

EUROPEAN TRAVEL WRITING AND THE REPRESENTATION OF ASSAM (16th – 18th CENTURIES A.D)

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Doctor of Philosophy

In

HISTORY

By

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DECLARATION

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I, **Monalisha Khakhlari**, hereby declare that the research embodied in the present dissertation entitled “**European Travel Writing and the Representation of Assam (16th – 18th Centuries A.D)**” is carried out under the supervision of **Dr M. N. Rajesh, Department of History**, University of Hyderabad, for the award of **Doctor of Philosophy** in **Department of History**. I declare to the best of my knowledge that it has not been submitted in part or in full to this university or any other university or institution for the award of any degree or diploma. I also declare that this is a bonafide research work which is free from plagiarism. I hereby agree that my thesis can be uploaded in Shodhganga/INFLIBNET.

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1. **“European Travelers' Glimpse into 16th-18th Century Assam: Unveiling the Historical Accounts”** in the International **Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research (JETIR)**, Volume 5, Issue 6, ISSN: 2349-5162, June 2018.

B. Presented papers at the following conferences:

1. **“Notional Presumption and Travel Writing: An Analysis of the Travel Account of Jean- Baptist Tavernier”** in the International Research Sessions at Peradeniya University, Sri Lanka, 5th and 6th November, 2015.
2. **“Medieval Assam: an analytical account of British Travellers”** in the 14th International Conference on Social Science and Humanities (ICSSH) held at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 13th -14th June, 2017.

Further, the student has passed the following courses towards fulfilment of coursework requirement for Ph. D was exempted from doing coursework (Recommended by Doctoral Committee) on the basis of the following courses passed during her M.Phil. program and the M.Phil. Degree was awarded.

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Dedicated to my daughter

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Chapter- 1

Introduction

From time immemorial, there has always been a fascination with uncharted and inaccessible locations. People have travelled on exploration and research missions out of a desire to solve the mysteries of far-off places. Travellers have diligently documented their experiences throughout history in a variety of travel writing genres, including as notes, diaries, letters, and verses. These writings are priceless sources of their encounters and findings. Writings about travel are first-person narratives of the author's experiences. They typically follow the structure of narratives, beginning at a specific location and ending at a different location. Travel accounts, while preserving the fundamental components of storytelling, are largely concerned with the journey and exploration of the traveller. Thus, travel narratives can be categorized as non-fictional prose forms that provide written reports of the traveller's personal impressions and observations of the places they have visited.

Assam, a strategically-located Indian state, had not initially been a popular destination for travellers. However, a few visitors from outside the region were drawn there by the prospect of possible gains or occasionally out of curiosity. They included explorers, scholars, invaders, merchants, soldiers, spiritual reformers, and missionaries. Many scientists and explorers have also visited and explored this area since antiquity. Assam has consequently gained from the historical reports and narratives documented by classical Greek and Roman travellers, just like other regions of India.¹

¹ N. N. Acharyya, *Northeast as viewed by Foreigners*(Omsons publications, 1985), iii.

Books like “*Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*,”² “*Geography*,”³ and “*Natural History*,”⁴ shed insight on the various tribes, regions, and economic activities that may be regarded as being a part of ancient Assam. The *Oidanes* and *Dyardanes* rivers mentioned by Curtius (VIII) and Strabo, respectively, can be connected to Ptolemy's *Doanes* and the *Brahmaputra*.⁵ The reports of travellers from China, Arabia, and Iran added significant depth to the fairly hazy picture of ancient Assam's history. Ancient Assam is known to have entered a new era around the middle of the 7th century AD. Due to their significant contributions to our understanding of Assam, Chinese explorers Yuan Chwang and I-tsing in particular deserve special recognition.⁶ In the eleventh century, the Arabian explorer Alberuni, who accompanied Sultan Mahmud to India, referred to the regions of Pragjyotisha, Kamarupa, Lohitya, Kirata, and Udayagiri ⁷ in his work “*Kitab-ul-Hind*.”⁸

Although Assam had only sporadic engagements with the kings of mainland India, it began developing connections in the early 13th century. The “*Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*”⁹ by Minhaj-i-Siraj has an exhaustive account of Muslim incursions into Assam. The mighty Ahom's emergence and subsequent overthrow of Koch and Mughal rule in Kamrup are described in depth in Mirza Nathan's book “*Baharistan-i-Ghaibi*”.¹⁰ The Koch kingdom and its wars with the Mughals are the subject of Abul Fazal's novels “*Akbarnamah*”¹¹ and “*Ain-i-Akbari*,”¹² which particularly highlight

² Wilfred H. Schoff, *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (New Delhi: Centre for Studies in Civilisations, 2017).

³ Claudius Ptolemy, *Geography of Claudius Ptolemy* (Ingram short title, 2011).

⁴ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History: A Selection*, trans. John Healey, Reprint edition (London, England ; New York, NY, USA: Penguin Classics, 1991).

⁵ Swarna Lata Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam* (Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1985), 36.

⁶ Acharyya, *Northeast as viewed by Foreigners*, iv.

⁷ Acharya, v.

⁸ “*Kitab-Ul-Hind Volume-001 by Abu Rehan Al Bairuni*,” <https://www.rekhta.org/ebooks/detail/kitab-ul-hind-volume-001-abu-rehan-al-bairuni-ebooks>.

⁹ Minhaj-Ul Siraj, *Tabkat-I-Nasiri*, trans. H. M. Elliot and John Dowson (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2006).

¹⁰ M. I. Borah, *Baharistan-I-Ghaybi - A History Of The Mughal Wars In Assam, Cooch Behar, Bengal, Bihar And Orissa During The Reigns Of Jahangir And Shahjahan - Vol 2* (Read Books, 2007).

¹¹ “*Akbarnama of Abu-l-Fazl: A History of the Reign of Akbar Including an Account of His Predecessors Vol. I*,” Indian Culture, accessed June 21, 2023, <http://www.indianculture.gov.in/rarebooks/akbarnama-abu-l-fazl-history-reign-akbar-including-account-his-predecessors-vol-i-0>.

¹² Abul-Fazl 'Allami, *The 'Ain-i-Akbari*, trans. Colonel H. S. Jarrett (Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2022).

Mukarram Khan's activities in Assam.¹³ The well-known book “*Padshahnama*”¹⁴ by Abdul Hamid Lahori describes the wars fought in the second half of the 17th century between the Koch and Ahom and the Mughals. In his book “*Maasir-i-Alamgiri*,”¹⁵ Muhammad Saqi Mustaid Khan provides a detailed description of Mir Jumla's campaigns in Assam. Shihabuddin Talish, a historian who travelled to Assam with Mir Jumla, also provided a description of the socio-economic status of Assamese citizens¹⁶ in his book “*Fathiya-i-Ibriyah*.”¹⁷ Teg Bahadur, the ninth Sikh Guru, travelled to Assam in 1668 and established the Sikh tola at Dhubri on the banks of the Brahmaputra. His work provides important insight into the topography and history of Assam.

The historical documentation of Assam has also been greatly influenced by European explorers. Around 1585, Ralph Fitch became the first Englishman to travel to Assam, giving him exposure to the region's political, judicial, and social frameworks. In 1626 A.D., Father Stephen Cacella and Father John Cabral, two Portuguese Jesuit travellers, travelled to Pandu, Koch Bihar, and Hajo.¹⁸ Their reports provided new perspectives into Kamrupa's earlier legal history. Father Stephen Cacella's letter-style account is mentioned in C. Wessel's book, “*Early Jesuit Travellers in Central Asia*.”¹⁹ John Van Leenen, a Dutchman, and Thomas Bowrey, a British merchant sailor, provided descriptions of the geographical area of Assam adjacent to Bengal in 1661 A.D. and 1663 A.D. respectively. Frans van der Heiden, a Dutch explorer, shed light on the Mughal era in Bengal and Assam in 1662 A.D. During the Ahom era, two French explorers named Jean Baptiste

¹³ Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, 1985, 50.

¹⁴ Beach, *King of the World: The Padshahnama* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 1997).

¹⁵ Maulawi Ali, *Maasir I Alamgiri of Muhammad Saqi Musta'idd Khan: Bibliothec Indica*, 1st edition (Gorgias Press, 2009).

¹⁶ Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, 1985, 50.

¹⁷ Shihab al-Din Talish Wali Ahmad ibn Muhammad and Shihab ud-Din Talish Ahmad Ibn Muhammad Vali, *Fathiyah Ibriyah*,.

¹⁸ Acharyya, *Northeast as viewed by Foreigners*, viii.

¹⁹ Cornelius Wessels, “Early Jesuit Travelers in Central Asia, 1603-1721. 1924,” *Reprint, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services*, 1992.

Tavernier and Francois Bernier travelled across Assam and recorded their findings in the 1660s. Important facts regarding the introduction of firearms by the Ahom's were reported by Jean Baptiste Tavernier. Jean Baptiste Chevalier, who arrived in Assam in 1755, provides a clear explanation of the area's mythical treasure. The narratives of Francois Bernier provide concise insight on Mir Jumla's journey to Assam.²⁰ The state attracted a significant number of British civil and military personnel as the 18th century ended and the 19th century began. An English soldier named Alexander Dow wrote down his impressions of Assam in 1769. He provided a thorough account of the territorial invasion of Bengal up to Dacca by the King of Assam during the Civil War. The complexity of the Ahom government and the socio-economic circumstances of the region were highlighted by Captain Thomas Welsh, a British military commander who lived in Assam for two years (1792–1794 AD). John Peter Wade, a British surgeon who travelled to Assam in 1792 AD with Captain Welsh, was an expert on the natural features and history of Assam. His insightful analysis of the Ahom government's operations and his article titled “*Geographical Sketch of Assam*”²¹ are significant sources detailing the history of Assam during the 18th century.²² The East India Company assigned Francis Hamilton the responsibility of mapping Assam from 1808 to 1814 A.D. His research has made a considerable impact on our comprehension of the political environment, social and economic circumstances in Assam prior to the Burmese invasion. In his thorough description titled “*A Descriptive Account of Assam*,”²³ another European explorer named W. Robinson provides a clear depiction of Assam's early

²⁰ Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, 1985, 51.

²¹ John Peter Wade, “A Geographical Sketch of Assam,” *Asiatic Annual Register, East India Co., Calcutta*, 1805.

²² Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, 1985, 51.

²³ William Robinson ; edited by Ramesh Chandra Kalita, *A Descriptive Account of Asam*, Bhabani edition (Bhabani Books, 2011).

traditions, ancient Kamarupa rulers, Muslim invasions, emergence of the Koches, Ahom reign, Moamariya uprisings, civil feuds, and Burmese invasions.²⁴

1.1 The Concept of Exploration

European writings centred on travels in India typically present a chronological narrative of the journeys, beginning with an overview of the preparations for the expedition, followed by the portrayal of the travellers as representatives of civilization. The “Self,” representing Europeans, and the Indian “Other” are clearly distinguished in European discourses. Indian thought is typically compared to having a vivid imagination, while Western thought is frequently described as being grounded in practical reason. Similar to how Indian civilization is described as having an oppressive but supportive caste structure, Western society is presented as embodying the idea of an independent but self-centered individual.²⁵

European travellers demonstrated a tendency to reinforce the notion of European superiority, which eventually resulted in the development and manipulation of Orientalist theory. According to Edward Said's explanation of this theory, there is a contradiction between the “Occident” (the West) and the “Orient” (the East). Said claims that the idea of the “Orient” was mostly a creation created by Orientalists, or European scholars, to highlight the West's hegemonic position. Orientalism was essentially a strategy for establishing and upholding Western dominance over the East.²⁶ Said further highlighted the power dynamics at work within travel writing and Orientalism. He emphasises that the Oriental subject is portrayed in these narratives as being rigid, stable, and in need of study or understanding from the viewpoint of the Orientalist. Between the

²⁴ Acharyya, *NorthEast as viewed by Foreigners*, ix.

²⁵ Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Indiana University Press, 2000), 3.

²⁶ Procida A, Mary- *A Tale Begun in Other Days: British Travelers in Tibet in the Late Nineteenth Century*, Oxford University Press, *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 30, No 1(1996), pp 185-208, p 188

Oriental as a source of knowledge and the Orientalist as a source of information, there is a fundamental distinction. The Orientalist retains authority and control over the representation and comprehension of the Oriental subject, and this portrayal precludes any opportunity for dialectic or reciprocal communication between the two.

Undoubtedly, the accounts of European travellers like Ralph Fitch, Father Stephen Cacella, Father John Cabral, Frans Jansz. van der Heiden, Francois Bernier, Jean Baptiste Tavernier, Alexander Dow, John Peter Wade, Jean Baptiste Chevalier, and Captain Welsh have made a significant contribution to our understanding of Assam's medieval history. It is crucial to remember that at this time, a number of preconceptions were also spread, which had a long-lasting effect on how Assam was subsequently seen and understood. Once established, these preconceptions had an impact on how Assam was viewed and interpreted in later ages. As Smith contends, even firsthand accounts should be approached critically, as they might have been manipulated to suit the author's hidden motives, which could distort reality.

Various representational techniques, including infantilization, chronopolitics, the gaze, eroticization, and degradation, are used in the context of European texts. These writings also exhibit tendencies to essentialise, categorise, and label the Other as regressive and oppressed. Such tactics help create an imperial encounter in which the Western viewpoint rules and dictates how the "Other" is portrayed.

1.2 Elements of the Topic

European travel writing on Pre-Modern Assam primarily focuses on the characteristics of the region that attracted a significant number of European travelers during that period. Despite the fact that the descriptions of European travellers frequently focus on the idea of the "other," as well as ideas of representation such as imagination, orientalism, infantilization, chronopolitics, the exotic

gaze, eroticization, moralization debasement and imperialism, they are regarded as important sources to acquire knowledge about the history of Assam.

Travel writing is intricately connected with the mapping and survey of regions. Not only did mapping serve the purpose of labelling flora and livestock, mapping also included a focus on geographical features, representing the process of mapping regions. This process served as a means of claiming ownership, both physically and intellectually. The discovery of new areas was frequently written figuratively represented as the discovery of uncharted territory that was only waiting to be discovered, domesticated, and claimed by male explorers. Sexual connotations were frequently present in the terminology used to describe territorial expansion, which became widely accepted and normalized.

Infantilization is a significant strategy used to portray the Other as incapable of making independent decisions.²⁷ In this sense, the Orient is portrayed as both a land of wisdom and sages as well as a place where people's mental growth is hindered and resembles that of a child. Contradictory perceptions, however, also portray the Orient as irrational, emotional, barbaric, and infantile. Infantilization justifies the need for direction and favor from the supposedly more 'enlightened', 'rational' West. Numerous metaphors were used to equate the East with a stubborn and irrational child.

The concept of chronopolitics draws attention to the relationship between people's and groups' political actions and perspectives on time.²⁸ It has been a major factor in how the non-Western other has been portrayed in the West. The other is frequently thought of as being socially and culturally behind the times, being portrayed as mediaeval, archaic (like the ancient Egyptians

²⁷ *Ibid* p. 33

²⁸ Wallis.W George- *Chronopolitics: The Impact of Time Perspectives on the Dynamics of Change*, Social Forces, Vol 49, No1 (Sep, 1970), p 102

or Mesopotamians), prehistoric (primitive), or even being beyond of time (timeless). It is frequently depicted that the colonial trip and the journeys of Western commentators moved forward in geographic space but backward in chronological time. Through the use of this strategy, non-dominant groups were kept out of the present and had their oppression justified in the name of modernism. The belief that natives were backward and required the authority, control, guidance, or assistance of the more 'sophisticated' foreigners in order to advance into the modern period, gained currency during this period.²⁹

The act of gazing is not simply a harmless act of curiosity or observation. The individual who is casting the look is positioned as being superior to the subject of their glance, which has a deeper consequence of power dynamics.³⁰ The European traveller's look may seem to be an act of inquiry or curiosity, but it really represents an effort to establish Western supremacy and superiority. Objects and people are classified, identified, and prepared for action through the processes of observation, assessment, and interpretation. The act of staring simultaneously subjects the target of observation to monitoring while fixing their essence. The identity of the person being observed is built through this process. This does not imply that people from non-Western cultures lack vision or are unable to look back at the West. The dominance of imperialism, however, ensured that domination and control largely remained in the hands of Western powers throughout a significant portion of the modern age. The authority of Western imperialism had a significant influence on the power dynamics of the gaze.³¹

A major feature of Western portrayals of the non-West or the Other is the eroticization of the latter. Entrenched gender distinctions and sexual images exerted a powerful, unconscious

²⁹Anand, Dibyesh- *Tibet: A victim of Geopolitics*, Routledge, Tolstoy Marg, New Delhi, 2009, p 31

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 22

³¹ *Ibid*, 23

influence on the jargon of exploration and colonisation. The act of discovering new places was frequently depicted as literally uncovering or exposing the uncharted terrain, as if to display the nude, seductive, and primordial female body of that land to the ‘civilized’ European man. .³² This portrayal suggests a desire to enslave native peoples and can be seen as a demonstration of male supremacy and mastery over women. A power dynamic rooted in gender hierarchies is visible in the vocabulary and images employed in the context of exploration and colonisation, where the male explorer attempts to assert authority and dominance over the Other as a mode of conquest and enslavement.

Morality was recognized as an indication of advancement, and moralization was used as an effective strategy by the West to establish and maintain hegemony. The norms of the ruling classes in European societies came to be considered the highest level of civilization, enabling the writers to juxtapose the ‘virtuous’ colonizers who were considered the epitome of morality, with the indigenous tribes, the Orientals, and the working classes, who were dismissed as lacking moral values.³³

Native subjects were demonized and associated with disgusting and dirty notions. In order to reinforce colonial tyranny and inculcate a sense of inferiority among the colonized people, language pertaining to pollution and disease was used to refer to them. The debasement of natives often went hand in hand with a strategy of negation through which Western works conceptualized the Other as lacking agency, history, and even language.³⁴ The goal of this denial was to render the Other non-existent, creating a vacuum that encouraged the development of the colonial imagination. The pursuit of desire also contributed to these processes.

³² Ibid, p.28

³³ Ibid 30

³⁴ Ibid 26

The Orientalist notion of the Other being irrational, lawless, ineffective, and dishonest served to validate the European belief that the West was ‘balanced’, ‘ethical’ and ‘virtuous’. The Western discourse of superiority and hegemony over the non-Western Other, particularly Assam, was reinforced by this dichotomy. Europeans frequently portrayed Assam in a humiliating and derogatory way, characterizing it as ‘savage’ and ‘uncivilized’.

1.2.1 Scope of the Study

The present research aims to investigate how European travellers described Assam and enhance context to Assam's pre-modern history. While travellers' accounts have been used in past study to examine Assam's history, just a handful of research endeavors have systematically assessed the historical accuracy of these works. Instead of just listing these narratives in chronological order, this study aims to adopt a theme-based approach. The thesis chapters will look into many aspects of Assam's politics, society, culture and economy by setting the scenario and suggesting new interpretations of these sources. Earlier scholarly efforts did not evaluate and interpret these materials with as rigor as this approach has performed.

1.2.2 Aims and Objectives of the Study

- The main aim is to examine the motive and purposes of the travellers, the generalisations they made based on certain assumptions, and the dominant ideologies that led to their portrayal.
- To investigate and study how the European travellers depicted the administrative set-up and polity of the region, as well as the devices of representation employed by them that became powerful typecasts and emerged as categories.

- To unravel the different literary evidences and textual traditions that the travellers used to describe the society and people of the region.

1.2.3 Methodology

This study's research methodology combines investigative and interpretative techniques with the goal of analyzing, evaluating, and outlining arguments based on gathered information. Throughout the inquiry, an informative and critical historical approach was employed. Journals, travelogues, documents, and recordings of European travellers to Assam are the main sources for this thesis. Books, journals, published materials, unpublished papers, multiple articles, and other relevant sources are considered secondary sources which too play a crucial role. These secondary sources give perspectives and information to the study's findings. As part of the research process, the relationship between the primary and secondary sources is observed. Additionally, the study aims to comprehend how particular representational strategies like gazing, exoticism, idealisation, and Orientalism were applied. This analysis makes it possible to compare the accounts stated in the travellers' reports to the data given in secondary sources, making it easier for one to assess the authors' impartiality and authenticity.

List of the Travellers to Assam (16th – 18th Centuries)	Period of the Visit
Ralph Fitch (English explorer)	1585
Father Stephen Cacella and Father John Cabral (Jesuit missionaries)	1626
Frans Van der Heiden (Dutch traveller)	1662
Jean Baptiste Tavernier (French traveller)	1664--1668
Francois Bernier (French traveller)	1660's
Jean Baptiste Chevalier (French traveller)	1755
Alexander Dow (Scottish traveller)	1769
Captain Thomas Welsh (British military)	1792
John Peter Wade (British surgeon)	1792

1.2.4 Significance of the study

Travel accounts and their potential significance have not received much attention in the present collection of historical research. The utilization of travel accounts has been a bit restricted. The historiography has overlooked the need for a distinct examination of travel accounts, which is the objective of this research proposal. The purpose of this study is to address the lack of recognition of travel reports as an essential resource for tracing Assam's pre- modern history, emphasizing the importance of this investigation.

1.2.5 Hypothesis

The thesis is built upon the hypothesis that Early modern Assam possesses distinct characteristics that cannot be completely generalized. This suggest that Assam as a region, exhibits unique qualities that make it stand out and should be studied as a ‘regional particularity’. A careful analysis of the selected works will highlight the length and diversity of travel writing about Assam. Whether

or not they are influenced by imperialist or non-imperialist attitudes, the subjective opinions that are present in the publications are intended to be made clear through this study. It also seeks to list the many narrative strategies applied in the genre of travel writing about Assam.

1.3 Review of Literature

Narratives of travellers from both the pre-colonial and colonial periods have been thoroughly investigated by academicians, who explored their portrayal of the socio-economic and political facets of life in India. These travel accounts have been the subject of several early publications that have offered insightful analysis and a thorough comprehension of the subject. Additionally, the number of books devoted to studying these tales has significantly increased in recent years, greatly advancing our knowledge. This section provides an overview of the major texts relevant to the current endeavour and offers novel insights into studies on travel narratives.

*“European Travellers in India”*³⁵ by E.F. Oaten, first published in 1909, was a pioneer in the study of the encounters and observations of European visitors to India. In-depth analysis of the reports provided by these travellers offers insightful knowledge on how they interacted with Indian society, culture, and politics. By providing a window into the colonial interaction between the East and the West, Oaten's work illuminates the perceptions and viewpoints of European travellers. The book examines the socio-economic and political consequences of these travel narratives, demonstrating how they affected colonial narratives and changed European perceptions of India. It not only gives a thorough examination of the experiences of European travellers, but also sheds light on the more general historical and cultural processes of the colonial era.

³⁵ Edward Farley Oaten, *European Travellers in India: During the Fifteenth, Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, the Evidence Afforded by Them with Respect to Indian Social Institutions, & the Nature & Influence of Indian Governments* (Asian Educational Services, 1991).

The book “*Early English Travellers in India*”³⁶ by R.C. Prasad examines the records of ten English travelers who visited India between 1579 and 1630. It must be remembered that his analysis is not intended to provide a review of the historical significance of these sources. These accounts are instead used as empirical evidence to create a historical narrative of India's political, social, and cultural life. They demonstrate the profound historical linkages between the ancient civilizations of the Indian subcontinent and the relatively more contemporary civilizations of the British Isles by offering crucial insights into the India of the Mughal Empire. The book bridges a long-standing gap in Indo-Anglian literature, and both academics and casual readers acknowledge it as a significant intellectual endeavour.

In Kate Teltscher “*India Inscribed*,”³⁷ the analysis of European and British texts about India between 1600 and 1800 challenges Edward Said's binary outline of the “Oriental Other” and “Occidental Self”. Other academics have accepted this divergence from Said's paradigm, highlighting the varied and dynamic nature of representations of India in the 17th and 18th centuries. Teltscher's study illuminates the intricacy of the literary and cultural debates surrounding India at that time by drawing on a wide range of sources, including trip diaries, missionary letters, historical publications, political speeches, paintings, literature, and poetry.

In the edited book “*Medieval Ethnographies: European Perceptions of the World Beyond*,”³⁸ Rubies analyses how pre-modern European travel texts began to take a naturalistic and ethnographic perspective. The understanding of a single "European culture" was eventually affected by this strategy, which helped to recognize cultural variety. Beginning in the eleventh

³⁶ Ram Chandra Prasad, *Early English Travellers in India: A Study in the Travel Literature of the Elizabethan and Jacobean Periods with Particular Reference to India* (Motilal Banarsidass Publ., 1980).

³⁷ Kate Teltscher, *India Inscribed: European and British Writing on India, 1600-1800* (Oxford University Press, 1995).

³⁸ Joan-Pau Rubiés, *Medieval Ethnographies: European Perceptions of the World Beyond* (Routledge, 2017).

century, the Latin West experienced a rise in cultural confidence along with an increase in the importance of empirical ethnographies as a literature form. This issue is highlighted in the book, which is a compilation of essays on mediaeval ethnographies, and it offers information on how these perceptions have changed over time.

In “*The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*,”³⁹ Tim Young asserts that the nature of travel writing cannot be reduced to a generalized framework. He observes that the study of travel narratives has received immense acceptance and significance in the humanities and social sciences. It has developed into an interdisciplinary field, and academicians from a range of fields are involved in reassessing various facets of travel writing. Experts in anthropology, history, literary analysis, and cultural studies have contributed to compiling “*The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*.” The book provides a thorough and engaging overview of travel writing in English from 1500 to the present.

“*European Travel Accounts During the Reigns of Shahjahan and Aurangzeb*,”⁴⁰ by Meera Nanda is an insightful book that focuses on a particular era in Indian history. However, it only applies to this specific time period. One critique of the book is that it presents the material without carefully considering the historical authenticity of the testimonies. Despite this drawback, Nanda's analysis highlights the fact that these travelogues provide distinct viewpoints in contrast to the Persian chronicles, which are the main indigenous source for the Mughal Empire. Additionally, the travel narratives are historically significant owing to the accuracy of the geographic information and the variety of perspectives they highlight.

³⁹ Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs, *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, vol. 10 (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁴⁰ Meera Nanda, *European Travel Accounts during the Reigns of Shahjahan and Aurangzeb* (Nirmal Book Agency, 1994).

“*Travellers' India: An Anthology*”⁴¹ a compilation edited by H.K. Kaul, has approximately 400 excerpts from 170 traveller narratives of India that were recorded between the early twentieth century and antiquity. The anthology's thematic organization offers a thorough overview of India over many periods in history. Compilations of travel literature have been existence for a long time, although recent years have witnessed a shift towards more thematic and critical approaches which seek to expand upon particular themes and provide objective evaluations of trip narratives.

“*North East as Viewed by Foreigners*, ”⁴² by Dr. N.N. Acharyya presents a complete account of the observations made by foreigners in the Northeastern region of India throughout history. The book examines the appeal of Assam to a range of people, including tourists, academicians, invaders, traders, soldiers, religious reformers, and missionaries. Although it does not follow a meticulous historical technique and hence fails to qualify as a thorough historical study, it provides a scholarly introduction to the field and offers valuable information which can serve as the foundation for further research.

Another work by Acharyya, “*In the History of Mediaeval Assam*, ”⁴³ offers a thorough and critical analysis of the activities and society of Assam. He traces in full and accurate detail of the valuable sources, political condition of Assam and its neighboring states early in the thirteenth century, of the arrival, growth and consolidation of Ahom power in Assam, retreat of the Kacharis from the Subansiri Valley to the annexation of the Chutia territory by the Ahoms, rise of the Koch power, repressive Ahom policy towards the Nagas. Undoubtedly, the book provides worthwhile information about Assam's Society.

⁴¹ H. K. Kaul, ed., *Travellers' India: An Anthology* (Delhi: OUP India, 1980).

⁴² N. N. Acharyya, *North East as Viewed by Foreigners* (Gauhati: Omsons, 1985).

⁴³ Nagendra N Acharyya, “The History of Mediaeval Assam,(AD 1228 to 1603).,” 1957.

Renowned Assamese historian H.K. Barpujari emphasises the significance of an objective interpretation of the past and relied heavily on original sources, notably unpublished official records, to accurately present historical events. However, Barpujari ignores the contextual aspect of historical facts as well as the prejudices and views of those who recorded them in his pursuit of impartiality. His well-known edited work, “*The Comprehensive History of Assam*,”⁴⁴ contains traveler's reports, although the research does not fully engage with critical approaches to historical facts. Instead, it frequently adheres to an empiricist-positivist method of writing history, which might restrict critical examination of the evidence offered.

S.L. Barua’s “*A Comprehensive History of Assam*,”⁴⁵ discusses foreign accounts very briefly. He asserts that when the Ahoms arrived in Assam in the 13th century, they brought with them the tradition of chronicling historical events in books known as *Azawins*, a practice which had begun in Burma, where they were originally from. Barua emphasizes that the written accounts of foreign travellers offer a limited, yet coherent description of Assam.

In “*Assam in the Eighteenth century*,”⁴⁶ Ramesh Chandra Kalita Ramesh Chandra Kalita depicts a very critical period in the history of modern Assam during 1769-1826 AD, dealing with the power dynamic at work within the Ahom state system. The policy of expansion followed both by the British and Burmese towards Assam which led the annexation of Assam by the Britishers in 1826. He refers to the expedition of Captain Thomas Welsh into Assam (1792-94) who through his report and account marks a new sight in the history of Assam.

“*Anglo-Assamese Relations 1771-1826*,” a work by Surya Kumar Bhuyan, focuses on the political and commercial ties between the English and the Ahom kingdom. Bhuyan asserts that

⁴⁴ Heramba Kanta Barpujari, *The Comprehensive History of Assam: From the Pre-Historic Times to the Twelfth Century AD*, vol. 1 (Publication Board, Assam, 1990).

⁴⁵ Swarna Lata Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam* (Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1985).

⁴⁶ Kalita, Ramesh Chandra- *Assam in the Eighteenth Century*, Omsons Publications, Gauhati, 1992

his work is the first thorough analysis of all available sources, including published and unpublished Assamese and English texts, to be done scientifically. His work mostly concentrates on politics and the economy, ignoring the socioeconomic and cultural components of that era, and it does not address non-European visitors to pre-colonial Assam. Bhuyan's work has also come under criticism in light of new research findings. For instance, he cites Gleanus' narrative as an essential source; but later research indicates that there is no evidence of a traveller by the name Gleanus having visited pre-colonial Assam. Such loopholes point to the need for a fresh interpretation of his ambitious research.

The book “*A Socio-economic & Cultural History of Mediaeval Assam, 1200 A.D.-1800 A.D.*”⁴⁷ by Satyendranath Sarma offers an overview of Assam's mediaeval history. This framework is especially helpful since it acts as a starting point for a comparative analysis of travellers' records.

Edward Gait, the author of “*A History of Assam*,”⁴⁸ adopted an imperialist approach to writing history, particularly concerning the pre-Ahom Brahmaputra Valley. He gathered historical data from a variety of sources in his capacity as a British official historian in order to produce an official history that benefited the British government. His work, which was published in 1906, made substantial use of travellers' accounts from the seventeenth century or earlier. Despite belonging to the colonizer's community, Gait demonstrated an understanding of the social, political, and economic conditions of Assam. “*A History of Assam*,” skillfully traces the history of the region from prehistoric times to the British rule, offering a comprehensive account.

⁴⁷ Satyendranath Sarma, *A Socio-Economic & Cultural History of Medieval Assam, 1200 A.D.-1800 A.D.* (Bina Library, 2001).

⁴⁸ Edward Gait, *A History of Assam* (Thacker, Spink & Company, 1906).

The history of medieval Assam is constructed in great detail in Amalendu Guha's work, *“Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity, Economy,”*⁴⁹ using the narratives of people like Talish, John Peter Wade, Captain Thomas Welsh, and others as major sources. Guha refers to these stories as eyewitness accounts that offer important insights into the process of political system and state creation in Assam in a well-researched study published in Social Scientist. The society, governance, and economy of mediaeval and early colonial Assam are the main topics of the book. By taking into account variables including material and mental culture, population, ideology, and more, it provides insights into the region's past.

