted with the attempt to resolve problems of rising extremism and political instability in the region through a set of economic policies that help induce the growth of employment and output in the region. We often hear people talk at the highest level of economic decision-making, that it can be done through a policy of pump priming and trade-oriented industrialization. We learn from history that paucity of fund is definitely not the key constraint to development in the north-east. We intend to bring this point into sharp focus in this book.

To the extent that economic development is a historical and an evolutionary process, we cannot ignore the historical past, since history appears in an essential way in any analysis of the evolutionary process of development. We also cannot ignore geography, since we need a reference point for giving a sense of continuity to the process of development. As we have seen above, the history of the north-east region has changed continuously overtime. Because of this lack of an invariant reference point, we are compelled to analyse the developmental problems of the region separately in three different epochs – the *Pre-colonial*, *Colonial* and the *Post-independence* peri-

ods. While we achieve a certain amount of geographical consistency by making this division, it obviously creates inconsistencies in terms of their comparability overtime, such as the geography of the region that had been changing under different epochs. Our answer to such criticism will be, that while the geography had been changing, there existed an internal unity among these states in the sense that Assam, as it stands today, had always been the 'core' or the 'hub' of the north-east. All other states are peripheral to Assam – the hub – in terms of trade, commerce and communication. The narrow neck on the western front of Assam, provides the only road and railway link for all the states of the region, with the rest of India. Even inter-linkages between various states, including Manipur and Tripura are not possible without accessing Assam. As a result, independent developmental possibilities are severely limited for these states and therefore, the development of the peripheral states is intricately interwoven with the development of the 'hub'.

The lack of analytical research also results in a variety of inadequacies. From the viewpoint of the people from outside this region, there are inadequacies as regards the understanding of the problems of the region, the characteristics of the economy of the region, the people, their aspirations and their historical past. Similarly, from the viewpoint of the people from within the region, there are inadequacies in the understanding of the evolution of their economies over the years, the growing interdependence of their economies and the mainstream Indian economy, and the constraints of development that they have been facing. Such inadequacies of understanding act as serious handicaps in many ways, particularly in solving the problems of economic development of the region. As a result, attempts to close the gap between the region and mainstream India had failed to bring about too many positive results. Developmental policies designed to help the region achieve faster growth, actually ended up in a mere fiasco.

Ironically, a disintegrative process had started in the region soon after Independence. In the process, the hills have been endowed with political and economic independence. Various ethnic groups in Assam, such as the Bodos have also started demanding their separation from Assam. Economic regionalism in Assam began with the oil refinery movement in 1959, and subsequently the language movement in 1960. Interestingly, the Assamese fought for faster economic development and not for ethnic identity, like the others. They saw the possibility of

industrialization through the installation of heavy industries such as the oil refineries. The language movement was essentially an attempt to make it easier for the local people of Assam to enter the job market. But, towards the early 1980s, frustration with stagnation, unemployment and economic backwardness, made certain groups of people within Assam raise slogans demanding political independence from India. Since then, the north-east has drawn much attention from various quarters at the pan-Indian level. The problem of the north-east is not entirely a creation of its own. The Central Government cannot shy away from its responsibility by taking pretext to an easy scapegoat that economic under-development of the region is the chief cause of the north-east syndrome.

These states are small enough to be viable units for the adoption of any independent path of development. However, there is enormous scope for a common strategy of development, with Assam as the core of the development programme. As the states are similarly endowed by nature and technology conflict among them is unlikely, in terms of the location of industry and the distribution of income as economic growth progresses. Further, they can enjoy a better bargaining power *vis-à-vis* the Centre, if they can stand together as a coherent group. The strategy of a joint development programme will put them on a better footing in terms of their ability to draw more resources from the Central Government for the development of infrastructure and industries in the region. In the same way, it will be easier for them to check extremism of various kinds that they suffer from, through a joint effort of the different state governments. Keeping extremism at its lowest level possible, will be the primary necessity for a development programme in the region to be successful.

The other important prerequisite for a successful implementation of economic reform is the political acceptability of the reform package by the larger mass of population in the region. It is, therefore, necessary to create consciousness amongst the people regarding the existing constraints of development, so that people respond positively to the reform measures. Our policy makers are often, unfortunate, victims of a widely-prevalent, but misconceived view that the mere transfer of financial resources to the state would be sufficient to achieve economic development. In the absence of the basic pre-conditions as outlined above, profitability in economic activities would be too low to motivate any inflow of private capital into the region. On top of it, if the political situation is also volatile, then profit-seeking private

investment will not flow into the region. Such capital, in fact, will flow out of the economy. This has happened on a large scale in the recent past.

Therefore, as an integral part of any reform package, it would also be necessary to educate the vocal and articulate educated middle class, that there are no other solutions, but only rapid economic growth that could enable them to solve their problems in the long run. Of course, it requires a visionary local leadership to be able to translate the aspirations of the people to reality. But political stability and a friendly attitude towards others, are the basic minimum necessities for the successful implementation of a reform strategy to achieve economic development.

Our federal structure is such that it is not based on the economically sound concept of a unit of the federation, say, a state. The arbitrary re-organization of the states based on language, has caused several irreparable distortions in the system. Smaller linguistic groups, for example, express their feelings of insecurity and consequently make their demands for a separate state. Behind such demands for separate states, is an implicit argument that political autonomy helps economic development. It is high time people were educated that such a view is false. For instance, the extent of political divisions that Assam has witnessed since the Independence of India, has no parallel in this country. Did that help economic transformation in the newly-created states? Yet, there exists even today, a strong urge for further division on any conceivable ethnic, cultural and linguistic basis. It needs to be emphasized, therefore, that political autonomy can provide neither peace nor economic development. The fact is that increasing regionalism growing all over the country today, is largely conditioned by the co-existence of big state hegemonies and the absence of a proper re-distributive mechanism to equalize inter-state income levels.

An increasing urge for political autonomy in any ethnic group has, of course, some valid reasons. There is indeed a rationale for greater political autonomy in a system where the dominant elite has certain distinctive advantages in terms of their command over social resources. So, the reasonably articulate elite belonging to any ethnic group, being unable to find for itself a position of strength within a bigger political unit, can therefore, find a rationale in the demand for a smaller, independent political unit where it can exercise its dominance. In an economically backward region, such a demand for

autonomy can easily get mass political support within a narrow political base. The argument that the root cause of backwardness is lack of political independence seems to be quite persuasive. Such an argument easily wins mass political support. So much so, that a very strong sense of neglect prevails even today, in the minds of the people of this region that their interests are not taken seriously in our highly centralized democracy. This sense of neglect comes mainly from the lack of social, political and economic integration of the region with the rest of India. To a lesser extent, it is due to the demonstration effect based on relative income disparities. People from the north-east feel, that their agonies and sufferings are ignored and that their voices are not heard. They believe that in spite of being so rich in economic resources, they are economically poor because of exploitation by the Centre and therefore, the solution lies either in political autonomy or in disintegration from the Centre. Fallacious and misplaced though this view is, it is nonetheless a fact that such a view widely prevails. It is fallacious, because political autonomy within a smaller horizon does not guarantee economic viability and it is misplaced, because such a theory of underdevelopment based on Centre's neglect is undoubtedly an over-simplification and is highly far-fetched.

This book is an attempt to understand the nature, characteristics and structure of the north-east economy, in order to put forward a perspective for development strategies for the region. The volume consists of papers on economic and political history, as well as economic analytical research papers. The contributors constitute a cross-section of authors from various disciplines. They differ widely, not only in their subject areas, but also in terms of the methodological approaches they have adopted. They however, have at least one thing in common, and that is, they all have attempted to contribute towards an understanding of the complex phenomenon of the region's economic under-development, thereby seeking an explanation of the region's relative isolation from the rest of India.

The two main objectives of the study are: (a) to provide a brief background of the region to those readers who are not familiar with its history and economy; and (b) to examine the development alternatives for the region. In doing so, we adopt a framework in which the region is cast not in isolation, but as a part of the Indian mainstream.

NOTES

1. See, B.G. Verghese, *India's North-East Resurgent, Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governance, Development*, Konark Publishers, Delhi (1996), p. 1.
2. Therefore, it does not make any sense to have an organization or institute like the North-Eastern Council (NEC), since it cannot play a role of being more than a budgetary allocation body. It does not function like a state in a command system. The central budgetary allocation is sufficient for the purpose. So, why are so many resources being wanted on an institute like the NEC, which does not have any role in development?
3. See Barua and Bandyopadhyay, 'Structural Change, Economic Growth and Regional Disparity in the North-East: Regional and National Perspectives' in this volume.
4. The literacy rate among the north-east states, except for Arunachal Pradesh, is above the national average of 62 per cent in 1997. It is above 95 per cent for Mizoram.
5. See, Barua and Bandyopadhyay in this volume.
6. By unification of markets, one does not mean political unification, since that is neither necessary, nor sufficient for the enlargement of the size of the market. Better transport facilities and communication would do this job.
7. Commenting on an earlier version of this paper Dr Hiren Gohain observed that the absence of metropolitan centre in the north-east is not so surprising given the fact that these metropolitan centres were largely creation of the East India Company that functioned from seventeenth century onwards. True, but the relevant point for us is that the same East India Company that had entered into the north-east during the early nineteenth century had failed to play the same role in the north-east that it had played in other parts of India despite the fact that tea exports from the region was flourishing by leaps and bounds by the end of the century. Further, independent India also did not try to break the hegemony of the big metropolis.
8. The history of the development of transport in the north-east is a sad reflection of the Centre's total indifference to the region. Assam's trade with Bengal, Bihar and Orissa was mainly carried on by river transport in the early times. The colonial government in 1847, established the steamer service in the Brahmaputra between Calcutta and Gauhati (960 km.). In the year 1856, the steamer service was extended from Gauhati to Dibrugarh. In 1863, there was only one trip per month that connected Assam with Calcutta. S.B. Medhi, *Transport System and Economic Development in Assam*, Guwahati: Publication Board Assam, 1978, pp. 19-20.

There were no reliable and convenient overland routes. Me Cosh, *Topography of Assam*, Calcutta, 1837, pp. 8-9.

The Assam Bengal Railway in 1895, connected Assam with the outside world for the first time. The total distance covered by the railway, during the British period was approximately 1,523 km. Independent India's contribution to the railway, up to 1970 was only about 400 km. As a result, even today there are no railway lines connecting the north-east states with each other and also with the Indian mainland.

The only bridge that connected upper Assam and other north-eastern states through railway with the rest of India, was available only after the Chinese aggression in 1962. Interestingly, it was the result of persistent political movements by the students of the north-east states. Air travel facilities are virtually non-existent in many north-east states and for those states which have an air connection, they are with the metropolis outside the region.

