

Society and Economy in North-East India

Volume 2

Editor

FOZAIL AHMAD QADRI

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SOCIETY AND ECONOMY IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

VOLUME 2



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Fozail Ahmad Qadri



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Foreword

The period from 13th to 18th century A.D. was crucial in the precolonial phase of the history of North East India due to the emergence of states within the regions and the attempts of the Turko-Afghan and Mughal rulers of Bengal and Delhi to extend sway over the region. The Koch, Jaintia, Dimasa, Tripuri and the Meitei states emerged from the indigenous social base. Most of these included both plains and hills inhabited by different ethnic groups, while the Ahoms established a state in the Brahmaputra Valley by conquest. The origins of the Meitei (Manipuri) and the Tripuri states are dated much earlier than the 13th century, but they bloomed into the statehood in this period. Similar is the case with the Jaintia state. The Dimasas had experienced the rudiments of state formation processes in the Sadiya region of the Brahmaputra Valley, but the state under them was more or less confined to the Dhansiri Valley, with the headquarters at Dimapur, in the 13th–14th century when they came into contacts, and eventually conflicts, with the Ahoms. The Koch state also began to emerge in about 13th century A.D. after the decline of Kamarupa. All these states were monarchies or kingdoms in nature. They generated socio-economic influences for the societies within the states, and the areas outside the states were also directly or indirectly influenced by those factors that caused the rise, consolidation and growth of the states. The chieftaincies — outside the states, also internalized some of these changes. The Khasi *hima* or *syiemships* were political organizations of their own type; in fact, unique in many respects, but the state formation processes were certainly on-going within the type till the colonial interventions. The Mizo chiefships also showed tendencies towards state formations. The impact was equally clear in cases of the Nagas and the Arunachali tribes in the hills bordering the Brahmaputra

Valley. Some of these non-state polities also could have perhaps eventually emerged as states had the indigenous polity formation processes not been artificially arrested by the British colonial interventions in the beginning of the 19th century.

The society and economy experienced major changes in this period — the Mughal Rule in Bengal and Lower Assam and then the rise of the authority of the English East India Company in Bengal in the 18th century were also important contributing factors, besides the formations of states and polities at the local levels. The Srihattarajya in the Barak-Surma Valley eclipsed in this period; the lower part of the valley passed under the successive rule of the Turgo-Afgans and then Mughals, and finally, the East India Company, with the rest of Bengal, while only the upper portion of the valley, namely, the Cachar plains, formed part of the Tripuri state, Khaspur state and the Dimasa state in rapid succession before the British annexation. These factors generated indirect motivation and specific influences in matters of administrative and institutional changes within the region. The Bhakti-Sufi impact on the society in the plains was significant in many respects; the universal appeal of love and brotherhood associated with the rise of neo-vaishnavite movement of Srimanata Sankaradeva in the Brahmaputra Valley and the Gauriya Vaisnavism of Srichaitanya Mahaprabhu in the Barak-Surma Valley, and the influence of Azan Fakir in Brahmaputra Valley and of Hajarat Shah Jalal in the Barak-Surma Valley, and the works of many other Sufi saints were wonderful factors of humane social development. The long and short distance trade, particularly the hills-plains economic relationship through trade for which strings of markets emerged in the foothills and the borders between political formations, is another important area of historical interest. In fact, trade and trade-routes across the region and with the neighbouring countries had evoked British interest in the region in 18th century, which ultimately resulted in the colonization of North East in the 19th century.

A national seminar organized by the department of History, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, on 'society and economy in North East India during 13th to 18th Century', on March 3–5, 2003, addressed the issues outlined above by involving the in-house scholars of NEHU and selected experts from other institutions and Universities in the country. The seminar was in

continuation of the one held in March 2002 on the same theme for the period ending roughly in 13th century A.D., the proceedings of which have already been published as *Society and Economy in North-East India, Volume 1*, edited by Professor Mignonette Momin and Dr. Cecile A. Mawlong. We are now introducing *Society and Economy in North-East India, Volume 2*, of the same series, and contains revised versions of the selected papers that were presented in the second seminar. Our colleague, Professor F.A. Qadri, who was the convenor of that seminar, has edited the volume with remarkable affection and care. We expect this volume also to be appreciated by a wide circle of readership, like our earlier publications, and to inspire further research in the history of North East India. It is my pleasure to inform that Volume 3 (19th–20th century) of series, which emerges out of our third national seminar on the theme held in March 2004, is also almost ready. We look forward to the responses and comments of the experts on our volumes on *Society and Economy in North-East India*, which is a thrust area for us under the Special Assistance Programme (DRS) of the University Grants Commission.

NEHU, Shillong
25th March, 2005



(J.B. Bhattacharjee)

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Editors' Note

The vastness and variety of source material for the history of Pre-Colonial Northeast India is by now acknowledged. The Persian chronicles along with *Firman*, *Akhbarat*, etc. for the study of the Sultans of Bengal and the Mughals *vis-à-vis* Northeast India, *Buranjis* for the Ahoms and some other neighbouring groups, *Manipuri Puias*, including *Cheitarol Khumbaba* and *Laitarol Lumbaba* for Manipur, *Rajmala* for Tripura and a variety of epigraphic and numismatic evidences which constitute the chief source of information for constructing the history of the period, there is non-political literature of different type: folk-tales, folk-songs, sufi *Maktubat* (epistles) and *Malfuzat* (collection of conversations) including hagiographies, besides these there are also travel accounts in foreign languages like French, Dutch and Portuguese. There are scores of surviving oral traditions in a variety of language in the length and breadth of the region which are now being used by historians, anthropologists, sociologists and other social scientists. With the changes that have taken place in the historiographical concepts, it has become imperative for a modern historian to tap and utilize as many as varied sources of information for the study as it is possible. In the present volume readers and scholars are going to encounter a fair combination of all these sources of information.