Travellers' narratives are considered as significant primary sources for historians, who have benefited greatly from their documents. These accessible accounts have been extensively used, reinterpreted, and gathered by historians in an effort to comprehend them in the context of Indian history as a whole. According to historical records, Assam was first visited by Europeans in the late 15th century. According to historical records, Assam was first visited by Europeans in the late fifteenth century. In 1583, a merchant hailing from London named Ralph Fitch set out on an expedition to investigate the Eastern parts of India. The book *“Ralph Fitch, England's Pioneer to India and Burma: His companions and contemporaries with his remarkable narrative told in his own words”*⁵⁰ by John H Ryley, mentions Fitch's travelogue, which documented his journeys spanning 8 years, covering a number of areas including Bhutan and Koch Bihar. Fitch recalls his encounters and interactions with the locals in these places in graphic detail. He also sheds light on the security measures used in the area and presents an image of citizens of Assam who are kind and respectful of animals.

⁴⁹ Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity, Economy* (Anwesha in collaboration with Jeevan Ram Mungi Devi Goenka Public Charitable Trust, 2015).

⁵⁰ John Horton Ryley, *Ralph Fitch, England's Pioneer to India and Burma: His Companions and Contemporaries, with His Remarkable Narrative Told in His Own Words* (London, 1899).

C. Wessel's work, titled "*Jesuit Travelers in Central Asia 1603-1721*,"⁵¹ provides valuable descriptions and information about the individualities of Father Stephen Cacella and John Cabral, two Portuguese Jesuits who embarked on a journey to India in 1614 CE with the aim of exploring Tibet. The book provides a thorough account of their trip, detailing their journey in locations including Dacca, Koch Behar, and Kamrup until arriving in Pandu in 1626 AD. The encounters and experiences of Jesuit missionaries in Central Asia during the period were documented in fragmented letters, which have been preserved by the Society of Jesus. These letters were eventually collected and published in C. Wessel's book, "*Jesuit Travelers in Central Asia 1603-1721*," thus making them accessible to the common people.

In the 17th century, Frans Jansz van der Heiden wrote the Dutch travelogue "*Vervarelyke Schipbreuk van 'T Oost-Indisch Jacht Ter Schelling*" which was translated into English as "*A Relation of an Unfortunate Voyage to the Kingdom of Bengala*."⁵² It is interesting that the identities of the original authors are not mentioned in the English translations. It's possible that Glanius, an Englishman who is also fluent in French and Dutch, translated the text into English. It is crucial to acknowledge its original writers and comprehend any potential misunderstandings. The book itself has historical relevance as a source, even though the author's identity is still up for debate. Although the narrative comprised aspects like cannibalism, monsters, and magic, it also makes references to real historical figures and events. For instance, the victory of the Mughal army under Mir Jumla over the Koch and Ahom provinces is mentioned. As a mercenary who was part

⁵¹ Wessels, "Early Jesuit Travelers in Central Asia, 1603-1721. 1924."

⁵² Mr Glanius, *A Relation of an Unfortunate Voyage to the Kingdom of Bengala Describing the Deplorable Condition, and Dismal Accidents, Attending Those Therein Concerned: How That After the Loss of Their Ship, They Were Forced to Abide in a Desert, and Barren Island, to Eat Leaves, Toads, Serpents, &c. and Reduced to That Extremity, as to Digg Open Graves, to Feed on Human Bodies* (Henry Bonwick, 1682).

of this mission, the author offers a fascinating perspective of the political situation and military developments of the time.

A French physician and explorer named Francois Bernier travelled to India in the late 17th century under the reign of the Mughals. His travels through the Mughal Empire are chronicled in the book “*Travels in the Mughal Empire*,”⁵³ which he authored between 1659 and 1669. It provides a window into a bygone age that is still relevant today. In addition to his experiences in India as a whole, Bernier also briefly describes his visits to Assam. During the Ahom-Mughal interactions, he travelled with Mir Jumla and recorded his observations in Assam.

“*Travels in India*,”⁵⁴ written by the French traveller and entrepreneur Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, gives a thorough and in-depth description of his travels around India in the 17th century. His book, initially published in 1676, is recognised as a classic piece of travel writing providing a detailed and valuable account of India of the 17th century. Tavernier, along with Mir Jumla, visited Assam and a concise account of his experiences there has been recorded in the book. He emphasised the importance of Assam as a source of firearms and gunpowder, and provided descriptions of Assamese towns, traditions, cuisine, and worldviews. He emphasised the richness of the monarchy by citing the presence of gold, silver, silk, and shellac.

In 1984, the account of Jean Baptiste Chevalier’s travels was eventually restored, edited, and published by historian Jean Deloche through the French School of Asian Studies (EFEO), Paris. The account was afterwards translated into English as “*The Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India*,”⁵⁵ by Caroline Dutta Baruah, a Guwahati-based translator. It recounts the adventures of the French traveller and diplomat

⁵³ François Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire, A.D. 1656-1668* (Oxford : University Press, 1916).

⁵⁴ Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Travels in India*, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, H. Milford, 1925).

⁵⁵ Jean-Baptiste Chevalier, *The Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India, 1752-1765: Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal, and Tibet* (LBS publications, 2008).

during his visit to Assam and offers important insights on the socio-political and cultural circumstances of the area at the time.

Dr. John Peter Wade's account was later used as source material for Lt. Col. J. Johnstone's 1877 book, "*Captain Welsh's Expedition to Assam in 1792, 1793, and 1794*."⁵⁶ Johnstone emphasises Captain Welsh's role in establishing the English East India Company's presence in Assam. The first British Commissioner of Assam David Scott also added to Welsh's report, which was eventually included in Alexander Mackenzie's 'History of the Relations of Government with the Hill Tribes of the North East Frontier of Bengal.'⁵⁷ Welsh's study offers novel perspectives on the era of transition when the Ahom kingdom was in collapse and the East India Company was progressively establishing itself as a power in the political arena of Assam.

In 1792 CE, Captain Welsh's troops were escorted by Assistant Surgeon Dr. John Peter Wade. His book "*An Account of Assam*,"⁵⁸ is an important resource for researching Assam's past. Some of the first initiatives to gather and disseminate information about the area were Wade's works on the history and geography of Assam. These initiatives were made to improve the administrative comfort of East India Company officers and merchants during the early stages of their stay in Assam. The "*An Account of Assam*" by Dr. John Peter Wade is a key historical work that provides important details about the geography and history of Assam in the late 18th century.

The book titled "*The History of Hindustan*,"⁵⁹ by Alexander Dow, was first published between the years 1770-72. From his father, Dow inherited the position of Private Secretary to Aurangzeb, the last Mogul Emperor. His main task was to correctly translate Ferishta's texts into

⁵⁶ J. Johnstone, *Captain Welsh's Expedition to Assam in 1792, 1793, and 1794*, (1912).

⁵⁷ Alexander Mackenzie, *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁵⁸ John Peter Wade, *An Account of Assam* (R. Sarmah, 1800).

⁵⁹ Alexander Dow, *The History of Hindostan* (Taylor & Francis, 2000).

English while trying to preserve the original framework. Dow added more dissertations to the second version of the book that excavated deeper into Indian history. Alexander Dow's observations suggested that Assam and Bengal had a major trading link. His reports also demonstrate the powerful influence of religion and the dominance of priests over different castes in India.

1.4 Ahom Traditions of Writing History

The Ahoms brought with them the practice of documenting all historical events. Their records, known as “*Buranjis*,”⁶⁰ are so numerous and extensive that they overshadow other primary sources like numismatics and archaeology.⁶¹ The most significant *Buranji* that provides a comprehensive history of Ahom dominance in Assam is the *Ahom Buranji*, which was written in the Tai-Ahom language.

The “*Deodhai Assam Buranji*”⁶² is a collection of numerous historical accounts from antiquity. It includes the translation of the Ahom Buranji as well as valuable information about the political interactions between the Ahoms, Naras, Chutias, Kacharis, Burmese, and Jayantias that was gathered from a number of ancient Assamese manuscripts. Another translated version of the Tai-Ahom Buranji is included in the “*Satsari Assam Buranji*,”⁶³ which provides a history of the time from King Kamaleswar Singha to King Purandhar Singha.

⁶⁰ The word ‘*buranji*’ is derived from the Ahom language meaning ‘a store house of knowledge that enlightens the ignorant’.

⁶¹ S.L Barua, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, p.43

⁶² Surya Kumar Bhuyan, *Deodhai Asam Buranji: with several shorter chronicles of Assam (compiled from old Assamese buranjis)*, 1962.

⁶³ Suryya Kumar Ed Bhuyan, *Satsari Asam Buranji Ed. 2nd*, 1964, <http://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.452577>.

The “*Tungkhungia Buranji*”⁶⁴ is a historical account that specifically focuses on the last dynasty of Ahom Kings, known as the Tungkhungia's. It offers a thorough account of the period from the reign of Chandrakanta Singha to that of Gadadhar Singha, and also includes an English translation of the *Satsari Assam Buranji*. Another significant Tai-Ahom chronicle is the “*Weissalisa*,”⁶⁵ which is a compilation of two chronicles known as *Weissali-Hukong* and *Weissali-Mung-Dum-Sunkham*. The *Weissalisa* discusses the Burmese invasions of Assam.

“*Assamese Buranjis*” exist in a variety of shapes and are used for various things. One type of *Assamese Buranji* such as the *Kakati Buranji* consists various reports and records. These *Buranjis*, as seen in the *Datiyalia Buranji*, include comprehensive information about the Ahoms' neighbouring states. Construction of maidams, temples, roads, bridges, and banyan tree planting along roadside are the main goals of the “*Chang-rung Phukanara Buranji*.”⁶⁶ *Buranjis* that belong to the *Datiyalia Buranji* subgroup include the “*Kachari Buranji*,”⁶⁷ “*Jayantia Buranji*”⁶⁸ and “*Tripura Buranji*.”⁶⁹ They mainly discuss the political interactions between the Ahom monarchs and the rulers of the various kingdoms of Kachari, Jayantia, and Tripura.

The *Kali-Bharati* and *Belimarar Buranjis* were combined into the edited “*Asamar Padya Buranji*.”⁷⁰ Beginning with Sukapha's tenure and ending with the handover of provinces from the

⁶⁴ Srinath Duara Barbarua, *Tungkhungia Buranji: Or, A History of Assam, 1681-1826 A.D.; an Old Assamese Chronicle of the Tungkhungia Dynasty of Ahom Sovereigns, with Marginalia, Genealogical Tables, Bibliography, Glossary, and Index* (Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies in Assam, 1968).

⁶⁵ Mahendra Barā, *Weissalisa: (containing 2 independent chronicles of the Burmese invasions of Assam, written originally in Tai language)* (Department of Assamese, Univ., 1977).

⁶⁶ Cão Bhūwana Candra Sandikai and P. Sobha, “*Cāmruṅga Phukanara Burañji, History of Chang Rung Phukan : On Tai Ahom Monuments*,” 1994.

⁶⁷ Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, *Kachari Buranji, Or, A Chronicle of the Kachari Rajas from the Earliest Times to the Eighteenth Century A.D., with Special Reference to Assam-Cachar Political Relations: Collated from Old Assamese Manuscript Chronicles* (Government of Assam in the Department of historical and antiquarian studies, 1984).

⁶⁸ Bahadur S. K. Bhuyan, *Jayantia Buranji*, 1937, <http://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.452406>.

⁶⁹ Manik de, *Tripura Buranji (ed) Suryya Kumar Bhuiyan [1938]*, 2018, <http://archive.org/details/TripuraBuranjiedSuryyaKumarBhuiyan1938>.

⁷⁰ Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, *Asamar padya-buranji: or, A metrical chronicle of Assam, consisting of Dutiram Hazarika's Kali-bharat buranji ... and Bisweswar Vaidyadhipa's Belimarar buranji* (Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, 1932).

East India Company to the crown, the former gives a historical description of the Ahom rule. From Captain Welsh's mission to Assam in 1792 until the Burmese victory at Khagarijan in Nowgong in 1819, the latter provides a chronology of events. In addition to providing details of Raja Ram Singha's activities and Mirjumla's journey to Assam, the Assamese text known as the *Pabishah Buranji* also describes the *Padshas* (emperors) of Delhi.

Two significant Buranjis, namely “*Assam Buranji*”⁷¹ by Kashi Nath Tamuli Phukan and “*Assam Buranji*”⁷² by Hara Kanta Barua, provide detailed accounts of the Ahom administration until 1838 A.D., when the English gained control over upper Assam. A significant Buranji titled “*Purani Assam Buranji*,”⁷³ compiled by H.C. Goswami, provides in-depth histories of the reigns of Dihingia Raja, Burha Raja, and Chakradhvaj Singha in addition to condensed biographies of other Assamese monarchs. Gunabhiram Barua's “*Assam Buranji*”⁷⁴ is the most thorough and systematic of all the Assamese Buranjis, and as such, it has a special historical significance. The “*Kamrupa Buranji*,”⁷⁵ which became available in 1930 A.D., is a collection that incorporates content from numerous original sources. It focuses on the wars between Cooch Bihar and Assam, which culminated in Swargadeo Gadadhar Singha's victory over the Mughals at the Battle of Itakhuli in 1682 A.D.

Other historical writings produced during the Ahom era include the *Vamsavalis*, *Bhuyanr Puthi*, and *Charitra Puthi*. The family history of the Koch Rajas of Darrang is especially explored

⁷¹ Kasi Nath Tamuli Phukan, *Assam Buranji*, 1906, <http://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.452910>.

⁷² Harakanta Barua and Hara Kanta Barua Sadaramin, *Assam Buranji, Or, A History of Assam, from the Commencement of the Ahom Rule to the British Occupation of Assam in 1826 A.D.: Being an Enlarged Version of the Chronicle of Kasinath Tamuli-Phukan* (Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Assam, 1930).

⁷³ Hemchandra Ed Goswami, *Purani Asam Buranji Ed. 2nd*, 1977, <http://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.452171>.

⁷⁴ Gunabhiram Barua, *Āsāma burāñjī*, 1972.

⁷⁵ Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, *Kamrupar Buranji Or an Account of Ancient Kamarupa: And a History of the Mogul Conflicts with Assam with Cooch Behar, Up to A.D. 1682 with Appendices : Compiled from Old Assamese Manuscript Chronicles* (Government of Assam, 1958).

in the *Darrang Raj-Vamsavali*. Similar to the family Vamsavalis of the Ahom nobles, the chiefs of the realms of Rani and Dimarua kept their own Vamsavalis. The *Bhuyanir Puthi* offers important insights into history and genealogy, illuminating ancestry and background. The *Satriya Vamsavalis* give histories of the Satras, detailing their interactions with the governing authorities. The *Mayamara Satrar Vamsavali* and *Dihing Satrar Vamsavali*, in particular, provide insights into the socio-religious and political circumstances that prevailed in Assam at that period.

Adi Charitra, *Guru Charitra*, and *Katha Guru Charitra* are a few prose and poetry compositions that collectively constitute the *Charitra Puthis*. The biographies of Vaishnava Gurus form the main theme in these texts. They portray the Assamese society of the period from the 16th century to the end of the 18th century.

Since the Ahoms were interested in history, they recorded it in writing. However, the *buranjis* are not always accurate in their descriptions of events and people. Besides, they do not provide a complete picture of the social, political, religious, and economic conditions of the time. Nevertheless, they remain significant as historical literature.

1.5 Outline of Chapters

The thesis is divided into six chapters, each of which focuses on a different set of objectives and arguments. Chapter one, serves as an introduction to the study, focusing on the central concept. It provides an overview of the topic, outlines its scope, objectives and significance. A detailed literature review, hypothesis, and methodology are given. The chapter also outlines the overall organization of the thesis.

Chapter two, titled "Travel Writing and Its Impact on History," examines the significant influence of travel writing on our understanding of the past. It analyses how the voyages to new locations made by traders and missionaries helped to shape the history of travel literature. The

chapter offers a thorough examination of significant turning points in travel writing, emphasizes the distinctive characteristics of pre-modern travel accounts, and organizes the numerous types of travel writing that developed during the pre-modern and colonial periods. It also critically assesses travel writing's potential for reconstructing historical narratives, raises issues regarding the potential for distorting or omitting history in travel writing, and investigates the potential for reinterpreting the past by incorporating various travel accounts and perspectives.

The third chapter, "Travel Writing and Indian History: With Special Reference to the Himalayan Regions," investigates how the Age of Geographical Discoveries impacted European ideas of non-European societies and their depiction in travel writing. It explores how Indology has affected travel literature about India, particularly the Himalayan regions, while looking at the roles of local informants and contemporary critics. The chapter also examines how borderlands are portrayed in travel writing and how the Himalayas are misrepresented and how European frames of reference are used. It also emphasizes Assam's borderland status, underlining the cultural intersections there as well as the difficulties associated with portraying the state's variety and identity within the larger Indian setting.

In Chapter four, which is titled "Historical Geography of Assam as Represented in Travellers' and Indigenous Accounts," the importance of historical geography in Indian history is explored. The chapter examines how religious texts, practices, and beliefs have impacted local perceptions of physical places and limits while focusing on the reconstruction of Assam's historical geography. The Kalika Purana and Yogini Tantra are specifically examined as sources. The chapter projects the Ahom *Buranjis* as significant historical material for comprehending the political, social, and cultural facets of mediaeval Assam. European portrayals of Assam during the

colonial period, characterized by Orientalism, cultural prejudices, and power relations are also scrutinized.

The fifth chapter, "Subject Matter and Its Treatment by European Travellers and Indigenous Sources - Survey of Select Themes Related to society, culture, economy and polity in Assam," examines how various facets of Assamese society, culture, and politics were portrayed by European travellers and indigenous sources. It focuses on using travel narratives to rebuild Assamese politics, examining how Assamese society, economy, and geography are portrayed, and analyzing how military systems are depicted too. The chapter also engages with the religious practices and customs of mediaeval Assam as they are described in travel narratives, exploring how they affected the spiritual and cultural life of the region. The major religious traditions as well as popular and folk forms of worship are explored and the mystical and spiritual facets of religious practices illuminated. The distinctive architectural styles, structures, and landmarks of the area and their engagements with the natural surroundings are also detailed in the chapter.

The last chapter provides an overview of the entire dissertation by summarizing and merging the findings presented in each of the preceding chapters. It provides a thorough understanding of the study by compiling the major arguments, ideas, and conclusions presented in the thesis. The significance of the research results, their implications for the field of historical research and travel writing, and possible directions for further investigation, are highlighted. Overall, the concluding chapter offers a clear and comprehensive review of the work, condensing the main ideas and highlighting the overall achievements of the thesis.

Chapter 2

Travel Writing and Its Bearing on History

2.1 Idea of Travel Writing as a Form of Literature

Historians have employed travel writing for organizing historical accounts chronologically. Travel writing is based on a traveller's encounters and observations and provides a clear account of the her/his own impressions, conveying cultural values. Travel narratives offer a wealth of information on adventures, discoveries, and conquests that the writer has experienced and presented in a non-fictional format.⁷⁶ According to Carl Thompson, travel writing primarily involves the traveller maintaining a personal record. It can also be referred to as creative non-fiction writing.⁷⁷ Travel writing emphasizes the writer's ability to observe keenly, foster intellectual curiosity, and showcase her/his best work. The current research in this field centers on examining its formal aspects, tracing its historical evolution, and exploring its representation-related concerns.

The focus of the investigation into travel writing is the author's detailed recording of the experiences of the travellers, underlining the allure of their journeys. Writing about travel poses a considerable challenge as authors strive to capture the essence of the unfamiliar. Ultimately, it is the author's interactions with the environment and the diverse individuals they encounter that shape their travel narrative.⁷⁸ Travel writing has served as a means for travellers to share their understanding and perception of other cultures. It has enriched their narratives by providing a

⁷⁶ Shruti Dabhi and K Shastri, "An Introduction to Travel Writing," August 1, 2016, 1.

⁷⁷ Barna Bijay Basumatary, "Importance of Travel Writing in Literature," *International Journal of Advance Research, Ideas and Innovations in Technology* 4, no. 5 (2018): 760.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 761.

deeper exploration of their comprehension, observations, and creative storytelling, centered on expeditions.

The genre of travel writing has a rich and extensive history that can be traced back to ancient times. Early examples of travel literature often revolved around accounts of pilgrimages to sacred sites. During the medieval period, travel writing often centered around the expeditions of explorers, traders, and missionaries to distant lands. In modern times, travel writing has evolved to encompass a wider range of themes and often blends elements of autobiography and personal storytelling.

Travel writing in the second half of the 13th century was significantly influenced by Marco Polo's records of his journeys. His writings were believed to have influenced not only future adventurers, including Christopher Columbus, but also European cartography. Among the European explorers, Marco Polo, an Italian navigator, is renowned for being the first to have charted a course that traversed the entirety of Asia.⁷⁹ Christopher Columbus' inaugural journey to the Americas in 1492 was a significant milestone in the history of exploration, and it opened a new era of travel writing. The earliest written accounts produced by individuals can be identified as travelogues or travel literature.⁸⁰

In the late 15th century, two pivotal expeditions were undertaken by Vasco da Gama, a Portuguese explorer, and Christopher Columbus, an Italian navigator. Their respective journeys opened up new sea routes to both the American continent and the Indian subcontinent. Vasco da Gama, a renowned Portuguese navigator, successfully discovered the route to India in 1497.

⁷⁹ Ram Chandra Prasad, *Early English Travellers in India: A Study in the Travel Literature of the Elizabethan and Jacobean Periods with Particular Reference to India* (Motilal Banarsidass Publ., 1980), xxxi.

⁸⁰ Barna Bijay Basumatary, "Importance of Travel Writing in Literature," 2018, 761.

Subsequently, numerous travelers who followed in his footsteps, roughly seventy to eighty years later, provided diverse descriptions of the regions they encountered.⁸¹

The period from the 16th to the 17th centuries was one of exploration and discovery, characterized by a significant number of Europeans explorations in distant corners of the world.⁸² With the emergence of new, systematic understandings, Europe witnessed a remarkable surge of enthusiasm across various fields of knowledge. Additionally, Asia played a substantial role in providing a practical foundation for the Renaissance and scientific movements in Europe.⁸³ In the 17th century, written accounts centered on religious beliefs were produced. Dutch Christian missionaries played a significant role in this, as they embarked on travels abroad, particularly to Asia, in their capacity as servants and priests of the VOC⁸⁴ (Dutch East India Company).⁸⁵ Additionally, various travelogues were authored in different regions of Europe during this period. Portugal and Spain, as Iberian nations, took the lead in European maritime exploration. While marine expeditions were organized by the rulers of Portugal and Spain, private entrepreneurs also played a significant role in these ventures. The Portuguese and Spanish quickly extended their commercial and missionary activities to regions such as India, Southeast Asia, and East Asia. As a result of the explorations undertaken by the Iberian countries, a number of travelogues focusing on Asia were produced, accompanied by the publication of numerous letters and booklets. Works

⁸¹ Edward Farley Oaten, *European Travellers in India: During the Fifteenth, Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, the Evidence Afforded by Them with Respect to Indian Social Institutions, & the Nature & Influence of Indian Governments* (Asian Educational Services, 1991), 57.

⁸² MM Azizul Islam Rasel, "The Seventeenth-Century Dutch Travel Account and the Production of Knowledge on Asia: A Study of Vervarelyke Schip-Breuk van 'T Oost-Indisch Jacht Ter Schelling," 2012, 22.

⁸³ Rasel, 27.

⁸⁴ Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, Dutch East India Company by name of United East India Company founded in the Dutch Republic in 1602.

⁸⁵ Rasel, "The Seventeenth-Century Dutch Travel Account and the Production of Knowledge on Asia: A Study of Vervarelyke Schip-Breuk van 'T Oost-Indisch Jacht Ter Schelling," 28.

in Iberian literature became recognized as some of the earliest instances of travel writing that provided Europe with valuable information about the Philippines, China, and Japan.⁸⁶

During the 17th century, the Portuguese were renowned for disseminating their knowledge of sea routes; French literature also contributed significantly by giving Europe useful information about Asian nations. The writings of Francis Bernier, a physician who worked for Aurangzeb, provided substantial information about the social and political aspects of the Mughal Empire.⁸⁷ Although Italian travel writers provided limited information on Asia, they contributed a number of travel adventure books in the 17th century, much like other European preachers. English travelogues were just as useful as Dutch travel writing to acquire knowledge about Asia. The period spanning the last quarter of the 16th century and the first half of the 17th century witnessed the emergence of travel literature, owing to the efforts of writers such as Richard Eden, Richard Willes, and Richard Hakluyt.⁸⁸ British explorer, Ralph Fitch ventured into Southeast Asia and established himself as prominent English traveller in India. It was during that period when England's commercial policy actively supported the exploration of uncharted territories.⁸⁹ Upon his return to Europe, Fitch gave detailed accounts of his profound knowledge of the cultures, economics, and political structures of the countries he had travelled to. Undoubtedly, the last two decades of the 17th century witnessed substantial academic and literary contributions from English travellers.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 31

⁸⁷ N. N. Acharya, *Northeast as viewed by Foreigners* (Omsons publications, 1985), viii.

⁸⁸ Rasel, "The Seventeenth-Century Dutch Travel Account and the Production of Knowledge on Asia: A Study of Vervarelyke Schip-Breuk van 'T Oost-Indisch Jacht Ter Schelling." 196

⁸⁹ John Horton Ryley, *Ralph Fitch, England's Pioneer to India and Burma: His Companions and Contemporaries, with His Remarkable Narrative Told in His Own Words* (London:[sn], 1899), 13.

2.1.1 History and Travel Writing

History and travel writing are closely intertwined in numerous ways. Travel writing has long been recognized as a valuable historical source. Historians find travel accounts beneficial for several reasons. Travellers often provide information that local writers may overlook due to their status as ‘ordinary’ or ‘mundane’. Sometimes, knowledgeable and perceptive travellers offer singular viewpoints on political developments and cultural norms in different countries, providing valuable insights to historians.⁹⁰ In travel writing, it is essential for writers to grasp the significance of historical context. The past holds interest and relevance primarily when it illuminates the present. History serves as a tool rather than the ultimate objective in travel writing. However, travel literature that simply narrates personal experiences without providing any historical framework can be unsatisfying.

European travel writing constitutes a significant subfield within history, encompassing various forms of written accounts such as travel guides, journals, letters, records, and other correspondences. These writings serve as valuable resources for comprehending the complexities of multicultural connections and encounters.⁹¹ Travel writing served as an early and significant means for Europeans to gain knowledge about and develop perceptions of non-European nations. Through their journals, travelers were able to express their thoughts and shed light on their own communities.

A wide range of European interests benefited from travel writing, which also helped the Europeans develop their capacity to communicate with people and surroundings that were unfamiliar to them. The literature produced as a result of the interactions of European travellers

⁹⁰ Faraz Anjum, “Travel Writing, History and Colonialism: An Analytical Study,” *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan* 51, no. 2 (2014): 196.

⁹¹ Bilal Ahmad Parray, “European Travel Writing and Kashmir: Representations of a Land Of Beauty, Borderland and Belated Interests,” 2014, 1.

with Eastern landscapes, communities, cultures, and traditions came to be known as travel writing.⁹² British explorers traversed the globe for a variety of reasons, including colonisation, commerce, diplomacy, scientific interest, and tourism, contributing to the flourishing of travel-related literature during this period.⁹³

Modern European travel writing has undergone a continuous process of transformation and preservation in terms of its themes and characteristics. Despite shifting perspectives, some of which present themselves as novel and distinct from previous writings, while others perpetuate inaccurate travel stereotypes, travel writing has remained a significant form of expression throughout the ages. In addition to serving as a representation of travel experiences, it helped Europeans comprehend the distinctions between being European and non-European, strong and weak, male and female, active and passive, civilized and uncivilized, and other dichotomies.⁹⁴ Travel writing has consistently played a crucial role in facilitating an understanding of the interactions between the Western world and non-Western nations and cultures.⁹⁵ This significance is likely to persist as travel writing continues its journey in this capacity. The encounters between different cultures is closely intertwined with the process of travel writing, which serves as a medium for documenting the experiences of encountering alien environments and people. Some explorers utilized travel writing as a means to record their encounters with and perspectives on foreign lands. However, it is important to recognize that there is no such thing as an entirely impartial textualization. The traveller is inevitably shaped by her/his social background, shared memories, sense of belonging, and cultural heritage. Textualizing travel experiences is a complex

⁹² Parray., 1.

⁹³ Elizabeth A Bohls and Ian Duncan, *Travel Writing 1700-1830: An Anthology* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 1.

⁹⁴ Parray, "European Travel Writing and Kashmir: Representations of a Land Of Beauty, Borderland and Belated Interests," 2014, 2.

⁹⁵ Rachel Heidi Moffat, "Perspectives on Africa in Travel Writing: Representations of Ethiopia, Kenya, Republic of Congo and South Africa, 1930–2000," PhD diss., University of Glasgow, 2009, 1.

process, as various elements tend to assume a subjective role influenced by the traveller's past experiences and their current presence.

2.1.2 Rise of Medieval Europe, Discovery of New Lands, and Growing Significance of Travel Writing

The Age of Exploration (15th –17th centuries) had a profound impact on travel writing, as the discovery of new territories opened up opportunities for European explorers to encounter unfamiliar cultures, people, and landscapes during their oceanic voyages. These explorers, alongside traders and missionaries, began documenting their observations and discoveries in notebooks, letters, and books. Travel writing has gained importance as a medium of communication and information sharing among various locales. The accounts documented in travel writing served as a valuable source of information for Europeans about the inhabitants, traditions, and resources of newly discovered regions. These writings also inspired and encouraged further journeys and explorations. Renowned travel authors of this era, such as Ferdinand Magellan, Marco Polo, Christopher Columbus, and Amerigo Vespucci, played a significant role in enhancing the understanding of the cultures and landscapes of the New World, which were often depicted as ‘exotic’ and ‘mysterious’. As the importance of trade and travel increased, the demand for travel literature grew. The emergence of new literary forms such as the travelogue, was a direct outcome of the desire to blend factual reporting, personal narrative, and literary flair. These travel books garnered great popularity among readers seeking to broaden their understanding of the world. The expansion of human knowledge and the increasing appeal of travel literature had a profound impact on European culture and society. It enabled individuals to develop a more comprehensive awareness of the world, global sensitivity, and greater creativity.

Travel writing on the East followed a consistent pattern during the Middle Ages, and it was characterised by the glorification of Europe and the portrayal of the East as ‘exotic’ and ‘different’.

Interestingly, the assumptions made by travel writers during this period were seldom subjected to critical examination or scrutiny. Marco Polo's travelogues, spanning the period from 1254 to 1324, played a significant role in challenging the Eurocentric perspective prevalent in the medieval era and generating renewed fascination with the East. Nonetheless, it was during the post-renaissance era that travel writing flourished as a prominent literary form. Travelogues such as “*The Travels of Marco Polo*,”⁹⁶ and “*The Travel of Sir John Mandeville*”⁹⁷ served as notable precursors to the modern travel literature. The discovery of new lands and sea routes further expanded the range of travel experiences, leading to a significant surge in the popularity of travel writing.⁹⁸

The travel writings and cultural contributions of Marco Polo, who is regarded as the first traveler to provide an in-depth account of his voyages, benefited the West tremendously. His accounts encompassed detailed information about the physical landscapes, political structures, religious practices, and social customs of the people he encountered, as also about the specific missions he was entrusted with.⁹⁹ “*The Travels of Marco Polo*,” had substantial impact on early modern explorers, missionaries, and merchants. Marco Polo's work served as a source of inspiration for fellow travellers, particularly during the age of exploration, with Christopher Columbus being among the notable figures influenced by it.

“*The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*,” an influential travel books from the late Middle Ages, drew inspiration from both medieval romances and factual observations. It played a pivotal role in inspiring Christopher Columbus to embark on his quest to circumnavigate the globe by

⁹⁶ Les Voyages de Marco Polo (The Travels of Marco Polo), compiled by Rustichello da Pisa, dated around 1350, the chronicle of the Italian trader Marco Polo's exploits in Central Asia and the Far East in the later part of the 13th century, is one of the earliest versions still in existence.

⁹⁷ The Travels of Sir John Mandeville, is a travelogue written by Sir John Mandeville. Originally written in French about 1356–1357, it was translated into a number of other languages, with an English translation appearing around 1375.

⁹⁸ Parray, “European Travel Writing and Kashmir: Representations of a Land Of Beauty, Borderland and Belated Interests,” 2014, 7.