9. The north-east's share of the border with the mainland of the country is only 2 per cent and that with the international border, i.e. Bangladesh, China, Myanmar and Bhutan is 98 per cent. See Map 5.
10. On the question of unification of the states Hiren Gohain has questioned 'the feasibility of such a proposal' in his comments on an earlier version of the paper. He thinks that '... political will among the states will not be strong in support of such an idea'. This is indeed a legitimate point. But then our concern here is the 'logic' but not the 'feasibility' of unification although it is true that logic by itself is meaningless if the proposal is not feasible. Our answer would be that 'feasibility' is only a temporal problem. A strong logic may overrun political infeasibility as it happened in the Europe today.
11. See B.K. Kakati, *Assamese, its formation and Development*, published by the Govt. of Assam in the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, N.H. Historical Institute, Guwahati, 1941, pp. 1-3.
12. See, op. cit., p. 3.
13. See, op. cit., p. 4.
14. A stream of immigrants from Burma invaded Assam in the early thirteenth century and established its kingdom in the north-eastern part of India. These immigrants called themselves *Tai* (meaning 'celestial origin') but were popularly known as the Ahoms. They belonged to the Shan dynasty. They ruled over Assam from the thirteenth century, till the British came to occupy the region in 1826. The name of the first Ahom King was *Sukapha* who had established the Ahom Kingdom in 1228. See Edward Gait (revised and enlarged by B.K. Barua and H.V.S. Murthy), *A History of Assam*, Calcutta: Thacker Spink and Co. Pvt. Ltd., 1933, pp. 77-8. The capital of the Ahom Kingdom was built at Charaideo in the thirteenth century, but it was later shifted to Garhgaon (in Sibsagar district) in the sixteenth century. Initially, they tried to consolidate their rule in Upper Assam by bringing various

tribes such as the Morans, Borahis, Kacharis and Chutias, etc., under their rule.

The boundary of the Ahom Kingdom or the Kingdom of Assam, 'embraced the whole of the north-east of the Indian subcontinent from the sources of the Brahmaputra to the river Karatoya and from the bottom of the Himalayas to the Hills of Surma and Subansiri valley. *They were so powerful that the kingdom they carved out for themselves came to be associated with their name as a nation.*' N.N. Acharya, *The History of Medieval Assam*, Guwahati: Dutta Baruah & Co., 1996, pp. 41-2. See Map 1.

15. In the words of the noted linguistic scholar B.K. Kakati, 'Though they [the Ahoms] constituted a ruling race for about six hundred years (1228-1824 A.D.), they gave up their language and religion in favour of Aryan habits and customs and their absorption was so complete that they contributed only a few words to Assamese vocabulary'.
16. As Kakati puts it, 'In the Ahom court, historical chronicles were at first composed in their original Tibeto-Chinese language, but when the Ahom rulers adopted Assamese as the court language, historical chronicles began to be written in Assamese'. See Kakati, p. 14.
17. Assamese literature grew and flourished in western Assam under the patronage of the kings of either Kamatapura or Koch Bihar. See Kakati, p. 14. See Map 1.
18. Before the invasion of the Ahoms, there was a powerful kingdom in the north-eastern part of the Indian subcontinent known as Kamarupa. It included roughly almost the whole region of the Brahmaputra valley, besides Rangpur, Bhutan, Coochbihar, Mymensingha and the Garo Hills. See S.K. Bhuyan, ed. *Kamrupar Buranji*, 2nd edn., Guwahati, 1958 p. 97; Gait, pp. 10-11.

During the times of the *Mahabharata*, it was known as Pragjyotishpur; but in the Puranas and the Tantras, it was referred to as Kamrupa. See Gait, p. 10.

By the beginning of the thirteenth century, the boundary between Kamrupa and the Muslim ruler of Bengal was the river Karatoya or Begmati. The eastern boundary was up to Nowgong. The subsequent history of Kamrup was the continued clash between various kings of Kamrup and the Muslims. N.N. Acharya, *The History of Medieval Assam*, p. 134.

19. The western part of the Brahmaputra valley, which was a part of the ancient Kamrupa, formed a single kingdom during the thirteenth century known as Kamata or Kamatapur. Hussain Shah overthrew the last representative of the Kamata dynasty, Nilambar, in 1498. See Gait, pp. 43-4.
20. The Koches are well spread out in Assam and Bengal. See Gait, pp. 47-70.

In the early sixteenth century, the Koches established a powerful kingdom on the ruins of the Kamata. Bisva Singh, the first Koch King, rose to power in 1515 and his kingdom was as far as to the river Karatoya in the west and the Bar Nadi in the east. However, towards the end of the century, the kingdom was broken into two – Koch Bihar and Koch Hajo. Koch Bihar became a vassal of the Mughal empire in 1596. Later, the Mughals also annexed Koch Hajo. See Gait, p. 67.

There were frequent wars between the Ahoms and the Muhammadans and in 1638, peace was negotiated between the Ahoms and the Mughals. The country, west of the Bar Nadi was given up to the Muhammadans and the Ahoms were given the rest of the eastern part of the Koch kingdom. See Map 1.

21. The Kacharis are the aboriginal people of the Brahmaputra valley. In the thirteenth century, the Kachari kingdom was extended along the south bank of the Brahmaputra, from the Dikhu to the Kallang, or beyond, and included also, the valley of the Dhansiri and the tract of the North Cachar subdivision. See Gait, p. 300.
22. The dominions of Jaintia included the Jaintia hills and the plains of Sylhet district. There was no difference between the inhabitants of the Khasi, and those of the Jaintia hills. See Gait, p. 311.
23. The Chutiyas are found chiefly in Lakhimpur and the adjacent part of Sibsagar.
24. The hilly tract inhabited by various tribes called collectively as Nagas had never been under the dominion of the Ahoms. See Gait, p. 366.

However, by the end of the nineteenth century, the British brought certain parts of Nagaland under its control.

25. The Garo hill was a part of Goalpara during the first few years of the British rule. In 1869, a separate district was formed with its headquarters in Tura.
26. The term Lushai refers to the *Zomi* of the Lushai hills, which is situated to the south of the Surama valley. It was Mr Edger, the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar who first officially used the term 'Lushai' instead of 'Zomi' around the year 1897.

The Lushais have changed their name to *Mizo* in 1946.

27. Sankardeva was born in Nowgong but could not live there because of the opposition of the Ahoms. He fled to Koch Bihar where he died at the age of 120 years.
28. What had constrained unification of markets needs more careful historical analysis. One view however is that (i) inefficient Ahom economic institutions and (ii) the impact of the Vaishara teacher on social values were responsible for lack of developmental spirit and market formation in the region (see Barua, 'The Rise and Decline of the Ahom Dynastic Rule' in this volume).
29. See Barua, 'The Rise and Decline . . .', in this volume.

30. Ibid.
31. See for details A. Barua, 'History, Trade and Development: The Assamese Experience', in this volume.
32. Ibid., p. 438.
33. Sanjib Baruah, *India Against itself: Assam and the Politics & Nationality*: Oxford, New Delhi 1999. p. 21.
34. The Brahmaputra valley can be partitioned into two divisions – the Upper Assam and Lower Assam. The present districts of Goalpara, Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Barpeta, Guwahati, Nalbari and Darrang constitute Lower Assam. The rest of the valley is known as Upper Assam. See, A. Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity and Economy*, Calcutta and New Delhi: K.P. Bagchi & Co., 1991, p. 28.
35. To quote S.K. Bhuyan, 'The kingdom of Assam, as it was constituted during the last 140 years of Ahom rule, was bounded on the north by a range of mountains inhabited by the Bhutanese, Akas, Duflas and Abors; on the east, by another line of hills peopled by the Mishmis and Singphos; on the south, by the Garo, Khasi, Naga and Patkai hills; and on the west, by the Manas or Manaha river on the north bank, and the Habraghat Perganah on the south in the Bengal district of Rungpore. The kingdom where it was entered from Bengal commenced from the Assam Choky on the north bank of the Brahmaputra, opposite Goalpara; while on the south bank it commenced from the Nagarbera hill at a distance of 21 miles to the east of Goalpara. The kingdom was about 500 miles in length with an average breadth of 60 miles.' See, S.K. Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations*, 1974, p. 1. See Map 2.
36. See, Map 4, Assam, 1950.
37. Historically, Sylhet was a part of ancient Kamrupa. During the times of the Koch rule, Naranarayan annexed it. See, S.K. Bhuyan, p. 27.
However, Sylhet was never been a part of Assam as it was known prior to 1874. It was made a part of the Assam province by the British in 1874. See Gait, p. 326.
38. See, Map 3, Assam under the jurisdiction of the Chief Commissioner, 1875, in Baruah, op. cit., p. 23.
39. By the Treaty of Yandabo, which was signed on 24 February 1826, the British forces expelled the Burmese from Assam for good and brought the entire region under the effective control of the East India Company. However, the Company Bahadur at the very initial phase was a bit indecisive about ruling and administering the entire region. Instead, the Company has decided to consolidate its power in a gradual and selective manner. For instance, Assam was divided into two divisions – Western Assam and Eastern Assam, which later on were called 'Lower Assam' and 'Upper Assam' respectively – and it took full possession of the Lower Assam on 7 March 1828. In July 1831, Lord William Bentinck

passed a formal order that Upper Assam should be restored to Purandar Singh, a Ahom prince and Sadiya must be maintained as a British post. In October 1838, the Upper Assam was brought under the full control of the British resulting in the final eclipse of the Ahom rule. See for detail *AHA*, pp. 341-70; *AAR*, pp. 551-77.

40. The phrase 'Ahom Assam' is often used to emphasize the association of the name Assam with the Ahoms. This view has however been contested by many. According to Gait, the name Assam was derived from the Sanskrit word *asama*. The Ahoms called themselves as Tai but the local tribes in admiration of their power called them as *asama* or 'unequaled' or 'peerless. In the course of time, the softening of the 's' to 'h', led to the change of Assam to Aham or Ahom. See, Gait, Appendix G.

According to the noted linguistic Kakati, *Asama* may be a later Sanskritization of an earlier form like Acham, which originated from the Tai word Veham (meaning to be defeated) with the Assamese prefix 'A' (meaning undefeated).

The important point to be noted here, is that there is some association between the terms Assam and Ahoms.