The essays in this volume are the revised version of papers that were presented in a National Seminar held in March 2003 that covered society and economy in the region 13th–18th centuries. It was a part of a series of seminars organized by the Department of History, North-Eastern Hill University under the ongoing UGC-SAP-DRS programme. The present volume is second in the series of publications on Society and Economy in North-East India. In her essay, 'Trends, Possibilities and Problems in

History Writing in North East India: Economy and Society in 13th–18th Centuries', Manorama Sharma has made an attempt to focus on the works which are representative of the historiographic trends. She, however, maintains that most of these works are in imperialistic or nationalistic traditions and stresses the need to examine and write history from people's perspective drawing from other contemporary sources reflective of the socio-economic conditions. Mignonette Momin in her, 'Socio-economic Linkages in the Decline of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa', ascribes the decline of the state to the lack of political acumen of the individual rulers, expanding agrarian economy with various tribal groups, their political assertion leading to the emergence of new ruling families in the Lauhitya region like the Chutiyas, Bhuiyas and the Koches. She has examined the emergence of these kingdoms and the parallel decline of Kamarupa-Pragjyotisha. J.B. Bhattacharjee in his essay on 'Economic Dimension of Meitei State Formation in Manipur' delves into the theoretical formulations on the role of economy in state formation and situates the factors in the context of state formations in Northeast India contending that surplus generation, extraction and redistribution was a common factor in state formation in almost all cases. He contends that despite the paucity of sources, a careful analysis of the recorded data reveals that the process in Manipur was not different from the pan-Indian model of state formation. J.B. Ganguly's essay, 'Economic Aspects of State Formation Process in Medieval Tripura' highlights the state formation in Tripura under the chiefs belonging to the Tripuri tribe and examines the transition from the primitive communal mode of production to a tribute paying mode, according to the author was as the most crucial in the process.

T. Gurung in her essay, 'Emergence of Ahom Monarchy in Upper Assam' examines the role of the three principal ideological influences i.e. kinship, caste and the neo-vaishnavite ideology in the functioning of the Ahom monarchy and concludes that the neo-vaishnavite ideology finally proved to be the alternative to two other ideologies as the Ahom monarch patronized the Satras as the focal point of social organization. 'Agrarian Dynamics and Technology in the Ahom State' by Sanjeeb Kakoty traces the surplus generation of the Ahom state to their unique technology as found in the study of plough used for cultivation of rice, which is the staple grown principally by the people.

C.L. Imchen in, 'Historical Reconstruction of the Relations Between the Nagas and the Valley Kingdoms' has made an attempt to reconstruct the Naga socio-political systems that developed in tandem with the formation of kingdoms in the neighbouring valley. By using oral and ethnographical data on the basis of a comparative analysis with the tribes of Africa, which he concludes more or less have many resemblances. S.K. Bose in 'Ao Naga and Their Medium of Exchange' examines the status of Naga economy and the medium of exchange prevailing in the Naga economic organization. A.K. Thakur's, 'Aspects of Socio-Political Formations in Pre-Colonial Arunachal Pradesh' examines the role of technology in the evolution of pre-colonial socio-economic and political formations with particular reference to the technology of defense and agricultural technology.

Caroline R. Marak in 'Pre-Colonial Economy and Society of the Garos' outlines the self-sufficient economy of the Garos and their later dependence on outside world and provides glimpses of their social life. Sangkima's 'Economy and Society of Pre-Colonial Mizoram,' is based on British records and the non-conventional alternative folklore materials. He contends that the economy was based on shifting cultivation and the life was migratory. Kamaluddin Ahmed attempts to reconstruct the social and economic life of the area in, 'Society and Economy in Medieval Barak-Surma Valley.' He also highlights the socio-economic forces, production relations and the political super-structure which created distinct nature and levels of social formations resulting in the division of the valley into two social patterns in the upper and the lower valleys. V. Ruata Rengsi has attempted an analysis of the problem of the surplus generation and technology in primitive societies and contends that in the Mizo society the nature of technology and ecology under normal conditions generally afforded a certain amount of surplus food in his essay, 'Surplus Appropriation and Power Structure in Mizo Social Formation.' Sahabuddin Ahmed defines the linguistic status of the area in his, 'Literary and Cultural Traditions of Medieval Barak-Surma Valley' in the context of Northeast and examines how far the literary traditions of the area was influenced by the geographical proximity with Bengal. He also surveys major Sanskrit and Bengali works by the local scholars and highlights the impact of Arabic and Persian traditions noticeable in the local writings.

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Trends, Possibilities and Problems in History Writing in Pre-Colonial North East India Economy and Society*

Manorama Sharma

The 13th–18th century has been a period in the historical developments in North East India which has found interest amongst scholars and therefore there exists a lot of published works on this period. However while examining the existing works of history to assess their contribution to the understanding of the existing state of society and economy of the period one faces certain problems. These problems are at the levels of both ideology and technicality. Scholars engaged with the analysis of pre-13th century history of the region had faced, to a greater or lesser degree, the problem of garnering enough reliable sources for historical analysis.¹ This problem is however mitigated to quite an extent for scholars working on the period 13th to 18th century because for this period there are some quite reliable official records in addition to other evidences that are available. For instance the three important monarchies flourishing during this period in the

* This is not a bibliography of all the published and unpublished works on the history of North East India. What is presented here is an attempt to focus on some of the works which indicate some trend of historiographic developments in the context of the subject matter of this seminar — economy and society (13th–18th century).

Brahmaputra valley, in Manipur and in Tripura, produced their own official records which remain important sources for historians for all times to come.

Any trend analysis of the works of this period to determine what is the status of historiography with respect to the integration of the economic and societal aspects of development in the process of history writing must begin with (a) an understanding of what we mean when we use the term trend analysis and (b) the importance of the idea of economy and society in history writing. The term trend very strictly refers to a direction, in which something takes shape, and extending this term to historiography would actually refer to various models or approaches to the study of history and such models or approaches could be many depending upon the ideological preferences of the historians. Some of the established trends or models in the realms of Indian history writing could be identified as the imperialistic, "colonialistic",² nationalistic and the gradually evolving reactions to these trends, the most plausible of the reactions coming from those historians who have adopted the Marxian tools of historical analysis. Therefore for "comprehending and explaining the past... we naturally look for models and typologies"³ and it is this search that leads us on to identify the trends of history writing. Which trend is the most acceptable would definitely depend upon the viability of the interpretation of sources and as R.S. Sharma puts it, on what is seen as the "prime movers of history".⁴ It is in this context that the issue of economy and society assumes great importance in history writing. This focus on economy and society does not mean writing segregated social and economic history but to view history as a process where people at all stages of development have organised social and political relations to uphold the requirements of their basic economic life. The various sources available to historians therefore have to be used to arrive at certain generalisations about the existing relations between the forces of production, the relations of production and the resultant civil society institutions. It is basically from this kind of a perspective that an attempt is being made here to assess the existing historical writings in North East India which deal with the period between the 13th and the 18th centuries.