⁹⁹ Rita Banerjee, “India in Early Modern English Travel Writings,” (Brill, 2021), 8.

sailing westward in search of Cathay. As the most significant English travel book of its time, it combined elements of imagination with firsthand accounts to captivate readers.¹⁰⁰ Travel writing flourished as a result of the interest of the public in travellers' accounts of their experiences and their interactions with various cultures. One of the earliest books to significantly influence English readers in documenting the discovery of the New World was Thomas More's *Utopia*, published in 1516. This work overshadowed much of the subsequent literature that focused on overseas travel, colonial expansion, and interactions with non-European societies.¹⁰¹

Travel literature developed immensely during a time when numerous transformative events occurred, including rising literacy rates in Europe, advances in printing technology, changes in the political environment, and the shift in literature from poetry to prose.¹⁰² The popularity of the genre of travel writing can also be attributed to unprecedented economic growth, expansion of financial systems, extensive trade networks, technological advancements, urbanization, and the establishment of cities. Consequently, an increasing number of travelogues were recognized as reliable sources of information concerning European advancements and global affairs. Modern travel writing was essential to the spread of European influence outside of continental affairs. The exploration of new territories such as America, and the discovery of maritime routes including the Cape of Good Hope, contributed greatly to the proliferation of diverse travel narratives.¹⁰³

European travellers started documenting their experiences in travel diaries, which now began to include accounts of the Far East. India emerged as one of the prominent destinations that captivated the European imagination and offered abundant opportunities. According to Eurocentric

¹⁰⁰ Andrew Hadfield, *Literature, Travel, and Colonial Writing in the English Renaissance, 1545-1625* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 6.

¹⁰¹ Hadfield, 7.

¹⁰² Parray, "European Travel Writing and Kashmir: Representations of a Land Of Beauty, Borderland and Belated Interests," 2014, 8.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 8

viewpoints, the discovery of the Cape of Good Hope was a turning point in the development of intercultural relations and the facilitation of commerce. India was important to these European projects, and travel literature has long been helpful in understanding how the West and other cultures and nations interact. Throughout various historical periods, the practice of creating travel accounts was adopted by a majority of travellers who voyaged to India.

During the Middle Ages, Europe experienced a remarkable expansion that resulted in extensive global travel by European nations. The latter half of the 15th century was a period of exploration, during which Europe established extensive connections with various regions and peoples across the globe. The discovery of new places and regions during this period encouraged direct contact between the Europeans and the people from Africa, the Americas, Asia, and the Indian Ocean.

The Portuguese undertook a journey to explore the uncharted parts of the new globe in 1419, under the leadership of Henry the Navigator. The West African coast was extensively explored and mapped as a result of their efforts, despite the fact that they did not succeed immediately. Henry the Navigator's maritime endeavors eventually led to the discovery of the Indian sea route, which had significant implications for both Europe and the East.¹⁰⁴

In 1488, Bartolomeu Dias embarked on a momentous journey towards the Cape of Good Hope, venturing into the Indian Ocean. In the late 1490s, Vasco da Gama successfully navigated the Cape of Good Hope and reached India. Around the same time, Spain emerged as a prominent explorer, with Christopher Columbus leading the first expedition in 1492 on behalf of the Spanish sovereigns. The primary goals of these explorations were to expand European trade and promote Christianity. Despite his initial intention to reach Asia, Christopher Columbus landed in the

¹⁰⁴ Eric Axelson, "Prince Henry the Navigator and the Discovery of the Sea Route to India," *The Geographical Journal* 127, no. 2 (1961): 154.

Bahamas by mistake. He also explored the island of Hispaniola, which is now known as Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. He went on to undertake three more expeditions, exploring parts of Cuba and the Central American coastline. Erroneously believing he had reached Asia, Columbus referred to the native people of the New World as "Indians". His discovery of the New World in 1492 had an immense bearing on history, marking the beginning of a new era, and profoundly shaping the course of modernity. When he unintentionally discovered the New World, Columbus began a transformational process that transported European culture and institutions to the Western Hemisphere. This intellectual and cultural interaction also had a huge impact on Europe, significantly changing the course of its history.¹⁰⁵

In 1493, Christopher Columbus penned a series of letters recounting his interactions with the indigenous people of the New World. Despite not reaching Asia as intended, Columbus became the first European to set foot in the land that would later be known as America. His expeditions served as a catalyst for further European explorations of the continent.¹⁰⁶ His letters describing the astonishing new land he discovered, inspired numerous Spanish explorers and other Europeans to embark on voyages to this uncharted territory.

In 1497, the Italian explorer John Cabot was commissioned by Henry VII of England to embark on a voyage of discovery.¹⁰⁷ It is believed that Cabot reached Newfoundland in the same year, although it wasn't until the 1500s that the English began showing significant interest in exploration. Subsequently, a considerable number of English settlers established colonies along the eastern seaboard of present-day Canada and the United States.

¹⁰⁵ Bartosik-Vélez, Elise. *The Legacy of Christopher Columbus in the Americas: New Nations and a Transatlantic Discourse of Empire* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2016), 1.

¹⁰⁶ Christopher. Columbus et al., *The Authentic Letters of Columbus* (Chicago: [Field Columbian Museum]), 188, <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/49389>.

¹⁰⁷ Frederic Kidder, "The Discovery of North America by John Cabot. : A First Chapter in the History of North America.," April 14, 2014, 7–8.

Inspired by the achievements of Spain and Portugal in the 1500s, France also sought to explore the New World. In 1523, King Francis I commissioned the Italian navigator Giovanni da Verrazano to search for a passage to Asia. Although Verrazano was not successful in finding the desired route, his journey from the coast of Florida to Newfoundland yielded valuable information, as documented in his letter to the King.¹⁰⁸ His expedition is renowned for the detailed data he recorded during his exploration of North America. Under the reign of King Francis I, Jacques Cartier embarked on two notable voyages, one in 1534 and another in 1535-1536. During his first journey, Cartier reached Newfoundland and continued his exploration through the Strait of Belle Isle, circling the Great Northern Peninsula before returning north. On his second expedition, Cartier focused on exploring the St. Lawrence River region and even established a colony, claiming the land for France.¹⁰⁹ The French had a strong desire to establish prosperous economic settlements, leading them to establish extensive trade networks around New France.

The establishment of the Dutch East India Company in 1602 marked a significant milestone in European trade with Asia. In 1609, the company entrusted the English explorer Henry Hudson with a mission to explore North America. Hudson's expedition brought him to the region known as New York, where he thoroughly examined the area's port and the river that now bears his name, the Hudson River.¹¹⁰ During the 17th century, explorers William Baffin and Robert Bylot embarked on expeditions that contributed to the expansion of geographical knowledge. In 1615 and 1616, they charted the south shore of Baffin Island, encountering various passages, including the notable Lancaster Sound. Baffin also made significant advancements in the field of navigation

¹⁰⁸ James Carson Brevoort, "Notes on Giovanni Da Verrazano and on a Planisphere of 1529, Illustrating His American Voyage in 1524, with a Reduced Copy of the Map," *Journal of the American Geographical Society of New York*, 1873, 145–260.

¹⁰⁹ Brevoort. 199–200.

¹¹⁰ Henry Cruse Murphy, *Henry Hudson in Holland: An Inquiry into the Origin and Objects of the Voyage Which Led to the Discovery of the Hudson River* (M. Nijhoff, 1909), 11–28.

by devising a new method for computing longitude.¹¹¹ Even though the age of exploration is known to have ended in the 17th century, the discovery of the New World and subsequent explorations were vital to the advancement of knowledge about the world. Furthermore, the exploration of new coastlines facilitated the development of trading operations in these newly discovered areas.

2.1.3 Traders and the Discovery of New Routes

European traders sought faster and more effective ways to transport goods in their quest to widen trade networks and enter new markets. In pursuit of new trade routes across the oceans, they consequently started considering the prospect of circumnavigating the world westward. Christopher Columbus embarked on a historic journey across the Atlantic Ocean in 1492, ultimately reshaping the course of history by introducing the New World to Europe.¹¹²

At around the same time, Vasco da Gama and Bartolomeu Dias, two Portuguese explorers, found a maritime passage that connected Europe and India by sailing around the southern tip of Africa.¹¹³ In 1498, Vasco da Gama reached India, which enabled the initial phase of direct maritime trade between Europe and the Indian Ocean region. This new route was connected with the Spice Route from the Far East, enabling direct trade between Europe and China as well as Southeast Asia. This provided the Europeans with a more direct and profitable trading opportunity, since they no longer had to pay intermediaries along the Silk Route. However, In 1488, Bartolomeu Dias had beforehand explored the Cape of Good Hope, opening the path for later voyages to navigate the southern route to India.

¹¹¹ William Baffin, *The Voyages of William Baffin, 1612-1622*, vol. 63 (London: Printed for The Hakluyt Society, 1881), liii–xxxii.

¹¹² Elise Bartosik- Velez, *The Legacy of Christopher Columbus in the Americas: New Nations and a Transatlantic Discourse of Empire* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2016), 1.

¹¹³ Alvaro Velho and João de Sá, *A Journal of the First Voyage of Vasco Da Gama, 1497-1499* (Hakluyt Society, 1898).

During the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, there was extensive trade within Europe involving regional resources, goods, and luxury items from the East. Various regions engaged in the exchange of minerals such as salt, iron, copper, lead, and precious metals, as well as commodities like lumber, fur, and fish. These resources were traded for textiles and manufactured goods produced in other regions that had an abundance of these products. Large quantities of wine, olive oil, and grains were produced in various areas and shipped to other countries. Sheep-rearing regions traded wool for various commodities, and wool was exported to regions engaged in textile production. German and Dutch ships from northern Europe, as well as those from Genoa and Venice in the Mediterranean, were the most prominent transporters.

In 1534, Jacques Cartier, a French explorer, discovered that the indigenous people of Canada were eager to trade fur for iron and knives. Trade was central to relationships among different indigenous groups.¹¹⁴ North America shared with Europe a well-connected system of trade routes linking the land with rivers, lakes and coastlines, which aided the exchange of products. One of the major reasons for exploration was the search for new routes to the lucrative spice and silk market, although precious resources like silver and gold were also in demand. The desire for new trading routes, wealth, and knowledge drove Europeans to embark on maritime expeditions during this period.

2.1.4 Missionaries and the Zeal to Proselytise in the New Lands

As European nations expanded their territories and ventured into unexplored regions, missionaries recognised the potential to spread Christianity and gain new converts. Missionary accounts played a crucial role in piquing European curiosity, especially in the case of India. These narratives, often

¹¹⁴ James Phinney Baxter, *A Memoir of Jacques Cartier, Sieur de Limoilou: His Voyages to the St. Lawrence, a Bibliography and a Facsimile of the Manuscript of 1534 with Annotations, Etc.* (Dodd, Mead & Company, 1906), 105.

highlighting the unwavering commitment of the missionaries in promoting the Christian faith, and the steady progress they made, were created to support and finance missionary endeavors.¹¹⁵ The governments of Europe actively encouraged the growth of Christian missionary efforts, which made it easier for them to provide healthcare and education based on innovative European knowledge.¹¹⁶ The spread of Christianity was viewed by many Europeans as an essential prerequisite for bringing Western civilisation to native peoples who were thought to lack religious enlightenment. Consequently, Christian evangelisation progressed in numerous Third World regions.¹¹⁷

The Portuguese were driven by a strong desire to preach the message of Christianity when they first arrived in India at the beginning of the 16th century. The Jesuits were able to set up schools and churches all over the region despite facing severe opposition from local authorities and the public. Additionally, they made serious endeavors to convert the native communities.¹¹⁸ During the 17th century, Jesuit missionaries in India displayed great enthusiasm and commitment to integrating Christianity into the native Indian culture. Their endeavours had a profound impact on Indian society and led to the establishment of a substantial Jesuit presence in the region. The Portuguese dispatched a significant number of friars to serve as missionaries with the goal of converting India to Christianity in order to take advantage of their dominant position in the East.¹¹⁹

The narratives produced by missionaries, depicting European authority, accountability, and profit, played a crucial role in establishing a precedent for later colonial literature. This literature,

¹¹⁵ Kate Teltscher, *India Inscribed : European and British Writing on India, 1600-1800* (Delhi ; New York : Oxford University Press, 1995), 74.

¹¹⁶ Linda Woodhead, Christopher Partridge, and Hiroko Kawanami, *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations* (Routledge, 2003), 223.

¹¹⁷ Woodhead, Partridge, and Kawanami., 372.

¹¹⁸ David Ludden, *India and South Asia: A Short History* (Simon and Schuster, 2013).

¹¹⁹ Teltscher, *India Inscribed*, 1995, 87.

in turn, influenced secular discussions and discourses. Missionary authors frequently portrayed Indians as objects of European innocence, utilizing them as a means to solicit funds. Indians were frequently portrayed in literature in a way that appealed to readers in Europe, emphasising their misery and portraying them as the recipients of European compassion. By appealing to the compassion and generosity of the European viewers, this portrayal served as a means of raising funding for missionary endeavours. They justified their pleas by presenting the hardships faced by these communities as a direct consequence of their conversion to Christianity. Their intention was to garner support for the impoverished members of their mission.¹²⁰ However, missionary writings subtly provided insights into governing foreign populations and offered strategies for subjugating and reshaping India to fit the European mold.

Currently, missionaries serve as a valuable source of anthropological knowledge, providing information that would otherwise remain inaccessible. They contribute immensely to our understanding of indigenous civilisations.¹²¹ Motivated by strong religious conviction to share their faith, and execute what they perceive as a divine duty, disseminating Christian religious teachings missionaries have been recognized for their keenness to evangelise in new places. This devotion has frequently resulted in changes in culture, society, and religion, influencing the development of civilisations.

2.1.5 Features of Travel Writing in the Pre-Modern Period

The concept of travel writing is continuously transforming, adapting to the changing times and acquiring new characteristics and possibilities. The advent of the modern era brought about a

¹²⁰ Teltscher, 77.

¹²¹ Edward Farley Oaten, *European Travellers in India: During the Fifteenth, Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, the Evidence Afforded by Them with Respect to Indian Social Institutions, & the Nature & Influence of Indian Governments* (Asian Educational Services, 1991), 103.

significant shift in the relationship between travel and travel writing, making writing an integral component of the act of traveling itself. This transition brought about substantial changes and innovations in the genre. Europeans travelled for a variety of reasons in the early modern era, including trade, diplomacy, colonisation, pilgrimage, and missionary work. The accounts of their journeys took various forms, including letters both official and informal and narratives meant for publication. Additionally, merchants often maintained journals to document their experiences.¹²² During the pre- modern era, travel writing developed into a very popular and adaptable genre, assuming numerous forms that served to inform and amuse readers. It could arouse pride in one's country, encourage business investment, and broaden people's perspectives on global marketplaces, trade routes, prominent figures, and cultures.¹²³

Throughout the early modern period, the exploration and discovery of new geographical territories played a crucial role in expanding historical knowledge. The concept of 'historia' during this time encompassed a broad range of disciplines, including ethnography, geography, and natural history.¹²⁴ These genres included chronicles and histories, geographical and cosmographical treatises, as well as political reports. Various forms of literature operated alongside travel writing to provide comprehensive representations of diverse societies and cultures.¹²⁵ Cosmography played a vital role in the multidisciplinary scientific community of the 16th and 17th centuries. Richard Hakluyt, a scholar with expertise in geography, history, and cosmography, undertook the task of assembling volumes of travel writings. This project was closely connected to the growth

¹²² Rita Banerjee, "India in Early Modern English Travel Writings," in *India in Early Modern English Travel Writings* (Brill, 2021), 14.

¹²³ Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs, *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, vol. 10 (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 20.

¹²⁴ Banerjee, "Index—India in Early Modern English Travel Writings," 2021, 16.

¹²⁵ Joan- Pau Rubies and Francis Bacon, "Travel Writing as a Genre: Facts, Fictions and the Invention of a Scientific Discourse in Early Modern Europe," *Journeys* 1, no. 1 (2000): 10.

of nationalism in England, as Hakluyt's efforts to gather reports of travels and descriptions of exotic lands and peoples contributed to the nation-building process.¹²⁶ The diversity of early modern travel writing was so extensive that it could not be categorised as a singular genre.

Travel writing in the pre-modern period acted as a means to explore unfamiliar territories and cultures, playing a crucial role in expanding geographical knowledge and influencing the perspectives of readers. Although pre-modern travel writing had its flaws and prejudices, it served as a useful resource in understanding the linkages between civilisations, the effects of exploration and colonisation, and the development of a global consciousness.

2.2 Types of Travel Writing

The genre of travel writing gained popularity over various historical periods as a result of the efforts of travellers and writers with diverse interests, professions, and ideological beliefs. The increasing number of travel accounts and their more detailed treatment of the subject can be attributed to the positive depictions of foreign places. The perspectives of merchant travellers, missionaries, adventurers, scientists, and colonisers have all had a profound impact on shaping the evolution of the genre.

Travel writing has been used for countless purposes due to its innate propensity to speculate on various matters. In addition to delighting European viewers, it also contributed significantly to laying the foundation for other forms of entertainment and artistic creations. The genre succeeded in educating Europeans about the outside world in every manner conceivable, while also entertaining them.¹²⁷ The significance of appreciating and respecting the cultural sensibilities of the host country was emphasised in European travel writing. As a result, travelogues frequently

¹²⁶ Banerjee, "Index—India in Early Modern English Travel Writings," 2021, 16.

¹²⁷ Bilal Ahmad Parray, "European Travel Writing and Kashmir: Representations of a Land Of Beauty, Borderland and Belated Interests," 2014, 4.

highlighted the negative characteristics of Oriental civilisation whenever they appeared. Travel narratives played a crucial role in the Orientalist endeavor, as they were the primary accounts of alien places and peoples, shared with European readers. These narratives emerged from numerous voyages of discovery and extensive interactions resulting from trade and warfare.¹²⁸

Accounts of India often draw comparisons between India and Europe, or establish connections between the two locales, either directly or indirectly. This is particularly evident in the writings of influential figures such as Sir Thomas Roe, the first English ambassador to the Mughal court, and François Bernier, whose chronicle of contemporary Mughal history was published between 1670 and 1701. These works challenged established cultural narratives and have had a lasting influence on subsequent writers. Bernier's History, published in multiple editions in both French and English, played a significant role in shaping the discourse on India.¹²⁹

The description of Ralph Fitch's travels in the East in Hakluyt's "*Voyages*"¹³⁰ combines cosmological knowledge with first-hand experiences. Interestingly, there are direct references to the structure and content of Caesar Frederici's earlier Italian story in a significant section of Fitch's narrative.¹³¹ William Hawkins' travel narrative documenting his journeys in India from 1608 to 1613 is divided into two sections. The first part portrays his personal experiences and interactions with the Mughal emperor, while the second part focuses on his observations in the field of astronomy. Notably, Hawkins grants the latter section a higher level of authority by presenting it as a collection of undeniable facts, separate from the author's subjective perspective.¹³² The

¹²⁸ Claire Lindsay, "Travel Writing and Postcolonial Studies," in *The Routledge Companion to Travel Writing* (Routledge, 2015), 26.

¹²⁹ Teltscher, *India Inscribed*, 1995, 14.

¹³⁰ *Voyages and Discoveries of the English Nation Principal Navigations, Hakluyt's Voyages*, ed. Richard Hakluyt and Richard David (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1981).

¹³¹ Teltscher, *India Inscribed*, 1995, 15.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 16

strategy adopted by travellers involved a portrayal of the unfamiliar, that aimed to enlighten the audience from a familiar context.¹³³ In the case of the British, it appears that they attempted to project their rulers as kind and competent, in order to overcome internal difficulties. Like other imperial regimes, they faced an underlying uneasiness that was often left unspoken, but which constantly resurfaced, leading to periodic attempts to alleviate it.¹³⁴

Travel has become a major field of study in the humanities and social sciences, and research on travel writing has increased exponentially. Disciplines such as history, literature, geography, and anthropology have overcome their reluctance to consider travel writing as a genre of significance and they now generate multidisciplinary criticism that reveal the genre's historical complexity.¹³⁵ Christopher Columbus' 1492 voyage to America is often cited as a turning point in travel literature. He had been significantly influenced by John Mandeville and Marco Polo. The descriptions of the Caribbean islands given by Columbus in his early accounts bear distinct echoes of the words and experiences documented by Mandeville and Polo.¹³⁶ Travel writing from this period must be examined and analyzed to completely understand this vital historical development. Travel writing was mostly a result of excursions conducted for professional reasons, such as military service, trade, scientific research, or other goals like education or health. However, the 20th century witnessed a growing trend of undertaking travel specifically with the intention of writing about the experience.¹³⁷ The majority of travel writing revolves around the exploration of foreign cultures and languages. Some travel writers engage in immersive experiences, delving

¹³³ Francois Hartog, *The Mirror of Herodotus: The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History* (Univ of California Press, 1988), 256.

¹³⁴ Teltscher, *India Inscribed*, 1995, 151.

¹³⁵ Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs, *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, vol. 10 (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1.

¹³⁶ Hulme and Youngs, 10:3.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

deeply into the cultures they encounter. This approach allows them to develop intimate knowledge and access to people and places that are typically unknown to short-term visitors or tourists.¹³⁸

2.2.1 Review of Landmarks in Travel Writing Over Centuries

Travel writing is an immensely diverse and sophisticated genre that combines memoir and journalism. As such, it provides essential insights into both the locales explored and the perspectives of the authors, which indirectly reveal the contexts of the respective cultures.¹³⁹ At certain points, the subject matter relies on earlier reports, and at other times, the traveler tries to highlight her/his own views. The genre of travel writing flourished since writers could imitate earlier works, and also had opportunities to articulate their unique perspectives. In addition to producing conceptual unity, the travellers thoughts often led to the emergence of diverse perspectives and knowledge. Travellers attempted to create unique trip narratives showcasing novel viewpoints, thereby catering to the interests of readers. European travel writing has been extremely significant in developing and spreading knowledge about the rest of the world and feeding aspirations for growth and invasion.¹⁴⁰

In order to appeal to the European market, among literary communities and readers searching for more convincing analyses of European encounters with other locales, European visitors marshalled facts and interpreted observations to suit their purpose. The travel writers' unique findings, autobiographical components, experiences recorded, prevailing impact, and philosophies added to the richness and tenacity of the form. The cultural environment, compelling ideas, and authoritative works also affected the genre and served as criteria to choose topics.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 97

¹³⁹ Rachel Heidi Moffat, "Perspectives on Africa in Travel Writing: Representations of Ethiopia, Kenya, Republic of Congo and South Africa, 1930–2000," 2009, 1.

¹⁴⁰ Julia Kuehn and Paul Smethurst, *Travel Writing, Form, and Empire: The Poetics and Politics of Mobility* (Routledge, 2012), 1.

Travel literature initially served to satisfy European curiosity. The genre accordingly embraced a necessary form of curiosity, as Europeans were eager to learn ever more about the globe beyond their continent. Foreign societies displaying differences owing to their status as non-European groups finally promoted among the Europeans a sense of belonging to a single group. Travel writing emphasized the need for personal growth and self-reflection, while also highlighting the positive aspects of one's homeland.

Throughout the extensive history of travel literature, new stories were continuously incorporated to cater to the tastes of the readers. Travellers were conscious of cultural sensitivities, both their own and those of their audience, while conveying their experiences. They adopted a practical and utilitarian approach, appreciating the opportunity to witness and engage with different cultures, civilizations, and societies.¹⁴¹ Through the act of writing, travellers leave their impression on the world and establish their claim on it.¹⁴²

“*Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*,”¹⁴³ a travelogue written in the 1st century CE that provides valuable insights into the economic, cultural, and political aspects of the Indian Ocean region. The text describes the commercial networks and economic activities of various ports and kingdoms, as well as the goods that were traded and their prices. It also provides details about local customs and cultures, making it a valuable historical document that sheds light on the early maritime history of the region.

¹⁴¹ Bilal Ahmad Parray, “European Travel Writing And Kashmir: Representations Of A Land Of Beauty, Borderland And Belated Interests,” 2014, 6.

¹⁴² Kate Teltscher, *India Inscribed: European and British Writing on India, 1600-1800* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 16.

¹⁴³ *The Periplus of the Erythræan Sea: Travel and Trade in the Indian Ocean* (Longmans, Green, and Company, 1912).

“*The Travels of Marco Polo*,”¹⁴⁴ is a travelogue written by the Italian adventurer Marco Polo in the 13th century. The book documents his travels to various parts of Asia and his encounters with Kublai Khan, the Mongol emperor of China. In addition to describing the geography and traditions of places such as China, India, Persia, and Southeast Asia, which he visited, the book also provides insights into the history, society, and culture of medieval Asia. The work had significant impact on European exploration, inspiring explorers like Christopher Columbus, and played a crucial role in establishing new trade routes and political connections with Asia.

“*The Road to Oxiana*,”¹⁴⁵ by British novelist and art historian Robert Byron describes his journey through the Middle East and Central Asia with his friend Christopher Sykes during 1933-1934. He demonstrates a deep awareness of the communities, cultures, and arts of the places he visited, and his opinions are frequently tinged with nostalgia for an ancient era. The work is considered a classic in the genre of travel writing, and it has had an impact on later writers. Travel writing as a genre is still evolving and thriving today, with authors examining a wide range of themes.

2.2.2 Types of Travel Writing during the Pre-Modern and Colonial Periods

Although travel writing has a long history, it is generally believed that the field of modern travel writing began to expand and become sophisticated only in the early modern era. Travel writing was one of the most enduring and adaptable genres of the early modern period, providing knowledge to readers, inspiring pride in one's nation and business investments, and documenting

¹⁴⁴ Marco Polo, William Marsden, and John Masefield, *The Travels of Marco Polo the Venetian* (London : J.M. Dent, 1908), <http://archive.org/details/marcopolo00polouoft>.

¹⁴⁵ Robert Byron, *The Road to Oxiana* (Oxford University Press, USA, 1982).

global sectors, trade routes, traits, and traditions.¹⁴⁶ From this period, visitors from Europe traveled to every corner of the globe for a variety of reasons, including scientific interest, investigation, colonization, trade, politics, religion and tourism, which had only begun to make its presence felt at the time.¹⁴⁷ The works provided unique viewpoints on societies, towns, and political structures of the past and served as windows into how early adventurers viewed the world around them.

Travel writing stimulated interest, passion, and a sense of exhilaration throughout the colonial era, which was vital for the Empire's economy and scientific accomplishments. In addition to fostering a sense of possession, entitlement and authority, it served as a tool for the imperial center to comprehend and establish its dominance over the peripheries. Travelogues provided a wealth of material that helped the Empire achieve its goals.¹⁴⁸ Numerous travelogues from the colonial era revealed the prejudices of the authors, who perceived the native subjects they encountered as 'exotic' or 'primitive'. Missionaries continued to write about their work, but as they attempted to persuade and humanise native populations, their writings took on new dimensions. These reports and memoirs were written by authorities and bureaucrats who administered or inspected colonial territories. They often described regional practices, economics, political institutions and assets, and made the exploitation of colonies possible. The accounts emphasize how Europeans brought civilization to the colonized lands, and they frequently depict European explorers as superior to the indigenous peoples. However, there are distinctions between pre-colonial and colonial representations.

2.2.3 The Post- Colonial Period and the Perception of Travel writing

¹⁴⁶ Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs, *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, vol. 10 (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 20.

¹⁴⁷ Elizabeth A Bohls and Ian Duncan, *Travel Writing 1700-1830: An Anthology* (Oxford University Press, 2008), xiii.

¹⁴⁸ Claire Lindsay, "Travel Writing and Postcolonial Studies," in *The Routledge Companion to Travel Writing* (Routledge, 2015), 25.

In the 1980s, a major counter-trend transformed travel writing and related academic concepts. Mainstream travel writing changed in terms of language, design, and subject matter during this time.¹⁴⁹ It became increasingly subjective and embraced a reflective approach. Particularly noteworthy were narratives of journeys to locations actively grappling with the consequences of colonialism and imperialism. The trip experience focused on investigating and comprehending these historical legacies.

A significant corpus of travel writing that critically examined the postcolonial state of former colonies emerged. This genre of travel writing, which distinguishes itself from earlier forms by intentionally attempting to reflect upon and criticize the history of colonialism and its effects, is called postcolonial travel writing.¹⁵⁰ Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak are among the notable scholars who made significant contributions to early postcolonial studies. The area of postcolonial studies still thrives despite arguments that the term “postcolonial” is overused and inadequate. One factor contributing to this resilience, according to Clarke, is the productive nexus between postcolonial studies and the study of travel literature.¹⁵¹

The concepts of transition and uncertainty, among other postcolonial notions, have been incorporated into postcolonial theory to offer novel perspectives on travel. This viewpoint allows for a deeper exploration of the complex and nuanced experiences associated with travel in colonial and postcolonial contexts. With the rise of postcolonial concepts in relation to travel writing, academicians, particularly those specialising in literary studies, began devoting greater attention to this genre. Edward Said's “*Orientalism*,”¹⁵² a central text in postcolonial studies, was considered to be the first theoretical book to comprehensively explore travel writing. Said's book has

¹⁴⁹ Robert Clarke, *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Travel Writing* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 3.

¹⁵⁰ Clarke, 4.

¹⁵¹ Clarke, 9–10.

¹⁵² Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 1st Vintage Books ed edition (New York: Vintage, 1979).

significantly influenced postcolonial studies and the study of travel narratives, which by their very nature feature representations of the cultural "Other." In his writing, Said makes the argument that the way the "Orient" was portrayed proved important in dividing Europe from its imagined "other." By creating this distinction, European power over non-Western regions was maintained and expanded. Despite the acknowledged challenges and potential drawbacks of Said's ambitious undertaking, his influence remains significant.¹⁵³

In a series of significant essays gathered in "*The Location of Culture*,"¹⁵⁴ Homi Bhabha offers both criticism and support for Edward Said's work. The main criticism Bhabha makes of Said's account is that it implies that the colonisers alone is the possessor of colonial authority and discourse. Bhabha contends that Orientalisation, or the construction of the colonial subject, is doomed to failure. A complicated interplay of fixity and fantasy is produced as a result of the colonial subject's representation through a variety of opposing stances. This procedure is intrinsically unbalanced, fragmented, and lacking.¹⁵⁵

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a noted critic for her work "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*"¹⁵⁶ has ties to a number of critical schools of thought, including post colonialism, feminism, deconstruction, and marxism. Spivak explores how early political history marginalised the voices of oppressed groups, including women, tribal communities and people from the Orient, in her essay. She emphasises the necessity of addressing the power dynamics that sustain these suppressed voices' subordination as well as bringing these voices to the fore.¹⁵⁷ Edward Said and

¹⁵³ Carl Thompson, *The Routledge Companion to Travel Writing* (Routledge, 2015), 27.

¹⁵⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Psychology Press, 2004).

¹⁵⁵ Antony Easthope, "Homi Bhabha, Hybridity and Identity, or Derrida Versus Lacan," *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)* 4, no. 1/2 (1998): 145.

¹⁵⁶ Gayatri Spivak, Rosalind Morris, ed., *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

¹⁵⁷ Ambesange Praveen V, "Post colonialism: Edward Said & Gayatri Spivak," *Research Journal of Recent Sciences*, Vol. 5(8), 47-50, August (2016), 48

Spivak both believe that Western authors in academic discourse unjustly portray Third World (subaltern) people. Both of them criticise how these underrepresented groups are portrayed. Additionally, Spivak concurs with Said's claim that there is an urgent requirement to reconsider European literature, particularly works from the 19th century, because they reflect imperialism and have an impact on how the empire is portrayed in popular culture.

Post colonialism conducts a critical examination of the interactions between the colonisers and the colonized, starting from the early periods of exploration and colonisation. When applied to the analysis of travel writing, postcolonial perspectives expand the boundaries and possibilities of interpretation. This method enables novel readings that emphasise both the colonised people's viewpoints as well as that of the colonisers. It gives voice to the oppressed "other" and draws attention to forgotten or willfully disregarded historical events that uphold the dominance of colonial exploitation and mainstream power structures. However, Postcolonial critique enables the establishment of links between historical events and the current political landscape, shedding light on the mechanisms of oppression and coercive control that continue to exist in the modern world.¹⁵⁸

Travel obtained immense academic attention in postcolonial studies, particularly in terms of its theoretical aspect as an ongoing and relevant issue.¹⁵⁹ This was accomplished by recognizing the presence of colonial knowledge systems within the travel narratives of diverse individuals ranging from visitors and military officers to entrepreneurs. Additionally, it involved promoting the development of a post-imperial perspective within this genre. The postcolonial approach to travel writing expanded its scope and dimensions by introducing 'eccentric' perspectives. Such views not only focused on the experiences of the traveller, but also granted significance to the

¹⁵⁸ Robert JC Young, *Post colonialism: An Historical Introduction* (John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 11.