41. See Gait, p. 365.
 42. *Ibid.*, p. 366.
 43. See S.K. Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations (AAR)*, p. 47.
 44. Gait, p. 366.
 45. The Ahoms never tried to impose their culture on those they conquered, nor did they ever try to extend their racial interests through expansion. They, on the contrary, got themselves completely assimilated with the local culture. That is why, they were found concentrated only in Sibsagar and Dibrugarh districts of Assam. See, B.K. Kakati, p. 52.
 46. See Gait, p. 367.
 47. See *AAR*, p. 45.
 48. *Ibid.*, p. 570.
 49. See Gait, p. 350.
 50. See also, B. Pakem, 'State Formation in Pre-Colonial Jaintia'; and Hamlet Bareh, 'Khasi-Jaintia State Formation', in Surajit Sinha, ed., *Tribal Politics and State Systems in Pre-Colonial Eastern and North Eastern India*, Calcutta: Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, K.P. Bagchi & Company, 1987.
 51. *Ibid.*, p. 314.
 52. *Ibid.*, pp. 182-3.
 53. *Ibid.*, p. 185.
 54. *Ibid.*, p. 358.
 55. See F.K. Lehman, *The Structure of the Chin Society*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963, p. 35; J. Shakespeare, *Lushai Kuki Clans*, London: Macmillan and Co., 1912, B.B. Goswami, 'The Mizos in the Context of State Formation', in Surajit Sinha, ed., *Tribal Politics*

- and State Systems in Pre-Colonial Eastern and North Eastern India. Also, AAR, p. 46.
56. See Gait, p. 356.
 57. See J.B. Bhattacharjee, 'Dimasa State Formation in Cachar', in Surajit Sinha, ed., *Tribal Politics and State Systems in Pre-Colonial Eastern and North Eastern India*.
 58. They were also called Kacharis.
 59. The Bodos are also known as the original inhabitants of the Assam valley.
 60. He was a Naga chief, who became a convert to Hinduism, taking the name Gharib Nawaz. E.A. Gait, *History of Assam*, p. 322.
 61. Gait, pp. 321-5.
 62. Ibid., pp. 400-2.
 63. See AAR, p. 27.
 64. Ibid., p. 260.
 65. See, Sanjib Baruah, op. cit., p. 97.
 66. The process of the break-up of Assam began in 1963, with the creation of Nagaland as an independent state. Meghalaya in 1970 and Mizoram in 1972, were separated from Assam. NEFA was initially brought under the direct control of the External Affairs Ministry, and was then transferred to the Home Ministry. In 1972, NEFA was renamed as a Union Territory and it was subsequently made a separate state in 1987. See Map 5, which represents the present Assam.

SECTION I

PRAGJYOTISHPUR TO
THE END OF THE AHOM
PERIOD, AD 1826

PAST IS PROLOGUE*

Surprising as it may sound, the extent of internationalization of the economy and society of ancient Assam, was far advanced than the rest of India, both ethnically as well as economically. Ancient Assam, in fact reveals itself as similar to what is being prescribed for the state today.

Indeed, as H.P. Ray points out, ancient Assam was linked by land routes to China and South-East Asia, and trade with these economies flourished. Additionally, even where ethnic diversity is concerned, Ray points out that the epics indicate that Assam, even during those days, was an exception to the general rule of ethnic homogeneity. However, trade was not overland in total, and there is evidence that ancient Pragjyotishpur also engaged in maritime commerce.

As to how Assam has gained from the continuous inflow of migrants/peoples is described by Amalendu Guha who shows how the Tai migration introduced wet rice cultivation, transforming the slash and burn cultivation of rice into a practice that was far more productive and sustainable. Guha also demonstrates that the contribution was not restricted to agricultural practices alone. The Tai also introduced participatory/communal infrastructure building on a grand scale, when it came to the construction of dykes and embankments. This gave rise to the distribution of water, necessary to support wet rice cultivation.

The decline of the Ahoms was inbuilt in their strategy of survival. Alokesh Barua points out that the Ahoms tried to keep their culturally-united subjects, divided by avoiding economic integration and growth. The lack of the 'will to grow' was reflected in the absence of a strong, standing army that could protect the Ahom State from internal disorder. Thus, opposition from a supposedly non-martial movement of the Vaishnavas in the form of the Moamaria revolt, the rebellion of the Prince of Darrang, the raids of the Burkendazes, self-assertations by local chiefs and raids by the frontier tribes were enough to bring down the six-century-old kingdom.

*These words are engraved on the pediment of the Archives Building in Washington.

The Silk Route from North-East India to China and the Bay of Bengal: Some New Lights

HARPRASAD RAY

Assam is the product of the Brahmaputra valley civilization. In the wider context, Assam belongs to that great trans-Himalayan multinational habitat which is watered and nurtured by the Brahmaputra in India, the Chang jiang (Yangtse) in China and the Mekong river, which is the lifeline of South-East Asia. The Mekong river originates near the fountainhead of the Yangtse on the Tangle range (on Qinghai-Tibet border) with the name Langcangjiang and changes into Mekong, as soon as it flows out of the Yunnan province of south-west China. It then flows through Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Kampuchea; and enters the Pacific ocean from Vietnam.

The Brahmaputra is another international river of this trinity, travelling along the Himalayan heights as the Tsangpo, it reincarnates in India as the son of Brahma (or mountain if we take Brahma as a variant of the Thai Kampuchean word *phram* = *phnam*, i.e. mountain), and flows into the Bay of Bengal through Bangladesh as the Jamuna.

There is yet another international river called Nujiang which also originates from the Tangle mountain. It flows from Yunnan into the Bay of Bengal through Myanmar as the Salween river.

As we cut across these rivers from the Himalayas, it is difficult, not to conceive the entire valleys of the five rivers (include also the Ganga) as an integral trans-Himalayan region. This is a marvellous land, gifted to man by nature. This is a region which is one of the centres of the world, a region that is occupied by nearly one-half of the world's population. In ancient times, this was the largest natural zoo and botanical garden on the earth, with nearly half its flora and fauna originating in this area. Most parts of this region today, is one

of the poorest and most backward areas on the globe. But, given a chance, nearly two billion minds here will transform their homelands into a paradise on earth. And the chance will surely come! Assam is a vital link between the east and the west, between the north and south of this trans-Himalayan world.

Scholars are increasingly inclined to believe that the foothills of the Himalayas and its surrounding areas is one of the cradles of the birth of humankind. The presence of the fossils of both the Rama Ape and Austro Ape in China (and in the Punjab), that too, so close to the Himalayan range suggests that this area is one of the earliest homes of species resembling humankind.¹ The discovery of the Yuanmou Human has provided us with a Himalayan species, that who was as old as, if not older than the Lantian Human discovered in Shaanxi (Shensi) province in the Yellow River valley of China.² This virtually extended the cradle of Chinese civilization from the Yellow River valley, further down south to the Himalayan foothills. Scholars believe that it is only a matter of time that early species of human apes would be discovered in areas of this region that are a part of India.³

The entire Gangetic belt is well-documented as an international and domestic trading centre in local archeological finds and in various literary sources dating earlier than 400 BC. The discovery of pre-Christian instances of Roman coins and other evidences, including the recently-studied Kharoshti and Kharoshti-Brahmi script inscriptions dated AD 100 to AD 500 found in lower Bengal, provide ample proof regarding trade, a substantial part of which might have gone via the sea route, simultaneously with the land route. Early Kushana coinage from Bengal and the Indo-China peninsula and the prevalence of Mahayana Buddhism in the ancient kingdom of Funan (Indo-China) as early as the fifth century when the entire South-East Asian insular as well as the peninsular region was under the sway of Hinayana Buddhism, show traffic through the overland route from eastern and north-eastern India to the Indo-Chinese peninsula, reinforcing the prevailing view that the early Mahayana monks like Dharmabodhi and others entered China through north-east India.⁴ During the construction of the Farakka barrage, numerous materials and artifacts of daily use and structural remains found on both the banks of the river Ganga, attest the site as having flourished as early as the fourth century BC onwards.⁵ The textile trade of Bengal, which included Chinese silks, must have contributed to the prosperity of the area. The areas find mention in Xuan Zang's travel account (Da Tang Xiyu Ji, j. X.) under the name *Ga-chu-wen-qi-luo* (Kajangala)⁶

such strong and flourishing hinterland prove the link of other parts of India with Assam, Arunachal, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Manipur in north-east India.

RICE CULTIVATION AND SERICULTURE

Only in Asia, has wild rice been cultivated and the earliest homes of rice cultivation must be either in India, China or South-East Asia. One of the rice species has been found in the neolithic cultures discovered in Yunnan, Jiangxi, Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces of China. Jiangxi has recently been confirmed as one of the earliest homes of rice cultivation.⁷ This latest research may supplement the earlier findings of the Rice Research Institute in Manila that the earliest home of rice lies in north-east India.⁸ It is possible that rice cultivation spread to other parts of India from Assam and other north-east regions.

Assam's trans-Himalayan linkage can be ascertained through its linguistic and racial connection. The great Indian joint family is made up of four major members:⁹ Aryan, Dravidian, Austric and Mongoloid. All the four elements have merged into one stream in north-east India. The Mongoloid Indo-Mongoloid was *Kirata* or *Cina kirata*. All, except the Aryan element, can be treated as trans-Himalayan elements. It is amply clear that a cultural confluence between the Indo-European and trans-Himalayan currents have given birth to the Indian civilization and its rich varieties which we see today, and throughout eastern India, one can recognize the contributions made by the trans-Himalayan Indo-Mongoloids such as the Newars, the Koch, the Kachari, the Tipra and other Bodo peoples, the Ahoms, the Jaintias and the Manipuris.¹⁰

Tantricism is another factor, which forms a bond between the north-eastern region, Tibet, Nepal and south China.¹¹ The Kamakhya hill and Umananda in Guwahati on the southern bank of the Brahmaputra are important centres of the Tantra cult. The famous story regarding friendship between the King of Kamrup, Kumar Bhaskara Varma (about AD 600-50) and the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang shows traces of the historical development of this cult. Xuanzang was surprised that Bhaskara Varma had already had some knowledge about the heroic Tang Prince Li Shimin who is known as Emperor Taizong (AD 626-49). Some scholars believe that Xuanzang has translated *Laozi* or *Daode Jing* (Tao Te-Ching) into Sanskrit at the request of King Bhaskara Varma.¹² If this was true, it would establish the connection between the later Tantra cult in India. This is further

strengthened by the fact that at least two of the eighteen *Sakta siddhas* of south India who propagated tourism and medicine in eastern India¹³ were associated with the Indian tantric followers.

The close proximity of the locales in the trans-Himalayan region, has created cultural affinities in the entire area throughout history. This cultural nearness is surely the result of frequent economic contacts among various peoples in the region. We have indelible marks of cultural affinity, but trade and other economic activities among them, have evaded the notice of modern historians. Thus, cultural affinity helps us restore economic contacts in a concrete manner and put things in the right perspective for future programmes.