The Ahom kings who ruled in the Brahmaputra Valley for almost six hundred years seem to have been endowed with a very

strong sense of history and so they were particular in getting the important happenings in their reigns recorded by official scribes. These official records called the *Buranji* provide us very useful information about various aspects of Ahom rule in Assam. The *Buranji* were originally written in the Ahom language, till about the end of the sixteenth century and from the seventeenth century the *Buranji* came to be written in Assamese⁵ because by that time the Ahom Kings had adopted the Assamese language as their own. These chronicles were official documents with each reigning king appointing his own scribe with instructions to maintain record of all the important happenings of the reign in a chronological manner. Each *Buranji* therefore can be said to contain a more or less truthful recording of all that happened during a king's reign and these happenings need not always be related to human actions. Commenting on the nature of the *Buranji* literature and their historicity Phukan holds the view that the *Buranjis* written in the Ahom language and the Assamese language *buranjis* need to closely compared, particularly for linguistic inconsistency, in order to get a correct view of the information available in the *Buranjis*.⁶ There is however no debate over the fact that the *Buranjis* contain a lot of useful information regarding the socio-political conditions of the time albeit from the rulers' perception, but this information is available to historians for their interpretation. How historians of the region have used this "store house of knowledge" we shall discuss in a later part of this paper.

In addition to the *Buranjis* there is one other important written source which can provide historians with information about the society in Assam which is not the rulers' perspective. This source relates to the period of the growth of the *Vaisnava* movement in Assam.⁷ The reference is to the *Katha-guru-carita* which is "a late but comprehensive biography of Śankardeva and his apostles....This biographical literature is of great importance not only with regard to the lives of the saints and the activities of the Vaisnava Order but also as providing much information regarding the political and economic structure of the country and the background of the Śankardeva movement."⁸ In addition to this major work there are numerous other *Guru-caritas* or biographical works in Assamese which can always provide interesting material for the discerning historians. These *caritas* of Śankardeva and Mādhavadeva have been categorised into two groups by

Maheswar Neog. In the process of classifying he wrote, "I have classified the *caritas* of Sankaradeva and Mādhavadeva into an Early Group and a Later Group."⁹ In the Early category Neog included those *caritas* which, as he says, falls into the "sober and realistic category, not ascribing any miracles to these saints even though *apothecising*(sic) them as an article of faith."¹⁰ In the Later category he included those which had elements of miracle and the supernatural. Neog also drew a parallel between the evolution of the Later *caritas* and the "expansion of the Vaisnava Order over the three states of Assam, Kāmarūpa and Koch-Behār."¹¹ In this expansion, Neog holds that the *caritas* also got influenced by the "schisms" that was taking place in the Vaisnava order and the interests of the new *Satras* that were being established. A very interesting point that Neog makes here is that in the course of all this expansion the *Caritas* were infiltrated not only by a lot of existing folk lore of the time but also by the "political accounts of Assam as well as religious history from outside Assam."¹² The *caritas* can therefore provide a lot of information on social and economic conditions of the time and can also be a source of corroboration and sometimes correctives to the information found in some of the *Buranjis*. But they have to be used critically particularly, what Neog has called the Later *Caritas*.

Similar to the *Buranji* literature is the *Rajmala* or *Sri Rajmala* (In 1926-31 K.P. Sen re-wrote the *Rajmala* and titled it *Shrirajmala*¹³) of Tripura which is accepted as the state chronicle of Tripura.¹⁴ "Maharaj Dharma-Manikya (A.D. 1431-1462[c]) of Tripura was the pioneer in the Tripura dynasty to commit to writing by competent hands the oral tradition of the history of the Tripura State."¹⁵ His successors continued the practice of recording the events of each ruler every year and thus was composed the *Rajmala* which contains in it the history of the Tripura Raj.¹⁶ The work which was patronised by subsequent kings runs into several volumes of various dates between 15th to 19th century and as E.F. Sandys writes, "Making every allowance for poetic fancy, Brahminical love of the supernatural and courtly flattery, we have a written record stretching back to the Aryans in the Epic period or 3,000 years ago...."¹⁷ Like the Ahom Kings the kings of Tripura from 15th century onwards employed bards in their courts to record the history of the kingdom and so like the *Buranjis* the *Rajmala* also praises the character of the reigning monarchs, but

even while doing this it provides information on various interesting aspects of the state of the society and which could be of great value to historians researching on the society and economy of Tripura of that period.¹⁸ While keeping in mind the fact that the pre-15th century part of the *Rajmala* is too steeped in myths and legends to be accepted as a very reliable source but the later parts which are contemporary to the writes are more acceptable, albeit critically.¹⁹ For instance the *Sri Rajmala* has many references to the kings making various land grants, setting up of new villages, and the fact there were no famines during the reigns of certain kings. "King Rajdhar Manikya was noted for his manifold virtues. As such there was no famine during his reign."²⁰ There is also information like "King Vijay Manikya brought from Dhvajghat a number of traders who were the makers of utensils and settled them at Dhvajnagar."²¹ The *Rajmala* also has interesting references to the organisation of labour by kings and the remuneration of such organised labour force.²² Despite the fact that the *Rajmala* needs to be viewed very critically yet it can become, with proper corroboration, a useful source material for historians in the construction of an economic and social history of Tripura.

The other source available to historians for constructing a social and economic history of Tripura is the *Krishnamala*.²³ Composed between 1790 and 1800 this work records the happenings in Tripura between 1784–1783. It was composed in Bengali verse and is a source of information for Tripura of the period. It could be used both as a point of corroboration for the *Rajmala* and as an independent source which provides a lot of details about economic organisation of the state (like taxes collected and distributed, natural resources etc.) and the evolving social structure.²⁴

The other area of this region which has a similar kind of recorded past is Manipur. As D.R. Syiemlieh states, "researchers on Manipur cannot but go back to *Leithak Leikharon*, a literary text of the 18th century which was a compendium of myths, legends, genealogy and folklore. From this text has derived two other: *Cheitharol Kumbaba* and *Ningthourol Lambuba*."²⁵ The *Cheitharol Kumbaba* which is regarded as the royal chronicle of Manipur was "re-written five times on the orders of the kings, during the period from A.D. 1700 to 1830."²⁶ As in the case of the *Rajmala* the first sections of the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* are also steeped in Myths and legends and so historians would have to take note of that. But the

later sections from about the 13th century onwards, recordings become more plausible and contain information, exaggerated at many places no doubt, which can be the starting point for historians for writing on the society and economy of Manipur between the 13th and 18th centuries.