¹⁵⁹ Steven H Clark, *Travel Writing and Empire: Postcolonial Theory in Transit* (Zed Books, 1999), 4.

perspective of the “Other” who had often been marginalized or overlooked. It illuminates previously ignored or undocumented aspects that challenge the narratives of exploitative colonial practices and dominant cultural supremacy.¹⁶⁰

2.3 Orientalism: Definitions, Problems and Prospects

Edward Said developed the concept of Orientalism as a discourse that the West uses to dominate and control the Near Orient, including Arab and Islamic nations.¹⁶¹ Starting from the late 1700s, when the term “Orientalist” became commonplace, until the publication of Said's work in 1978, the term encompassed diverse viewpoints and held various connotations, which were often contradictory and inconsistent.¹⁶² The way the “Orient” is portrayed in European literature, travel accounts, and other publications has contributed to the creation of a division between Europe and its “Others”. The East was seen from the perspective of the West as an ‘unfamiliar’, ‘foreign’, and ‘exotic’ region. In Orientalism, Said argues that European culture derived its strength and identity by creating a contrast between itself and an Oriental “Other”. This contrast resulted in a pervasive belief system based on the notion of European superiority, with the East serving as a negative reference point for the West.¹⁶³ Moreover, the boundaries of the Orient were indeterminate and changeable, encompassing extensive regions of the world located east or south of Europe.¹⁶⁴

Medieval travel literature highlighted the concept of Orientalism, which emphasizes the fundamental differences between the West and the East, making the latter the “Other”. By creating this dichotomy, Orientalism reinforces the notion of Western identity being separate from and

¹⁶⁰ Dr Anuradha Chaudhuri, “Travel Writing and Colonial Consciousness: A Postcolonial Interpretation,” n.d., 21.

¹⁶¹ Lindsay, “Travel Writing and Postcolonial Studies,” 2015, 26.

¹⁶² Filipa Lowndes Vicente, *Other Orientalisms: India between Florence and Bombay 1860-1900* (Orient Blackswan, 2012), 31.

¹⁶³ Teltscher. *India Inscribed*, 1995, 6.

¹⁶⁴ Filipa Lowndes Vicente, *Other Orientalisms: India between Florence and Bombay 1860-1900* (Orient Blackswan, 2012), 32.

opposed to that of the East. This idea has significantly influenced how Westerners perceive Eastern cultures and people. By depicting the East as an ‘exotic’ region profoundly different from the West, travel writers like Sir John Mandeville and Marco Polo helped shape the Western identity as distinct from that of the East.

Edward Said's *Orientalism*, considered a seminal contemporary theoretical work, delves deeply into travel writing and its role in perpetuating colonial representations. Said's work has become a cornerstone in the field of postcolonial studies, initiating critical analysis and scrutiny of the colonial narratives present within travel literature.¹⁶⁵ Orientalist discourse claims to be a type of knowledge that is distinct from and superior to the knowledge possessed by the Oriental subjects about themselves, leading to the Orientalists exerting cognitive power over the latter.¹⁶⁶ European discourses have a tendency to draw a distinction between their own identity and that of the “Other”, portraying Western thought as grounded in practical reason and the “Others” thought as being marked by a vivid imagination. Western society is depicted as being liberal, while the East is portrayed as oppressive.¹⁶⁷ Such “Othering” had significant social consequences.

2.3.1 The Negative Consequences of Orientalism

In *Orientalism*, Said argues that the Western representation of the Orient or East, predominantly through travel writings and subsequent texts, had engendered specific stereotypes¹⁶⁸, the perpetuation of which had aided the colonial project. He asserts that the use of colonial power is connected to knowledge of the Orient. However, as many critics have pointed out, Said's conceptualization of Orientalist discourse is excessively rigid and uniform. His belief in an

¹⁶⁵ Dr Anuradha Chaudhuri, “Travel Writing and Colonial Consciousness: A Postcolonial Interpretation,” n.d., 21.

¹⁶⁶ Ronald B Inden, *Imagining India* (C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2000), 37–38.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶⁸ Edward W Said, *Orientalism* (Penguin Books India, 1995), 26.

unaltered, constant tradition of European depiction of the East from the time of the ancient Greeks to the present, ignores discrepancies, contradictions, and fluctuations, and pays insufficient attention to the context of history.¹⁶⁹

A major feature of Orientalism is that it is based on essentialism, the idea that a certain culture or group of people has an unchanging, inherent nature. This perspective ignores the intrinsic distinctions and variations among civilizations, and instead homogenizes them, portraying them as a monolithic entity.¹⁷⁰ According to critics, Orientalism maintains the preconceptions and stereotypes it aims to dispel, and fosters the idea that the East is a timeless, unchanging reality. Nevertheless, Said's politicized view of the development of knowledge of the "Other" is a very useful tool for analysis. His work was particularly important in challenging the critical and laudatory historiography that predominated the European study of foreign cultures, especially in colonial contexts.¹⁷¹

The notion of India being a land of disorderly imagination rather than ordered rationality has been expressed in various forms over time. Caste is often used as a symbol of India's social structure. The idea of the country as a nation divided along caste lines and lost in dreams is part of a larger Orientalist discourse that draws distinctions between Asia's numerous nations, as also between India and the West.¹⁷² However, recent research highlights the heterogeneity of Orientalist discourses and cautions against overlooking power dynamics such as subordination, racial biases, gendered and class violence, and various forms of oppression.

¹⁶⁹ Kate Teltscher, *India Inscribed: European and British Writing on India, 1600-1800* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 6.

¹⁷⁰ Said, *Orientalism* (Penguin Books India, 1995), 3–4.

¹⁷¹ Vicente. *Other Orientalisms: India between Florence and Bombay 1860-1900*, 2012, 31.

¹⁷² Inden. *Imagining India*, 49.

Historically, debates centered on Orientalism have frequently pitted two opposed groups against one another: the colonisers and the colonised, the powerful and the dominated and writers and subjects. Recent research has illuminated the variety of perspectives, contradictions, silences, and hesitations within Orientalist discourse. The issues with Orientalism include its tendency to homogenise non-Western cultures and peoples, perpetuate stereotypes, and overlook power dynamics.¹⁷³ Despite criticisms of Said's standpoint, his work is valuable in challenging colonial historiography. While examining Orientalist knowledge, we must be cautious not to overlook power dynamics and slip into hybridised views that obscure the functioning of hegemony.

2.3.2 Prospects and Limitations of Travel Writing in the Reconstruction of Historical Narratives

Travel writing has the potential to offer distinct insights into previous experiences and it provides historians with primary sources that contain the observations of travellers and descriptions of their encounters with other cultures. These accounts reveal the perspectives and biases of the travellers themselves, while also shedding light on historical events.

Travelogues have greatly influenced historical analyses and writings. Travel journals can be informative and convenient, but they are not always clear or completely trustworthy as sources of history. Similarly, travelogues are extremely problematic sources of knowledge, much like other historical documents. Travel accounts are troublesome records that require cautious and thorough scrutiny. It is important to analyse and evaluate the information presented in these accounts carefully to ensure their accuracy and reliability.

The circumstances that influence the reception of travel literature are widely acknowledged. The portrayal of the Eastern Other is a deliberate and self-aware process. Readers use their prejudices

¹⁷³ Vicente. *Other Orientalisms: India between Florence and Bombay 1860-1900*, 2012, 32–33.

to determine the veracity of stories about distant countries. Often, they easily accept the distorted versions provided by travellers from their countries, because the perceived oddity, diversity, and barbarism of other countries would help reinforce pride in their homeland.¹⁷⁴

David Spurr frames his study of the processes by which one culture subordinates another through acts of identification, depiction, and perception, using Jacques Derrida's concept of the "Violence of the letter"¹⁷⁵ and the widely used, but problematic, metaphorical equation between author and coloniser. However, this assumption tends to ignore the potential instability of language, as also the fundamental democracy of the activity of travel writing, a genre in which, as Spurr notes, the author is the coloniser.¹⁷⁶

Travel writing allows authors the liberty to write creatively, and its status as a scholarly field lends credibility to the writers. At the same time, readers expect travel writing to include exotic and unusual stories, which are often eagerly consumed.¹⁷⁷ It is not always possible to depict an event accurately and reconstruct historical accounts in their true form. The process of writing history can alter reality or make it challenging to determine the truth. The claims made by travel writers regarding their status as witnesses is vital to the legitimacy of their writings; however, it also reveals authorial limitations.

2.3.3 Travel Writing and the Elimination of History

Travel writers who focus solely on present experiences may overlook historical factors that shape the locales they explore. As such, their descriptions may be shallow and irrelevant, concealing the complex and often difficult history of these areas. The veracity of information provided by

¹⁷⁴ Teltscher. *India Inscribed*, 1995, 28.

¹⁷⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

¹⁷⁶ Lindsay, "Travel Writing and Postcolonial Studies," 2015, 28.

¹⁷⁷ Teltsche, *India Inscribed*, 1995, 46–47.

travellers is a significant issue in the field of history. Even renowned scholars like Herodotus, who is regarded as the founder of History, have come under criticism for allegedly fusing myth, history, and geography in their writings.¹⁷⁸ It is commonly acknowledged that travel writers frequently conflate information obtained from others with that gleaned from personal observation, and also engage in blatant fabrication. As a result, readers are often uncertain about the truth of the material they read.¹⁷⁹

Travellers often make extensive use of the wisdom and writings of their predecessors. They study the journals and accounts of previous travellers, as a result of which their own works might seem lacking in originality. Travellers may create memoirs based on their memories. As such, historians must be cautious of possible memory gaps that may affect the accuracy of representations of the past.¹⁸⁰ The concept of travel lies has been in existence for a long time, and historically, it was assumed that travellers often fabricated stories.¹⁸¹ Percy Adams explored the notion of travel liars and the close relationship between the novel and travel literature. However, it is not always possible to tell if a falsehood is articulated intentionally or out of ignorance. It is often challenging to ascertain the motives behind a traveller's deception.¹⁸²

Travellers may unintentionally omit or distort the customs and histories of the places they visit if they view them through the lens of their own culture and social background. This can reinforce colonial attitudes by presenting the destination as 'exotic', 'backward', or 'primitive', which can obscure the heterogeneous cultures of the locale and perpetuate prejudiced beliefs

¹⁷⁸ Elizabeth A Bohls and Ian Duncan, *Travel Writing 1700-1830: An Anthology* (Oxford University Press, 2008), xiii.

¹⁷⁹ Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs, *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, vol. 10 (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 31.

¹⁸⁰ Anjum Faraz, "Travel Writing, History and Colonialism: An Analytical Study," *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan* 51, no. 2 (2014): 198.

¹⁸¹ Percy G. Adams, *Travelers & Travel Liars* (University of California Press, 1980), 1–2.

¹⁸² Faraz. "Travel Writing, History and Colonialism: An Analytical Study," 2014, 198.

rooted in the ideologies of colonialism and imperialism. In general, travel writing can erase history if it fails to critically appreciate the cultural and historical contexts of the places visited and to acknowledge or engage with the perspectives and stories of local people.

2.3.4 Possibilities of Reinterpreting the Past Through Travel Writing

Utilizing travel writing as a tool for reinterpreting the past opens up a plethora of opportunities for historians to acquire fresh perspectives on historical events. They can amass information about diverse eras, civilizations, and places by examining the firsthand descriptions contained in travelogues. These narratives provide insight into the complexities of daily life, social systems, and historical circumstances that may otherwise have eluded comprehension. The expansion of the British Empire was influenced by various factors such as trade, diplomacy, missionary efforts, and scientific exploration, all of which generated their own forms of travel writing. The expanding technical dominance of Europe also led to a perceived intellectual superiority, with Europeans claiming the ability to comprehend and interpret not just the physical landscapes they encountered, but also the people inhabiting those areas.¹⁸³

Travel writing serves the purpose of raising awareness about and generating interest in diverse regions across the world. It aims to enlighten readers on unique natural environments, cultures, and engagements with indigenous communities. Travel literature broadens perspectives by offering valuable insights into a wide range of subjects such as historical events, geographical features, societal dynamics, artistic expressions, identity and diversity, as well as the intricate connections between gender, power, elitism, and nationalism.

While some literature on travel can be self-centered and overly simplistic when depicting encounters with different cultures, it remains a vital source of knowledge about the global

¹⁸³ Hulme and Youngs, *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, 2002, 10:53.

landscape.¹⁸⁴ Although travel writing as a genre could be rudimentary and confining, the concept of an established collection of works or a tradition was valuable, especially for social historians. Moreover, travel writing has had a profound impact on exploration and the advancement of fields like Science, History, and Literature. It also serves as a significant source of information for contemporary readers, teaching them to effectively interpret older travel narratives, grasp their historical context, and recognize inherent biases.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁴ Barna Bijay Basumatary, "Importance of Travel Writing in Literature," *International Journal of Advance Research, Ideas and Innovations in Technology* 4, no. 5 (2018): 761.

¹⁸⁵ Hulme and Youngs, *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, 2002, 10:266.

Chapter 3

Travel Writing and Indian History, with Special Reference to the Himalayan Regions

3.1 The Age of Geographical Discoveries

Europe went through the Age of Exploration or Age of Discovery from the 15th to the 17th centuries. Exploratory efforts increased throughout this time, and uncharted areas were discovered. Through these trips, hitherto undiscovered trade routes to the Americas, the Far East, and India were found. European ideas and the portrayal of non-European societies have been greatly influenced by encounters between Europeans and different societies outside of Europe. New sea routes opening up to the East and the historic discovery of continents like the Americas profoundly altered the direction of human history. The rise of European powers, colonisation, and the exploitation of indigenous populations were all facilitated by the creation of trade routes to the Americas, the Far East, and India.

The Chinese had made great progress in maritime operations throughout the Ming dynasty. A Chinese adventurer named Zheng explored several parts of Asia and Africa in pursuit of wealth. He returned home having learned a lot about Asia's southern and southern-eastern regions. His voyages to eastern and western Africa unearthed more information about these parts of the world before the Chinese. It is crucial to recognise that by the start of the fifteenth century, China had already attained a high degree of naval supremacy by pre-industrial standards. The seven

expeditions Cheng Ho commanded between 1405 and 1433 as the commander-in-chief of the Ming dynasty served as an example of the height of Chinese maritime strength.¹⁸⁶

During the Ming dynasty, while China was engaged in its explorations of other regions, Niccolo Conti, a famous Western traveller, became the first to successfully travel to China and return in 1439, following in the footsteps of Marco Polo.¹⁸⁷ Niccolo Conti is known to have embarked a journey from Italy to Persia. He sailed across the Gulf from Persia to the Bay of Bengal. Zheng He and Niccolo Conti had been on a journey at roughly the same time and had seen many of the same places.¹⁸⁸ Niccolo Conti's admire for the spices he found in the places he travelled as a merchant was particularly evident. He showed a keen interest in learning more about these spices and returned to Europe with this important information. Conti brought to the Western world wonderful information about the areas he had explored through his reports of the East, which were full of amazing tales.

Throughout the initial phases of the Age of Exploration, the Portuguese made a name for themselves as pioneers in marine endeavours. These endeavours were encouraged and supported in large part by Prince Henry the Navigator. Despite the fact that he was not a sailor, he is frequently referred to as a 'navigator.'¹⁸⁹ He hired sailors to explore the African coastlines in order to compile data and create maps. His ultimate goal was to find a sea route to India by charting a course along the western. Prince Henry played a significant role in the Portuguese exploration of coastal Africa and their search for a sea route to India through the funding of sailors and the

¹⁸⁶ Kuei-Sheng Chang, "The Maritime Scene in China at the Dawn of Great European Discoveries," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 94, no. 3 (1974): 347, <https://doi.org/10.2307/600069>.

¹⁸⁷ Leonardo Olschki, "Asiatic Exoticism in Italian Art of the Early Renaissance," *The Art Bulletin* 26, no. 2 (1944): 103, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3046937>.

¹⁸⁸ Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, *1492: The Year the World Began*, Reprint edition (New York: Harper One, 2010), 532.

¹⁸⁹ "Prince Henry the Navigator," *Transactions and Papers (Institute of British Geographers)*, no. 35 (1964): 119, <https://doi.org/10.2307/621104>.

acquisition of charts. He received recognition mostly for the Portuguese discoveries in Africa, which later resulted in the whole control of the continent.¹⁹⁰

In 1486, another Portuguese sailor named Bartholomew Diaz set out on a southward journey along the western coast of Africa. Bartholomew Diaz succeeded on his second effort in 1488, which was a historic accomplishment. He eventually made it to the southernmost point of Africa, where he learned how to travel eastward over the Indian Ocean to India. The southernmost point of Africa named as "Cape of Good Hope" opened up new opportunities for trade and travel between Europe and the East.

Italian sailor Christopher Columbus set off on a voyage in 1492 with the intention of sailing west and discovering a new maritime route to the East. His unintentional discovery of the "New World" of America instead of Asia, however, had a significant historical influence. The first time Columbus came into contact with the locals, he mistakenly thought the territory for being part of the Indian subcontinent and called them "Red Indians." The Spanish, who funded Columbus's exploration, discovered themselves in undiscovered regions with a wide range of prospects. Later, another Spanish sailor by the name of Amerigo Vespucci carried out considerable research of this newly discovered territory and identified it as a separate continent. It was given the name America after Amerigo Vespucci, who accurately identified it as a distinct continent.¹⁹¹

In 1497, Vasco da Gama was given permission by the King of Portugal to travel beyond the Cape of Good Hope and discover unexplored territory. Vasco da Gama's deliberate discovery of India in 1498 was not a coincidence; rather, it was a direct result of the deliberate exploratory tactics that were developed and perfected during the fifteenth century under the Portuguese king

¹⁹⁰ "Prince Henry the Navigator," 120.

¹⁹¹ Joseph Jacobs, *The Story of Geographical Discovery: How the World Became Known* (Forgotten Books, 2018), 108,109.

Henry the Navigator.¹⁹² This accomplishment had great significance since it represented the Portuguese entry into the lucrative spice trade, which had previously been controlled by Muslim traders.

In the years between 1519 and 1522, Portuguese adventurer Ferdinand Magellan (1480–1521) led the first successful circumnavigation of the globe. Magellan travelled along South America's coastline on his trip, eventually arriving at the continent's southernmost point, which is today known as the Strait of Magellan. The Pacific Ocean, which Magellan called, was the ocean he entered from this point onward. Magellan's journey revealed that it was possible to go around the entire Earth, and it was a key turning point in maritime discovery.

Moreover, Geographic explorations led to the discovery of new trade routes and lands, opening up new trading opportunities. Missionaries go out on voyages to preach Christianity in the same manner as explorers and traders. The geographic discoveries had a big influence on how quickly Christianity spread. Countries engaged in geographic expeditions simultaneously tried to impose their political dominance over the recently discovered regions. Due to this desire for political supremacy, European nations established colonies in Asia, Africa, and America.

3.1.1 The dominant paradigms of European in India and its bearing on non-European society

With Europe's conquest of the continents, Westerners began to have ideas about India. The knowledge of India that the west projected and disseminated had an impact on European thought on the one hand, and on India's future intellectual advancements on the other. This information had helped the West, especially the British, assert its hegemony over its eastern rival. The Western nations depictions of India had a big impact on how India was portrayed historically and how the

¹⁹² Eric Axelson, "Prince Henry the Navigator and the Discovery of the Sea Route to India," *The Geographical Journal* 127, no. 2 (1961): 149, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1792890>.

colonial mission was justified. These prejudices, which originated from English and German sources, affected how people thought about India, its people, and its culture.

Some of the early British scholars held a favorable perspective towards India, as reflected in their literary contributions. The British were trying to maintain a cordial relationship during this time since they had not yet fully asserted their military superiority. For instance, Sir William Jones travelled to India in 1783 and lived there until his passing in 1794. His commitment to learning Sanskrit and transcribing the “*Manusmriti*” into English is noteworthy. Jones also promoted the idea that Indo-Aryan languages emerged from a single source.¹⁹³ “The Royal Asiatic Society” was founded in Calcutta by Sir William Jones with the goal of examining Indian literature and culture.¹⁹⁴ Later orientalist who studied Indian culture and history did not, however, share his sentiments towards India. Some of these orientalist gave cliched portrayals of Indians, implying that they lacked even the most fundamental cultural components. In his lengthy eight-volume history of the Indians, William James also gave a stereotyped view of India. Most of these books concentrated on in-depth descriptions of British military occupations in India. Rude nations seem to take a particular joy in claiming their ancient beginnings, he said at the beginning of the second chapter of the first volume. Oriental nations sometimes prefer to embellish their claims to an extreme degree because they are known for their extravagant and exaggerated pride.¹⁹⁵

The claims made by Indians and other oriental nations about their lengthy histories and civilised pasts were contested by James Mill. Additionally, he disagreed with the perspectives of notable historians like Sir William Jones who had different opinions on Indians and Hindus. It is

¹⁹³ Samirmiya Amirmiya Saiyed, “Sir William Jones and ‘Manusmriti’: A British Initiative for Harmonious State in The Early Period of British Raj” 13, no. 1 (n.d.): 225.

¹⁹⁴ William Jones, *The Works of Sir William Jones: With the Life of the Author by Lord Teignmouth. In Thirteen Volumes* (John Stockdale, Piccadilly; and John Walker, Paternoster-Row, 1807), 14,15.

¹⁹⁵ James Mill, *The History of British India, Vol. 1* (Forgotten Books, 2018), 154.

clear from James' writing that he thought that the European/British occupation of India marked the beginning of civilization in that nation. He frequently used terminology like "rude nation" in his writing, fawning over the Indians' claims to have an extensive past. The editor of the first volume criticised James Mill for drawing superfluous distinctions between rulers and the ruled, despite the fact that many European experts disagreed with him on particulars and the broader perspective he provided.¹⁹⁶

According to William James, a European historian, the ancient history of India is only known through its "historical fables," which he deems should be regarded with contempt. When compared to genuine historical time periods, James explores the idea of yugas (ages) and argues that the historical time periods they reflect are artificial and fictional.¹⁹⁷ He casts doubt on the validity of such sources, citing their wildness and discrepancy, and contends that they cannot be relied upon to provide accurate information about the past.¹⁹⁸ James is giving a different Western viewpoint that contends the Indians lacked a genuine historical writing tradition

Another dominant vision of India was being developed in Germany, especially in the nineteenth century. The most representative thinker of this paradigm was Frederick Max Muller. Muller was trained in oriental studies and Sanskrit. He started translating the "*Hitopadesa*" in 1844. Soon after that, he started collecting the "*Rigveda Samhitas*." He believed that one who wants to study the value of human mind and culture should necessarily look into India as this land possesses a great treasure of spiritual knowledge.¹⁹⁹ He criticized the Europeans' impulse to include Greek and Latin alone in the curriculum of classical languages while looking down upon

¹⁹⁶ James Mill, ed., "PREFACE," in *The History of British India*, vol. 1, Cambridge Library Collection - South Asian History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), viii, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511782329.001>.

¹⁹⁷ Mill, *The History of British India*, Vol. 1, 154–64.

¹⁹⁸ Mill, 165.

¹⁹⁹ F. Max Muller, *INDIA WHAT CAN IT TEACH US?* (Rupa, 2002), 5–6.

Sanskrit as useless. According to him, the nearest intellectual relatives of the west are the 'Indians.'²⁰⁰ This belief was a contribution of the linguistic theory of the Indo-Aryans, as he has suggested many times in his lectures and writings.

The romanticised picture of India shared by thinkers like Max Muller was a defining trait. They thought of India as being strange and very dissimilar from the intellectual life they were used to in England. Muller especially suggested that young civil workers stationed in India learn Sanskrit because he thought it could teach them useful information.²⁰¹ He noticed a development in the Vedas from the terrestrial to the celestial, from the sensual to the super sensual, and from the human to the divine and heroic.²⁰² Muller was particularly interested in the spiritual practises of India. The contribution of academics like Max Muller was the introduction of a new paradigm for India in Europe. The West was considered as the home of material advancement, while India began to be seen as the place of spirituality. Indeed, Europeans had a propensity to romanticise or stereotype India as being "uncivilised" in order to support their superiority complexes. While romanticising India was frequently done to enhance the exotic allure of the Orient and create a sense of Western cultural and intellectual superiority, the caricature of India as being uncivilised served to justify colonial dominance and exploitation. Both methods helped to create narratives that supported European rule and influenced how people thought about India throughout the colonial era.

²⁰⁰ Muller, 13.

²⁰¹ Muller, 39.

²⁰² Muller, 71.

3.1.2 Political and cultural transformations in Europe: Rise of the Absolutist State, Enlightenment, and Romanticism

The idea of the absolutist state as a system of government first appeared in Europe when the continent transitioned from the mediaeval to the modern era. The presence of the nobility and the emerging bourgeoisie, two powerful classes, was what made this state distinctive. The state in turn safeguarded and serviced the interests of these classes since they held considerable authority within the machinery of the state. Nevertheless, scholars have differing perspectives on the class nature of the absolutist state. According to one viewpoint, it was a feudal state with ongoing feudal connections and features in its structure. Another point of view contends that the absolutist state primarily promoted the bourgeoisie's interests, demonstrating the dominance of this newly developing class. According to a third viewpoint, the absolutist state represented a compromise between the bourgeoisie's and nobility's interests. Bestowing to this interpretation, the state served as a mediator between these two classes, attempting to strike a compromise between their divergent demands.²⁰³ Overall, researchers continue to argue the class nature of the absolutist state, with various interpretations emphasising feudal, bourgeois, or compromise aspects within its governing framework.

The alliance between the monarch and the aristocracy, who served for their mutual interests, served as the foundation for the absolute monarchy in seventeenth-century France. But the monarchy was associated with more than simply the conventional nobility. The emerging urban bourgeoisie, which the aristocracy struggled to compete with, was eager to do favour for the state. Due to their fixed income, aristocracy were unable to keep up with the seventeenth-century price

²⁰³ Michael S Kimmel, "The Ambivalence of Absolutism: State and Nobility in 17th Century France and England," *Journal of Political & Military Sociology*, 1986, 56–59.

revolution. As a result, in seventeenth-century France lands were frequently purchased by affluent urban merchants.²⁰⁴ France and the other European nations were engaged in numerous conflicts at this time. More taxes were imposed by the state as a result of imperial demands and foreign conflicts, and their collection required an effective administrative system. In the seventeenth century, administrative changes were implemented that led to the establishment of a proper bureaucracy and the appointment of officials.²⁰⁵ The political and economic environments were comparable in other European nations. In the seventeenth century, Europe experienced a wide-ranging crisis that aided the rise of the continent's absolutist governments.²⁰⁶

Louis XIV's reign (1638–1715) is a prime example of the fundamental characteristics of French absolutism. Louis XIV was an absolute monarch, hence his writings shed important light on the characteristics of the absolutist state in medieval Europe.²⁰⁷ The Bibliotheque Nationale maintains Louis XIV's works, including his letters, diaries, and other notes, and these provide important insights into his defence of the notion of divine right of monarchs.²⁰⁸ The political philosophies of the ancient Roman Empire and the medieval church are where the idea of divine right first emerged. Louis XIV continuously emphasised the monarch's supreme authority and claimed that God had given them their authority directly. This ultimate power was not bestowed by the pope or with the approval of the people. Louis XIV declared himself to be the sovereign monarch and linked himself with the state. He demonstrated his dominance over his subjects

²⁰⁴ Kimmel, 61.

²⁰⁵ Roland Mousnier and Brian Pearce, *The Institutions of France Under the Absolute Monarchy, 1598-1789, Volume 1: Society and the State* (University of Chicago Press, 1979), xv.

²⁰⁶ E. J. Hobsbawm, "The General Crisis of the European Economy in the 17th Century," *Past and Present* 5, no. 1 (1954): 33,34, <https://doi.org/10.1093/past/5.1.33>.

²⁰⁷ Paul W Fox, "Louis XIV and the Theories of Absolutism and Divine Right," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science/Revue Canadienne de Economiques et Science Politique* 26, no. 1 (1960): 128.

²⁰⁸ Fox, 132.

material assets and his contempt for civic authorities like the church and the judiciary.²⁰⁹ Numerous of his concepts not only supported the absolute monarchy in France but also other similar regimes in seventeenth-century Europe.

The concept of the absolutist state finds relevance in the rule of the Stuart Kings in England, although scholars hold differing views on its applicability to the English context. Scholars dispute on how to apply this phrase in the context of England, as some of them do not believe that there are any monarchs in England who are truly absolute.²¹⁰ However, the historical backdrop of England and France from the sixteenth to the middle of the seventeenth centuries stays the same, and the outcomes of monarchical rule in both countries were comparable. By the early sixteenth century, both England and France were feeble states, but by the middle of the seventeenth century, their rulers were strong, especially in terms of creating an effective bureaucracy for governing and collecting taxes.²¹¹

Despite these parallels, the establishment of the absolutist state in England was marked by a number of differences. Both the Frondes Uprising (1648–53) and the English Civil War (1640–46) had distinct outcomes. While the monarchy in England was overthrown by the Civil War, the French monarchy was able to put an end to the insurrection in Frondes.²¹² Another unique aspect of the sixteenth and seventeenth century English state construction was the marginalisation of Catholicism in favour of Protestantism. However, England significantly increased its military prowess during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which was a result of the reign of the absolute monarchs, much like France did. Similar advancements were made in taxation

²⁰⁹ Fox, 136,137.

²¹⁰ James Daly, "The Idea of Absolute Monarchy in Seventeenth-Century England," *The Historical Journal* 21, no. 2 (1978): 227.

²¹¹ Richard Lachmann, "Elite Conflict and State Formation in 16th-and 17th-Century England and France," *American Sociological Review*, 1989, 141.

²¹² Lachmann, 142.

collection.²¹³ In order to better understand the nature of the Absolutist States in the West, it may be helpful to compare the state building processes in various European nations during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

One outcome of the age of absolute monarchy was that despite being divided into numerous states, Europe began to be seen by its various nations as a single political entity. This fictitious identity was contrasted with the other parts of the planet. The reason why Europeans were able to recognise a European identity among their diverse nations may have been due to the existence of identical political institutions at a certain historical period. The Europeans had access to the traveller's accounts of various regions of the world, the inhabitants, their habits, and civilizations at this point. The rest's Western imaginations have been influenced by these narratives. This idea of the other's perceived difference was influenced by Renaissance and Enlightenment intellectuals. The intellectual advancements in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are referred to as the "Enlightenment." Enlightenment intellectuals promoted secularism against religion and reason against faith while criticising the deeply held medieval religious beliefs. The way the Enlightenment interacted with religion will reveal how it perceived the "other" cultures. Discussions on the Enlightenment thinkers' understanding of the "other" have been reopened by Said and other postcolonial intellectuals.²¹⁴

Thinkers of the Enlightenment era placed a high value on careful observation and the capacity for inference. Influential Enlightenment philosopher Rene Descartes emphasised the importance of reason's superiority. He maintained that reason should be the gold standard for truth,

²¹³ Lachmann, 142,143.

²¹⁴ David Allen Harvey, "Religion (s) and the Enlightenment," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 40, no. 2 (2014): 1.

transcending the accuracy of our frequently deceptive sensory perceptions.²¹⁵Descartes believed that since animals are completely incapable of reasoning, reason serves as a "universal instrument" that separates humans from other species.²¹⁶Descartes redefined the bounds of true knowledge by giving reason such a high priority and by describing man as a rational being. According to his theories, knowledge must be acquired by reasoning. This puts rationality at the centre of the search for knowledge, which is contrary to religious ideas.