We know that China is the motherland of sericulture. But the fact is that Assam was the second country that developed this industry, side-by-side with China. This fact remains largely unknown. If Assam acquired the know-how from China, then it was surely through southwest China. However, one believes that Assamese silk is a native product, developed quite early from the wild variety grown in this region. This is evident from several facts. When Kautilya, one of the earliest to mention Chinese silk, spoke of *cinapatta*, he definitely meant silk produced in China. This means that *patta* a variety of Indian silk was already known to our ancestors. This is verified by the fact that silk is still today known as *pat* in Assam, although in Bengal it means hemp, jute, flaxen (corrupted as *patua* in Bihar). It is possible that silk came to Bengal and other parts of eastern India much later by which time, they had already started growing hemp, the name *pat* was given to hemp, because it has the look and partially the quality of Assamese silk (*pat*). By the third or the fourth century AD, we had various names for cultivated silk. It was known as *angsuka*, *kauseya*, etc. The name *cinapatta* disappears completely and is replaced by *cinangsuka*. The Assamese, however, preferred to cling to the original name, *patta* = *pata* = *pata*.¹⁴ One may like to presume that a part of the consignment that was sent out from the Indian ports in the past contained Assamese silk also. Since, 'patta' silk originated in Assam, the name remained unchanged in Assamese language whereas we do not find this name in this sense in other Indian languages except in Tamil (called) *Pattu* or *Patta*. On the other hand, Assam did not adopt any of the other words for silk current in Sanskrit in its colloquial expression.

By AD 700, Assam's silk industry had reached its pinnacle of perfection. Banabhatta, the author of *Harsa Caritam* (the Biography of

Harsa) informs us that the King of Kamrup, Bhaskara Varma, presented to Harsavardhana silken towels which were described as 'silken towels as pure as the autumn moon's night . . . soft loin cloths smooth as birch barks, . . . bundles contained in sacks of woven silk and consisting of black aloe dark as pounded collyrium (Krisnagurutaila)'.¹⁵ We have enough proof to substantiate that direct trade existed between north-east India, and south and south-west China. Historical records from China tell us how the Chinese Emperor Wu, attempted to open up the trade route from the capital to north-east India, through the hostile independent local rulers of Yunnan and the adjoining areas but failed.¹⁶ If trade did not exist in the region, then these rulers would probably not have resisted the Han traders – they would have rather welcomed the prospect of commercial transaction with them. The ruler of Yunnan's jealousy on the establishment of direct trade between China and India at the cost of his own profit that he would have earned, as the middleman, prevented the Chinese from gaining access to India;¹⁷ but the trade in *cinapatta* (otherwise known to the Chinese as the cloth of Sichuan province of China) and the Yunnan square bamboo continued unabated.

The Chinese Emperor was so keen to open up the route to north-east India, that he embarked upon conquering Yunnan, but failed.¹⁸ Yunnan was annexed by China during the reign of the Han Emperor Ming (AD 58 till AD 75). After the Chinese administrators took over the country, they discovered foreign settlers of many countries at Yunnan, including Indians (*Shendu*, which means Sindhu or Juandu Janbudvipa) and the Garos of Meghalaya.¹⁹ This means that the Indians, both from the plains and the hills, visited this area for the purpose of trade.

Cowries have been used in east India as currency from very early times. The Tang annals, *Jiu Tangshu*, has alluded to this, showing that the Chinese had known it before AD 900.²⁰ This was also the case in south China. Scholars have studied and compared its history with those of Assam and Yunnan.²¹ There is a record in a Chinese text that mentions cowries as products of Xiao Poluomenguo (Brahmana desa Minor) which could be referring to the source of the import of cowries into China.²² The name suggests that it was not 'India proper', a likely reference to eastern India, east of the Ganga which was considered to be outside the pale of Vedic influence. It is a well-known fact that cowries were an important import of Yunnan from India during the older days.²³ Both Yunnan and Sichuan provinces have

been good markets for Indian precious and semi-precious stones – the fact being frequently testified till this day because of archaeological discoveries made in recent years.²⁴

Excavations carried out at Ambari near Guwahati in Assam yielded some precious celadon ceramic wares (of later days) and pottery made out of *kaolin* (Chinese clay from early times). Guwahati was a flourishing river port along with Pandu, near Kamakhya, in the past. These two Assamese river ports must have attracted a large number of commodities from China, in exchange of native products.²⁵

The accepted theory among international scholars on the advent of Buddhism in China is that it was first introduced to China not through Central Asia, but through Burma (Myanmar) and Yunnan in an era before Christ. Also, it is rumoured that it was Ashoka's son Mahendra, who first introduced Buddhism into south-west China. He is supposed to have carried the ash urn with him. Recently, a Buddhist ash urn (*sarira*) was discovered in a casket, from under the base of a broken pagoda that scholars believe to be the *sarira* (*sali* in Chinese) brought into China by Mahendra or the earliest carrier of Buddhism. This view was expressed by authentic Chinese experts including the Director of the Famen Si Monastery Museum during the International Symposium on Xuanzang Studies, held from 16 to 22 April 1994 in Luoyang and Xian, the birthplace of Xuanzang and capital the erstwhile Chinese capitals respectively.²⁶

It is even speculated that the two legendary Indian monks, Kasyapa Matanga and Dharmaratna entered China through the Yunnan Sichuan route to Luoyang.²⁷ Such views need to be supported by documentary or archaeological evidence to become historical facts. But, there is no denying that Yunnan was being under the influence of Buddhism at a very early date, which could be prior to the advent of Buddhism in north China through Central Asia. This also provides an indirect evidence of the ongoing trade and cultural contacts between Assam and its surrounding areas.²⁸

Scholars have been debating on the possible existence of a historical highway between the ancient Pragjyotisha Kamrup and China through Burma. Some scholars, however, think that the evidences are too fragmented to draw firm conclusions about a well-established trade route.²⁹

This opposite view is based on secondary references and seem to be prejudiced against the rich, cultural heritage of north-east India. In our opinion, a well-established trade link in history, may not be

always recorded or written down. Recorded history mainly reveals what is amenable to the powers-that-be. Other borderline events, or events that do not directly favour the great emperors, are generally ignored. These linkages can be verified today, through what is now known as subaltern studies. While in China, we have to rely on unofficial histories and private accounts. It is in this context that we have to accept the fact that many great historical events are reconstructed today with the help of fragmented information, and in case of the Assam-Myanmar-Yunnan highway, we are gradually confronted with discoveries that are difficult to deny.³⁰ It is true that this route is difficult to be trodden today, with modern means of transport shying away from this path? However, during ancient times, people depended on destiny and yet hazarded the dangers of trade routes in water and land in the East. Ironically today, there exists a golden triangle of drug trafficking and other smuggling activities, despite hard conditions of journey.³¹ The Nagas and other illegal elements continue to journey to Myanmar, China and further north. This is no longer a secret. If much of what is happening on the ground escapes documentation in this age of electronics and photoelectric cables, we must take the historical highway for granted in the absence of well-preserved historical documentation.³²

Those who doubt the existence of a north-eastern route to China, are ignorant about the history of ethnic migration from different areas of China and South-East Asia to north-east India. Ethnic contacts and movements have continued since the dawn of human civilization throughout the ancient trans-Himalayan interface.³³

THE SAGA OF THE AHOMS

The Ahoms of Assam, known as the Tai Shans (the Burmese called the Yunnanese Tais on the northern Burmese border as Shans) followed the old route through the Patkai Range from Maulung in the Hukong valley in Upper Burma and arrived at Tipam near the coal town of Mergherita in the eastern Brahmaputra valley around AD 1252.³⁴ A branch of it had even migrated to Assam, Cacher, Tripura and Manipur, as early as AD 800.³⁵ The Tai people were distributed all over from Yunnan to the southernmost extremity of Thailand.

For various reasons, both topographical and political, this route had to be supplemented or replaced by an alternative route passing through Tibet into India. It is even presumed by some scholars that

the *shubu* (Sichuan fabric) and quing-bamboo (from Yunnan) that Zhang Qian found in Bactria in the 200 BC, may have been traded through the shorter and easier way, via Tibet.³⁶ We cannot say with certainty if this route was used in this particular instance, but we have definite proof of the route being used during the Tang and later periods. During the region of the Qing dynasty (the British period in India) both the Tibetan and the Bhutanese trade routes were used by people from both sides, for the exchange, buying and selling of goods. Apart from the Nathula pass which led into India directly from Lhasa, Shigatse, Gyantse, Yadung and Phari, there were three other routes, two via Bhutan, the first from Tashi Lumpo (Tibet) through Paro Pilo (Bhutan) to the Buxa near present-day Alipur Duar in North Bengal from where Rangpur town in Bangladesh was approached; the second by the valley of the Monas river via Tassgong and Dewan-giri and Hajo, north of Guwahati in the foothills; the third took the eastern course of the Tsangpo (Brahmaputra as known in Tibet) and passed through Zedang, Tawang and further on to Hajo.³⁷

Trade and communication was (and still is) entirely carried on by the Tibetans only and a few of the Bhutanese (known as the Bhutias). They brought down principally red and partly-coloured blankets, gold dust and silver, rock salt, cowries (mostly Yak tail), musk, and Chinese silks, munjeet and bee-wax; these they exchanged in north-east India for rice lac, raw and manufactured silks of Assam, iron, cotton, dried fish and tobacco. Arriving here during winter, they took care to go back between February and March, before the return of the hot weather or rains.³⁸

The road north of Guwahati near Hajo, was an important passage to Tibet via Tawang (India), Cuona (Tsona) on the Tibet border, reaching Zedang, south of the Tsangpo and thence on to Lhasa from where the route spread eastward to Chamdo, the all-weather route to China through Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan. The importance of this road is confirmed by the fact that the Muslim conqueror of Bengal, Muhammad-i-Bakhtiyar chose this route to Tibet in his wild dream of conquering the roof of the world around AD 1202.³⁹ The second invasion by Sultan Ghiyasuddin I, probably took place during the last month of AD 1226.⁴⁰ These incidents corroborate the fact that the invaders chose this route through north Assam, evidently due to the fact that this was the prevalent route negotiated by traders both from Tibet and China on the north, and other parts of India in the south.

According to Taranath (author of *Rising of Indian Dharma*) who

lived in early thirteenth-century Tibet, painters, priests and scholars of Bihar and Bengal fled to Assam, Arakan and even to such far away places as Cambodia in South-East Asia, after the massive invasion of Bakhtiar Khilji.⁴¹ This account shows that the routes to the sea through Arakan, and to Cambodia, etc., along the shores of the Pacific ocean and the south China sea, were still being used by people of various descriptions.⁴²

The Ahom migration to Assam is another convincing proof of constant use of the north-eastern route to China. Sukapha, the leader of the Ahoms was not the first adventurer to follow the Patkai route. It is learnt from Assamese sources that some Mao-Shans (some time in the sixth century AD) crossed the Sri Lohit (Irrawaddy) and entered the country called Prophanpau (Puphangpom), which might be somewhere in the northern foothill of the Patkai and subduing the native people, consolidated the power of the Mao-Shans there.⁴³ The Khunlung (AD 568–638) one of the two ancestors of the Tai-Ahoms, ruled over a vast empire extending from Chiong Mai in northern Siam in the east to the vicinity of the Lohit (Brahmaputra) in the west.⁴⁴ It is possible that during this period, some Tais and non-Tais like the Mons and the Chinese migrated to north-east India through the Patkai pass. These immigrants possibly took the shortest and the easiest route to the Patkai. But the Ahoms led by Sukapha, having mainly followed the river courses, the route of their migration was possibly not exactly the same with the one followed by these people.