Interestingly the style of recording information about the events of the reigning monarchs in the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* is very similar to the style of the *Buranjis* of the Ahom kings. Granting all the historiographic limitations that royal chronicles have, the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* should remain a very important source material for the discerning historian. For instance it has recordings like "there was great scarcity of food in this [1687–88] year. The Raja himself used to sit in front of the Sanathong gate to distribute paddy to the poor"²⁷ or in the recordings of the year 1715–16 there is this information: "The prices of paddy became too high, a *sangbai* (a basket containing 25 seers) of paddy was sold at fourteen annas and six pies (*Lishing maree, chamanga*) and the price of each slave was 19 maunds of paddy.... The Raja distributed paddy to the poor at the bazar.... The *Laifam* and *Khabam Laloops* were introduced in this year...."²⁸ With this kind of raw data available it is not necessary to detail what possibilities lie here for the historian wishing to integrate the ideas of economy and society in Manipur of the period historically covered by the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*. Another document which could be both a point of corroboration for the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* and also an independent source of information is the *Loiyamba Shinyen* (The 12th Century Constitution).²⁹ This document, after having been subjected to the due test of the historians criticism of sources, can provide very interesting insights to the social structure in Manipur and also to the existing economic activities and the economic resources of the kingdom.³⁰ In addition to texts like the ones mentioned above all these kingdoms (Ahom, Tripura and Manipur) also have coins and inscriptions which can always yield a lot of data about the economic organisation of the states.

For most of the societies of the hill areas like the Khasi-Jaintia and Garo societies, the societies of the various Naga tribes, the tribes of Mizoram and the numerous tribes of Arunachal Pradesh there is always a problem of reliable historical evidence for a greater part of their past because these societies have come out of the pre-literate stage only recently. For such societies historians

interested in learning about the economy and society of the period from the 13th to the 18th centuries would have to be very innovative in interpreting oral sources and making careful use of ethnography and anthropological studies. Such exercise coupled with culling information from available sources from the surrounding areas with which these societies must have had economic intercourse would open new frontiers of studies in the society and economy of these areas.

With the kind of written texts mentioned above which are available for historians it was to be expected that the economy and society of many of the areas of North East India would find some analysis in the works of the scholars. This unfortunately has not happened. This has been so mainly because the ideological preferences of the historians, particularly their conceptualisation of the discipline, become crucial when writing history. As we have written elsewhere, the dominant trends of history writing in this region, even today continue to be influenced by the Indian nationalist historiographic ideologies with a very strong bias towards empiricism of the Rankean type.³¹ In this kind of historiographic preferences the emphasis is not so much on integrating the processes of socio-economic developments to the understanding of the history of a society but on descriptive narratives where interpretations remain at very superficial levels. Thus even if economic data is used it is not used to analyse the roots of political power or the emergence of new social forces and social structures in the society but merely to enumerate the sources of revenue, natural resources etc. of a society. The concept of an integrated economic history that accepts the view that people "engage in producing or procuring goods and services in order to support themselves; however, the framework within which they engage in such activities is provided by the society and polity they live in,"³² is still to take off in the region as is revealed in most of the history works that exist.

The earliest tradition of history writing that exists in the region was influenced by the imperialist ideology which was introduced by Edward Gait in his *History of Assam*.³³ Gait, like other imperialist historians, believed that the only change that took place in the history of Assam till the coming of the British was dynastic change.³⁴ So when he gives an account of the Ahom rule his focus is basically on the reigns of the monarchs and their administration.

If economy is mentioned it is only as a part of an administrative policy and as a description of such measures.³⁵ Fortunately for the region Gait's imperialist ideology did not have a strong following here because the historians who succeeded him were influenced by the dominant Indian nationalist ideas of the early twentieth century. The only imperialist influence which remained on these historians was the emphasis on dynastic histories. S.K. Bhuyan whose works follow Gait's work (not in ideas *per se* but in chronology) had this dynastic backdrop to his writings but in his works there is a definite leaning towards biographies and also autobiographies. There is no doubt that in his writings on the history of Assam there is ample evidence of the fact that he was much influenced by the dominant empirical traditions of the nineteenth century. But running through all the empiricism there is a recognisable theoretical trend which seems to have escaped the notice of historians. There is an unmistakable Carlylian bent, at times very pronounced, at other times subdued, but the leaning was always there.³⁶ Bhuyan of course never followed Carlyle to the extent of having a contempt for the common masses but the element of hero worship is very marked in his works.³⁷ Such a trend of historiography does not focus on the importance of material forces in historical developments but on individuals as being the important forces of change. Thus we find that in his book *Anglo-Assamese Relations*,³⁸ which basically deals with the relations of Assam with the East India Company between 1771 and 1826 and therefore has a lot of information on the early trade of the British with Assam, the economic information is not really woven into the warp and web of the developing economy and society of the time. For instance Bhuyan begins with a very long and exhaustive introduction where he discusses under different heads various aspects of Ahom rule in Assam. Beginning with a synoptic account of Ahom dynastic changes in Assam he concludes that "the factor which enabled the Ahoms to consolidate their power in Assam and to maintain it for such a long period were mainly their militaristic cult, their highly developed political sense, and their religious toleration, detachment and neutrality."³⁹ Such a view clearly portrays the ideological preferences of the historian and it is not surprising therefore that after having provided a very detailed narrative of the specific economic relations between the East India Company and the Ahom rulers he concludes that "the

conquest [of Assam] was unpremeditated, and in a way it was forced upon the British who had for many years deliberately refused to assume any control over the affairs of Assam...."⁴⁰ (A very imperialist way of looking at British expansion no doubt.) The work itself however provides us with a wealth of useful information and a mind, well instructed with the nuances of integrating economy and society, should be able to do wonders with all the information it contains.