Along with exploring issues of reality and metaphysics, Enlightenment thinkers also concentrated on issues of personal freedom and the nature of government. Thomas Hobbes is a good example in this sense because he thought carefully about the best type of government to have and what citizens' rights should be. Hobbes claimed that "all men" are naturally equal. This equality implies that everyone has the right to self-preservation, which in turn indicates that everyone has an equal claim to resources and to the protection of those resources.²¹⁷

More forcefully and persuasively, French thinkers like Russo, Voltaire, and Montesquieu contended for citizens' rights. The French Revolution did not, however, grant the populace their fundamental rights. Many of the European thinkers lost hope as a result of the terror that followed the revolution. Additionally, this disillusionment stood counter to enlightenment principles like reason and rationality.²¹⁸

The three main figures most closely connected with the early German Romanticism were Novalis, Schlegel, and Schleiermacher. The subsequent Romantic philosophers did not share the

²¹⁵ R Descartes, "A Discourse on the Method of Correctly Conducting One's Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences.(I. Maclean. Trans.) Oxford: Oxford University Press," 2006, 33.

²¹⁶ Descartes, 47.

²¹⁷ Thomas Hobbes, "Philosophical Rudiments Concerning Government and Society," 1841, 45.

²¹⁸ Robert W Lougee, "German Romanticism and Political Thought," *The Review of Politics* 21, no. 4 (1959): 631.

international view of the Early German Romanticism.²¹⁹ The enlightenment intellectuals made an effort to understand their surroundings. The romantics, on the other hand, believed that one should feel and experience the world.²²⁰ They contended that knowing the truth can also be done through feelings and experiences rather than just through analysis. Romantic poets from all throughout Europe shared these views and found their finest expression in writing.²²¹

As a reaction to both the Enlightenment and the violent upheaval of the French Revolution, the Romanticism of the late 18th century evolved. A well-known person of the time, Georg Forster (1754–1794), is a good example of the intellectual advancements in German and European philosophy at that time. The well-known traveller and author Forster joined the Jacobins in France and took part in the Revolution in Mainz in 1792.²²² He vehemently disagreed with Immanuel Kant's view of "duty." Forster is often credited as one of the founders of modern anthropology, emphasising the significance of methodically and scientifically researching native cultures. Georg Forster also supported indigenous peoples' rights despite thinking that Europeans are better. Although he did support some aspects of European domination, he also voiced opposition to racism and imperialism. "Voyage Around the World,"²²³ Forster's chronicle of the journey he took with Captain James Cook, was published in 1792. In this work, Forster adopts a cosmopolitan viewpoint and argues that Europeans should learn from indigenous cultures.²²⁴ Additionally, 'Voyage Around the World' demonstrates his faith in the kindness that humanity is born with. He

²¹⁹ Andrew Bowie, "German Idealism and Early German Romanticism," in *Aesthetics and Subjectivity* (Manchester University Press, 2018), 49.

²²⁰ Lougee, "German Romanticism and Political Thought," 631–34.

²²¹ René Wellek, "German and English Romanticism: A Confrontation," *Studies in Romanticism*, 1964, 35.

²²² Frederick C. Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution & Romanticism – The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought, 1790–1800* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992), 154.

²²³ George Forster, Nicholas Thomas, and Oliver Berghof, *A Voyage Round the World* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000).

²²⁴ Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution & Romanticism – The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought, 1790–1800*, 156, 157.

thought that one of what made people who they are was their charitable attitude.²²⁵ The idea that human nature is universal and consistent across all races and religious beliefs was advanced by Forster. However, the descriptions given by tourists from various cultures painted a different picture. These stories frequently stereotyped ‘other’ societies, portraying them as uncivilised or cannibalistic. In his explanation of cannibalism, Forster argued that eating human flesh is not fundamentally deviant in and of itself. He suggested that cultural forces and conventions may have an impact on whether cannibalism is common or uncommon in certain societies. Forster contends that, absent the constraints imposed by societal norms, consuming human flesh might be regarded as a customary behaviour.²²⁶

Following his disappointment with the French Revolution, George Forster's viewpoint underwent a significant alteration that ultimately contributed to his passing in 1793. On his final days, a map of India was unexpectedly found, highlighting his unrealized yearning to travel there. Forster's life and thoughts are a witness to the change from logic to compassion and from promoting prejudices against other cultures to taking a more compassionate and understanding stance. The majority of travellers, however, did not share George Forster's outlook. The people that the European traveller encountered were romanticised and stereotyped. This was frequently required to highlight how superior European culture was. It is therefore important to take a thorough look at them in the context of the current investigation.

3.2 Indology, its native informants, and modern critics

The term Indology, refers to the study of India by European academics during the colonial period, which resulted in a substantial body of writing about the country. Michel Foucault's theories and

²²⁵ Beiser, 159.

²²⁶ Beiser, 160.

techniques about the interaction of power and knowledge are relevant in this context. The study of Indology and other kinds of knowledge production, as well as critical approaches to knowledge, power, and discourse, have all been impacted by Foucault's ideas. Foucault's observations show how Indology as a disciplinary practice was interwoven with colonial power systems and helped to the creation of hegemonic narratives about India by studying the mechanics of power and the function of language. As a result, contemporary critics of Indology have examined and criticised the field using Foucault's theoretical framework.

The Indologists aimed to collect and organise knowledge about India, but this project had political implications that revealed the relationships between those in authority and those being researched. To demonstrate this idea, a specific piece of text by Indologist Colebrooke can be examined. This essay focuses on Colebrooke's interpretation and portrayal of ancient philosophical systems in Hinduism. It was published in the Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland in 1824. Colebrooke emphasises in his essay the complexity and diversity of ancient Indian thought and culture. He divides diverse Indian philosophical traditions into “orthodox” and “heterodox” categories. Due to their intimate ties to Vedic theology and metaphysics, the Vedas and kin philosophical systems are referred as ‘orthodox.’²²⁷ He names the ‘Charvaka’ and ‘Pasupata’ as significant examples of the “heterodox” streams, on the other hand. Colebrooke also recognises a third group, which demonstrates aspects of both partly heterodox and partly conforming to the established Hindu beliefs. This category includes philosophical systems like Sanchya, Yoga, and Vaiseshika as examples. Colebrooke compares Indian philosophical systems to their Western counterparts in his analysis. Aristotle and Sanchya

²²⁷ Henry Thomas Colebrooke, “On the Philosophy of the Hindus. Part I,” *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1, no. 1 (1824): 19.

philosophy are contrasted, while Kanada and classical Greek atomic physicists are compared.²²⁸ This method of deciphering and articulating Indian philosophy and culture using comparative frameworks is what Edward Said subsequently referred to as the codification of the endless variation of India. Said contends that orientalists, like Colebrooke, sought to both rule over and learn about India in order to make analogies between the Orient and the Occident.²²⁹

Indologists such as Henry Thomas Colebrooke and Sir William Jones acquired their understanding of Sanskrit and access to scriptures through their proficiency in the language. However, the question arises about the native informants who assisted these scholars. The chief source of information for these European scholars was the Sanskrit pandits, or learned individuals, of India. Sanskrit pandits, or educated individuals from India, were responsible for assisting the eastern scholars in learning the language.²³⁰ The British intellectuals and rulers did not become subordinate to the pandits because they relied on them to study Sanskrit; rather, they used their influence over them. At first, the pandits were unwilling to teach as they weren't sure how to react to the offer to teach Sanskrit to a group of folks they had never met before. This led to a complicated and unclear connection between the pandits and the Indologists. The pandits, however, were viewed with great doubt by the Indologists. Even Sir William Jones expressed skepticism regarding the validity of these pandits.²³¹ Power dynamics, cultural differences, and shared uncertainty all played a role in how the pandits and European scholars interacted.

Understanding Hindu and Muslim customs and rituals was important to the British kings and early East India Company administrators because it improved the effectiveness of their

²²⁸ Colebrooke, 20.

²²⁹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Penguin Books India, 1995), 78.

²³⁰ Brian A. Hatcher, "What's Become of the Pandit? Rethinking the History of Sanskrit Scholars in Colonial Bengal," *Modern Asian Studies* 39, no. 3 (2005): 687.

²³¹ Rosane Rocher, "British Orientalism in the Eighteenth Century: The Dialectics of Knowledge and Government," *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, 1993, 234.

administration. For instance, Warren Hastings stated that the Company intended to control Muslims in accordance with their customs and Hindus in accordance with their own established laws. Two treatises on Hindu law, one titled "*Code of Gentoo Laws*" and the other "*Digest of Hindu Law on Contracts and Successions*," were released in 1773 to aid in this knowledge. The intent of acquiring the native's language and culture at this point in colonialism was to reign over them more effectively. The company's administrators thought that the laws of the *Shastras* could be applied to the Hindus; and the laws of *Koran*, to the Muslims.²³²

Indologists mainly concentrated on researching textual and philological evidence throughout the early stages of colonisation.²³³ The late 18th century saw the continuation of this pattern. However, the strategy started to evolve in the 19th century as the British Empire grew more entrenched in India. But British researchers and officials continued to rely on knowledgeable locals as sources when trying to comprehend India. In his essay "*Colonial Histories and Native Informants: Biography of an Archive*," Nicolas Dirks offers persuasive examples of British officials who made important contributions to the study of India. People like Dow, Elphinstone, Wilks, Malcolm, and Mackenzie understood how crucial it was to gain a historical perspective on India.²³⁴ They aimed to understand the nation from a wider viewpoint than the Indologists of the 18th century. The account of Colin Mackenzie serves as an example of the importance given to local informants in learning about the Indian community. Mackenzie understood the value of these informers in getting a good understanding of the circumstances and viewpoints of the ruled. This change in viewpoint represents a developing method for researching India that goes beyond textual analysis to incorporate historical knowledge and perceptions from local informants.

²³² Rocher, 220.

²³³ Nicholas B Dirks, "Colonial Histories and Native Informants: Biography of an Archive," *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, 1993, 281.

²³⁴ Dirks, "Colonial Histories and Native Informants: Biography of an Archive," 280,281.

First Surveyor General of India, Mackenzie served in that capacity from 1815 until his passing in 1821. He participated in the Deccan Survey before that and was tasked with assessing the recently captured territory of Mysore.²³⁵ Mackenzie was conscious of one key drawback, though: his lack of proficiency in the 'native languages.' He used the aid of regional authors and translators to get beyond this obstacle. Mackenzie had the utmost respect for the Indian informers who helped him with his mission. His intimate bond with his principal interpreter, Boria, is a clear indication of this. Despite Boria's premature demise at such a young age, Mackenzie had already enlisted a number of Brahmins to gather data on India before the passing of his translator.²³⁶ Their main goal when they arrived in a community was to interact with the Brahmins there. This focus on connecting with Brahmins draws attention to Mackenzie's strategy for establishing a group of local informants who were crucial in producing Indological knowledge. The goal is to clarify how Mackenzie formed this group and his attitude towards these native informants by looking at their social standing. Additionally, Mackenzie's team was made up of Brahmins, a few Christians, and a Jain, creating a diverse group that was tasked with acquiring knowledge about the indigenous people. This indicates Mackenzie's appreciation of the value of local knowledge and his efforts to compile insightful information about the nation with the help of Indian informants.

However, Mackenzie's viewpoint, as previously indicated, was not typical of the general attitude among the contributors to Indology at the time. A more assertive and intolerable outlook among their eighteenth-century contemporaries had replaced the initially accommodating perspective of seventeenth-century Indologists. One such instance is Benjamin Heyne, a close friend and companion of Mackenzie, who had unfavourable opinions of Indians and described them as adulterous, dishonest, and liars. Heyne's viewpoints anticipated those of individuals like

²³⁵ Dirks, 284,285.

²³⁶ Dirks, 293,294.

Macaulay.²³⁷ This change in perspective is a reflection of the British Imperial Indologists' shifting attitudes over the eighteenth century. These Indologists treated the Indians with contempt, seeing them largely as rescues on a mission for the Empire, rather than with pity or understanding.

3.2.1 European Travel Writing on India: Texts and Context

The earliest accounts of European explorers' voyages to India began to appear in English and other European languages soon after their initial encounters. Hakluyt and Purchas put together the oldest collections of these travelogues by English writers. "*Principal Navigations*," a work by Hakluyt that was published in 1589, exhibited two different attitudes. As a reaction to Catholic Spain, it first conveyed a sense of nationalism among Protestant England. Second, it reflected mercantile capitalism's ideals, with its visions of transcontinental trade and growth.²³⁸ Hakluyt first concentrated on journeys outside of Europe, but he also included the exploits of Drake and Cavendish in his collection since they offered adequate material to demonstrate national pride.²³⁹

The account of Ralph Fitch's travels between 1583 and 1591, which is featured in Hakluyt's "*The Principle Navigation Voyages Traffiques & Discoveries of the English Nation*" (1599), is one of the first instances of travel writing on India.²⁴⁰ In 1613, 1619, and 1625, Samuel Purchas published many volumes of the trip memoirs of English travellers. A couple of the images that express the authority of the English and the magnificence of the English travellers can be seen on the title page of the collection published in 1625. The pictures also allude to the traveller's goal, which was to survey the entire world by sea with the help of the kings. Purchas and the other

²³⁷ Dirks, 293.

²³⁸ David A Boruchoff, "Piety, Patriotism, and Empire: Lessons for England, Spain, and the New World in the Works of Richard Hakluyt," *Renaissance Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (2009): 11,12, <https://doi.org/10.1086/647349>.

²³⁹ Mary C. Fuller, "Writing the Long-Distance Voyage: Hakluyt's Circumnavigators," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 70, no. 1 (2007): 37,38, <https://doi.org/10.1525/hlq.2007.70.1.37>.

²⁴⁰ Richard Hakluyt, "The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation. Vol. XIII. America. Part II.," n.d., 480.

European tourists highlighted the cultural difference between Europe and the other continents they visited. In the account, the comparison between Europe and India was made either directly or indirectly.²⁴¹ From the very beginning of the colonial exploration of the east, the explorers sought out or created the idea of an "other".

During the reign of Mughal King Muhammad Jahangir (1605–1627), Sir Thomas Roe (1581–1644) visited India.²⁴² He was dispatched as King James I's official Ambassador. Additionally, he spoke for the English East India Company. His meticulous journal entries and letters to King James I serve as a wealth of knowledge about India in general and the Mughal court in particular. Details of his journal and correspondences can be found in his *Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to the Court of the Great Mogul, 1615–1619*, which was later published by the Hakluyt Society. One can learn about the Mughal court's daily operations, the tumultuous relationship between the British and the Mughals, Roe's fervent religious beliefs, etc., from his diary entries. In order to emphasise his superiority over and difference from the common people, he occasionally makes statements about them, such as few will believe those barbaric people.²⁴³

Between 1916 and 1919, Edward Terry spent two and a half years in India as a chaplain for Sir Thomas Roe. He recorded his travel experiences in the book “*A Voyage to East-India*,” which Purchas put together. While in India, Terry made an effort to study Persian. Terry's book, in contrast to many other travel works, details his actual travel experiences on the way to India and back. The book's initial section, which is an account of his journey and the events he had along the route, makes it appear to be more about travel. These descriptions include ones that might appear

²⁴¹ Kate Teltscher, *India Inscribed: European and British Writing on India, 1600-1800* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 12,13.

²⁴² Mehreen M-Chida-Razvi, “The Perception of Reception: The Importance of Sir Thomas Roe at the Mughal Court of Jahangir,” *Journal of World History* 25, no. 2/3 (2014): 264.

²⁴³ Sir Thomas Roe, *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to the Court of the Great Mogul, 1615-1619: As Narrated in His Journal and Correspondence* (Hakluyt society, 1899), 281.

trivial, like those of sharks, turtles, dolphins, etc.²⁴⁴ However, they exhibit the curiosity of the pre-colonial English traveller. His account of the non-European peoples provides as justification for the colonial conquest, much like that of other European travellers of his time. One example is his depiction of a "savage" ritual that he claims to have seen among the Saldanha locals. According to his testimony, Saldanha's residents throw their disabled and elderly parents out of their homes at night so that the wild animal might eat them.²⁴⁵

Not only English travellers remained at the Mughal court and later jotted their memories. A French physicist and traveller named Francois Bernier had resided in the Mughal court and afterwards wrote his journey memoirs. His travel journals were translated into French and published in 1670–1671 under the title “*Travel in the Mogul Empire: AD 1656–1668*”. Dutch, German, Italian, and many other European languages were among those that it was translated into. The first edition of this in English appeared in 1671. Later, in 1776, a new edition of this book was released. The book is important because it helped develop the idea of "Oriental Despotism," which is one of the western world's preeminent notions about the East. Bernier stated that the subject of his work is “a matter of history” and that he is making an effort to provide "a faithful account of the manner" of the people.²⁴⁶ However, the "other" was what he perceived in the non-European nations. He makes a consistent effort to set himself apart from Easterners.

In his work, Bernier claims that land in the Mughal Empire was state property. The King holds the bulk of the power, and India lacks a ducal and early aristocratic structure. The King awards a number of pensions and other grants, although these can always be revoked.²⁴⁷ The royal

²⁴⁴ Edward Terry, *A Voyage to East-India: Wherein Some Things Are Taken Notice Of, in Our Passage Thither, But Many More in Our Abode There, Within That Rich and Most ... Observations and Inferences Upon The...* (Nabu Press, 2013), 8–10.

²⁴⁵ Terry, 15.

²⁴⁶ Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire, AD 1656-1668* (Asian Educational Services, 1996), 12.

²⁴⁷ Bernier, 5.

family is described as being indulgent and through the use of travel writing, Bernier helped spread concepts like the public ownership of land, the irrigation system, the King's unquestionable power, etc. throughout Europe.

These travelogues of Asian nations influenced Enlightenment thought and motivated writers like Montesquieu to theorise on “Oriental Despotism.” Aristotle is cited as the originator of the term “Oriental Despotism.”²⁴⁸ The Renaissance and Enlightenment intellectuals gave the concept of Oriental Despotism shape by analysing the travellers' accounts.²⁴⁹ Marx was one of the Western intellectuals who employed ideas like the Asian Mode of Production and Oriental Despotism to understand the East. As a result, the travel literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had a significant impact on western thought.

Travel writers directly contributed to European intellectuals' attempts to theorise and comprehend India. Their narratives affected historical works as well as the development of preconceptions about India. During that time, these travel accounts had an immense influence on how Europeans perceived and knew about India.

3.3 Borderlands of India as an integral part of India

The concepts of border, boundaries, and frontier have been widely utilized in the social and human sciences since the early 1990s, with metaphorical implications and varying references to different social occurrences. The increased usage of these terms in the social sciences can be attributed to the influential work of Fredrick Barth in 1969, where he explains the process by which ethnic groups form their identities by creating boundaries in relation to others.²⁵⁰ Every border and

²⁴⁸ Joan-Pau Rubiés, “Oriental Despotism and European Orientalism: Botero to Montesquieu,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 9, no. 1–2 (2005): 109, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1570065054300275>.

²⁴⁹ Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire, AD 1656-1668*, 114.

²⁵⁰ Inga Brandell, *State Frontiers: Borders and Boundaries in the Middle East* (IB Tauris, 2006), 10.

borderlands has a distinct historical backdrop that results from various viewpoints. In human activity and society's structure, borders play crucial roles. They have always been and will always be important factors influencing our planet. Borders serve as significant symbols and practical mechanisms for creating distinctions between what belongs to us and what belongs to them.²⁵¹

In recent times, there has been a growing focus on the exploration and examination of borderlands. Borderlands have existed at various points in time throughout history. Borderlands are specific geographical regions that can be delineated on a map, similar to any other defined area. Borderlands represent more than just physical boundaries; they encompass the surrounding space, extending the concept beyond a mere line. They serve as the meeting point between states and societies, playing a crucial role in shaping their interactions. Understanding the complexities of borders and the relationships between states and societies within borderlands requires a deep comprehension of the lived experiences of those residing in these regions.²⁵²

Geographical features, historical occurrences, and numerous social and political variables all have an impact on the development of borders. It is challenging to define a single, universal definition of borderlands because the idea of borderlands is also influenced by unique historical conditions. Regional differences do not always prevail, though, as the nation-state reality is important in the global system in which we live. Some historians have attempted to extend feudalism to embrace a world system in the pre-modern era, which lacked a global structure like capitalism, however this perspective is frequently contested. The idea of the nation-state is one of the universal foundations of capitalism as a global economic system that may be used in a variety of geographical contexts. On the contrary, the absence of a comparable frame of reference in

²⁵¹ Alexander C Diener and Joshua Hagen, *Borders: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 64.

²⁵² I William Zartman, *Understanding Life in the Borderlands: Boundaries in Depth and in Motion* (University of Georgia Press, 2010), 1.

feudalism makes it difficult to construct universal notions. The establishment of borders is a long-standing practice in India, one that experienced substantial modifications in the early medieval era when regions rose to prominence. Borders are physically marked off, nonetheless the book referring to borders in Ancient India also examines how borders are portrayed in literature, particularly in works with religious overtones. The issue of sacred and fictitious spaces, also known as heterotopic spaces, is covered in depth throughout the book. As an illustration of the author's awareness of multiple notions of hell related with various geographies, boundaries, and borderlands, the Hindu classic the Shiva Purana cites five different sorts of hell, including deserts and thorny forests. A well-known book called "*The Making of Early Medieval India*,"²⁵³ focuses on the growth of state formation and the emergence of regional powers from a central core. However, it also considers the importance of outlying areas.

Natural landscapes of the Indian subcontinent include hills, hill ranges, forests, deserts, and rivers. These geographic features serve as boundaries that separate populations with various cultural traits, which are frequently influenced by their respective production methods. Significant frontiers are created within the region by these divisions. It is important to keep in mind that travel writing changes when it passes through these borderlands because of the distinctive peculiarities of the area.

3.3.1 Travel writing and the misrepresentation of the Himalayas

With the observer's perspective coming from a Western society and the subject's perspective originating in a different society, the problem of historical distance provides a fundamental obstacle in travel writing. Both people's conceptions of reality are shaped by their respective conceptual frameworks. This unresolved paradox imposes certain limitations on travel writing.

²⁵³ Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya, *The Making Of Early Medieval India P*, Second edition (New Delhi: Oxford, 2012).

Travel writing encounters several challenges, including issues of value judgments, generalizations, and the underlying dynamics of the outsider versus insider perspective. The concept of outsider compared to insider, as was previously described, is directly tied to these difficulties. One essay makes mention of Clifford Geertz, a well-known anthropologist who studied Islam in depth using in-depth textual analysis and library research. But as he immersed himself in fieldwork in Indonesia and Morocco, he found that there were big differences between how Islam was represented in writings and how it was actually practiced there. As a result of this insight, Geertz declared that "a way of seeing is a way of not seeing."²⁵⁴ This insightful comment emphasizes how our selected frames of reference affect our perception of the topic matter. Diverse viewpoints and perceptions might result from using different frames of reference.

In his widely read book "*Orientalism*," written in 1978, Edward Said made the case that certain prejudices about the East, also known as the Orient, were reinforced by the West, also known as the Occident, particularly in travel writing and later works.²⁵⁵ According to Said, these tropes helped perpetuate colonialism and the idea of the 'White man's burden.' Said urged readers to view these works as a component of a power dynamic in which the Western desire for dominance and control is expressed through travel writing that represents the Western mission.²⁵⁶ Said's ideas, including the gaze and others, have been widely applied by his followers and have proved useful aids in understanding travel writings.

An essential question arises when thinking about travel writing in the Himalayan regions, particularly the eastern Himalayas: should we adapt the same techniques used in travel writing in

²⁵⁴ Ananda Rajah, *Remaining Karen: A Study of Cultural Reproduction and the Maintenance of Identity* (ANU Press, 2008), 7.

²⁵⁵ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 1st Vintage Books ed edition (New York: Vintage, 1979), 26, 58.

²⁵⁶ Said, 157, 181.

other civilizations to this unique place, even though both may be seen as borderlands?²⁵⁷ As we look into how travellers have portrayed the eastern Himalayas, it is critical to be aware of such generalizations and representational approaches.

It is interesting to note that many visitors to the eastern Himalayas also experienced life at the Mughal Court. Their depictions of the Mughals and the eastern Himalayas, as a result, were different and both deviated from British civilization. The emergence of the great Mughal rulers, especially Emperor Akbar and his successor Jahangir, as well as the impact it had on Mughal India, occurred at the same time as the golden age of travel. The Mughal court's splendor and rich lives, as well as its elaborate ceremonies and displays of wealth, all contributed to India's developing reputation as a prosperous nation. The Mughal Empire was frequently depicted as having a ruling class made up primarily of landowners and military officials who were accused of extracting the wealth from peasants and artisans. It is crucial to remember that the Mughal system was a patrimonial administration with the Emperor at its centre rather than a feudal one.²⁵⁸

The plains of India, including regions such as the Gangetic Valley and Bengal, were characterized by expansive and continuous land with no significant mountainous or discontinuous geographical features apart from pasturelands. These areas have abundant flat, cultivable land, rivers, and other natural resources that contributed to their agricultural prosperity. As a result, many visitors to India confused their experiences with the Mughals with the overall Indian experience.

The idea of India itself came to be equated with the centre or core parts of India, which included Bengal and North India. The descriptions of travellers and later orientalist who

²⁵⁷ Mignonette Momin, Cecile A Mawlong, and Fozail Ahmad Qadri, "Society and Economy in North-East India," 2004, 81.

²⁵⁸ Stephen P Blake, "The Patrimonial-Bureaucratic Empire of the Mughals," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 39, no. 1 (1979): 78–81.

continued this tradition, highlighting the regional specificities of these locations, contributed to the perpetuation of this view.²⁵⁹ Consequently, representing these regions and their inhabitants required departing from the notion of unending continuity as same. Identification of developments in the production of knowledge and regional representation as learned from many societies becomes essential.

3.3.2 Representation of the Himalayas

Travel to places like the borderlands was regarded as different from ordinary circuits of travel during the “Age of Discoveries.” The idea that big areas connected by well-established routes were considered normal and the borderlands were perceived as discontinuous helped to form the concept of travel itself. The difficulties of crossing unknown geographical and cultural zones are mostly to blame for this feeling of discontinuity. Consequently, understanding and experiencing these borderlands began to focus heavily on travel.

The writing of history that emphasizes ethnic movements has grown significantly in the modern era. This development can be linked to these movements impact on the development of historical narratives. On the other hand, another phrase, in addition to “ethno-history,” has evolved, therefore it is vital to approach this style of history writing with caution. Even if the main ethnic group or groups may have a more prominent role as authors, perhaps becoming another dominating group, it is important to take into account the multicultural aspect of these locations when considering ethnic borderlands. Consider using the idea of a cultural area that includes related ethnic groups and recognizes the agency of the region to examine some areas of the borderland. Ladakh, Lahaul, Spiti, and Kinnaur are Tibetan-influenced regions in the western Himalayas. The bordering areas of Kashmir (Pakistan Occupied Kashmir) are significant borderlands between the

²⁵⁹ Manu Goswami, *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space* (Orient Blackswan, 2004), 192, 193.

Kashmir Valley and the Punjab region and speak different dialects. The terrain plains of Nepal act as a borderland between the mountainous areas of Nepal and the Gangetic plains of India in the central Himalayas, marking a notable discontinuity. As we approach eastern India and the eastern Himalayas, which include areas like Bengal, Assam, and Burma, the situation becomes increasingly complicated. These rural areas stand in contrast to the borderlands that surround them. This region, unlike the western Himalayas, is primarily made up of Tibeto-Burman-speaking communities and consists of several ethnic groups in a state of disarray, thus the problem is not as clear as it might seem. Even though it is a border region, it maintains the idea of a border region through ethnic alliances in which certain tribes acquire supremacy at the expense of others. Similar to pre-modern confronts between various polities, this rivalry can occasionally turn into military warfare and major fights.

3.4 Assam's Borderland: Intersecting Cultures

Finding explanations for the regions formation and its historical roots is now of utmost importance. In this regard, we note that rich valleys with irrigation potential can be found in the plains. These regions have the ability to create excess agricultural goods, which have been successfully used in places like Assam, Tripura, Manipur, and the Burmese plains.

In the eastern Himalayan region, Assam has a broad, uninterrupted area of plains. The Brahmaputra River, which plays a crucial role, has had a considerable impact on the historical evolution of the area. The Brahmaputra originates in Tibet and enters India through Arunachal Pradesh before flowing from the hills into the Assamese plains. It is distinguished from other rivers by its turbulence and frequent flooding. However, this very trait aids in the widespread deposition of alluvium, fostering favorable conditions for extremely fruitful agriculture. The Brahmaputra

River and the surrounding alluvial plains have historically played a significant role in fostering the development of diverse communities in the Assam regions.²⁶⁰

The Ahom dynasty came to power in the 10th century A.D., and by the 12th century A.D., they had made Assam their homeland. The Ahoms mostly settled in the areas that are today known as Jorhat and Sivasagar, on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra River. Soldiers known as Paiks helped establish the Ahom dynasty.²⁶¹ Early Assamese kings followed the Indic model and published Sanskrit inscriptions. Inscriptions and land grants, combined with the creation of coinage and other institutions, indicate the emergence of a governmental entity known historically as Kamrupa in the Brahmaputra valley. The polity itself adheres to the monarchy model that is common in North India, despite the fact that King Baskaravarman is not only a historical figure but also a symbol of the governing Varman dynasty. This is explained by the fact that the Assamese population speaks Indo-Aryan languages.²⁶² Assam not only became a significant political entity but also held a place in the Indian collective imagination, influenced by various myths. In mediaeval India, where they were combined with tales from other areas, these myths were an essential component of the Puranic religion. But in the 12th century A.D., a new population speaking the Thai language came from as far away as the eastern Himalayas. On the strength of their military prowess, they quickly established their political authority in Assam. The Ahom dynasty, as they came to be known, had exceptional success militarizing Assam's northern Brahmaputra valley districts and rapidly expanding agriculture.²⁶³ The potential for considerable surpluses to be produced in the centre part of the Brahmaputra valley's agrarian communities was

²⁶⁰ Rajen Saikia, *Social and Economic History of Assam* (Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2002), 87–88, 96.

²⁶¹ Jahnabi Gogoi, *Agrarian System of Medieval Assam* (Concept Publishing Company, 2002), 29, 124, 126.

²⁶² Mukunda Madhava Sharma, *Inscriptions of Ancient Assam* (Department of Publication, Gauhati University, 1978), 122.

²⁶³ Gogoi, *Agrarian System of Medieval Assam*, 17–24.

completely realized. There were, however, many additional areas nearby that were essentially pastoral and lacked the capacity for extensive irrigation and agricultural excess. These areas consequently became borderlands. Goalpara, is a fine instance of such a borderland.²⁶⁴ The term “Goalpara” is composed of the phrases “Goala,” which denotes a cowherd, and the suffix “para,” which denotes a settlement. This name designates a pastoral area as opposed to an agricultural one. The main agrarian regions, which had a plenty of resources, functioned as the political and economic centre, but they were also the source of the culture. As a result, a borderland was created in terms of topography and production methods. The study of Sanghamitra Misra on the development of borders in Assam is a powerful example of this idea. However, the borders between Assam and Bengal serve as both physical and cultural frontiers, especially in the southern portion, which is characterized by marshlands.²⁶⁵

In addition to the central and southern borderlands of Assam, there are two other noteworthy borderlands that come into consideration. The lowland regions that border the Kingdom of Bhutan are those in the northern section.²⁶⁶ The Bodo tribe, which happens to be the largest tribal group in the entire eastern Himalayan region, makes up the majority of the population in this area.²⁶⁷ The Bodo tribe stands out because, in contrast to other tribes in the area, they are largely a plain tribe rather than a hill tribe. The Bodo tribe used various ways of production, which led to the establishment of unique cultural institutions. The difference in culture and geography can be traced to this. The Ahom chronicles historical records contain the first mentions of the Bodo

²⁶⁴ Sanghamitra Misra, *Becoming a Borderland: The Politics of Space and Identity in Colonial Northeastern India* (Routledge, 2013), 2–4.

²⁶⁵ Richard Maxwell Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*, vol. 17 (Univ of California Press, 1993), 129.

²⁶⁶ Swarna Lata Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam* (Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1985), 2.