It appears that a few years before Sukapha's advent in the Brahmaputra valley, Sam-long-pha, the brother and general of the Mao-Shan monarch Su-kan-pha, conquered Manipur, Cacher and Upper Assam. According to Ney Elias, Sam-long-pha led his first expedition to Manipur,⁴⁵ advancing probably from the Lushai Hills (Mizo Hills) and Tripura from northern Arakan, and as pointed out by Robinson, he first captured the capital of Cacher and 'returning thence he descended into the Manipur valley'.⁴⁶ During his Assam expedition, he marched by the way of the Mali valley into Khamti-Long on the east of the Chindwin river. He occupied Khamti-Long and established there, the rule of the Mao-Shans. From Khamti-Long he entered Upper Assam, then ruled by the Chutiyas, defeated and compelled them to pay him annual tribute.⁴⁷ According to Pemberton⁴⁸ and Phayre,⁴⁹ Sam-long-pha conquered Cacher and Tripura in addition to Manipur. Pemberton is of the opinion that having conquered Tripura, he marched back across the hills and descended into the

Manipur valley near Moirrang, on the western bank of the Logtak lake.⁵⁰ The chronicles of Manipur also make mention of Sam-long-pha's expedition.⁵¹ This makes it clear that besides the Assam-Burma route via Manipur, which was better known, there were also routes connecting north-east India with Burma and China through the Lushai Hills and Tripura. Whether Sam-long-pha crossed the Patkai hills through the Panchou pass or the Bissa pass, is not exactly known but his march to Upper Assam a few years ahead of Sukapha, inspired the latter to undertake the adventure.⁵²

The hazardous journey from Upper Burma to Upper Assam via the Patkai hills is, however, learnt in detail from a later source. Chang Ang, a chieftain of the village Mung Yang, who accompanied the Burmese contingent on its first invasion of Assam in AD 1817, has left a comprehensive account of the advance of the army from Mung Kwang till its arrival at Jorhat, then capital of the Ahoms, via the Patkai pass. The chronicle is written in Tai-Ahom and is entitled *Weissali (Assam) Hukong*.⁵³ According to sources, it took two weeks to reach Mung Khong (Mung-Kham) from Mung Yang via Mung-Kong. The army had to pass through dense forests and marshes and cross many stream and rivers. The area was inhabited by the Singphos, who were friendly to the Burmese invaders. Advancing from Mung Khong, the army reached the Tanai river and after crossing it, arrived at the territory of Bisanong, the chief of the Singphos of the area. Halting there for nine days, the army resumed its march and crossed the river Talung (Turung) which was a very difficult task. Then, moving towards the west, they reached the bank of the river Jalip. Meanwhile, the soldiers suffered from painful water sores, having had to march through the terrain hills, muddy swamps and cross rivers with strong currents. At last, they reached the bank of the river Nam-Tawa and then the Jaga hills, which were known in Burmese as Khong Tong or the western hills. Along these hills, the army made its way westward to Weissali or Assam. Thereafter, crossing the rivers Khojong and Loklai, they reached the Patkai hills. The Loklai River had such strong and swift currents and split rocks hidden under its surface, that many soldiers fell into them and lost their lives.

Crossing the Patkai ridges with the horses was very risky and difficult. In order to reach the top, one had to climb as many as eighteen ridges, nine small and nine big tones. From the summit, one could clearly see five roads girdling the mountain and passing through numerous rocks. The army had to continuously scale its way for

twelve days, at the end of which, it arrived on the banks of the Burhi Dihing in the valley of the Brahmaputra. Unable to withstand the hardships of the journey, many soldiers lost their lives. Six hundred years before this Burmese (Man) invasion, the Tai-Shans (Ahoms) while migrating to Assam, also followed almost the same route and were subjected to the same odds and hazards. It was again along this route that the Burmese army invaded Assam in AD 1819 and 1821, and were finally driven out of the Brahmaputra valley by the British troops in March 1823.⁵⁴

During their long reign spanning six centuries, the Ahoms maintained their contact with their homeland through this route. Towards the later part of their rule, they even established friendly relations with the Burmese. Marriage alliances were also made between the royal families of Assam and Mung-Kawng, and later, several Assamese princesses and maidens were married to the Burmese emperors and generals. In such alliances, there was an interchange of valuable gifts of choicest products of the respective countries which included silk, gold embroidered head-dresses, cross-bows, ivory products, horses and elephants. The royal brides from Assam were accompanied by hundreds of soldiers with their families, besides slaves and attendants to Ava.⁵⁵ Such events promoted cultural assimilation. Francis Hamilton informs us that slaves were sent from Assam to Mung-Kawng from where they were probably exported to Ava.⁵⁶

Initially, the Patkai route was under the surveillance of the Ahom government, route, but in AD 1401, by the terms of a formal treaty, the Patkai hill was fixed as the boundary between Assam and Mung-Kawng.⁵⁷ Thenceforth, this responsibility fell on the latter government which used to set up village or military settlements at every 12 or 15 miles along the route to ensure its safety.⁵⁸

Subsequently, numerous routes were opened up, connecting north-east India with China via Burma, Bhutan and Tibet. M'Cosh in his *Topography of Assam*, makes mention of five routes, of which three, namely, the one through the pass of the Dihing, the other through the Mishmi hills and the third through the Phungan pass to Manchee and China, were most notable.⁵⁹ The accounts of British officers like Mitchell⁶⁰ and Butler⁶¹ describe several routes connecting Assam with Burma and thence with China via the Naga hills, Manipur and the Lushai hills, some of which are being followed by present-day insurgents in the north-east to maintain cooperation with the Kachin Independence Army.⁶²

There were also numerous passes through the northern mountains of Assam leading to China, Afghanistan and the West, through Bhutan and Tibet. According to the *Tabaquat-i-Nasiri*, a Persian work of the late thirteenth century, there were as many as 35 passes between Assam and Tibet which led to China and through which horses were brought to Lakhnauti, the capital of Gauda in Bengal.⁶³ Of all these passes, the safest and the most convenient was the one which connected the two important marts, Chuona (Tsona) within the border of Tibet and Gegunshur, 6.4 km. away from Chuona within the border of Assam. Tibetan merchants carried silver bullion to the tune of Rs. 1 lakh, besides a considerable quantity of rock salt for sale to merchants in Assam and purchased from the latter, articles like rice, Assam silk, iron, lac, otterskins, buffalo horns and pearls.⁶⁴ Though this information is in regard to the eighteenth century, the nature and articles of trade were possibly the same in earlier times as well. The Singphos, on the other hand, followed the Assam-Burma route to China and managed to procure copper, silver, tin and other articles from that country and exchanged them with Assam silk, ivory, musk, manjit, madder, etc., at the frontier market at Sadiya.⁶⁵ To this mart, the Mishmis, the hill-Miris and the Abors (Nishis) brought gold, iron implements and woollen cloth from China.⁶⁶ These tribes maintained their contact with China through the Mishmi hill route. Along the route through Bhutan, horses and Chinese silk were imported to Assam from China and Tibet.⁶⁷

ASSAM-BHUTAN TRADE ROUTE⁶⁸

If we turn the pages of the history of Assam, we find proof of the Assam-Bhutan intercourse right from the period of the Salastambha rulers of Assam from the middle of AD 700 to the first quarter of AD 1000. With its capital at Tezpur (Hadappesvara), and its massive sculptural and architectural achievements, it must have exercised political authority and exerted cultural influence on its neighbour, Bhutan. The *Darrang Rajavanshavali*, and even a later work by Ashley Eden in his *Political Mission to Bhutan* confirm genealogical connections between the Koch kings and Bhutanese royalty.

Tradition associates many religious places of Assam with those of Bhutan. The Trivenighat Thaan, about 7 km. north of Kokrajhar in north-west Assam, perpetuates, the memory of the great Assamese Vaishnava preacher Madhava Deva, who was believed to have been

patronized by the Bhutanese king, which facilitated the conversion of a member of the Bhutanese royal family into Vaisnavism.

The *melas* and the fairs associated with religious festivals, also marked the social occasions where goods were exchanged between people assembled from various places in the surrounding areas of Assam. The present town of Udalguri in the Darrang district happened to be the venue of annual *mela* for Butanese trade, normally held between the dry season of January and mid-February each year, when the people combined socio-religious functions with trade. They came to this fair, via a road linking Bhairav Kunda in the north and Udalgiri, which was popularly known as the Bhutiya Road. The Bhutanese brought to the fair ponies, dogs, blankets, chillies, oranges, whisky, musk, *hing* (asafoetida), *jabrang*, etc., for sale and presumably purchased textiles and silks to wear, salt, perfumes and incenses. All the three districts of Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang are associated with Bhutan. Their visits even today, during winter to the Gupteswara Siva temple on the north bank of Brahmaputra, about 50 km. south-east of Udalguri, include the shaving of heads at a fixed point atop the hill nearby, and performing the *shradha* ceremony to their ancestors. They make their pilgrimage to Hindu temples in and around Guwahati, such as Asva-Kranta, Umananda (the seat of Siva), Kamakhya (the seat of the Mother Goddess), Siddheswar (at Sualkuchi), and also to the Buddhist temple of Hayagriva Madhava, considered the seat of Tathagata (Buddha). They understand the *Hayagriva* (horse-faced) Madhava to be a Buddhist image.⁶⁹

EXPORTS AND IMPORTS THROUGH THE AGES

Chinese sources give us an idea about the exchange of goods between north-east India and China during the ancient period.