In addition to S.K. Bhuyan's writings on 13th to 18th century Assam there also exist a number of other works on the Ahom monarchy mainly due to the fact that a lot of material is available on the Ahom rule in Assam particularly from sources like the *Buranjis*. Both in English and the Vernacular (Assamese) there are a number of works which throw light on the status of the Ahom monarchy. Works like those of N.K. Basu, *Assam in the Ahom Age*,⁴¹ P. Gogoi's, *The Tai and the Tai Kingdoms*⁴² or Lila Gogoi's, *The Buranjis: Historical Literature of Assam: A critical Survey*,⁴³ contain a lot of insight into the kind of material which can be obtained from the *Buranjis*. Basu's work contains a chapter on the economy of the Ahom kingdom where he discusses various important economic aspects of the Ahom state like agriculture and management of land, non-agricultural occupations of the people, and the existing trade and commerce of the time. In the chapter succeeding the one on economy Basu describes the people (i.e. castes and occupation, the ethnic groups, position of women, family system etc.), their religion and the status of education, all under the general heading "Society".⁴⁴ These sections of the work are highly informative with data collected from sources like Shihabuddin Talish's account, accounts left behind by British officers like Francis Buchanan Hamilton, J. M'Cosh and J.P. Wade, Imperial Gazetteers, District Gazetteers and various other British archival sources in addition to a number of secondary sources.⁴⁵ From the economic information provided by Basu it is quite possible to construct an account of the kind of surpluses generated in the Ahom state and the nature of distribution of that surplus or in a more simple way who got what share of the resources and production of the state. This same exercise can be done even from S.K. Bhuyan's work mentioned above. In fact a lot of information that Basu gives is taken directly from Bhuyan's work. An integration of the chapters on Economy and Society in Basu's work

would definitely provide us with a fair picture of the nature of social stratification in Assam under the Ahom rule and would thus also be able to enlighten us about the true nature of political evolutions in the period. A similar kind of a re-interpretation of P. Gogoi's work can also be done because he has provided an account of the economy as a part of administrative policy of the Ahoms. Thus, despite the fact that the accounts available in the works of Bhuyan, Basu and Gogoi amongst others remain primarily at the descriptive-narrative level and are therefore not strictly works on an integrated view of economy and society, yet such works can always be the starting point for a historian interested in writing analytical accounts of economy and society of the region.

Another important work which attempts to throw light on the economy and society in Assam during the 13th to the 18th centuries is S.N. Sharma's *A Socio-Economic and Cultural History of Medieval Assam*.⁴⁶ This work of Sarma has a lot of very important information, collected both from *Buranjis*, Ahom inscriptions and various other contemporary sources. The author himself suggests in the preface to the work that "Chronicles in the form of *Buranjis*, *Rajavamsavalis* and the *Sattra-vamsavalis* supplemented by literature, biographies of religious preachers and inscriptions of the period provide us with sufficient materials to reconstruct the social and cultural life of the people of Assam during the long period of six hundred years."⁴⁷ In a brief review of literature also included in the preface Sarma laments that despite the fact there are available sources most of the existing works have focussed primarily on political histories although there are a few works which contain useful information on economy and society of the times.⁴⁸ A close reading of Sarma's work leaves no one in doubt that he has not only collected a tremendous amount of very important empirical information but has also arranged the data in a very systematic manner. There is information on the ethnic composition of the society, on rural and urban settlements and the institutions and organisations in the village. There are detailed discussions on agriculture, education, literature and various religious and social customs and practices. Yet after presenting this wealth of information when we come to assess the conclusions that the author tries to arrive at we are disappointed with not what we find there but with what is not there. In fact the information about the society and economy does not get woven into a fabric of

understanding economy and society. The concluding chapter merely summarises the obvious and thus remains at the level of describing economic and social developments and an integration of economy, society and culture is difficult to come by. This is a very major problem that historians need to exercise their minds on as how to transform information about the economy and the society into a socio-economic history. In the works that we have briefly dealt with above we do not find this trend developing and in fact when we do a trend analysis of history writing in the field of economy and society in this region we see that from Gait to Sarma there has not been much change to the approach of analysing historical developments in Assam.

In this context Amalendu Guha's works on medieval Assam must be mentioned because he sought to develop a model for integrating economic information into an understanding of the state and society in the period.⁴⁹ His endeavour, as he states, was to "add certain new dimensions to the stereotyped interpretations of Assam's past, handed down to us by historians of imperialist and nationalist schools."⁵⁰ In his essays on medieval Assam he has tried to use "the combined method of history"⁵¹ and has tried to understand the dynamics of change in medieval Assam by accepting the concept that "the material conditions of social life"⁵² play a predominant role in historical developments in a society. His work therefore presents a model of how economic data can be transformed into economic history by taking a more holistic view of economic and social developments. What he has tried to achieve is perhaps best said in his own words as he puts in the introduction to his collection of essays on Medieval and early colonial Assam. He writes:

"Essentially feudal though, the mode of production that thrived in Medieval Assam sharply contrasted with comparable modes that co-existed elsewhere in India not only in scale but also in quality. The basis of this contrast was not so much in realms of production relations, as in that of the productive forces. Therefore and for other reasons the transition from a pre-modern to modern society was also of a different genre. Colonialism reduced the indigenes (*sic*) more or less to one dead level and built enclaves of capitalism where they hardly had any place. Neither E.A. Gait, nor S.K. Bhuyan, nor even H.K. Barpujari or Maheswar Neog — all historians

of eminence — could aptly comprehend the process, because of the limitations of their conservative ideology and perspectives. They missed much of the dynamics of the medieval society and of the colonial domination that followed.⁵³

From these ideas reproduced in Guha's own words one can get a fair impression of what the problems were in the realm of integrating socio-economic data in writing the history of medieval Assam. Guha intervened in this discourse on history and attempted to bring in a new trend in the interpretation of historical data. In this he succeeded to some extent because a number of the younger researchers and scholars did get influenced by his way of looking at developments in Assam and also parts of North East India and perhaps entered into debates with him on various conceptual questions.⁵⁴ But owing to the domination of the more orthodox ideas about history in this part of the country and the weaknesses at the level of training on conceptual aspects of history writing in this region Guha's model has not been able to gain the popularity it should have gained because that model of integration needs very clear understanding of the links between economic structures and social and political structures. For instance in a number of articles published in various publications Romesh Buragohain has sought to focus on the Ahom state formation.⁵⁵ In this context he has also taken into consideration the economics of the process and tries to assess the *Pyke* system's contribution to the growth of the Ahom state. In fact in his doctoral thesis Buragohain painstakingly shows, by drawing upon examples from other societies, that in the Ahom state too the management of water played an important role in state formation.⁵⁶ One can see here that there was an attempt to make a departure from the orthodox dynastic narratives, but the problem that crops up in works such as these is at the level of developing the linkages between political power and the agrarian social structure. Here somehow the dominant conservative trends seem to take the upper hand. There is no doubt however that the exercises carried out by scholars like Buragohain did try to break the earlier predominant views about history writing and economy and society did begin to play an important role in their view of history.