²⁶⁷ Baruah, 186,187.

people, which serve as a starting point for their history. These documents largely focus on the contacts between the Bodo and the local chieftaincy.²⁶⁸

There are two key characteristics that must be taken into account when analysing Assam and other polities in the eastern Himalayas. Firstly, the change from non-state to state societies should not be seen as a straight line with definite directions. Contrary to what the Zomia paradigms say, the experiences of several tribal communities and polities, including Tripura, Manipur, and the Chakma's, show successful development towards state society. The use of the phrase "North-East India," which is regarded as an anachronism and essentially a postcolonial invention, is the subject of the second point. However, this phrase has been purposefully omitted from the conversation because of the problem of anachronism.²⁶⁹

Tavernier's accounts offer insightful perspectives into Assam's past and have been extensively utilized in the present rewriting of the history of the area. There are several reasons for the ongoing historical interest in Assam's past, but one important one is the ongoing creation and re-creation of its borders. Rajen Saikia claims that Assam's shape has changed over time due to revised borders in response to political pressure and environmental factors.²⁷⁰ This border revision process involves defining what defines Assam and what exists outside of its borders, making it more than just a geographical exercise. The areas of contention in this exercise include both the borderlands and Assam's central region, which encompasses the Brahmaputra valley. These borderlands include Assam's hills in the northeast and southeast as well as the plains in the north that border Bhutan.

²⁶⁸ Golap Chandra Barua, *Ahom-Buranji, from the Earliest Time to the End of Ahom Rule: With Parallel English Translation* (Spectrum Publications, 1985), 66, 76.

²⁶⁹ Nilika Mehrotra and Lalgoulia, "A Report on" Towards a New Understanding of North East India," *Indian Anthropologist*, 2008, 96.

²⁷⁰ Saikia, *Social and Economic History of Assam*, 12, 13.

Chapter 4

The Historical Geography of Assam as represented in major Travellers' accounts and Indigenous narratives

4.1 The Scope of Historical Geography

Historical geography involves reconstructing geographical aspects of the past, which can greatly aid in understanding a region from a comprehensive and broader standpoint. In addition to providing information on the territory, geography, and physical environment, it also helps locate crucial political, social, cultural, and economic aspects. Historical geography is essential to comprehending how space and time interact in historical situations, because it emphasises the investigation of both spatial and temporal dimensions. Due to the efforts of eminent researchers in recent years, the field has witnessed tremendous development and has transformed into an important discipline. It has been influenced significantly by the methodical investigations and reinterpretations of various travel tales from around the world. The incorporation of new geographical locations, processes, tools, and approaches have made this advancement conspicuous.

In the English-speaking world, the term 'historical geography' has traditionally been associated with particular forms of topographical literature. In more recent times, it has evolved to represent a distinct sub-discipline within academic geography. However, this sub-discipline presents some challenges, and students who enroll in their first historical geography course may find themselves perplexed about how it differs from other courses offered by History or Geography

departments. Historical geography differs from other systematic geographies such as economic, social, political, urban, agricultural, and medical geographies in that it lacks a clearly defined topic of inquiry. This is so because the word ‘history’ itself contains a wide variety of topics that can be researched from multiple perspectives. As a result, academicians who identify themselves as historical geographers concentrate on a wide range of important subjects and use a variety of philosophical and methodological stances, consulting both primary and secondary sources.²⁷¹

D. W. Moodie contends that historical geography is a field where data analysis can be used. The exponential growth in studies, the creation of computer programme and their use as research tools across disciplines, show how important content analysis has become in recent years. It comprises content analysis research from fields like psychology, political science, sociology, communication, history, literature, and music. Despite the fact that the underpinnings of this method can be found in numerous studies investigating patterns within the field of geography, geographers are only beginning to recognize its potential now.²⁷² A sizable number of Western academicians have utilized historical geography to comprehend their country and its location.

The significance of this field is hard to ignore, and it can be successfully employed to study the past and the present eras. The study of historical geography may show how a region, its scenery, and its connection to the populace have changed across time and place. It is a highly efficient and practical tool, since it may be used in transdisciplinary contexts such as environmental history. The multidisciplinary approach of historical geography has further broadened the area. Around the latter half of the 20th century, it began acquiring momentum. The addition of historical materialism is an example of innovative approaches to the topic. The relevance of historical geography can be

²⁷¹ Chris Philo, “History, Geography and the ‘Still Greater Mystery’ of Historical Geography,” *Human Geography: Society, Space and Social Science*, 1994, 252.

²⁷² D.W. Moodie, “Content Analysis: A Method for Historical Geography,” *Area*, 1971, 148.

demonstrated by the large number of compositions that have been published and made available in the form of books and articles. Its use outside of Western scholarship, however, needs to be considered carefully.

Historical geography had evolved into a subject of great significance in the early 1980s and was regarded as a specialized field of study. In this field, historical data was the main subject of research, and a spatial approach was used for its analysis and interpretation. Four distinct developments, though not wholly novel deviations, began to define historical geography significantly during this time. These issues came to light as questions of emphasis and intent as a result of the advancements and breakthroughs that occurred in the middle of the 1970s. Greater emphasis on social theory, the increased importance of historical explanation within human geography, rise in the emphasis on quantification via historical GIS and disease modelling, and stronger connections with disciplines outside of geography in terms of epistemology and theory are the four major developments that influenced the field of historical geography. The study of economic, social, and political factors that influenced geographic developments during this time was conducted by various academicians, including historical geographers. The emergence of Marxist critique and developments in social, economic, and cultural history throughout the 1960s and 1970s, or a combination of both, were major influences in determining the approach to history during this period.²⁷³

4.1.1 The Problem of Historical Geography in Indian History

The Indian subcontinent occupies a unique position within the field of historical geography, serving as an example of both a nation and a region. Although the regional characteristics have

²⁷³ Mona Domosh, Michael Heffernan, and Charles WJ Withers, *The SAGE Handbook of Historical Geography*, vol. 1 (SAGE, 2020), xxxviii.

evolved over time, the national identity remains intact. The boundaries of the Indian subcontinent have changed over the centuries, occasionally widening to include new regions or shrinking when certain regions secede to found their own independent states. This continuous alteration and evolution reflect the dynamic history of the region. The Indian subcontinent has long been a fascinating location for adventure for a wide range of travellers. Local and foreign classical explorers and geographers were among them. They had varied motivations. Some travelled for business purposes, searching opportunities for commerce, while others came for religious reasons, either in search of spiritual knowledge or to spread their religious views.

Insights into the historical geography of the Indian subcontinent is provided by an array of literary works which covers topics including the culture, societal norms, religious diversity, river systems, and weather patterns of the region. Both religious and secular writings can be useful in comprehending the historical geography of the Indian subcontinent. Puranic and Brahmanic books are prominent examples of religious literature, whereas travelogues by foreign travellers who visited the Indian subcontinent are frequently the source of secular literature. Travel narratives from Chinese and Arab explorers who travelled to the Indian subcontinent at different periods have left behind priceless archives. These narratives provide a wealth of material that explores the social and cultural life of the people in addition to religious circumstances. This tradition of travelogue writing was continued by Western explorers, especially those from Europe, who frequently interacted closely with the local populace. Such writings divide the Indian subcontinent into the northern, eastern, western, southern, and central parts, to better comprehend their distinctions.

In addition to literature, epigraphic records also serve as important resources showcasing historical geography. These inscriptions not only mention the names of kings and the gifts they gave, but also describe historical locales. Besides Brahmanic literature written in Sanskrit, other

religious writings such as Buddhist and Jain texts composed in Pali and Prakrit, also illuminate the early historical geography of the subcontinent. Pali literature is perhaps the most important source of information on the geography of India during and after the time of the Buddha. Early Buddhist literature details the history and geography of ancient India from roughly the time of the Buddha until the reign of Ashoka the Great. This is occasionally supplemented by Jain and Brahmanic texts.²⁷⁴

Secular literature providing ample information about the historical geography during the early periods include works from Greek and Roman scholars, Chinese pilgrims, and Muslim travellers. Their narratives offer in-depth perceptions on a variety of aspects of the Indian subcontinent. Megasthenes, who resided in India for an extended period, provides us with highly valuable topographical information. He visited the court of Chandragupta Maurya as an ambassador. Arrain, a renowned historian and the author of an account detailing the Asian expedition of Alexander the Great, also gives a detailed description of India. The work titled “*Indika*”²⁷⁵ is divided into three sections: the first part contains a general portrayal of India based primarily on the accounts provided by Megasthenes and Eratosthenes; the second part recounts the journey made by Nearchos the Cretan from the Indus to the Pasitigris, based largely on the travel narrative penned by Nearchos; and the third part provides substantial evidence to suggest that the southernmost parts of the world were uninhabitable due to extreme isolation. He describes India's dimensions, its rivers, people, and more. Pliny contributes to our understanding of the topography of India through his work “*Natural History*.”²⁷⁶ “*Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*,”²⁷⁷ is a manual

²⁷⁴ Bimala Churn Law, *Historical Geography of Ancient India* (Ess Publications, 1954), 2.

²⁷⁵ John Fletcher Hurst, *Indika: The Country and People of India and Ceylon* (Logos Press, 1992).

²⁷⁶ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History: A Selection*, trans. John Healey, Reprint edition (London, England ; New York, NY, USA: Penguin Classics, 1991).

²⁷⁷ Wilfred H. Schoff, trans., *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea: Travel and Trade in the Indian Ocean by a Merchant of the First Century* (Kessinger Pub, 2007).

that details the trade and commerce operations that took place across the Red Sea and the African coast to the East Indies. Ptolemy's "*Geograph*"²⁷⁸ is a significant piece of literature carrying thorough descriptions of India inside the Ganga valley, and accounts of the numerous nations, cities, towns, rivers, mountains, and hills in the region. The text is divided into eight books. The long tours of northern India by Chinese pilgrims like Fa-Hien and Yuan Chwang offer priceless insights into the history of ancient India. The geographical records provided by Muslim writers have been equally beneficial.²⁷⁹

Undoubtedly, the Indian subcontinent has a rich record of historical geography dating back to the early periods, as clearly demonstrated by both religious and secular literary accounts and the remnants of material culture. Nonetheless, presenting a narrative of historical geography can be challenging if the nation and region are viewed as distinct entities. It becomes difficult to comprehend the Indian subcontinent from the standpoint of a single nation or a single geographical region. Both viewpoints have alternate interpretations; hence, choosing one and ignoring the other would provide only an incomplete picture. The confusing image would also reveal a narrow understanding of the Indian subcontinent.

In the Indian subcontinent, the cultural issue is extremely important. If we consider the subcontinent as a unified nation and disregard its diverse regions, we might overlook the unique cultural adaptations and practices that exist within them. The five geographical divisions of the subcontinent allow us to highlight the many facets of cultural adaptability and strategies. Such adaptations cover a wide variety of traits that differ greatly between areas. Each region has unique characteristics that contribute to its distinctive personality. Therefore, in order to comprehend the

²⁷⁸ Claudius Ptolemy, *Geography of Claudius Ptolemy* (Ingram short title, 2011).

²⁷⁹ Law, *Historical Geography of Ancient India*, 5–6.

historical geography of the Indian subcontinent completely, it is essential to consider both the national and the regional perspectives.

4.1.2 Reconstructing the Historical Geography of Assam

Assam, situated within the eastern part of India's geographical landscape, holds significance as a distinct region with unique features. It is situated within the eastern part of India's geographical landscape. Understanding Assam's longer history, which dates back to ancient times, has proven to be a necessity for those studying historical geography. The state is a case in point for the previously noted concern regarding the applicability of historical geography to understanding the Indian subcontinent. It is vital to adopt a region-centric viewpoint in order to completely understand the historical geography of Assam, where there are numerous regional modifications and variations. We can do justice to the study of the historical geography of Assam only if we concentrate on the unique features of the region.

Both textual sources and physical evidence can be utilized to determine the historical geography of Assam. The travel diaries of visitors and native tales offer novel perspectives and abundant knowledge about the history of the place. In studies of Assam's historical geography, it is important to recognize that the identity of the state is closely intertwined with that of tribal communities. This tribal link is apparent in both literary works and tangible artefacts, highlighting the important role that tribal cultures played in influencing the history of the area.

Due to its geographical features, Assam is a place of richness, with a variety of flora and fauna, hills, and mountains. The fertility of the ground makes it possible to grow a variety of crops, especially rice, and it also supports a diverse system of plants. The dominant presence of River Brahmaputra defines the cultural landscape and also serves as the major source of water. Furthermore, Assam's geographical location permits strategic economic ties with neighbouring

nations. Being a prosperous state, Assam maintains stable relationships with other regions owing to the presence of myriad trade routes and mountain passes. The passes and routes had a significant impact on the cultural and economic dynamics of Assam. First, they made it possible for India to expand its cultural ties with China and conduct business with Central Asia. Secondly, they facilitated the migration of Mongoloid groups, who gradually settled down in Assam. The Ahom dynasty, which ruled the state for six centuries and influenced the course of its history, first arrived in Assam from Thailand in the 13th century AD.²⁸⁰

Historical records found in epigraphical inscriptions from the early period offer valuable insights into the geography and history of Assam. The literary sources that support these epigraphical descriptions include native narratives and the chronicles of pilgrims from China. They serve as comprehensive records of the geographic traits, cultural practices, social norms, religious beliefs, commercial links, and agricultural output of the state .

The traditional approach employed to analyse the inscriptions and literary sources in Assam from the 5th to the 13th century AD mentions a plethora of regional names. The socio-political and economic history of the area has been significantly and visibly influenced by these inscriptions. Thirty- eight inscriptions from this period have been found, with twenty- three of them being records of land transfers to Brahmins, and the others including short stone image inscriptions, engraved clay seals, royal notes in the form of stone inscriptions, and stone pillar inscriptions. They provide important information such as sixteen place names from outside early Assam, twenty names of rivers and streams, one hundred names of administrative divisions and land plots, and thirteen sacred geographical names. In order to examine the construction of political and social frameworks, the Sanskritization process, and other subjects, it is essential to locate the

²⁸⁰ Birinchi Kumar Barua and H. V. Sreenivasa Murthy, *Temples and Legends of Assam* (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1965), 5.

nomenclature of these areas. However, most of these names are yet to be identified and their locations have not been accurately established.²⁸¹

The historical geography of Assam can be traced back to the pre-Ahom period. The name 'Assam' itself is relatively recent, and in earlier times, the region was referred to as Pragjyotisha and Kamarupa. Both these names were used to refer to the area, with Pragjyotisha being the earliest name and Kamarupa acquiring connotations later. The origins of these names have been the subject of numerous academic investigations. The general consensus is that they may have been connected to astronomy and, in their own special way, denoted the sacredness of the land. Ancient literary works like the “*Ramayana*” and the “*Mahabharata*” contain references to Pragjyotisha and Kamarupa, although the term Assam did not appear until much later. Scholars have propounded various theories about the origin of the name; however, it is evident that it did not exist during the time before Ahom. Mythology is significant to studies of the historical geography of Assam, and it offers diverse theories explaining the origins of Pragjyotisha and Kamarupa.

In both epigraphical records and literature, the name Pragjyotisha appears in connection with Lauhatiya, Kamarupa, and Kamakhya. It has ties to every monarch of the time, beginning with Naraka-Bhagadutta. Since the word refers to both a city and a country, it is difficult to locate its etymology. It seems to be a Sanskritized variant with non-Aryan roots. One theory holds that a group of people called the Chao Theius from China settled down in India, occupying three important centers, and adopted the name Zuthis. The branch that established itself in Assam was known as the Prag Zuthis, which later changed to Pragjyotisha. There are uncertainties regarding the ethnological explanation. B. K. Kakati, drawing on an Austric word that refers to a location with many hills, suggests a relationship between ‘Pragjyotisha’ and the physical characteristics of

²⁸¹ Rabindra Das, “A Short Account of the Historical Geography of Early Assam,” *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 19, no. 4 (2014): 143–44.

the area. The Sankhyayana Grhyasamgraha mentions the word ‘Pragjyotisha’, which is presented as a sacred nation connected to solar worship, although there is no ancient precedent for the name. The “*Ramayana*” also claims that Amurutaraja, an Aryan chief, founded it. References to the involvement of Pragjyotisha with solar worship and planetary ceremonies lend credence to the assumption that it is a location connected to Eastern astrology. Archaeological remains, including the Surya Pahar in Goalpara and the Navagraha temple in Guwahati, further buttress the assumption that Pragjyotisha was involved in sun worship.²⁸²

In ancient India, Pragjyotishpur might have been an established centre for astrology or research in astronomy. It is still unknown if this information comes from pre-Aryan or Aryan traditions. The Navagraha temple contributes to the significance of Pragjyotishpur in astrological practices. It is currently run by qualified astrologers called Daibagnas or Graha-Bipras. Edward Gait highlights the interesting connection between the name Pragjyotishpur and the region's reputation as a land associated with magic and incantations. Moreover, there is a belief that Assam was the birthplace of Tantric Hinduism. Despite Kamarupa's alleged associations with magic, sorcery, and its prominence as the initial centre of Tantric Hinduism, there is no clear relationship between the names Pragjyotishpur and the Navagraha temple. The Kamakhya temple, located west of Guwahati, was probably involved in tantric rituals or magical rites. It is commonly accepted that pre-Aryan practices are at the root of *yonis* and *linga* worship in Tantric Hinduism.²⁸³ Tantrism and accompanying practices are frequently associated with Assam. Due to the close ties of the region with tantric traditions, scholars have portrayed it as a place infamous for witchcraft and black magic. This characterization of Assam has been heavily influenced by historical geography.

²⁸² Pratap Chandra Choudhury, *The History of Civilisation of the People of Assam to the Twelfth Century A.D.* (Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies in Assam, 1966), 28–29.

²⁸³ Kanaklal Barua, *Early History of Kamarupa: From the Earliest Times to the End of the Sixteenth Century* (B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2020), 14–15.

The Kamakhya temple, a significant Shakti Peetha close to Guwahati, also stands testimony to such depictions. This relationship is made more legitimate by the fact that key tantric works like the *Yogini Tantra* and the *Kalika Purana* were created in or near Assam. The origin myth of Kamakhya and its status as the primary Shakti Peetha find mention in both the *Kalika Purana* and the *Yogini Tantra*. Since ancient times, the local populace has held Kamakhya in the highest regard as a *yonī* deity. Although features of the temple building may have undergone transformations over time, it has always been associated with the *yonī* deity and mother goddess. This specific way of identifying the land endures and has become quite significant today. Therefore, it may be said that the historical geography of Assam and the local religious culture are closely related.

4.1.3 Reconstructing the Historical Geography of Assam through Religious Maps

Religion and historical geography have a complex relationship, and when they function in tandem with each other, it becomes possible to obtain a comprehensive understanding of specific regions. The two factors should function harmoniously and not in opposition to each other. The religious practices, rites and rituals of various societies can be utilized to interpret the landscape. These factors were often ignored in the past. However, more recent literature incorporates these ideas, adding fresh perspective on geographically significant locations.

Initially, researchers focused only on the realm of Biblical geography, but as time went on, the field of study substantially broadened and developed. The difference between ‘religious geography’ and ‘geography of religion’ has been highlighted by researchers. This distinction has led to the expansion of the field, encouraging academic contributions to the domain. In recent research, ‘religious geography’ and ‘geography of religion’ have been accepted as two separate methods. The first concept, ‘religious geography’, investigates how religion influences people’s understanding of the world, their place within it, and how theological and cosmological views

shape their comprehension of the universe. However, 'geography of religion' focuses more on the multifarious ways in which religion is expressed, rather than on specific religious ideas. It examines the social, cultural, and environmental aspects of religion and views it as a human institution. Geographical research had mostly employed the 'geography of religion' approach. The discovery that all the major religions of the world originated in a relatively small region, often referred to as Southwestern and Southern Asia, has been significant to the geographical study of religions.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, attempts to explain such remarkable geographic phenomena mainly relied on the idea of environmental determinism, which refers to the explanatory approach that assumes that environmental factors dominantly influence or direct human behavior.²⁸⁴ In Assam, religious mapping and historical geography are deeply intertwined and their relationship displays a clear pattern. Witchcraft and black magic have always been associated with the region, marking it as unique. Such labelling is not accidental; rather, it is a deliberate conception based on the local religious context. The unique narrative of Assam is shaped by several factors, including the enduring presence of the tantric tradition, the continuation of the Sati myth in popular culture, the significance of Kamakhya as the primary Shakti Peetha, the Kesi Khati temple in Sadiya known for its history of human sacrifice, and Mayong in Morigaon district, renowned as the land of black magic. It has also been influenced by writings like the *Yogini Tantra*, *Kamaratna Tantra*, and *Kalika Purana*.

²⁸⁴ Chris Park, "Religion and Geography". Chapter 17 in Hinnells, J.(Ed) *Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, 2004, 4–8.

4.1.4 Reconstructing Assam through *Kalika Purana* and *Yogini Tantra*

The “*Kalika Purana*” and the “*Yogini Tantra*” are two prominent texts associated with the tantric tradition in India. According to certain estimations, the *Kalika Purana* was written in or near the Kamrupa region in the 9th or 10th century A.D.²⁸⁵ The *Yogini Tantra*, on the other hand, is a collection that was supposedly put together no earlier than the 16th century A.D.²⁸⁶ Although they were written during different periods, both contain tales about the Kamakhya temple and tantric practices. These books were originally written in Sanskrit, but they have been translated into English and numerous regional languages.

The *Kalika Purana* and *Yogini Tantra* both intended to convey geographical knowledge largely through the prism of topography, similar to other books of its quality. These writings contain information about the region in concern as well as provide helpful insights into how regional boundaries are drawn. It is necessary to consider specific details regarding the *Kalika Purana* and the *Yogini Tantra*, and acknowledge their significance to Hinduism. Claims regarding the authorship, patronage, place and period of origin, and the precise location of composition of these works are ambiguous. These uncertainties occasionally present difficulties. According to experts, there are variations in the genesis myth of Kamakhya and the Naraka episode in the two versions of the *Kalika Purana*. They also point out that there was a gap of about three centuries between the composition of the two versions. Despite such differences, these works remain central to comprehending Assam.

²⁸⁵ R.C.Hazra, *Studies in The Upapuranas, Vol.2, Year 1963* (Generic, 1963), 280–81.

²⁸⁶ Heramba Kanta Barpujari, *The Comprehensive History of Assam: From the Pre-Historic Times to the Twelfth Century AD*, vol. 1 (Publication Board, Assam, 1990), 45.

Some academics have drawn attention to the fact that there are two copies of the *Kalika Purana*, each having a unique account of the tantric tradition. According to R.C. Hazra, an earlier version that was written in Bengal around the 7th century was free of tantric influences. He asserts that the latter version, which was written sometime between the 10th and the 13th centuries, greatly diverged from the previous one. However, the later version, which gives a thorough explanation of the worship and rituals connected with Kamakhya according to tantric practices, is usually the major object of study.²⁸⁷ The *Kalika Purana* text has been reinterpreted in light of Hazra's argument.

As in the case of the *Kalika Purana*, the *Yogini Tantra* also lacks clarity regarding authorship, patronage, and the exact time frame of its composition. However, according to scholarly speculations, it may have been written in or near Assam during the 16th century. Despite these uncertainties, both texts hold significance in the realm of tantric tradition and the worship of Kamakhya. The *Kalika Purana* describes the origin of Kamakhya as the outcome of Sati's sacrifice, Shiva's wrath, and her body parts transforming into Shakti Pithas. The *Yogini Tantra*, on the other hand, explains how Kamakhya came into being as a result of Kali's terrible meeting with the demon Kesi, the helplessness of Brahma and Vishnu, and Kali's ultimate forgiving. Besides, the *Yogini Tantra* depicts Kamakhya as being under a curse²⁸⁸ and the *Kalika Purana* attributes the curse to Naraka.

Kakati elaborated upon the relevance and acceptability of the different versions in the two texts and the altered understanding they created. The change in perception was a result not only of a gap in the period of composition of the texts, but also because of a distinct change in the religious

²⁸⁷ Nilam Kakati, "A Comparative Analysis of the Origin Myth in Kalika Purana and Yogini Tantra", *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Educational Research* Vol: 9, (2020) Issue: 7, pp 105

²⁸⁸ Ibid, pp 107, 109

setting of Assam. The *Yogini Tantra* highlights the significance of Brahma, Vishnu, and Kali while the *Kalika Purana* places more importance on Sati and Shiva. While Kali is seen as a form of Devi in the *Kalika Purana*, she is depicted as the main deity in the *Yogini Tantra*. Vaishnavism appears to have had an influence on the alternative version provided in the *Yogini Tantra*, which downplays the roles of Sati and Shiva by emphasizing Vaishnavite gods such as Brahma and Vishnu. It is possible to have an understanding of the *Yogini Tantra* as a tantric text that connects with Kamakhya and the tantric tradition. However, it does not completely discard the influence of Vaishnava practices, which held prominence during the time of its creation. This effect can be seen in the text revisions that were made to adapt to the dominant religious setting.²⁸⁹

The descriptions of Assam given in the *Kalika Purana* and the *Yogini Tantra* also differ from each other. However, the geographical descriptions are not completely divergent, despite their apparent variance. Both writings offer vital information about the regional borders, which is significant to any kind of academic inquiry into Assam. Notably, the Kiratas, who are believed to be of tribal origin, are mentioned in both texts. They were part of a tribal kingdom that was subjugated by Naraka. The native Kiratas of Pragjyotisa were Saiva devotees prior to the arrival of Naraka. However, a sizeable population also practiced Shakti worship. For Kiratas who adhered to the religion, the mother goddess or Devi Kamakhya, who took the shape of the *yoni* and symbolized Shakti or the female procreative energy, was an object of reverence.²⁹⁰

The *Kalika Purana* provides detailed descriptions of the process of adoration for Kamakhya Devi. It presents a list of sixteen offerings to Devi. The first item mentioned is a seat, which can be made of flowers, wood, cloth, or hide. Each type of seat is meant for a specific purpose and they differ from one another. The measurements of these seats are also specified. The

²⁸⁹ Ibid, Pp 109

²⁹⁰ Girish P Singh, *Researches into the History and Civilization of the Kirātas* (Gyan Publishing House, 2008), 279.

text also lists the several kinds of attire, decorations, flowers, and fruits that may be presented to the goddess. After the Devi is worshipped through mantras, she can accept four different kinds of textiles: *karpasa* (cotton), *kambala* (woollen), *balka* (birch tree cloth), and *kauseya* (silk from cocoons).²⁹¹

The variations in the geographical descriptions of Kamarupa found in the *Kalika Purana* and the *Yogini Tantra* can be attributed to two factors – the substantial time gap between the composition of the two documents, and Kamrupa's regional expansion during the Ahom era. Radical cultural, political, and geographical changes occurred during the pre-Ahom and Ahom periods, which helped shape Assam's medieval era. The modified accounts of important events such as the tale of Kamakhya's origin and the Naraka episode mentioned in both the *Kalika Purana* and the *Yogini Tantra*, can be attributed to such transformations in the social order.

4.2 Political History of Assam till the Arrival of the Ahoms

The pre-Ahom period in Assam does not yield an abundance of sources, which poses a challenge for scholars attempting to decipher the historiography of the period. Nevertheless, a few significant inscriptional sources, tangible proofs, and mention of Pragjyotisha and Kamarupa in works of literature such as the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, and the *Puranas*, as well as in numerous foreign accounts, have helped mitigate the issue to a large extent. These materials are employed by researchers to map Assam's pre-Ahom era. Mahiranga Danava, a non-Aryan, was the first king to be identified in the history of Kamarupa or Pragjyotisha, as it was known in earlier times.²⁹² This non-Aryan country endured for a while before the king was deposed by a ruler called Naraka.

²⁹¹ Biswanarayan Shastri and Surendra Pratap, eds., *The Kālikāpurāṇā: Text, Introduction and Translation in English Verse with Shloka Index*, 2nd ed (Delhi, India: Nag Publishers, 2008), 1046.

²⁹² K. L. Barua, *Early History of Kamarupa: From the Earliest Times to the End of the Sixteenth Century* (LBS Publications, 2020), 26.

Historical chronicles are ambiguous regarding the status of Naraka in ancient Assam. His exact roots are not well-recorded, although he is believed to be of non-Aryan ancestry. The birth of Naraka is the subject of several myths. Attempts by scholars to identify his origin have resulted in competing explanations. Naraka, in the opinion of N.N. Vasu and K.L. Barua, is of Dravidian descent. However, P.C. Choudhury suggests that he was of Alpine origin. The last Naraka, according to Choudhury, was known as an *asura* because he adopted non-Aryan practices and displayed a propensity for Buddhism. The relationship between Naraka and Banasura, a non-Aryan king who ruled Sonitpur, lends credibility to this argument.²⁹³

According to the mytho-historical tale mentioned in the *Kalika Purana*, King Naraka, a complicated, semi-divine, and tragic figure, initially captured Kamarupa. He entered the kingdom on the orders of Lord Vishnu and displaced the native Kiratas. Thereafter, he established several Brahmin households whose members were well-versed in the Vedas and the Shastras.²⁹⁴ The origin and legacy of Naraka are shrouded in ambiguity, but his arrival is often considered to have inaugurated Assamese historiography. However, the Varman dynasty is considered the first historical dynasty and its last king Bhaskarvarman, the greatest ruler of ancient Assam. The reign of Bhaskarvarman is quite significant to the study of the period. His association with Harsha Vardhana of the Vardhana dynasty and the visit of the Chinese pilgrim Hieun Tsang to Kamarupa during his reign are well documented. His reverence for Buddhism and the presence of the said religion in Assam during the ancient period are established historical facts. The Varman dynasty was succeeded by the Salastambha and the Pala dynasties.

²⁹³ Swarna Lata Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam* (Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1985), 80–81.

²⁹⁴ Hugh B Urban, *The Power of Tantra: Religion, Sexuality and the Politics of South Asian Studies* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009), 45.

The political history of Assam is said to have begun with the Varman dynasty, which Pushyavarman established in the 4th century CE. He lived during the reign of King Samudragupta (350-380 CE) of the Gupta dynasty. The last ruler of the Varman dynasty, who was also the most renowned, was Kumar Bhaskarvarman (594-650 CE), a monarch who lived during Harshavardhana's reign. Due to his bachelor status (*Kumar*), he did not have heirs and the Salastambhas founded a new dynasty which ruled from the 7th to the 10th centuries CE. Subsequently, the Pala dynasty, established by Brahmapala, came into power and ruled from the 10th to the 12th century CE.²⁹⁵ The Pala dynasty ruled successfully till the middle of the 12th century; however, their gradual decline provided a necessary opportunity for other kingdoms to grow and expand. Following the decline of the Pala dynasty, several significant kingdoms emerged in mediaeval Assam, including the Chutiyas, Kacharis, Marans, Barahis, and the Koch kingdom, most of which were of Mongoloid descent. The Sisi River, a branch of the Suvansiri River, the Brahmakunda, the hills, and the Burhi Dihing River formed the western, eastern, northern, and southern borders of the Chutiya Kingdom. The modern-day North Cachar district was part of the Kachari kingdom, which stretched from the Dikhou River in the east to the Kapili River in the west. In the eastern portion of the Brahmaputra valley, the Marans and Barahis established their independent or partially autonomous realms.²⁹⁶

The expansion of the geographical region of ancient Assam did not commence with the first ruler of the historical dynasty. It began only in the 6th century CE. The precise extent of the geographical region can be determined with the help of epigraphical records of the period. Pushyavarman's creation of the Varman dynasty in the latter half of the 4th century AD marked the beginning of the political history of Assam. Information about this period comes mostly from

²⁹⁵ Rena Laisram, *Religion in Early Assam: An Archaeological History* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019), 5.

²⁹⁶ Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, 182,186,192.

historical sources like inscriptions and literature. From the time of its founding until the reign of Narayanvarman (around 518 AD), the territorial organization of Pragjyotisa was in an impoverished state. Existing historical documents do not mention any territorial inclusion or secession at this time, nor do they include names of administrative historical divisions and subdivisions. As a result, the effects of political developments were felt only in a very small area in lower Assam (the undivided districts of Kamrup and Goalpara). During the reign of Bhutivarman in the first half of the 6th century AD, the state of Pragjyotisha experienced an expansion of its boundaries towards the east and the south. The Nidhanpur CP inscription refers to the gift of land in Sylhet, an uninhabited region in modern-day northern Bangladesh that may have been governed by minor chieftains and non-state territories. Bhaskaravarman established his rule over this area in the first part of the 7th century AD, bringing it under his direct control and expanding his power over a sizeable portion of North Bengal, including Karnasuvarna.²⁹⁷

4.2.1 The Advent of the Ahoms and the re-drawing of Political boundaries

The arrival of the Ahoms, who settled down in Assam and established a durable dynasty there, is a significant event in the historiography of mediaeval Assam. The dynasty ruled the state for over six centuries. Although a slight discontinuity occurred when the Mughals disrupted their rule, the invaders were successfully repelled. The rule of the Ahoms is significant for a number of reasons. The cultural, social, religious and political settings were altered during their rule, and political boundaries were re-drawn. However, it is vital to keep in mind that the Ahoms were not the only dynasty ruling Assam during the mediaeval period.