Among the goods transported from Sichuan (south-west China) to India were, Sichuan cloth (silk or grass cloth known as *huangrun* in Chinese), square bamboo sticks (for use of mountain-dwellers), salt, iron, copper, iron, lead, tin, gold and silver and probably jade and agate.⁷⁰ Besides, north-eastern India also learnt to cultivate rice, sesame and tea bushes since very early times.⁷¹

The list of exports from India is interesting.⁷² India exported cotton or flax cloth (known as *bodie* in China), myrobalan, pineapple, jack-fruit, *cowries*, coloured glaze, precious stones, pearls, peacocks,

halcyons, elephants, and even orangutans to Sichuan. Some of the last few items, like pearls and precious stones were presumably from west and south India. The techniques of processing tea by rubbing with the hand and baking over the slow fire of a roaster emerged in China and were passed on to north-east India. It is quite possible, that a certain amount of tea bushes grew in India too, and that the local people used them as intoxicants or as an energizer by processing the leaves by hand before consuming them. The improved technique of processing tea, was learnt from the neighbouring parts of China.⁷³

The *Arthashastra* of Kautilya contains references to the silk of Assam. It mentions a place, Suvarnakudya, where excellent silk fabrics were produced.⁷⁴ Suvarnakudya has been almost correctly identified with Sonkudiha in the Kamrup district of Assam, 9 km. from Hajo, that remained an important mart for Tibeto-Indian and Bhutan-Indian trade till recent times.⁷⁵ The same area also produced a kind of perfume called *tailaparnika*,⁷⁶ *aguru* (agallochum, resin of aloe) sandalwood⁷⁷ and malabathrum (*tejpat*), all transported down the streams of the Brahmaputra and the Ganga for export to south India, Sri Lanka and western countries.⁷⁸

It seems that traditional trade during the entire medieval period has mainly been conducted through Tibet and the old items continued to be traded right up to the British period. Both the Bhutanese and the Tibetans carried their merchandise to northern Bengal at Rangpur and Hajo in Northern Assam.

The goods, imported from Bhutan were⁷⁹ *debang* (China silk), crow tails, hill ponies, wax, walnuts, musk, lac, madder or *munjeet*, blankets and silver. Goods exported to Bhutan were⁸⁰ indigo, cloves, nutmeg, cardamom, camphor, sugar, copper, broadcloth, goat skins, Endy cloth, coarse Endy cloth, *googul* (*aguru*), sandalwood, country gun powder, dried fish and tobacco.

The Khampas of eastern Tibet, exported the following goods to north-east India, via Hajo:⁸¹ red and partly-coloured blankets, gold dust, silver, rock salt, *cowries*, musks, few coarse Chinese silks, *munjeet* (madder) and bee-wax.

Goods exported to Tibet (and probably to China via Tibet) were:⁸² lac, raw and manufactured silks of Assam, cotton, dried fish and tobacco.

We may compare the above-mentioned articles with some of the items which are allowed to be traded on the borders of India and

China's Tibet region today. Even the trade agreements today, signed between India and China do not exceed the limits of traditional exports and imports; for instance, coffee, tobacco, iron ore and concentrates, chrome ore, finished leather and leather products, iron and steel bars, chemical dyes and dye intermediaries, sandalwood, myrobalan, wax, and such other natural products and minerals are invariably present in the inventory for export from India. From China, India normally imports beans, sulphur, borax, gypsum, silk and silk piece goods, wool, paper, nutmeg, musk, vermicelli, porcelain, resin, glassware, etc. Added to this in modern times, is machinery and other scientific products.⁸³

Assam's and for that matter, north-east India's prosperity was closely related to the high level of development of its local handicrafts, natural products, silks and other textile products, forest products, etc., as well as its easy access to the different parts of India in the west, to Myanmar and south-west China in the east, to the north through the tribal intermediaries, and to the south through a direct sea route.

THE LUIT FLOWS HOME TO THE SEA

The combined waters of the Brahmaputra and the Meghna fell into the sea. There were navigable rivers connecting the Brahmaputra with the Ganga. Later (as per Rennel's map of 1783) the Jenni (Jamuna) which issued from the Brahmaputra near Sherpur (in Bangladesh) joined the Ganga near Jaffargunj below Pabna and Ruttongunj.⁸⁴ This facilitated direct navigation from the farthest point in Assam to the mouth of the Ganga (near Tamratipti and Ganga) on the sea.

The *Periplus* of the Erythraean Sea, in describing a cruise along the coast of Bengal from the west to the east, mentions that near the sea where the river Ganga meets it, there exists an island in the ocean called 'Chryse', meaning 'golden', which has wrongly been located in Burma or Java or the Malay peninsula. The text clearly indicates a place nearby, which could only be Sondip (a corruption of Suvarnadvipa) at the mouth of the united waters of the Ganga and the Brahmaputra, and no other place.⁸⁵

There are many facts in history which remain obscure or neglected as a result of oversight or misinterpretation by historians who have scarce knowledge about the topography and ancient history of north-east India. The capital of Assam today, is located at Dispur. The

word 'Dis' and 'pur', is a corruption of Pragjyotishpur. In ancient times, the place and the country was known as Pragjyotish [as in *Raghuvamsa cakampe tirna-Lauhtye tasmin Pragiyothiseswara* which means, the King of Pragjyotisa trembled when he (Raghu) crossed the river Lauhitye (Brahmaputra)] (IV.81). In ancient times too, the tribes around the country, as well as the foreigners called the country Pragjyotishpur. This is as evidenced in the *Periplus*. This valuable truth has been discoursed upon by a great historian of this region, the late N.K. Bhattasali. As the source material is not readily available today, it may be worthwhile to quote extensively from his paper.⁸⁶

Periplus's description of the country of This follows immediately after Chryse:

After this region under the very north, the sea outside ending in a land called This, there is a very great inland city called Thinae, from which raw silk and silk yarn and silk cloth are brought on foot through Bactria to Barygaza and are also exported to Daminica by way of the river Ganges. But the land to This is too easy of access; few men come from there and seldom. The country lies under the Lesser Bear and is said to border on the farthest part of Pontus and the Caspian Sea, next to which lies Lake Maeotis, all of which empty into the ocean.

It will be remembered that the mouth of the Ganga and the Island of Gold, i.e. present Sondvip being talked of, immediately after which the above passage occurs. Unfortunately, translation from the original Greek by Mr Schoff has left some passages rather obscure. In the first sentence, we are told parenthetically that 'the sea outside ends in a land called This'. As the passage begins with a direction to the north, to any man of common sense, the passage would mean that at the end of the gulf to the arctic zones, the Black Sea (Pontus) and the Caspian Sea, stood the city called Thinae. Mr Schoff, in his notes (p. 261) has recognized in Thinae, the country of China and its great western state Ts'in, but has confused it with This which began according to the *Periplus*, at the end of the head-waters of the gulf of the Ganga. It appears to me clear that two different countries are being spoken of; one This beginning from the head-waters of the gulf of the Ganga and extending northwards to inaccessible places; and the other Thinae still further north extending to the arctic regions and to the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. When we remember that Bhagadatta is described in the *Mahabharata* (Sabha: Ch. 34, Bhandarkar Institute edition, Ch. 31—*shloks* 9 and 10) as present in the Rajasuya sacrifice of Yudhisthira with his hosts of mlecchas and

dwellers of the sea-coast, and when we take note of the fact that in historical times the kingdom of Pragjyotisa included Sylhet, Tippera and Noakhali districts and thus extended up to the sea-coast at the head-waters of the Gulf of the Ganga, we at once realize that the author of the *Periplus*, in talking of This, is really meaning Pragjyotisa. He calls the kingdom, 'This' the last part of the actual name, Pragjyotisa, the first portion of the long name having proved too much for him.⁸⁷ The other name Thinae, as recognized by Schoff and other scholars really refers to China, the land of silk after which the stuff became known Cinamsuka, as the fabric of China.

I have shown above that the hitherto unidentified country of This is none else than Pragjyotisa. The manner in which the well-known malabathrum or tejpat trade of the country of This is referred to in the next paragraph will this make clear:

Every year on the borders of the land of This there comes together a tribe of men with short bodies and broad flat faces and by nature peaceable; they are called Besatae, and are almost entirely uncivilised. They come with their wives and children carrying great packs and plaited baskets of what looks like green grape leaves. They meet in a place between their own country and the land of This. There they hold a feast for several days, spreading out the baskets under themselves as mats, and then return to their own places in the interior.

The Besatae appear to me to be none else than the Bhutiyas who carry on the overland trade with the northern districts of Assam, Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri of Bengal through the various *duars* or passes. The annual fairs on the borderland which attract them are well-known and I can just call to mind the great fair at the temple of galpes in Jalpaiguri district during the Shivaratri festival. Several more fairs are likely to exist all along the borderland of Bhutan and Assam, and *Periplus's* description of the custom shows that they have been held in this region from time immemorial.

And then the natives watching them come into that place and gather up their mats; and they pick out from the braids, the fibres which they call *petri*. They lay the leaves close together in several layers and make them into balls which they pierce with the fibres from the mats. And there are three sorts; those made of the largest leaf are called the large-ball malabathrum; those of the smaller, the medium ball; and those of the smallest, the small ball. Thus there exist three sorts of malabathrum, and it is brought into India by those who prepare it.

The above is a rather confused account of the procurement, packing and marketing of the tejpat. Tejpat in Sanskrit is called simply *patra*, and *Periplus* actually calls the commodity by this Sanskrit name. The Bhutiyas who came to the border fairs of Pragjyotisa with this commodity are easily recognized by their short bodies, broad flat faces and peaceable nature. The packing of the leaves in wicker work baskets and their gradation in classes are followed even up to the present time. In Shillong, in the Jaiaw quarter of the town, by the bank of the hill stream Umkhra, I found Tejpat trees growing wild and Mr Hunter also, in his statistical account of Assam notes the fact in describing the produce of the Khasi hills. Mr Gordon in his monograph on the Khasis, on p. 47, gives an account of the extensive tejpat gardens in the Khasi and This states. This commodity of everyday use among the Indians, which now grows wild in the hill districts of Assam and is exported so largely to outside markets, appears in the first century AD, to have been obtained from the Bhutiyas with some trouble.