Moving into the last decade of the twentieth century we find encouraging works coming from younger scholars. A mention

must be made here of works like Manoranjan Dutta's *Asomor Uttar-Madhyajugat Arthnaitik Uttaran Aru Samantatantrik Sankhalan*⁵⁷ (in Assamese), Jahnabi Gogoi (Nath)'s *Agrarian System of Medieval Assam*⁵⁸ and Sanjeeb Kakoty's *Technology, Production and Social Formation in the Evolution of the Ahom State*.⁵⁹ While Dutta's work is based primarily on *Buranjis*, a few *caritputhis* and a number of secondary sources Gogoi (Nath) has a rich variety of primary sources, ranging from *Buranjis* to numismatic evidences and sources like *caritputhis* and a wide selection of Persian chronicles and accounts of British officers and other archival sources. Kakoty too uses *Buranjis*, writings of British ethnographers and accounts left behind by officials, and archival sources. Both Dutta and Gogoi (Nath) have tried to reflect on the forces at work in the formation of the Assamese agrarian society. The latter presents a very well evidenced account of land system under the Ahoms, their method of cultivation and the consequent system of revenue administration. There is also an attempt made by her to look into the nature of the Ahom state where she concludes by accepting Amalendu Guha's view that it was in a "stage of transition from tribalism to feudalism".⁶⁰ But it must be acknowledged here that the external criticism of sources and integration at the level of theoretical frame on issues like debates on production of surplus in the agrarian economy and the resultant spread of Brahmanical practices, the use of force by the Ahom state to popularise the plough-based agrarian economy and the development of feudalism in the Ahom state is perhaps more seriously undertaken by Dutta although his work may be technically less well organised than Gogoi (Nath's). Kakoty's work on the other hand while tracing the evolution of the Ahom state through its various stages attempts to integrate the understanding of this evolution by focussing on technology as a means of understanding the socio-economic and political dynamics of change. He provides a very novel insight into the mode of production debate in medieval Assam, a debate which has not really been taken up very seriously in analysing economy and society in North East India.

In addition to these published works younger scholars of the region are gradually taking up interesting areas of study on economy and society in the region but till they become a part of public knowledge through publications it becomes futile to bring them in for assessment here. But one thing becomes apparent from

such on-going works that many of the younger scholars of the entire region are beginning to realise the problems of historiography of the region and are therefore trying to undertake works with some amount of conceptual clarity. After an assessment of the works which have been published and which have made very wide use of *Buranjis* one can perhaps make this generalisation that most of the scholars have used this source mainly to repeat what is there or sometimes to even glorify a past to which they may have some sentimental attachments.⁶¹ A critical use of this source with corroboration from other sources like inscriptions and even folk traditions, with further enlightenments coming from the theoretical and conceptual orientations of the scholars can definitely yield very useful insights into society and economy of the period.

Moving away from Assam to the other areas of the North East to ascertain what kinds of trends have developed in the study of economy and society of those areas leads us into a very difficult terrain because the dearth of materials to discover any definite trends becomes the first great obstacle. If we begin with the areas which had available written records like the *Buranjis* as in Manipur and Tripura⁶² we find that in the existing works of history there is a very strong tendency to emphasise on political history rather than on economy and society. One of the main reasons for this may be the over dependence on chronicles like the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* and *Ningthourol Lambuba* and the *Rajmala*. For instance, works like J. Gan Choudhury's *A political History of Tripura*, and *The Riangs of Tripura*⁶³ or N.R. Roy Choudhury's, *Tripura Through the Ages*⁶⁴ can throw but little insight into economy and society of the times although Roy Choudhury did include some information of socio-economic conditions. Most of the existing published works on Tripura follow the same orthodox patterns of history writing as we had discussed in the case of Assam and these works remain at the level of dynastic narratives mainly because of heavy and basically unimaginative use of the *Rajmala*. In this connection we have discussed above how the *Rajmala* can also provide us with the kind of information that is necessary to construct a history of Tripura which can incorporate an integration of economic, social and political developments. While looking into the writings on Tripura we find quite a few works which deal with the varied tribal groups of the state.⁶⁵ But these works also mostly remain

at the level of descriptive narratives and therefore although information may be found in these works on the economic and social dimensions of the society of the different tribes yet we cannot really find in them any new trend of an integrated presentation of society and economy. A situation similar to the Historiographic trends in Tripura seems to get repeated in the case of Manipur also. Manipuri scholars have produced works on history of Manipur both in English and the vernacular. There are general historical overviews like those written by W. Ibohal Singh⁶⁶ or works focussing on religion and culture like that of Chander S. Panchani.⁶⁷ There is also a collection of papers to be found in a work edited by N. Sanajaoba⁶⁸ some of which relate to the period between the 13th and 18th centuries. In this collection of essays too there is not much that can help us to appreciate the fact that there is a consciousness developing about an alternative perspective to the concept of history. It can be safely reiterated therefore that in the period under discussion because of the ideological preferences of the historians and the lack of a serious academic debate on the issues of conceptualisation of history the works of most of the scholars remain at the level of descriptions and issues like the economy influencing other historical processes has not become a very popular theme. In fact it is rather unfortunate that in addition to an uncritical dependence on works like the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* the writings of British ethnographers like Hodson⁶⁹ still continue to be a very uncritically referred work on the History of Manipur. The problem here too is therefore that there is an overdependence on official texts and a tendency to accept them without corroborating them with other historical evidences. This is a problem of historical methods which requires serious attention from all scholars.