²⁹⁷ Nirode Boruah, "Geopolitical Movements, Power Centres and the States: Mapping the Ruling Dynasties of Ancient Assam," vol. 71 (Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, JSTOR, 2010), 121.

The Ahoms migrated to the Brahmaputra valley in the 13th century from Southeast Asia. They settled in the Brahmaputra valley, established matrimonial alliances with the indigenous population, learned their way of life, taught them agricultural techniques and in return, attempted to adopt indigenous traditions. They had their own religious practices and spoke the Tai- Ahom language. When they decided to settle in the Brahmaputra Valley, they attempted to establish an amicable relationship rooted in mutual understanding, instead of using brute force to gain power. Although many scholars have attempted to decipher the legend of their origin, it still remains vague and mythical. After settling in Assam, the Ahoms intermingled and they were 'Hinduized'. Sukapha was the first ruler of the Ahom dynasty which continued to rule Assam till 1826, when the Treaty of Yandaboo was signed with the East India Company. One of the major contributions of the Ahoms was the practice of composing dynastic chronicles known as *Buranjis*. The *Buranjis* engage deeply with the political and economic situation of the period, and in a lesser degree with the social setting, thus serving as vital primary sources of information on mediaeval Assam.

Both the geographical and political boundaries of Assam were redrawn during the period of the Ahoms. This became possible as a result of the expansion of the dynasty, particularly during the reign of the successors of Sukapha. Sukapha's successor Suteupha ruled for about fourteen years. During his reign, the kingdom extended to the west as far as the Dikhow River. After Suteupha, his son Subinpha ascended the throne in 1291 AD. The custom of sending men to state officials in exchange for payment was first practiced under Subinpha's administration. During the reign of Sukhangpha, Subinpha's successor (1293–1322), the dynasty witnessed rapid growth in power. The Ahoms made their influence and presence felt as far west as Kamata. Chronicles state that the Kamata ruler, presumably Pratapdhvaj (1305-1325 AD), established an alliance with the Ahom king by marrying Rajani, the latter's daughter. Numerous wars between the two powers

ensued in the succeeding years as a result of the Chutiyas' resistance to the growing dominance of the Ahoms.²⁹⁸

The Ahoms were successful in expanding and redrawing the boundaries of mediaeval Assam through strategic amalgamation with the indigenous population in the initial stages of their settlement. It is only later that they adopted the policy of conflict, annexation and violence against neighbouring regions. Matrimonial alliances also contributed to regional and geographical expansion during the Ahom period. Three significant factors aided the expansion of territorial boundaries and also provided a firm base for the dynasty – the initiation of *Buranji* writing, the establishment of the Paik system and the adoption of the policy of agricultural expansion. The central role played by *Buranjis* in formulating the historiography of the Ahom period cannot be overlooked. The Paik system laid the foundations for social functioning and distribution of land. The policy of agricultural expansion stabilized economic demands and made mediaeval Assam a self-sufficient region.

The duty of paiks (a form of military servitude) and their gaa mati (cultivable lands) in Assam was to assure the remuneration of government officials, favored individuals and retainers, and the maintenance of religious institutions. The distribution of land to those who would benefit from it was made possible through this system. The *khets* (*khats*), which were lands restored from abandoned areas using slave labour, were added to the estates of the native gentry. The gentry received these estates as gifts, and their families retained them as hereditary property.²⁹⁹ From the very beginning, the Ahom monarchs followed the policy of expanding agriculture by opening new

²⁹⁸ Jahnabi Gogoi, *Agrarian System of Medieval Assam* (Concept Publishing Company, 2002), 27,28.

²⁹⁹ Uma Nath Gohain, *Assam under the Ahoms* (U.N. Gohain, 1942), 117.

territories, raising fields, constructing embankments to protect cultivated fields from floods, and, most all, by gathering and involving every adult male in agricultural endeavors.³⁰⁰

4.2.2 Ahom *Buranjis* as Historical Sources for the Study of Medieval Assam

The Ahoms made a significant contribution towards the historiography of mediaeval Assam by initiating the process of writing *Buranjis*. *Buranjis* were the official chronicles patronized by the royal class, to record and maintain an account of significant events in the history of the dynasty, along with issues pertaining to economy, politics and society. Although a few religious matters were also recorded, they did not occupy much space in the chronicles. Overall, the *Buranjis* provided a comprehensive view of the state of affairs during the Ahom period. They were composed in the Tai Ahom language. The government made special appointments to compose *Buranjis* and it was considered a vital responsibility and duty of the kings.

The *Buranjis* portray the Ahom rulers as the highest authority in the state. Various epithets were applied to describe them. The Ahom community in pre-colonial Assam is not expressly mentioned in the chronicles which constitute a major part of Assamese historical literature. The word 'Ahom' appears very infrequently in these works. The geographic location of the Ahom kingdom is similarly not specified in the *Buranjis*; it is merely referred to as the *swargadeo's* (heavenly king's) territory. Today, the Ahom community reveres the *swargadeo* as their hero and royal ancestor, and they trace their lineage back to the first *swargadeo*, Sukapha, who they regard as both a human being and a deity. Sukapha's tale involved migration from Upper Burma to Upper Assam and has its origins there. Through myths, tales, relatable heroes, religious rites, and gift and messenger exchanges between royal courts, the early *Buranjis* frequently emphasised the

³⁰⁰ Gogoi, *Agrarian System of Medieval Assam*, 30.

relationship between Upper Burma and Assam. They depicted an all-inclusive, borderless community that spanned and went beyond the Luit valley in the expanding *swargadeo* area. This community encompassed several religious, ethnic, and linguistic groups.³⁰¹

The *Buranjis* as a broad category can be classified into several distinct varieties that engage with particular topics. The two main types are the familial *Buranjis* and the institutional *Buranjis*. Royally approved documents and accounts were utilized to create authorized *Buranjis* meant for official purposes. The family *Buranjis* contained information about the accomplishments of the royal family. The custom of writing *Buranjis* is believed to have commenced with the arrival of the Ahoms from Upper Burma and the southern China region in Northeast India in the 13th century. The monarchies of Koch Behar, Kachari, Jaintia, Manipur, and Tripura utilized the *Buranji* tradition of historical writing, which is distinctive to the area. Although Edward Gait asserted that the *Buranjis* dated back to 568 CE, he regarded them as valid sources from 1228 CE onwards. This gives rise to the question as to whether *Buranji*-style writing existed before the arrival of the Ahoms. According to historians like Yasmin Saikia, *Buranjis* are actually 17th century chronicles that became popular during the period of colonial rule.

In the Tai-Ahom language, the word ‘*Buranjis*’ refers to a repository or granary of information that instructs the uneducated. The phrase is frequently translated as ‘ancient writings. On the orders of the king or other important state officials, these chronicles were mainly inscribed on the bark of Sanchi trees. *Buranjis* were based on periodic reports that military leaders and frontier governors submitted to the court, on diplomatic correspondence with foreign suzerains and allies, on judicial and revenue papers that were sent to the kings and ministers for final approval, and on daily court annals that recorded transactions, significant statements, and events

³⁰¹ Yasmin Saikia, “Religion, Nostalgia, and Memory: Making an Ancient and Recent Tai-Ahom Identity in Assam and Thailand,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 65, no. 1 (2006): 36,37.

that were witnessed by trustworthy people. There were specific *Buranjis*, such as the *Tripura*, *Kachari*, and *Jayantia Buranjis*, devoted to chronicling the interactions of the Ahom kingdom with its neighbours. Ahom interactions with the Mughals were documented in *Padshah Buranjis*, whilst *Kataki Buranjis* concentrated on diplomatic and military contacts. Under the direction of the Likhakar Barua office, scribes created official *Buranjis* based on state papers, diplomatic correspondences, court cases, and other official documents. On the other hand, family *Buranjis* were written by nobles or people under their direct control, occasionally anonymously, and they provided information on the language, customs, institutions, official and judicial processes, social and religious practices, and intricate elements of the state apparatus.³⁰²

4.2.3 Medieval Assamese Currency and Its Circulation

The regional extent of mediaeval Assam can be determined through various accounts and records. The minting, circulation and trading connections in Assam of this period are vital markers of its extent. The region has been a productive zone since antiquity. The land is quite fertile and yields a variety of grains and other produces. During the medieval period, with the arrival and settlement of the Ahoms, the production of certain crops in several areas increased. The Ahoms, with their advanced knowledge of agricultural production, aided the growth in yield.

Besides, there were several other factors that required mediaeval Assam to be self-sufficient. The rulers attempted to maintain amicable relationships with neighbouring regions like Bengal and the valleys with tribal population. The need to sustain these alliances obligated the rulers to be self-reliant. This proved to be a boon for Assam, as it could successfully maintain its growth and production. A few records mention that tribal regions frequently attacked and looted

³⁰² Dwijen Sharma, "Buranji in Northeast India: A 13th Century History Project of Assam.," *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 14, no. 2 (2022): 1.

the foothills of the plain areas. Usually, these attacks were launched with the intention of gathering food and other necessary items like wood, cloth, cattle etc. Since the hilly and densely forested tribal areas were not very fertile, they could not produce much. Hence, they frequently attacked the foothills. However, the Ahoms devised a system called the *Posa* system through which tribal leaders would be paid an annual tax which included food, cloth, cattle, wood etc., and they would refrain from attacking the region. This system was beneficial for both the groups and it persisted for a short period under the administration of the East India Company also. However, to continue the arrangement, the Ahoms had to be self-sufficient.

Trade and commerce during the period were successful. Internal and external trade flourished and found frequent mention in records. Various grains, along with forest produce and animals, were exported to neighbouring regions like Bengal and throughout the Mughal Empire. Luxury items such as silk and muga textiles were vital export goods during the period. Trade links were common with China, Tibet, Burma etc., and ties were established with far off regions like Kabul and Sindh. Both land and water routes were utilized for commercial transactions. Salt was one of the most important goods imported to Assam, as it was not produced in the region. Local markets known as *hat* were established in places where peaceful negotiations could take place. Along with marketplaces, fairs and festivals also functioned as spaces where commercial transactions took place. The government assigned a number of officers to take care of the forest produce, markets, and the duars or hill passes through which goods were transported.

The *Buranjis*, official documents and travellers' accounts detail the trade and commerce relationships that existed in mediaeval Assam. Records were maintained regarding the production of goods, their quality, price and quantity. Comprehensive accounts and records of the transactions aid in mapping the economic setting of the period successfully. Along with records, currency, or

more specifically, the coins used for financial transactions, also serve a significant source of information of medieval Assam. Although the barter system and the use of cowries were not completely discontinued, a substantial number of transactions were carried out through the exchange of currencies. A positive result of the expansion of trade during this period was the minting and circulation of coins, which were used not only at the local level, but also in trade with neighbouring regions.

During the early period of Ahom rule, the economy was self-sustained. External intervention was not allowed in the territory. Though, there were attempts to enlarge the Sultanate's dominance and control in the Northeast after the establishment of Sultanate power in Bengal. But it's important to remember that the Bengal Sultanate did not immediately conquer the Northeast. Instead, they made multiple trips there, establishing connections with the local political organisation, wielding power, and having an effect on the town and its inhabitants. As a result, the Ahoms came into contact with outsiders for the first time and the need for a monetized economy was felt. The Ahom kings realized the importance of coinage around the middle of the 17th century. These silver coins bore the inscription *Svarga Narayan*, which denoted the monarch's recognized reign, and were dated Saka 1570, or 1648 CE. Following the adoption of the 176 grain weight standard, which was comparable to the Mughal silver coins, by the Ahom monarchs, half tankas and quarter denominations were also issued to accommodate lower denominations. However, as copper coins were not available, cowries were frequently used as the smallest unit of money in the area, making daily transactions easier.³⁰³

4.2.4 Relations of the Ahoms with Neighbouring Polities and Regions

³⁰³ Sukhiwinder Kalsi, "Coinage and Currency of the Ahoms and Jaintiapur: Some Reflections on Trade," vol. 66 (Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, JSTOR, 2005), 475.

The humble beginning of the Ahoms, based on amicable relationships with the indigenous population during the initial stages of their settlement, established the foundations of their dynasty. The relationship was further expanded by establishing matrimonial associations with them. It was only gradually that the successors of Sukapha adopted conflict as a form of political expansion.

The Ahom migrants, under the leadership of Sukapha, arrived in upper Assam in 1228 with the goal of establishing a long-term colony. Searching for a suitable location to settle down, they functioned as a self-governing band of armed peasants. They built tiny settlements along the way in key locations like Khamjang and Tipam. After attempting to establish themselves in a number of temporary locations, the majority of the Ahoms finally made their home in the rich Dikhou valley, which today comprises the Sibsagar region. Sukapha initially chose this location because the hill streams were full of silt, making it ideal for farming. The neighbouring Naga Hill range served as a natural defence and made it easier for the migrants to irrigate the hills and conduct slave raids. Iron ore resources and salt wells were also accessible. The original Ahom capital was built on Charaideo, a small hill. Charaideo remained a holy site for the Ahoms until the end of their rule, despite the fact that it was abandoned in 1397 in favour of a new capital at Chargua, and afterwards at Ghargaon in the 16th century. The remains of *tumuli*, which were used to bury departed kings, queens, and significant nobility, can still be seen in the terrain.³⁰⁴

Political expansion, matrimonial alliances and the systematic arrangement of annual tributes with the tribal communities were some of the approaches through which the Ahoms extended and developed their dynasty. The Koch kingdom, along with the Kacharis, was one of the politically prominent and formidable powers of the period. Prior to the British colonization of Assam, the Brahmaputra valley was ruled by three dynasties: The Ahoms, the Kacharis, and the

³⁰⁴ Amalendu Guha, "The Ahom Political System: An Enquiry into the State Formation Process in Medieval Assam (1228-1714)," *Social Scientist*, 1983, 12,13.

Koches. Although the Kacharis and the Koches were native groups, the Ahoms dominated the region for a long period. The two native dynasties, which descended from the local Bodo tribe, are comparable to the Mech, Garo, and Lalungs tribes in the area. The Kacharis and Koches took control over specific regions of the Brahmaputra valley, established royal power, and created efficient administrative frameworks, during different historical periods. Before the Ahoms reached the region drained by the Dhansiri River in the early 13th century, the Kacharis were already ruling there. Their kingdom stretched from the Dikhu River in the east to Kalang in the west, which corresponds to the western portion of present-day Jorhat district and the entire Golaghat district, with Dimapur as its capital. It also covered the North Cachar region. A major battle took place in 1531 as a result of the conflict between the well-established Kacharis and the ascendant Ahoms. After their victory, the Ahoms established power over a part of the Kachari kingdom and looted Dimapur. Later, the Kacharis moved their capital from Maibong, which is in today's North Cachar Hills, to Kashgar, finally settling down in the Cachar plain.³⁰⁵

The relationship of the Ahoms with the indigenous population functioned at various levels. The Ahoms did not attempt to subdue the latter; rather, they were respected and given satisfactory positions. The tribal population of the region was categorized into two types. One was the population residing in the plains, and the other comprised those residing in hilly areas. The Ahoms relationship with the tribes of the plains was very different from that with the hill tribes. While the former was an amicable relationship, the tribes of the hill areas often looted and vandalized the foothills in search of essential commodities for survival and sustenance.

An illustration of the association and harmonious relationship between the Ahoms and the tribal population of the plain areas is the case of the Morans and the Borahis. The Moran and

³⁰⁵ Kamal Rampriti Dikshit and Jutta K Dikshit, *North-East India: Land, People and Economy* (Springer, 2014), 34.

Borahi tribes lived in Assam, which was sparsely populated, but home to a variety of valuable tree species and fauna, including elephants. According to historical reports from Assam, the Morans were skilled in capturing and raising elephants. The Ahom empire was aware of the significance of possessing an elephantry for both household and military purposes, because elephants were necessary for lifting heavy goods and transporting them. With the aid of the Moran tribes, the Ahom state was able to establish a department devoted to hunting, raising, and using elephants to meet this requirement. The Hatichungi guild was a result of this partnership. In addition, the Morans were in charge of delivering a variety of forest goods, including fruits, vegetables, honey, and lac to the state of Ahom.³⁰⁶

The relationship between tribal populations living in the highland areas and the Ahom state was hierarchical, with the latter occupying a higher station. The *posa* system was established by the Ahom administration in order to subjugate these tribes and prevent invasions. The main goal of this system was to safeguard the inhabitants of the Duars or foothill regions from raids and looting by the hill tribes. The *posa* system was established by Swargadeo Pratap Singha, the first Ahom ruler to create a systematic strategy for engaging with the tribes of the highlands. In this system, certain hill tribes obtained particular goods from plains settlements. This kind of engagement and trade between hill tribes and lowland communities involved the exchange of items or commodities. The tribes had to give up their right to conduct raids on the plainsmen in exchange for these products, or *posa*. The Ahom administration imposed harsh penalties for violations of this pact. Swargadeo Pratap Singh gave the Nagas and the Mikirs lands on the plains at the base of the hills, known as Naga Khats, in order to improve relations with them. Naga Khataki was chosen by the Ahom administration to manage these areas. Due to these advantages, the Nagas

³⁰⁶ Jahnabi Gogoi Nath, "Forests, Rivers and Society- A Study in Social Formation in Medieval Assam," vol. 68 (Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, JSTOR, 2007), 464–74, 466

and Mikirs upheld their allegiance to the Ahom kingdom and provided tributes in the form of hill produce. The Ahom administration also gave the Mikirs access to ponds for fishing and agricultural land. In exchange, the Mikirs acknowledged the hegemony of the Ahoms and gave them annual tributes. Through land grants and resource allocation, the Ahom administration sought to control the indigenous communities and ensure their continued allegiance.³⁰⁷

4.2.5 Mughal Encounter with Assam

The Mughal encounter with Assam during the Ahom period and the resistance by Lachit Barphukan was a significant event. The Mughal dynasty established itself as the strongest political power in North India after Babur emerged victorious in the First Battle of Panipat in 1526. Gradually the dynasty under Humayun, Akbar and his successors expanded the territories. It was during the period of Aurangzeb that the Mughal dynasty was at the height of its territorial expansion, bringing the southern regions of the Indian subcontinent under its control. When the Mughal Empire was emerging as a strong political power, the Ahom dynasty was already a durable power in Assam. As a result of the Mughal aspiration for further territorial expansion into the Northeast, there was a political battle between the Mughals and the Ahoms. The conflict is described in the accounts of Mughals, foreign travellers and also in the indigenous chronicles of Assam like the '*Buranjis*.' These records are significant not only because they provide a detailed view of the conflict, but also because they present the historical geography of mediaeval Assam. The region and the social settings of Assam are described in an exotic manner in the Mughal accounts and the accounts of foreign travellers. The account of Shihabuddin Talish, who accompanied the Mughal imperial army, is of particular importance. The account provides a

³⁰⁷ Guptajit Pathak, *Assam's History and Its Graphics* (Mittal Publications, 2008), 104, 105.

comprehensive description of the region of Assam, including the social setting, climatic conditions, the vegetation and wildlife.

The “*Baharistan-i-Ghaybi*,”³⁰⁸ written by Alaud-Din Isfani, also known as Mirza Nathan or Shitab Khan, is one of the most important texts describing the battle between the Mughals and the Ahoms in the 17th century. From 1612 to 1625, Mirza Nathan oversaw the army garrison at Kamrupa as the Faujdar. He was a modern Mughal general who made substantial contributions to several operations in Bengal and Assam under Jahangir's rule. Besides, he took part in the Shahjahanī uprising when he temporarily occupied Bengal. Since Mirza Nathan employed the pseudonym Ghaybi, which means ‘invisible’, the work is also known as “*Baharistan-i-Ghaybi*.” This report detailed the encounters of soldiers during the Mughal invasion of Assam and the eastern part of Hindustan. It highlighted the difficulties the Mughals encountered during their incursions into the area and provided insights on the Mughal-Ahom conflict.

The “*Fateha-e-Ibreyā* or *Tarikh-e-Aashaam*,”³⁰⁹ authored by Shihabuddin Talish, was another important chronicle that described the political environment of the Ahom and Koch kingdoms, their interactions with the Mughals, and the social and economic systems in these territories. Talish, also known by the name Ibne Mohammad Wali Ahmed, was a Mansabdar (ranking official) of the small state of Bengal. Between 1661 and 1663, he travelled with Nawab Mir Jumla as he executed the orders of Emperor Aurangzeb to attack Koch Bihar and Assam. Written in just 47 days, the “*Tarikh-e-Aashaam*” provided a vivid account of the Mughal invasion of Assam under Mir Jumla. It described the fierce battles fought between the Mughals and the Ahoms, and the difficulties the Mughal army encountered. Notably, this Persian chronicle stands

³⁰⁸ Government Of Assam, *Baharistan I Ghaybi Vol. I*, 1936, <http://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.279664>.

³⁰⁹ Ahmad Ibn Muhammad Wali Shihab Al-Din Talish, *Tarikh-I Asham: Récit De L'expédition De Mir-Djumlah Au Pays D'assam / Traduit Sur La Version Hindoustani De Huçaini Par Théodore Pavie* (Ulan Press, 2011).

out as one of the earliest works to describe in detail the features of Assam, including its topography, climate, vegetation, animals, dress, food, and crops. Talish meticulously captured the events as they transpired without overstating or understating them. He provided information on Aasham's inhabitants, including the Ahom kings and their civilization, as also geographic details about Aasham (Assam). The design of Ahom royal palaces, including Ghosol Khane, Jharoka, and Heram, was elaborated. In addition to a thorough overview of the military affairs in the area, the '*Tarikh-e-Aashaam*' contained valuable information regarding the strategies and equipment of the Ahoms.³¹⁰

Apart from travellers who accompanied the Mughal imperial army, scholars like Abul Fazal also discussed the social setting of Assam. Their descriptions were based on a prejudiced understanding and knowledge of Assam and hence depicted it as 'bizarre'. A historical text from the Mughal era called the "*Ain-i-Akbari*"³¹¹ mentions Kamrupa and portrays its residents as attractive and engaged in sorcery. The literature tells strange tales of buildings built from the pillars, walls, and roofs of people compelled by sorcery. Most likely, these tales emphasise strange or paranormal events connected to the building of these structures. The passage also refers to the horrifying practice of cutting open the abdomen of a fully pregnant woman in order to examine the unborn child in an effort to predict the future.

Abul Fazl, the author of "*Ain-i-Akbari*," further noted that the dominions of the Rajah of Asham (Assam) bordered Bengal. He discussed the grandeur of the Rajah and how, upon his passing, his servants who had occupied crucial posts both men and women willingly buried themselves in his grave. This was a variation of the practice of *Sati*, wherein widows commit

³¹⁰ Arnisha Ashraf, "A Critical Overview of the Historical Works of Ahom- Mughal Period, , C 1500-1600," n.d., 4905,4906.

³¹¹ Abū al-Faḍl ibn Mubārak, *The Ain i Akbari* (Institute for the History of Arabic-Islamic Science at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, 1993).

suicide by jumping into the funeral pyres of their deceased husbands. Shihabuddin Talish observed the excavation of these graves at Garhgaon, while Mir Jumla was a witness. According to Talish, eminent senior officers created funeral vaults for the deceased, storing gold and silver utensils, carpets, clothing materials, and food supplies required for several years inside the crypt. The wives and servants of the deceased would be killed and interred there.³¹²

In the 17th century, Frans Jansz van der Heiden published a Dutch travelogue titled “*Vervarelyke Schip-breuk van 'T Oost-Indisch Jacht Ter Schelling*.”³¹³ Heiden, a seaman of the Dutch East India Company, was part of the crew that accompanied Mir Jumla to Assam in 1662 and 1663. The travelogue concentrated on a variety of subjects, including hallucinations, shipwrecks, experiences on a desert island, famines, cannibalism, bad luck, and encounters with unfamiliar areas and people. It contained a first-person narrative of Heiden's travels and the difficulties the group encountered while in Assam. The first edition of the travelogue was printed in Amsterdam in 1675, by the bookseller Johannes van Someren. Later in the same year, a second edition by Willem Kunst was published. This travelogue offered a unique perspective on the experiences and observations of the Dutch sailors during their trip to Assam, and the Dutch stance towards the Mughal-Ahom conflict.³¹⁴

Other foreign travellers from the Mughal court such as Manucci from Italy and Bernier from France also mentioned Assam in their accounts. A substantial part of their work is centered on the period of Mir Jumla's invasion and attack. They described the capital city of Ghargaon and

³¹² M Parwez, “Magical Attributes: Some Glimpses from Medieval India,” *Black Magic, Witchcraft and Occultism: Secret Cultural Practices in India*, 2023, 267, 268.

³¹³ F. J. van der Heiden, *Vervarelyke schip-breuk van't Oost-Indisch jacht ter Schelling, onder het landt van Bengale;- everhalende desselfs verongelukken ... Beneffens een bondige beschrijving der Koningrijken van Arrakan, Bengale, Martavan, Tanassery, &c* (Meuss, Jacob, 1675).

³¹⁴ Paranan Konwar, “Mir Jumla's Invasion of Assam (1662–63), War Experience of a Dutch Sailor Heiden and Translator Glanius,” *Indian Historical Review* 46, no. 1 (2019): 45, 46.

the physical traits of the population of Assam. A common feature of the accounts composed during the time of Mir Jumla's invasion, apart from details of the attack itself, was the portrayal of Assam as a land of 'exotic' practices like sorcery and magic. Travelogues and accounts of people who visited Assam, and even the narratives of those who had never been to the region, projected it as a unique land of commercial significance, with secret and esoteric practices being part of the lives of the people. The accounts of later travellers, especially those of the colonial period, perpetuated such views.

4.3 Colonial Representation of Assam in Travel Accounts

It was with the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 that colonial presence began to be felt in the region of Assam. The East India Company was eager to expand their influence in Assam, as it was a highly productive region. Moreover, the Moamariya conflict with the Ahom dynasty provided a fortunate opportunity to the East India Company to seize power in Assam. During the initial stages, the officers of the Company faced difficulties due to their limited knowledge of the terrain and the language; however, they gradually overcame such hurdles with the help of indigenous influence.

Over time, the Company was successful in establishing various profitable industries in the region such as those of tea, coal and petroleum. The discovery and cultivation of tea in Assam was highly beneficial for the colonizers, since it quickly became the Company's most profitable industry. Tea, especially Assam tea, had an enormous market not only in Britain but also in the rest of Europe. It was a highly sought after luxury item in high demand among the elite sections of the society. Thus, the tea industry in Assam was of particular interest to the Company.

For a substantial period of time, the Company followed the *posa* system instituted by the Ahoms in order to maintain amicable relations with the tribal population of the hilly terrains. This proved beneficial for the colonizers, as violent conflicts with the tribal population could be

avoided, allowing the Company to focus on other issues. The Assam plains had once been under the control of the Ahom monarchs, who also successfully resisted many attempts by the Mughal Empire to subjugate them. Nevertheless, due to internal strife, the Ahom kingdom was unable to defend itself when confronted by an aggressive Burmese power. The Burmese invaders were driven out of Assam only after the military forces of the East India Company intervened in 1825–1826. The main reason for the initial British involvement in the conflict was the need to defend their holdings in the neighbouring Bengal region. As a result, the British finally established power over a major part of what is known as the northeastern region of India today, leading to the annexation of Ahom Assam and surrounding chiefdoms.³¹⁵

A group of Company executives developed interest in the cultural and social features of the area after seizing governmental control over Assam. They conducted academic research to learn more about the region. Sir Edward Gait, renowned for his work on Assam, published as “*A History of Assam*,”³¹⁶ was a prominent scholar in the field. Gait's book, which was first released in 1906 and then revised in 1926, established a legacy and is widely recognized as an authoritative secondary source for historians researching Assam and the northeastern part of India. Academicians from different fields have cited “*A History of Assam*,” in their works and it was established as a text of immense significance during the 20th and 21st centuries. Sir Edward Gait worked for the British government in India as a colonial officer and held a number of posts, including that of Superintendent of the Bengal census operations (under Herbert Risley), Assistant Commissioner of Assam, and eventually, Lieutenant Governor of Bihar and Orissa. His commitment to research is visible in his books and the study pieces he wrote for the “*Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*,” beginning in the 1890s. He is also the author of a number of

³¹⁵ Jayeeta Sharma, *Empire's Garden: Assam and the Making of India* (Duke University Press, 2011), 3.

³¹⁶ Edward Gait, *A History of Assam* (Thacker, Spink & Company, 1906).

significant government documents, including "The Assam Immigration Manual," which was released in 1893.³¹⁷

Colonial travel writings on Assam mostly focused on the exoticism of the area, the cultural practices of the population and the religious systems in and around the northeastern region. Imaginative descriptions and stereotyped narratives also abounded in travel accounts of the colonial period, due to the limited knowledge of the writers and their preconceived notions about the region and its culture.

The development of travel writing in Assam has taken an intriguing course. At first, it consisted of descriptions of European interaction with the area, characterized by a patronizing attitude towards the locals. These tales frequently infantilised, objectified and stereotyped the local subjects. Alongside, the Assamese gentry produced documents that included detailed sketches and beautiful descriptions of the locations and sites in the region. People who lacked the means and resources to physically travel created another category of travel narratives by using their imagination and creativity to describe people and places instead. These travellers provided descriptions based on their individual observations and analyses. Furthermore, there were those who actively and systematically investigated their own selves and their experiences as they came into contact with other subjectivities while travelling, viewing themselves as active knowledge producers and examining the transforming effects of their travels.³¹⁸

The use of the idea of rigidity in constructing 'Otherness' is a crucial component of colonial discourse. In Butler's "*Travels in Assam*," the idea of cultural, historical, and racial differences being fixed and used as a sign of distinction within the discourse of colonialism is also evident.

³¹⁷ Manjeet Baruah, "At the Frontier of Imperial History: Revisiting Edward Gait's *A History of Assam*," *Asian Ethnicity* 18, no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 452.

³¹⁸ Shibashish Purkayastha, "Travelling Identities, Bodies and the Poetics of Difference: Travel Writing in Assamese Literature," *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 12, no. 3 (June 5, 2020): 120.

The development of diverse types of difference, including racial disparities, is necessary for the depiction of the colonial subject in discourse as well as the exercise of colonial power through language.³¹⁹ Stereotyping also plays a key role in colonial discourse. They act as a form of knowledge and identity that fluctuates between what is seen as permanent and familiar and what requires constant reaffirmation with terror.³²⁰ Several instances of stereotyping can be found in John Butler's work. His depictions of several ethnic groups, like the Nagas, Karbis (Mikirs), Kukis, and Assamese, reveal repetitive picture patterns and prejudicial viewpoints. Butler's concentration on gaining economic supremacy as well as his goal to establish and expand the colonial state are also clear throughout his description.³²¹ Butler's "*Travels in Assam*" serves as a collection of his personal impressions and insights derived from his interactions with the local population. This account includes a great deal of geographic information and emphasises the importance of Butler's studied locations and landscapes.

Undoubtedly, Colonial travel accounts depicting Assam are shaped by the perspectives and biases prevalent during the colonial era. They usually emphasise the perceived dominance and control of the colonial powers while demeaning or dehumanising the native population. It is necessary to critically evaluate it is crucial to evaluate colonial travel narratives of Assam while acknowledging their biases and Eurocentric viewpoints in order to get a better understanding of the complex relationship between colonialism, representation, and Assam's history. Such investigation allows for a deeper understanding of the intricate processes at work in Assam throughout the colonial era.

³¹⁹ Padmini Mongia, "Homi Bhabha: The Other Question*," in *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory* (Routledge, 1996), 38.

³²⁰ Mongia, 36.

³²¹ Rajib Handique, "Colonial Ethnography and Understanding the 'Other' Through John Butler's *Travels in Assam*," SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY, November 1, 2018), 2.