One point worthy of note that emerges, if we accept the proposed identification of This with Pragjyotisa, is that the kingdom, even in the first century AD, a period for which we have no political record, extended up to the Gulf of the Meghna, probably up to the Noakhali and Chittagong coasts.⁸⁸

ASSAM'S OPENING TO THE SEA

It is now a well-known fact that the low-lying and waterlogged parts, to the south of the Assam range was perhaps connected with the Bay of Bengal by the estuary of the Brahmaputra and was known as the 'eastern sea' (*purba samudra*). Geologists have established that there was a time when sea-waves swept over the land forming the present Mymensing and Sylhet districts of Bangladesh lying south of the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia hills. Even in modern times, some parts of the Mymensing and Dhaka districts were marked as 'sea'. The low-lying parts of Sylhet, parts of Comilla, Noakhali, Mymensing (in Bangladesh) and Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi (in Assam) are still called *haor*, a corruption of the colloquial form of *sagar*.⁸⁹ It is interesting to note that Xuanzang (Yuan Chwang) says the same thing when he says that the kingdoms of Si-li-cha-da-lo (Sri Ksetra, meaning Srihatta) and other areas of Samatata (the shore or level country which denote that the country abuts the sea) bordered on the

great sea.⁹⁰ Alberuni, in the eleventh century, has also referred to the area as being under the sea or near it.⁹¹

Our purpose of such detailed analysis of the geographical position of Assam *vis-à-vis* China is to underline the factors responsible for the prosperity on one hand and the adversity of north-east India, particularly after the ill-fated partition of the country for which the then leaders of Assam are also responsible. The importance of the route to the sea through Chittagong had been emphasized upon, for instance, in an editorial of *The Statesman*, dated 7 November 1893, subsequent to the transfer of the administration, of the Mizo (Lushai) hills to Assam. The editorial runs as:⁹²

In common with the public generally, we have all along been led to believe that, on the transfer of the Lushai Hills to the Assam Chief Commissionership, the Chittagong division would also be made over, but, according to a contemporary, that consummation is not to have effect until the completion of the Chittagong-Assam Railway, or such portion of it as will run from the port to Silchar. Unless Chittagong, Tipperah, and Noakhally are incorporated, the Imperial Government must finance Assam for some years to come, for the latter will find it quite impossible to meet, unaided, the expenses entailed by the defence of her frontiers and possible (though not very probable) punitive expeditions. The severance of Assam from Bengal was dictated by motives of purely Imperial policy, and it becomes the bounden duty, therefore, of the Supreme Government to see that the newly-constituted Province does not suffer in any way.

This sounds as pathetic in the context of what happened during the century that followed.

RESUME

The traditional trade route came into being first as a track, then as a road that developed into a overland trade route with the expansion of commercial activities. It also brought about socio-economic development in the entire region.

Most sections of this route have the monsoon type of climate. The route receives the north-east wind in winter and the south-west monsoon in summer. The direction of course, varies with the season. There are roughly three seasons: the cool season (from November to February), the hot season (from March to May) and the rainy season (from June to October). During the rainy season, heavy rain accom-

panied by thunder, brings down torrents of water rushing down the mountains. Rivers are in spate – even small streams or brooks become turbulent rivers, very difficult to cross.

In the dry season, the atmospheric temperature rises to as high as 40 degrees centigrade, thus, communicable sub-tropical diseases are prevalent in the entire region. The cool season is the best time for trading activities. Every year, since November onwards, the strong north-east monsoon winds, blowing in from the Yunnan-Guizhou plateau of China, steadily dispel the damp and hot airflow from the Indian ocean. The days are sunny, the climate arid with rare rainfall. The river courses dry up, making it convenient for one to pass through. However, this 'dry' duration is short, whereas the journey is a long one – it is possible to make only one trip to and fro in a year, which to a large degree, places restrictions on the development of trade and commerce.

Also, the areas through which the overland trade route passes, are inhabited by many ethnic minorities whose political, economic and social organizations are more than primitive and backward. They are constantly at loggerheads with each other, which is extremely harmful to the advance of trade and safety of the route.

THE FUTURE

Assam is almost a land-locked state with hilly regions all around it. One of the solutions to its problems will be to open the southern gate to the sea by entering into friendly trade links with Bangladesh. As it is, even normal trade with Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) which existed till 1965, is at a standstill due to apathy from both sides, and under these circumstances, it will be a case of building castles in the air if we presume a breakthrough of any kind in this regard in the near future.

Ever since the first illegal Naga mission was rumoured to have reached the Tengcheng area of north-west Yunnan in China (on the trail of the ancient north-east India-China route via Burma) after a trek through the Kachin state in northern Myanmar (Burma) as early as 1967,⁹³ the existence of a regular route to south China has started arousing the interest of the historians of this Silk Route on the one hand, and has created tension in the minds of various security agencies of India on the other. Moreover, the illicit drug traffic

involving this part of India and the Golden Triangle, comprising northern Thailand, Shan and Kachin states in eastern Myanmar, and western Laos has forced the governments concerned to strengthen their vigil in the area.⁹⁴ One of the steps would be to open the different border posts adjoining Myanmar to regular trade. A step in that direction has already been taken by opening the border towns of Moreh (110 km. from the capital town of Manipur) in India and Tamu (in Kabaw valley) in Myanmar to regularize border trade. Both these places were the hubs of smugglers.⁹⁵ More such border towns should be opened for trade.

Trade continued on the Tibetan border, till it was disrupted after strict Chinese control was enforced in the entire region of Tibet. Trade in this area had been going on since ancient times, and it is quite possible that it was more in use because of its easy accessibility to India in the south and inland China in the north. This is clear from our discussion in the earlier pages. After a long closure, some townships like Taklakot Puran, etc., on the northern border of India have been opened to trade. This is, however, an extremely inadequate step. The most viable route has emerged from the well-known textile manufacturing town of Hajo and leads to Tibet via Tsuona (Chuona) and thence to Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan through the all-weather road to China's heartland. This link should be re-opened for the mutual benefit of traders from both sides.

North-east India's trade with Tibet was disrupted whenever the Chinese asserted their role in the latter. Since their permanent occupation of Lhasa, they closed Tibet to the inhabitants of India, and the inhabitants of the neighbouring countries like Bhutan could pass the boundary only under the sanction of a passport.⁹⁶ Such restrictions were enforced not only in this part of the border, they enforced similar restrictions in relation to coastal trade with the other Asian countries and the West too.⁹⁷ Such sanctions undermined border trade. Gradual expansion of the Muslim rule to the north-eastern part of India in the medieval period did the same damage to trade.

British rule in India caused untold misery to the common people. The colonizers adopted systematic measures to disrupt our village economy and enforced subversive economic measures to destroy it so that the foundations of our textile industry and trade was jeopardized.

The apathy of the ruling politicians towards the importance of a comprehensive system of production and distribution which entails

the opening of our doors to our neighbours for mutual give-and-take, is stalling our development. Mutual suspicion, mistrust, and mud-slinging have to be got rid of. Political stability is a *sine qua non* for economic progress. This and the determination to stand on one's own feet will smoothen the way for the progress of the north-east. All the factors that go into the making of such an atmosphere already exist. The British economy flourished at our cost. Textiles and other indigenous products which brought prosperity to us were banned for the benefit of our rulers. The benefits of scientific discoveries reaped by the industrial revolution were all monopolized by the Western countries and denied to us.

Much has been done after Independence. It is now high time, that other border posts, especially the one joining Hajo and Guwahati with the Tibetan area of Zedang be opened to trade. This will facilitate trade with the Tibetan as well as the Bhutia traders.

In our development programme, which includes an array of productive activities and trade, we have not paid attention to indigenous products and the traditional items of trade based on them. No serious attempts have been made to identify and study native products scientifically, classify them according to their value as commodities, apply modern scientific experiments to develop their uses to suit modern diversified requirements and put them up to compete in foreign markets. Ginger, catechu, putchuk, myryobalan, asafoetida, emblica officinalis (*amla*), etc., should be chemically analysed and their medicinal and food value should be assessed to meet our needs. Modern sophisticated technology should be used by local entrepreneurs to improve quality and increase varieties in the production of tea, silk, endy, muga, forest products, paper and sugar that are produced in abundance in Assam.

We have already mentioned the opening up of the road to the Bay of Bengal via Chittagong. But this is well-nigh impossible today. The most convenient outlet for Assam is through West Bengal. The airport at Rupsi in Dhubri district is the doorway to Assam and one of the best airports in the north-east, but it lies abandoned. As a result, traders and other citizens of the neighbouring area have to rush to Koch Bihar (now Coochbehar in north Bengal, to avail both the air service and road transport, thus causing a loss of revenue to Assam. Rather than vying with others in order to set-up heavy industries, Assamese entrepreneurs should brace up to the development of traditional items of production with the help of the latest technology.

Some who have the breadth of vision at home and abroad, advocate the building of an Asian-European railway or rail-cum-roadways, starting from Shanghai in the east and passing through Zhejiang, Jiangxi, Hunan, Guizhou and Yunnan (all in China), entering northern Myanmar, and going on to reach the north-eastern part of India to join the Indian railway network. Then, one can then go south-westward to the Bay of Bengal (at Chittagong port) and further west to the Indian Ocean. Proceeding westward, one can travel to Brest and France, through Pakistan and Central Asia. At present, there are two big gaps in this project – the railway lines in Yunnan (in China) and Myanmar have not been constructed as yet, nor has the line that would link Myanmar with the north-eastern part of India been laid. This magnificent plan will come true only after the efforts of all concerned are pulled up together. When this international railway link project is completed, it will play a very significant role in the social and economic life of north-east India, Myanmar and south-west China. It will then be extremely advantageous for India to develop eco-cultural contacts with its neighbours, reduce transport expenditure and improve the competitive capability of Indian products in the international market.⁹⁸

NOTES

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2. *Ibid.*, p. 297.
3. *Ibid.* pp. 297-8.
4. B.N. Mukherjee, 'Kharoshti and Kharoshti-Brahmi Inscriptions in West Bengal (India)', *Indian Museum Bulletin*, no. 25, 1990, pp. 23-39; K.K. Sarkar, 'Mahayana Buddhism in Funan', *Sino-Indian Studies*, vol. V, no. 1, 1995, pp. 73-4.
5. K. Chakravarty, 'On the Identification of Ka-Chu-Won-k'i-lo (Kajangala) of Hiuen Tsang', *Journal of Indian History*, vol. VI, no. 1, 1978.
6. Ji Xianlin et al., eds., *Da Tang Xiyu Ji Jiaozhu* (*Journey to the Western Region During the Tang Dynasty*, annotated), Beijing, 1985, pp. 788-90.
7. Tan Chung and Ray, *op. cit.*, p. 298.
8. T.T. Chang, 'The Rice Culture', in *The Early History of Agriculture*, pp. 143-55, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*, ser. B., p. 275.