Trying to assess works on economy and society of the Khasi-Jaintia, Garo, Naga, and Mizo communities and the numerous communities inhabiting Arunachal Pradesh in the period between the 13th and the 18th century can be a frustrating task because these aspects have not really found much space in the existing works of history of these communities. It is not that works in English and also the vernacular are not there on aspects of history of the Khasi-Jaintia and the Garo societies or on the Mizo and Naga societies and of quite recent nature on the history of Arunachal Pradesh.⁷⁰ But most of these works travel through the well beaten

path of descriptive narratives with a very trusting dependence on the accounts of the early British officers and ethnographers. The other problem is that almost all the existing works focus primarily on the developments during the colonial period with of course an introductory chapter or two on the "traditional" society before the coming of the British. But these sections do not move much beyond descriptions and the information in these descriptions has rarely gone beyond the information available in the writings of British ethnographers and travellers. Gurdon, Playfair, Hutton, McCall and Shakespeare are amongst some of the most widely used sources for information.⁷¹ But what is needed is developing a concept of history which goes beyond information and description and tries to analyse the existing data on economy and society in a manner which can reflect upon stages of development and socio-economic formations. Such reflections would also bring some important conceptual issues into the gamut of discussions on history writing in North East India. The first issue of course would be the necessity of breaking away from the very conservative and orthodox ideas of history which even now seem to be the predominant understanding of history in this region. It is only when new paths are broken in the perceptions of history that trends would evolve in the study of economy and society in the region which would be able to draw the kind of generalisations relating to the relations between the socio-political institutions and the productive forces in a society as discussed in the first part of this writing. From our discussions above it becomes clear that such trends are either non-existent or beginning to emerge only in the peripheries of what is predominantly considered to be history here. Integrated studies of economy, society and polity need to occupy centre stage in history writing for history to remain relevant as a social science discipline. The other important issues which would also then begin to figure in academic discourses would relate to periodisation and dating of developments in North East India.

Periodisation of the historical developments in North East India in general and the hill areas in particular have to be viewed in a slightly different context from many of the surrounding areas. As we have discussed in details elsewhere⁷² if one were to conceptualise the term periodisation then the question would definitely arise whether the period called medieval for the rest of India is also applicable to all the societies of the North East. "Mere

use of dates is not periodisation. When James Mill introduced the idea of dividing Indian historical developments into Hindu, Muslim and British he had in mind only dynastic changes. But today we cannot still contribute to those ideas."⁷³ Periodisation in history needs to be viewed as the development of the various forms of property, property relations and division of labour, in short, a process of the development of material forces in the society and the resultant organisation of a civil society. As Marx had written that the period of history referred to as ancient "corresponds to the undeveloped stage of production, at which people live by hunting and fishing, by cattle raising or at most by agriculture."⁷⁴ Such a phase of development would therefore also see a division of labour broken at a very low level. This phase would gradually lead to the emergence of ancient and state property. From this phase would develop other forms of property and resultant social relations which would transform society to another stage of development. Now these are phases of development which cannot happen uniformly anywhere, at least not in a diverse country like India. Thus the level of development existing, for instance, in Bengal or Oudh, which has been periodised as medieval, may not have existed in many of the communities of the North Eastern States particularly in the hills. Such a level of development might have taken place much later or may not have taken place at all because of the advent of colonialism. Even within the region different societies might have had different levels of development within a given time frame. Under these conditions it is only pertinent that historians of the North east should give more thought to the question of periodisation which would automatically require a very thorough understanding of economy and society of the concerned areas. It is perhaps unfortunate that questions such as these have not found a place for discussion in a majority of the existing works. In fact there has not been a proper debate on the forms of property relations in the societies of north east India. Such academic exercises have not become the rule because of the prevailing theoretical lacuna in historical researches. The encouraging scenario is that many of the younger scholars who are pursuing or those who have completed their doctoral works seem to be becoming more aware of some of these problems. Those who are still working will of course require sound training and those who have written works integrating the process of

economic transformation with socio-political changes need to get their works published so that their researches become a part of public knowledge. When more and more works come to be produced which take the debates on perspectives of history and periodisation etc. seriously and thus move away from the dominant trends of history writing that exist today in North East India than perhaps a more fruitful discussion on trends of writing on economy and society could be undertaken.

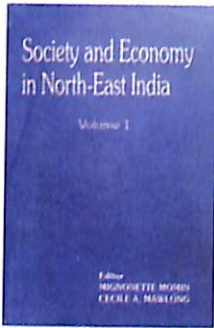
END NOTES

1. For a detailed discussion on this see Manorama Sharma, "Socio-Economic History in Pre-Colonial North East India: Trends, Problems and Possibilities" in M. Momin & Cecile A. Mawlong (eds.) *Society and Economy in North East India*, Vol. 1 (Delhi, 2004), pp. 1–20.
2. This term is taken from R.S. Sharma, *Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India* (New Delhi, 1996 [rep.]), p. 1.
3. Loc. cit.
4. *Ibid.*, Introduction.
5. See J.N. Phukan, "How reliable are the Assamese-Language Buranjis for the Early Ahom History?" in *Proceedings of North East India History Association*, VIII session, Kohima, 1987, pp. 112–118.
6. For details on this aspect of the language of the Buranjis see *ibid.*
7. For an account of the emergence and growth of the Vaisnava movement in Assam see S.N. Sarma, *The Neo-Vasnaivite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam* (Gauhati University, 1966).
8. Maheswar Neog, *Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam*, pp. 3.
9. Maheswar Neog (ed.), *Guru-Carit Katha* (Guwahati, 1999 [2nd ed.]) p. 137.
10. Loc. cit.
11. Loc. cit.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
13. J.B. Bhattacharjee, "Rajmala and the Historical Writings in Tripura", *Proceedings of the North East India History Association*, XXIII Session, p. 43.
14. Narendra Chandra Nath (Translated) *Sri Rajmala*, Foreword.
15. *Ibid.*, Prefatory.
16. The work E.F. Sandys (compiled) *History of Tripura* [compiled and edited by R.G. Singh & Arun Deb Barma] (Agartala, 1997, 2nd rep. First print 1915) also provides us with an insight to the *Sri Rajmala*.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
18. This aspect of containing useful information while eulogising the monarchs is discussed by Rev. James Long in his *Analysis of the Rajmala or Chronicles of Tripura* (Tripura State Tribal Cultural Research Institute & Museum, Agartala 1995 [reprint]).
19. J.B. Bhattacharjee, *op. cit.*, p. 45 has referred to the work of Dinesh Chandra Sen to drive home this point.