9. Tan Chung and Ray, op. cit., p. 303.
10. Suniti Kumar Chatterji, *Karata-Jana-Kriti: The Indo-Mongoloids: Their Contribution to the History and Culture of India*, revd. 2nd edn., Calcutta, 1974, p. 184.
11. Tan Chung and Ray, op. cit., pp. 304–5.
12. Ibid., p. 305.
13. Huang Xinchuan, 'Hinduism and China', paper presented at the Assembly of World's Religion, San Francisco, 15–21 August 1990, p. 5.
14. Harprasad Ray, 'The Southern Silk Route from China to India—An approach from India', paper presented at the 34th International Congress of Asian and North African Studies (ICANAS), Hong Kong, 22–28 August 1993, p. 18. Our point gets support from R.L. Turner, *A Comparative Dictionary of the Indo-Aryan Languages*, London: OUP, 1966, rpt. 1973, p. 434.
15. P.V. Kane, ed., *The Harsacarita of Banabhatta*, Delhi-Varanasi-Patna, rpt. 1973, Ch. VII, p. 61; for English translation see, E.B. Cowell and F.W. Thomas, Delhi-Varanasi-Patna, 1961, p. 214.
16. Shiji by Sima Qian, j. 123, *Zhonghua Shuju*, 1965 edn., pp. 3158–60, 3166.
17. Ibid., also j. 116, pp. 2995–6.
18. Ibid.
19. Chang Qu (Jin Dynasty), *Huayangguo Zhi*, *Nanzhong zhi* (Chronicles of the Hua Yang Countries, Records of the Nanzhong Areas), quoted in the *Draft History of the Va Nationality*, Nationalities Institute, Chinese Academy of Sciences, 1963, pp. 24–5.
20. Tan Chung and Ray, op. cit., p. 307.
21. *Yunnan Wenwu* (*Cultural Relics in Yunnan*), 22, 1987, p. 42; T.C. Sharma, 'Sources of the History of Assam—Ancient Period', in N.R. Ray, ed., *Sources of the History of India*, vol. 3, Calcutta, 1980, p. 51.
22. Jiang Yuxiang, 'Gudai Zhongguo Xinan Sichou Jianlun' (A Brief Discussion of the Ancient South-West Silk Route of China), paper presented at the 34th International Congress of Asia and North African Studies, Hong Kong, 22–28 August 1993.
23. *Yunnan Wenwu*, 20, 1986, p. 26.
24. *Sichuan Wenwu* (*Cultural Relics of Sichuan*) 5, 1988, p. 30; also *Yunnan Wenwu*, 22, 1987, p. 42.
25. Sharma, op. cit., p. 82; Harprasad Ray, 'Southern Silk Route', op. cit., p. 38.
26. This point has been discussed in an international conference and published in *Renwen Zazhi* (*Journal of Humanities*), additional issue, Xian, 1993, brief summary is given on pp. 1–2.
27. Jiang Yuxiang supports this theory after a lengthy discussion in his paper cited in n. 22.
28. Tan Chung and Ray, op. cit., pp. 307–8.

29. Ibid., p. 308.
30. Ray, 'Southern Silk Route,' op. cit., pp. 33-43.
31. Pradip Srivastava, 'India and South-East Asia: The Drug Connection', paper presented at the 1st Conference of the Indian Congress of Asian and Pacific Studies, 7-29 January 1995.
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33. D.P. Sharma, 'Neolithic Industries of India and South-East Asia', paper presented at the 12th Conference of the International Association of the Historians of Asia, Hong Kong, 24-28 June 1991; Ray, 'The Southern Silk Route', op. cit., pp. 30-3.
34. S.K. Bhuyan, ed., *Deodhai Buranji*, Gauhati, 1932, 1962, p. 9; P. Gogoi, *The Tai and the Tai Kingdoms*, Guwahati, 1968, p. 265.
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36. W. Liebenthal, 'Sanskrit Inscriptions from Yunnan', II, *Sino-Indian Studies*, vol. 1, 1955, p. 62, f.n. 3.
37. R.B. Pemberton, *Report on Bootan*, Calcutta, 1839, rpt., 1961, p. 78.
38. Ibid., p. 79; also, idem, *The Eastern Frontier of British India*, Calcutta, 1835, rpt., Guwahati, 1966, p. 83.
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40. Ibid., 'New Lights on the History of Assam', *Indian Historical Quarterly*, XXII, 1946, pp. 1-14.
41. J. Filliozat, 'Emigration of Indian Buddhists to Indo-China, c. AD 1200', *Studies in Asian History*, Proceedings of Asian History Congress, 1961; ICCR, 1969, pp. 46-7.
42. Ibid., pp. 45-8.
43. P. Gogoi, op. cit., pp. 133f.
44. N. Elias, 'Introductory Sketch of the History of the Shans in Upper Burma and West Yunnan', Calcutta, 1876, p. 18.
45. W. Robinson, *A Descriptive Account of Assam*, Calcutta, 1809, p. 160.
46. N. Elias, op. cit., pp. 61f.
47. R.B. Pemberton, 'The Eastern Frontier', op. cit., pp. 113f.
48. A. Phayre, *History of Burma*, London, 1883, p. 15.
49. Pemberton, op. cit., p. 114.
50. Ibid.
51. English translation of the chronicle is by B. Barua and published along with another chronicle entitled *Weissali Mung-dun-Sui-K'han* with the title *Weissalisa*, Dibrugarh University (Assam), 1977.
52. S.L. Barua, 'The Indian Historical Evidence on the Southern Silk Route: The Route of Ahom Migration to Assam', paper presented at the 34th Session of the ICANAS, 22-28 August 1993, p. 8. I am indebted to this author for much of the information on Ahom migration.

53. *Weissalisa*, *ibid.*, pp. 7f.
54. S.L. Barua, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
55. *Ibid.*, fn. 42. *The Deodhai Assam Buranji*, *Assam Buranji* and *Ahomar Din* cited in the footnote state that Hemo alias Bhamo Aideo, daughter of the Ahom prince Baga Konwar offered to the Burmese king Bada-wpaya (AD 1781–1819) in 1817, was accompanied by 500 soldiers along with their families. They were settled at a place which subsequently came to be known as Bhamo after the name of the princess; quoted in S.L. Barua, *loc. cit.*
56. Francis Hamilton, *An Account of Assam* (ed. S.K. Bhuyan), Guwahati, 1964, p. 64.
57. K.N. Tamuli Phukan, *Asam Buranji Sar* (in Assamese), ed. P.C. Choudhury, Guwahati, 1964, p. 14.
58. Barua, *A Cultural History of Assam*, Guwahati, 1951, 1969, p. 101.
59. *Topography of Assam*, Calcutta, 1837, p. 10.
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61. John Butler, *Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam*, Calcutta, 1855, Delhi, 1978, pp. 45f.
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63. Elliot and Dowson, tr., vol. 1, *The History of India as Told by its Own Historians*, London, 1867, pp. 31f.
64. Pemberton, *op. cit.*, p. 83.
65. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 244.
66. *Ibid.*, pp. 242f, Pemberton, *op. cit.*, pp. 78 f.
67. Pemberton, *op. cit.*, p. 83.
68. The details here are from, Pradip Sharma, 'Cultural Intercourse between Assam and Bhutan', *Bulletin of the Assam State Museum* (Golden Jubilee Issue), 12, 1991, pp. 27–33.
69. *Ibid.*
70. Tong Enzheng, *Gudai Bashu (The Ancient Bashu)*, Sichuan Renmin Chubanshe (Sichuan People's Publishing House), 1979, p. 112.
71. *Nanya Yanjiu (South Asian Studies)*, 2, 1983, p. 88, quoted in Zhu Changli, 'Nanfang sichou zhilu yu Zhong, Yin, Mian jingji wenhua jiaoliu' ('The Southern Silk Route: Eco-cultural exchange between China, India and Burma), in *Dongnanya (Southeast Asia)*, 32, 1991, p. 12.
72. See nn. 23 and 24; also see, Xiang Da, Manshu Jiaozhu (collation and notes on *A Book of Savage Tribes*), Zhonghua Shuju (Zhonghua Book Company), 1962, pp. 171–2, 191–2, 194, 195.
73. Zhu Changli, *loc. cit.*
74. R.P. Kangle, *The Arthashastra of Kautilya*, I (text); 2, 11, 113, p. 55; for English tr. see. R. Shamasastri, tr., *Kautilya's Arthashastra*, 5th edn., Mysore, 1956, p. 80.

75. N.K. Bhattasali, 'New lights on the History of Assam', *Indian Historical Quarterly*, 22, December 1946, pp. 248-9.
76. Kangle, op. cit., 2, 11, 57, p. 53; Shamasāstry, loc. cit.
77. Kangle, loc. cit., Shamasāstry, op. cit., p. 79.
78. A.L. Basham, *The Wonder that was India*, London, 1969; p. 230.
79. Pemberton, *Report on Bootan*, op. cit., p. 77.
80. Ibid., p. 77.
81. Ibid., p. 79.
82. Ibid.
83. As reported in the *Times of India*, 16 June 1994, and *Navabharat Times*, 29 September 1992.
84. K.L. Barua, *Early History of Kamrup*, 2nd edn., Guwahati, 1966, p. 57.
85. Bhattasali, op. cit., 249.
86. Ibid., pp. 250-2.
87. This view is confirmed by its present name, Dispur, the capital of Assam. It is the local name prevalent from time immemorial. The first part of its name, 'Dis' being a corrupt form of Jyotish, just as this was during the time of the Periplus about two millennium ago. See also B.K. Kakati's view that the name Pragiyotish was a Sanskritization of an earlier non-Aryan name Pagar-juhtic, meaning a region of extensive high hills; B.K. Kakati, *Mother Goddess Kamakhya*, Guwahati, 1948, p. 6.
88. Nagendra Nath Vasu, *The Social History of Kamrupa*, Calcutta, 1922, pp. 19-20.
89. K.L. Barua, op. cit., p. 59.
90. Samuel Beal, Hsi-yu-ki, *Buddhist Record of the Western World*, translated from the Chinese of Hiuen Tsiang, AD 629, 1884, rpt., Delhi, 1969, pp. 199-200; Ji Xianlin, et al., eds., op. cit., pp. 801-3.
91. K.L. Barua, op. cit., p. 6.
92. '100 Years Ago', *Statesman*, 7 November 1993.
93. B. Lintner, loc. cit.
94. Pradip Srivastava, op. cit., pp. 2-9.
95. J.B. Lama, 'A Tale of two Border Towns', *Impressions* (supplement), *Statesman*, 28 May 1995, p. 3.
96. Pemberton, op. cit., p. 78.
97. See for example Yuanshi, j. 104, p. 5a, Nanjian edn., quoted in W.W. Rockhill, 'Notes on the Relations and trade of China with the Eastern Archipelago and the coast of the Indian Ocean during the fourteenth century', *Toung Poo*, 15, 1914, p. 426; for King Dynasty ban, see King Taizu Shihlu, j. 70 (AD 1372), Academia Sinica, Taipei edn. (1966), p. 3; for a detailed discussion, see Stephen Chang Tsenghsin, *Maritime Activities on the South-East Coast of China in the Latter Part of the Ming Dynasty* (in Chinese), vol. 1, Taipei, 1988, pp. 3-11.
98. For example, let us take the distance from Kunming (capital of Yunnan

in South China) to Calcutta. The present railway route from Kunming to Guangzhou (Canton) is more than 2,000 km. and it is approximately 5,926.4 km. from Guangzhou to Calcutta by sea. If we travel by land, it is less than 2,200 km. from Kunming via northern Myanmar to the frontier town Ledo in north-eastern India. From Ledo to Calcutta it is more than 1,600 km., which comes to a total of about 3,800 km. as against more than 7,926 km. by the sea route.