20. Narendra Chandra Nath, op. cit., p. 143.
21. Ibid., p. 95.
22. Ibid., p. 78. Also see Rev. James Long, op. cit., pp. 16–17.
23. Maharajkumar Bikramkishore Debbarman & Jagdish GanChoudhury (eds.), *Krishnamala* (Agartala, 1995). (In Bengali).
24. See for example Ibid., pp. 131–135. A close and critical reading of the verses in the *Krishnamala* would provide various other insights into the socio-economic organisation of Tripura of the times.
25. D.R. Syiemlieh, *Survey of Research in History on North East India: 1970–1990* (New Delhi, 2000), p. 2.
26. L. Joychandra Singh (compiled & ed.), *The Lost Kingdom: Royal Chronicle of Manipur* (Imphal, 1995), p. i.
27. Ibid., p. 18.
28. Ibid., p. 27.
29. Khullem Chandrasekhar Singh (Tr. Naorem Sanajaoba) *Loiyamba Shinyen* in Naoram Sanajaoba (ed.) *Manipur Treaties & Documents (1110–1971)*, Vol. I (New Delhi, 1993), pp. 3–11.
30. For a historical commentary on the *Loiyamba Shinyen* see Gangmumei kabui, "A Note on 'Loiyamba Shinyen' (A.D. 1110): The First Written Constitution of Manipur" in Naorem Sanajaoba (ed.), *Manipur Past and Present (The Heritage and Ordeals of a Civilization)* Vol. I (Delhi, 1988), pp. 307–311. In this commentary Kabui holds that the "Loiyamba Shinyen was further expanded by later kings like Kyamba (1467–1508), Khagemba (1597–1652), Garibniwaj (1709–1748, Bhagyachandra (1763–1798 and Chourjit (1803–1813). This expanded document was edited by Khullem Chandasekhar Singh and published in 1975."
31. See Manorama Sharma, *History and History Writing in North East India* (Delhi, 1998), also Manorama Sharma, "Socio-Economic History in Pre-Colonial North East India: Trends, Problems and Possibilities" op. cit.
32. Amiya Kumar Bagchi, *The Political Economy of Underdevelopment* (CUP, New York, 1982), p. 1.
33. See Edward Gait, *A History of Assam* (Guwahati, 1992 [5th Edition]).
34. This point has been discussed at length by Mignonette Momin, "Studies in the Political and Socio-economic History of Pre-Ahom Assam: Perspectives and Prospects", *NEHU Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, Vol. I, No. 1, Jan.–June, 1998.
35. Evidence for such a view for instance can be had from Edward Gait, op. cit., pp. 222–235.
36. See for further details on this Manorama Sharma, "Suryya Kumar Bhuyan and History Writing: A trend Missed" in S. Bora & Manorama Sharma, *Historiography in North East India: Assessing Suryya Kumar Bhuyan* (Shillong) pp. 20–31.
37. For a discussion on this aspect of comparison between Carlyle and Bhuyan Ibid., pp. 29–30.
38. S.K. Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations (1771–1826)* (Guwahati, n.d.).
39. Ibid., p. 7.
40. Ibid., p. 581.
41. N.K. Basu, *Assam in the Ahom Age* (Calcutta, 1970).
42. P. Gogoi, *The Tai and the Tai Kingdoms: With a Fuller Treatment of the Tai Ahom Kingdom in the Brahmaputra Valley*. (Gauhati University, 1968).

43. Lila Gogoi, *The Buranjis, Historical Literature of Assam: A Critical Survey* (New Delhi, 1986).
44. N.K. Basu, op. cit., pp. 149–257.
45. Loc. cit.
46. Satyendranath Sarma, *A Socio-Economic & Cultural History of Medieval Assam* (A.D. 1200–A.D. 1800) (Guwahati, 1989).
47. *Ibid.*, Preface, p.i.
48. Loc. cit.
49. Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity, Economy* (Calcutta, 1991).
50. *Ibid.*, Introduction.
51. Loc. cit.
52. Loc. cit.
53. *Ibid.*, p. xiv.
54. For instance one can see the beginnings of such a debate in Manorama Sharma, *Social and Economic Change in Assam: Middle Class Hegemony* (Delhi, 1990).
55. See for instance amongst others Romesh Buragohain, "Formation of the Ahom State: The Origin and Growth of the Pyke System and Ahom Feudalism in Medieval Assam" in *Proceedings of North East India History Association*, IX Session (Shillong, 1989) pp. 118–130; "Conflicts and Contradictions in Early Ahom State (A.D. 1332–1681)" in *Proceedings of North East India History Association*, XX Session (Shillong, 2000), pp. 121–125.
56. Romesh Buragohain, "An Enquiry into the factors of Polity Formation in Medieval North East India", Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, NEHU, Shillong, 1988.
57. Manoranjan Dutta, *Asom Uttar-Madhyajugat Arthnaitik Uttaran Aru Samantatantrik Sankhalan* (Guwahati, 2002).
58. Jahnabi Gogoi (Nath), *Agrarian System of Medieval Assam* (New Delhi, 2002).
59. Sanjeeb Kakoty, *Technology, Production and Social Formation in the Evolution of the Ahom State* (New Delhi, 2003).
60. Jahnabi Gogoi (Nath), op. cit., p. 165.
61. Exceptions are there no doubt as for instance Manoranjan Dutta, op. cit., or Kakoty op. cit., make critical use of the information available in the *Buranjis* to help in their interpretations.
62. See discussions on this above.
63. Jagdish GanChoudhury, *A Political History of Tripura* (New Delhi, 1985); *Riangs of Tripura* (Agartala, 1983).
64. N.R. Roy Choudhury, *Tripura Through the Ages: A Short History of Tripura from the Earliest Times to A.D. 1947* (New Delhi, 1983).
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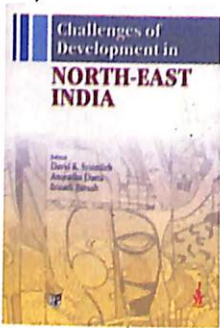
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