Chapter 5

Perspectives of Subject Matter and Its Treatment by European Travellers and Indigenous Sources: A Survey of Select Themes Related to Society, Culture, Economy, and Polity

5.1 The Scope of Travel Writing and European Sojourns to Medieval Assam

Travel writing has transcended its traditional role of merely being a travelogue that describes the geographical aspects of a journey. It has evolved into a multifaceted form that encompasses elements of journalistic reporting, autobiography, anthropological description, biography, and narrative fiction, making it a truly interdisciplinary genre. The emphasis is now on engaging in in-depth conversations about the sociological, cultural, and anthropological facets of the countries visited. It does so by offering a critical analysis from the perspective of an outsider. Travel writing could play a major role in portraying, or even shaping the image of the 'Other', as it provides empirical proof to buttress its assertions.

The quest to discover new lands and people led to an increase in the number of travels, and in the early 1500s, records describing these expeditions began to appear. Richard Hakluyt and Richard Eden's works contributed significantly to the arena of maritime exploration during this time period. Direct accounts by sailors emerged over time, providing vivid and precise descriptions of their maritime journeys. A wide range of European travellers, including traders, explorers,

diplomats, soldiers, and religious missionaries, began travelling the world in the 17th century. They chronicled their contacts and experiences in various forms, including letters, journals, and reports.³²² By the end of the 18th century, both political and personal travel literature had advanced concurrently and in parallel directions. Travel writing continued to develop even during the end of the 19th century, transforming into a unique literary genre. It evolved throughout the 20th century and eventually became a distinct field of study. The closing years of the century witnessed a steady stream of works that attempted to trace the development of travel writing, theorise its character, and probe into key issues like ethics, gender, and identity-related concerns. The 'colonial lens' in travel writing and the East-West difference grew increasingly prominent as the 19th century progressed towards its second half and the colonial conquest of India was almost complete. In recent times, travel has attained significance as an area of inquiry in the humanities and social sciences, leading to an unparalleled surge in academic works centered on travel writing.

Assam, despite its appealing features and advantageous location on the periphery of India, had not received much attention over the years. However, several foreigners were attracted to this area for specific commercial reasons or, in some cases, for adventure. Very few outsiders visited the region and even fewer recorded their experiences. However, accessible records provide a wealth of knowledge that sheds light on the political system, the society, and the economy of the region.

Between the 16th and the 18th centuries, several foreigners traveled to Assam and recorded their experiences. They include Ralph Fitch in 1585, Father Stephen Cacella and Father John Cabral in 1626, Dutch sailor Frans Van der Heiden in 1661, Jean Baptiste Tavernier between 1664 and 1668, François Bernier in the 17th century, Jean Baptiste Chevalier between 1752 and 1765,

³²² Percy Adams, "Travel Literature of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries: A Review of Recent Approaches," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 20, no. 3 (1978): 488–515.

John Peter Wade in 1772, Captain Thomas Welsh in 1792, and Alexander Dow in the 18th century. They contributed to the historical understanding of Assam during this period. The first Englishman to reach in Assam was Ralph Fitch, who is often considered the forerunner of English travellers in India. He undertook a solitary journey to the eastern provinces, sailing down River Ganges, making halts at Allahabad, Banaras, and Patna. From Patna, he proceeded to Tanda (now known as Malda) in North Bengal. In 1856 A.D., he travelled to Kuch Bihar in the north, lived there for a while and later travelled to Assam and Bhutan in the east.

The history of Christianity in Northeast India is widely thought to have begun with the arrival of two Portuguese Jesuit priests, Father Stephen Cacella and Father John Cabral. According to various ecclesiastical and secular historical accounts, they encamped at Hajo and Pandu in Guwahati, on 26 September 1626, while on their way to Tibet and Hooghly. The pair first reached the Portuguese settlement at Hooghly in 1627. It is generally believed that their primary goal was to find a route to Tibet and China. Their journey took them as far as Pandu, located slightly west of Guwahati, which served as the border between the Ahom kingdom and the Mughal territories. Father Cacella described their journeys to Goalpara and Kamrup in Assam in a letter dated 4 October 1627, which provided details of their journey and the beginnings of Christianity in the area.

Frans Jansz van der Heiden (1638-1681), a sailor affiliated with the Dutch East India Company, undertook extensive travels across Northeast India, covering regions such as Bengal and Assam. Contrary to the assumptions of several historians that W. Glanius accompanied Mir Jumla on his expedition to Assam, evidence suggests that Glanius was actually the English translator of Heiden's travelogue. It was Heiden, serving in the role of a conscripted sailor, who journeyed with Mir Jumla to Assam. The expedition to Assam (1662-63), led by Mir Jumla, took

place during the reign of Aurangzeb (1658-1707), the sixth Mughal Emperor, and King Süa-taam-laa (1648-63) of the Ahom kingdom in Assam. In his capacity as a sailor on this expedition, Heiden had the unique opportunity to observe the military engagements, historical developments, geographical features, and cultural atmosphere of Assam during the period. His travelogue provided an engrossing narrative of his experiences. He documented his journey, the wars fought by the Mughal army, and his encounters with different cultures, traditions, socio-economic structures, and religions. His writings offered readers an intimate and first-hand perspective on the regions he traversed.

Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (1603-1689) was a renowned merchant and explorer who lived during the 17th century. He embarked on a business journey to Persia and India between the years 1630 and 1681 AD, making a total of six visits to India. Notably, he also travelled to Assam during his visits. He gained firsthand information about Assam by accompanying Mir Jumla during the confrontations between the Ahoms and the Mughals. Although the exact date of his arrival and information about the Ahom king at the time remain unknown, it can be inferred from Mir Jumla's invasion that he visited Assam between 1662 and 1664, towards the end of the rule of the Ahom dynasty.

Francois Bernier, a French national, was a physician, political thinker, and historian. Like many others, he traveled to the Mughal Empire in search of opportunities. François Bernier accompanied Mir Jumla, the Bengal Governor at the time, during the ongoing war between the Ahoms and the Mughals when he journeyed to Assam. In 1661, the official conquest of Assam began in Dacca. As the Mughal armies advanced victoriously, the Ahom King was compelled to flee. However, the Mughal forces were ultimately unable to progress beyond Gargaon. According to Francois Bernier, Gargaon was abundant in resources, which greatly appealed to the Mughals.

From 1767 to 1778, Jean Baptiste Chevalier was the French Governor of Chandernagore and an ardent advocate of the Company's establishment of French trade in India. He was entrusted with a crucial expedition to Assam to identify land for the construction of a factory. Therefore, it can be inferred that Chevalier's primary purpose in visiting Assam was to strengthen commercial ties with the northeastern region of India. His travel account should be read within this specific context.

From 1760 to 1779 A.D., Colonel Alexander Dow, a military officer, resided in India. He was one of the early English historians whose account of Assam aligns with the information recorded in the Buranjis, which were historical chronicles originating from the region.

Dr. John Peter Wade, a surgeon, was a member of Captain Welsh's expedition to Assam in 1792 A.D. Prior to this mission, he had served in various locations including Berhampur, Calcutta, Chunar, Banaras, and Surat. During the fourteen months he spent in Assam, he demonstrated strong interest in exploring the cultural heritage of the region. Actively gathering information on Assam's geography and history, he used this data as the source material to write two books on these subjects, undertaking his work with scientific rigour. In addition to this, he published numerous medical treatises.

Lord Cornwallis dispatched Captain Thomas Welsh, a British military officer, from Calcutta with the objective of suppressing a rebellion in Assam and restoring Gaurinath Singh to the throne. Welsh arrived in Goalpara on 8 November 1792. He successfully defeated the Moamariya and other rebel leaders, and reinstated King Gaurinath Singh as the ruler. Having accomplished his mission, he returned to Bengal in July 1794. In accordance with instructions from the Honourable Governor General in Council, Captain Welsh submitted a report from Assam to Edward Hay, the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, on 6 February 1794. Captain Welsh's

report on Assam remains a highly valuable historical document of the period, as it is based on the firsthand observations of a responsible British officer.

5.1.1 The Polity of Assam: A Reconstruction Based on Travel Writings

Foreign travellers often depicted native kings as morally corrupt and lacking in masculinity.³²³ While the king's power was constrained in various ways, he was subjected to intense scrutiny in the writings of foreigners, since he was the leader of the state. With only a few exceptions like the Jesuit Father Cacella and the English traveller Ralph Fitch who showed some affection for the ruler of Koch Behar, the majority of foreign visitors adopted a critical stance towards the king and the monarchy. Travellers such as the Dutch mercenary soldier Heiden (previously mistaken for Glanius), Mirza Nathan, and Dr. Peter Wade, depicted the king as harsh, reckless and ineffective.³²⁴

Ralph Fitch traveled northwards for 25 days from Bengal to the land of Couche, also known as Quichen. The ruler of this region was a gentile known as Suckel Counse. The extent of his realm was impressive, and it was near Cochin-China, as evidenced by the existence of pepper trade. The main port of this land was Cacchegate. The monarch, according to Jean Baptiste Chevalier, was a dictator who spent his time maintaining his numerous seraglios. He wielded despotic authority over all his subjects, treating them as slaves.³²⁵ While they provided limited information about the inner workings of the royal family, the accounts exhibited an overall tone of criticism and disapproval of royalty. However, there were times when King Rajeswar Singha was

³²³ Stephen H Gregg, *Empire and Identity: An Eighteenth-Century Sourcebook* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005), 12.

³²⁴ Mr Glanius, *A Relation of an Unfortunate Voyage to the Kingdom of Bengala Describing the Deplorable Condition, and Dismal Accidents, Attending Those Therein Concerned: How That After the Loss of Their Ship, They Were Forced to Abide in a Desart, and Barren Island, to Eat Leaves, Toads, Serpents, &c. and Reduced to that Extremity, as to Digg Open Graves, to Feed on Human Bodies* (Henry Bonwick, 1682).

³²⁵ Jean-Baptiste Chevalier, *The Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India, 1752-1765: Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal, and Tibet* (LBS publications, 2008), 187.

able to gain Chevalier's respect by being tenacious and making compelling arguments in favor of the isolationist attitude of the Ahom state.³²⁶ Dr. John Peter Wade's work discussed the brutality of the Ahom ruler and the harsh punishments meted out to wrongdoers, including the removal of the eyeballs of offenders.³²⁷ It was well known that only the king had the power to carry out the death penalty by spilling the culprit's blood.

Despite severe criticism levelled against the king, he emerged as a strong and significant figure in the accounts of foreign travellers. He also occupied a key position in the political system. The king was frequently described as a divine entity who was too honorable to walk on the earth, and hence carried by others.³²⁸ This hypothesis was frequently used by pre-colonial groups in India, where reigning dynasties claimed divine heritage by tracing their origins back to a deity.

The Ahom monarchs were regarded as the representatives of God on Earth and hence had complete control over both governmental and religious matters. In reality, though, the formation of the state and adoption of policies were influenced by a plethora of factors. The hierarchy in the bureaucracy played a significant role in determining the organizational structure of the Ahom government. While contemporary chronicles discuss the autocratic powers of the pre-colonial rulers, they frequently overlook or fail to mention the tyrannical powers held by the nobles and the general populace. However, colonial documents provide insights into this topic.

Amalendu Guha highlights this lacuna in contemporary chronicles and suggests a comparison of these works with the publications on the Ahom political system by John Peter Wade (1800 CE) and Francis Hamilton Buchanan (1808–1809 CE)³²⁹ to bridge the gaps in knowledge.

³²⁶ Chevalier, 42.

³²⁷ John Peter Wade, *An Account of Assam* (R. Sarmah, 1927).

³²⁸ Chevalier, *The Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India, 1752-1765: Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal, and Tibet*, 2008, 38.

³²⁹ Amalendu Guha, *The Ahom Political System: An Enquiry Into the State Formation Process in Medieval Assam, 1228-1714* (Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, 1985), 6.

Dr. Peter Wade joined Captain Welsh's expedition to Assam in 1792-1794 CE and made an additional visit to Assam in 1798. He witnessed the Ahom political system during a challenging period. Wade observed that the kingdom's government was a combination of the monarchy and the aristocracy, distinguished by a highly artificial, methodical, and innovative system that was, despite certain flaws, advantageous in terms of certain aspects.³³⁰

Chevalier's writings also provided similar information. The monarch, according to Chevalier, was only indirectly involved in the affairs of the kingdom and served mostly as a symbolic figurehead. The real power lay with his first and second viziers, who controlled and managed the functioning of the state. Meanwhile, the king led a self-indulgent lifestyle in numerous seraglios, which led to a diminishment in his status and reputation as ruler. The king possessed despotic power over all his subjects, who were effectively treated as his slaves.³³¹ However, the ministers of state wielded immense power over the king and the state administration. Chevalier's connection with the king was established through Soladhara Foucon,³³² whom he identified as the second vizier of the Ahom king. According to Chevalier, the Soladhara Phukan mentioned in his account was the son of the grand vizier.³³³ He also emphasized the significance of a person's ancestry for selection to high-ranking posts in the Ahom government.

Concerning the structure of governance and the authority of the Rajah and numerous chiefs, Captain Welsh asserted that the Ahom state had a dual nature, being both monarchical and aristocratic. The right of conquest gave Siu-ka-pha's successors and his principal allies sovereignty. Welsh depicted the Ahom monarchy, specifically in the paternal line, as being partly

³³⁰ Wade, *An Account of Assam*, 1927, 13.

³³¹ Chevalier, *The Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India, 1752-1765: Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal, and Tibet*, 2008, 187.

³³² Cholahdara Foucon, in charge of international relations, including both political and business issues.

³³³ Chevalier, *The Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India, 1752-1765: Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal, and Tibet*, 2008, 186.

elective and partly hereditary. Due to the equal claim to the throne held by the siblings and cousins of the deceased ruler, succession through inheritance did not necessarily follow the law of birthright.³³⁴

Ramesh Chandra Kalita has expressed reservations regarding Captain Welsh's statement. According to Kalita, Captain Welsh might have thought the succession procedure used during the four earlier reigns of Gaurinath Singha was a general rule. Rudra Singha's four sons—Siba Singha, Pramatta Singha, Rajeswar Singha, and Lakshmi Singha—ruled from 1714 to 1780 CE after Rudra Singha's demise. There were a few similar cases where brothers succeeded the reigning monarch following his death, including those of Sutupha (1364–76 CE), Sutyinpha (1644–48 CE), and Udayaditya Singha (1669–73 CE). However, Kalita contended that these instances were the exception rather than the rule.³³⁵ Besides the monarch, the ruling class also exerted significant influence on the pre-colonial states of Assam. The political scene was significantly shaped by the ministers and bureaucrats. Apart from advising the king on important matters, they often wielded enough influence to oust him if necessary. These influential officials interacted directly with outsiders, including the travellers. With the exception of writers like Chevalier and Welsh who reportedly met the kings, travellers primarily interacted with the officials, who provided insights into the state and its administration.

Captain Welsh emphasized that the Ahom monarchy was partially elective and accorded the nobles considerable power. In other words, the aristocracy possessed the authority to elect and dismiss the king. High-ranking ministers and bureaucrats, including *Burhagohain*, *Bargohain*, *Barpatra Gohain*, *Barbarua*, *Barphukan* and others, exerted immense control over the

³³⁴ Alexander Mackenzie, *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 377–80.

³³⁵ Ramesh Chandra Kalita, *Assam in the Eighteenth Century* (Omsons Publications, 1992), 88.

administration, often using their power to appoint favoured candidates as rulers.³³⁶ It is interesting to note that the nobility served as kingmakers, but never acceded to the throne. The primary criterion for claiming Ahom kingship was being part of the royal lineage from the house of Siuka-pha. As a result, in the Ahom polity, kinship was an essential criterion for kingship. Captain Welsh, in his discussion of the king's powers over material and human resources, asserted that although the king conferred recognition, titles, and positions, he could do so only on the advice of the aristocracy. Furthermore, the monarch did not possess all rights to the land. He had the authority to gift land to people without requiring them to present formal proof of their legal tenure. Although the king owned all unclaimed lands, he had no authority over the people or things that belonged to his subjects.³³⁷

The administration of the Koch kingdom also displayed the effects of Mughal as a result of its geographic and cultural proximity to Bengal. The monarch was the head of state, but he was assisted by a council of ministers known by many names including *karjis*, *patras*, and *amatyas*. The founder of the dynasty, Bishwa Singha, selected twelve of his kinsmen as *karjis*, or military leaders who also functioned as advisors.³³⁸ The position of Raikot, also known as the Chief of the Fortress, was significant in the Koch kingdom, ranking second only to the king. It was often bestowed upon the heir apparent and was associated with ceremonial duties such as holding the royal umbrella during the coronation (hence known as Chatradhari Raja).³³⁹

The Koch kingdom did not always adhere to the law of primogeniture, where the eldest son inherits the throne. The king would often share his power with his brothers. Even at the peak of his power, Naranarayan shared considerable authority with his brother Sukladhawj or Chilarai.

³³⁶ Kalitā, 8–9.

³³⁷ J. Johnstone, *Captain Welsh's Expedition to Assam in 1792, 1793, and 1794*, 1912, 2.

³³⁸ D. Nath, *History of the Koch Kingdom, C. 1515-1615* (Mittal Publications, 1989), 29 and 32.

³³⁹ Nath, 29.

Chilarai's substantial control over the administration was noted by Ralph Fitch, who referred to him as the ruler of the country of Couche in his accounts.³⁴⁰ Overall, the Koch kingdom demonstrated a structure in which the members of the ruling family shared power and, like Chilarai, exerted significant influence on the government. Although the Ahom king was the head of the monarchy in principle, it was clear from travellers' tales that his power and influence were limited. In reality, the king was forced to divide and assign power to a hierarchical aristocracy. In the Ahom state, the concepts of power and authority were flexible. Although the monarch had a claim to absolute authority, in practice, his power was shared among a number of people at different levels.

The extravagant royal processions and court occasions were recorded diligently by Chevalier in his journal. He gave a detailed account of a magnificent procession that included more than 500 special boats belonging to the monarch. A huge number of elephants and sepoys with long spikes were part of the royal entourage. Chevalier admitted that the majesty and splendor surrounding the monarch augmented his estimation of the king's authority and stature substantially, and that this magnificent display of might had had a profound effect on him.³⁴¹ He gave a thorough account of his visit to the Ahom court, which necessitated lengthy negotiations and conversations with the Ahom authorities over the protocol. Interestingly, the Ahoms insisted that Chevalier follow the court customs, which included kneeling before the monarch and paying other forms of homage.³⁴² He was told to remove his shoes before entering the court and that only the monarch and his ministers could use a palanquin or wear a cap. Additionally, he was informed that he was not allowed to bring an armchair to sit alongside the king. Chevalier chose not to follow these

³⁴⁰ Nath, 86.

³⁴¹ Chevalier, *The Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India, 1752-1765: Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal, and Tibet*, 2008, 185–86.

³⁴² Chevalier, 186.

traditions since he thought them to be extremely degrading. He announced that if they would not make allowances in their traditions for a foreigner, someone who did not belong to their land, he would leave and inform his fellow citizens about the rude treatment he was accorded, in his capacity as their representative. He believed that these rituals were demeaning to Europeans and emphasized that in response to such an offensive reception, his countrymen would know how to vent their displeasure.³⁴³ In his statement, Chevalier expressed his disappointment and proudly described how he was able to successfully negotiate with the Ahoms by employing both persuasive and combative strategies. He claimed that he coerced the officials into bending the rules and providing him exceptional privileges like the permission to sit on an armchair in the king's presence. Chevalier boasts that the king himself acknowledged him as the only individual to have ever been granted this honor by the kings of Assam. It is evident that Chevalier exaggerated these claims to enhance his reputation and portray himself as a proud representative of his nation, France.³⁴⁴ The majority of European writings about foreign lands displayed their belief in their ethnic superiority, as also their disdain towards the customs and behaviour of other cultures.

The invasion of Bengal by the Tartars from Assam in 1638 A.D. was documented by Colonel Alexander Dow, a military officer in India. Armed with weapons, they travelled by boat down the Brahmaputra River till its confluence with the Ganges, south of Dacca. They seized many forts while pillaging different Bengali districts in the north. According to Dow, Shah Jahan had been the first Muslim prince to travel to these areas. The Assam King took control of the region between the Ganges at Dacca and the mountains around Assam during the civil wars. His power and wealth made him both a beacon of glory and a target for plunder. The Assamese retreated to the Hajo fortress, which was subsequently surrendered to Mir Jumla, who then proceeded to the

³⁴³ Chevalier, 189.

³⁴⁴ Chevalier, 191–92.

mountains of Assam where he defeated the King of Assam in a major battle and laid siege to his capital, Gargaon.

The state utilised a number of external symbols in addition to the ceremonial act of royal sacrifice in order to reaffirm the power of the monarch and the institution of kingship. The Court, with its elaborate customs, manners, and planned events like regal hunting, sought to imbue the institution of royalty with a divine aura. It is noteworthy that these aspects received prominent mention in the accounts of the travellers we have examined. The Court, where material wealth and luxuriance were used to display the monarch's prestige, is a conspicuous illustration of the king's power. The court, as well as the rituals and grand festivities centered on it, presented a captivating spectacle, that left a lasting impression on both outsiders and on the subjects of the kingdom. Travellers' accounts highlight the presence and influence of the power groups, which acted as pressure groups within the highly hierarchical pre-colonial states. Since the king was often not directly accessible, the travellers had to engage with these power groups which wielded significant influence in the political landscape.

5.1.2 The Architecture of Assam: A Comparative Study of the Landscape

Chevalier provided a stunning portrayal of the grand audience hall of the palace. Elephants, cavalry, cannons, and soldiers kept guard in numerous heavily guarded courtyards leading to the palace. The actual audience hall was a large area supported by numerous wooden columns inlaid with elaborately carved figures made of gold, silver, and ivory. The ceilings were made of boards covered in gold sheets laid out carefully, creating the impression of a continuous golden expanse. The walls were decorated with wooden objects. Chevalier observed that the splendor of the palace stood in stark contrast to the lowly, thatched roof covering the building. He was told that that the

rudimentary material was chosen for the roof, since stone roofs were ineffectual due to frequent earthquakes. Despite this realization, Chevalier was awed by the extravagant design of the golden chamber on which a huge sum of money might have been spent. It was said that various monarchs had spent a large percentage of their wealth to construct this magnificent room.³⁴⁵

Chevalier also discussed the architecture of the houses in the region, noting their resistance to earthquakes. However, he was surprised to see houses which were essentially rooms covered with ordinary straw. He presumed that this design was adopted in order to combat the vulnerability of the area to earthquakes. In contrast, the real reason for these two types of constructions is tied to economic factors. In this instance, Chevalier's observations were somewhat misguided. He proceeded to say that considering the amount of gold used, the audience hall of the palace might have been extremely expensive. The room was the product of the labour of several monarchs, each of whom contributed immensely to its construction.³⁴⁶

Weissalisa's account portrayed the splendor of the palace adorned with abundant gold and silver. The pillars were embellished with intricate serpent motifs crafted in shimmering silver.³⁴⁷ From his meticulous analysis of the seating arrangement in the audience hall, it becomes evident that in a medieval monarchy such as that of the Ahoms, an individual's status and authority were established and displayed through her/his position and proximity to the throne.

5.1.3 The Society of Assam as Represented in Travel Writings

Assam, a vibrant state in northeastern India, is known for its rich cultural heritage and diversity. The societal composition of Assam presents an interesting mixture of diverse ethnic communities,

³⁴⁵ Chevalier, *The Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India, 1752-1765: Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal, and Tibet*, 2008, 26–27.

³⁴⁶ Chevalier, 26–27.

³⁴⁷ Bara and Barua, *Weissalisa: Containing Two Independent Chronicles of the Burmese Invasions of Assam, Written Originally in Thai Language*, 1977, 26–27.

dialects, faiths, and customs. Travellers from the early modern times were deeply intrigued by the physical, ethical, and social disparities among the people they encountered, and they communicated these experiences to their audience. The people they encountered in alien societies were portrayed as peculiar subjects with unusual habits and traditions, and their stories were frequently exaggerated.³⁴⁸

The description of the local people in Captain Welsh's account was based on the social structure of the period and emphasized the physical characteristics, social behaviors, and religious beliefs and practices of the native communities. It was noted that terms like 'tribe' and 'caste' were often employed interchangeably in these texts. Because of the continuity between tribes and castes during the early-colonial period in Assam, it was difficult to explain the social structure exclusively in terms of caste, as was possible in the rest of India. This state of flux led to a high degree of social fluidity, resulting in a complex, yet flexible, social framework.

Travellers' accounts before the 18th century do not mention the Brahman caste. However, references to priestly organizations connected to the Dergaon, Kamakhya and Siva temples indicated the possibility that the deities in these temples were primarily worshipped by organizations that adhered to Brahmanical traditions. Brahman Katakis, who supervised diplomatic ties between the Ahom state and its neighbouring areas, also find mention in numerous works. Captain Welsh observes that the temples of Camaca (Kamakhya) and Madhow (Haigriva Madhab) in the country of Camroop (Kamrupa) were devoid of Brahman, Kaist (Kayashta), or other upper castes prior to Naranarayan's dominion. However, Brahmanas from other areas

³⁴⁸ Stephen Gosch and Peter Stearns, *Premodern Travel in World History* (Routledge, 2007), 4.

including Balia, Bordowa, Brahmapoor and Narainpur, were invited to the kingdom by Naranarayan and Chilarai, and they were relocated to Kamarupa.³⁴⁹

It should be noted that the Ahoms sent some soldiers wearing the sacred thread into battle against the Koch kingdom in 1562, as they believed that the latter would not kill Brahmanas or cows. However, these fake Brahmanas had had their sacred threads cut off during the reign of Subinphaa (1281–1993). The Buranjis also mention this incident, stating that an officer by the name of Lekai Chetia was tasked with executing it.³⁵⁰ It's possible that Robinson recognized the group of Monusingho Brahmans as those who were allowed to keep the sacred thread.³⁵¹

Such thorough classification was not available in narratives before the 19th century. The restrictions imposed by caste-based Brahmanical Hinduism could be changed and some intermarriage and inter-dining agreements were tolerated. The Buranjis mention a debate regarding the 'pure' norms of Brahmanical rituals that took place in the court of the Ahom monarch, Siva Singha (r. 1714–1744 C.E.), who had summoned Krishnaram Bhattacharya (Nayabagish), a Bengali Brahmin priest also known as Parbatiya Gosain, to introduce 'pure' Brahmanical rituals and traditions into the realm.³⁵² Nevertheless, Assam's strong tribal background and the growth of neo-Vaishnavism prevented a complete adoption of these strict caste-based restrictions. The elite felt the effects of these standards more keenly, whereas the so-called lower classes adopted a lenient stance towards the new social norms. The situation remained the same even during the British era. According to Robinson, there was minimal or no distinction between caste and

³⁴⁹ Mackenzie, *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal*, 182.

³⁵⁰ Suryya Kumkar Bhuyan, *Satsari Assam Buranji*, 1960, 37, <http://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.452953>.

³⁵¹ William Robinson, *A Descriptive Account of Assam: With a Sketch of the Local Geography, and a History of the Tea-Plant of Assam : To Which Is Added a Short Account of the Neighbouring Tribes, Exhibiting History, Manners and Customs* (Sanskaran Prakashak, 1841), 262.

³⁵² Rajmohan Nath, *The Back-ground of Assamese Culture* (Dutta Baruah, 1978), 4.

profession in Assam, with each caste, or more appropriately, tribe, practicing all known arts in the region.³⁵³

These narratives frequently distanced the ‘other’ from the ‘self’ by demonising the indigenous people and attributing immoral qualities to them. Travellers frequently created broad portraits of the native subjects that portrayed them as contentious, vicious, brutal, petty, and deceitful. Such writers emphasized the allegedly inferior nature of the Assamese people using powerful imagery. Khafi Khan, for instance, had an extremely poor impression of the Ahoms, portraying them as ungrateful and murderous people who used floods as an excuse to conduct midnight raids on Mughal outposts.³⁵⁴

Both Frans van der Heiden and Francois Bernier echoed similar sentiments about Gargaon. Heiden described the town as extraordinarily beautiful and highlighted the exceptional charm of the women who lived there.³⁵⁵ Bernier portrayed it as a large, attractive and extremely wealthy city with a flourishing economy. He further underscored the extraordinary beauty of the women there, which added to its fame.³⁵⁶

According to Jean Baptiste Chevalier, the towns lacked proper structure and organization. His account portrayed them in an unfavorable light. However, the ‘scenic’ location of Guwahati managed to captivate his interest. He was particularly harsh with the Assamese people, accusing them of trying to take advantage of him. In his opinion, they were more deceptive than any other group and he labelled them corrupt and treacherous. He even implied that they thought of him as

³⁵³ Robinson, *A Descriptive Account of Assam*, 264.

³⁵⁴ Mīrzā Nathan, *Bahāristān-i-Ghaybī: A History of the Mughal Wars in Assam, Cooch Behar, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa during the Reigns of Jahāngīr and Shāhjahān*, vol. 2 (Government of Assam, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies ..., 1936), 199.

³⁵⁵ Paranan Konwar, “Mir Jumla’s Invasion of Assam (1662–63), War Experience of a Dutch Sailor Heiden and Translator Glanius,” *Indian Historical Review* 46, no. 1 (2019): 51.

³⁵⁶ Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire, AD 1656-1668* (Asian Educational Services, 1996), 172.

naive, uneducated, and susceptible to deception³⁵⁷ and that they did not want him to come into contact with anyone who could give information regarding product prices, so as to advance their schemes. He claimed that even minor encounters between locals and visitors were forbidden. Merchants could approach him only after the King had fixed the prices for the products.³⁵⁸ The King, according to Chevalier, had complete control over his subjects, who were treated like slaves. He observed that they provided the King with their services without receiving any payment in return; instead, the King gave them some land to cultivate for their sustenance. Due to this, they lacked any sense of industrial ambition or competition. He articulated his despair, believing that the people he was dealing with were too corrupt to be open to peaceful conversations.³⁵⁹ It is interesting to note that despite his harsh critique of the populace, Chevalier frequently resorted to bribery to further his business interests.³⁶⁰

Jean Baptiste Tavernier outlined his perception of Kamrup, describing it as the King's residence. He says that even though the King did not demand taxes from his subjects, he was the owner of all the gold and silver mines. He hired workers from nearby countries for these jobs, instead of forcing his subjects to work in the mines. However, this was not always the case, as the service of local people was required for washing the gold. Tavernier also propagated the message that the Assamese people were very affluent. Their residences were often located in the middle of expansive property holdings. Houses typically included a fountain surrounded by trees, and many families had domesticated elephants meant for the use of female members.³⁶¹ It can be argued that Tavernier's descriptions of the residences largely reflected an aristocratic perspective, neglecting

³⁵⁷ Chevalier, *The Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India, 1752-1765: Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal, and Tibet*, 2008, 137–38.

³⁵⁸ Chevalier, 183.

³⁵⁹ Chevalier, 198.

³⁶⁰ Chevalier, 150.

³⁶¹ Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Travels in India*, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, H. Milford, 1925), 223.

the living conditions of the economically disadvantaged. He asserted that polygamy as common in the community. In order to ensure harmonious relationships among his multiple wives, a man would assign each wife specific tasks.³⁶² From Tavernier's perspective this procedure could be seen as a means of objectifying women. Additionally, polygamy conveys ethical questions and draws attention to the perceived ridiculousness of using tricks to keep several spouses satisfied. However, the traditional conventions of the period reveal that women in Assam held a better position in compare to other states.

Women's participation in public life was frequently scrutinized by travellers as a measure for assessing the sociocultural status of a particular nation. It has been stated that Assamese women, who were inspired by tribal values, had more flexibility in terms of work and mobility than women on the rest of mainland India. This divergence resulted from limitations placed on women's mobility in mainland India by caste-based patriarchal norms.³⁶³ It's crucial to remember, though, that more mobility does not necessarily mean that patriarchal values are completely absent. Talish and Chevalier also make reference to the polygamous nature of Assamese society. There aren't many instances of women actively engaging in political negotiations in the world of politics. Historical accounts, referred to the *Buranjis*, offer proof that women had some influence over political outcomes. Occasionally throughout the Ahom state's history, queens were successful in acquiring important positions for family members inside the state government.³⁶⁴ In Assam's history, prominent women like Ambika and Bor Raja Phuleswari played important roles.

The “*Purani Assam Buranji*” mentions a queen from Darrang who presided over her kingdom on behalf of her infant son. She formed a clandestine alliance with the Bar Phukan of the

³⁶² Tavernier, 1:223.

³⁶³ Swarna Lata Baruah, “Status of Women in Assam: With Special Reference to Non-Tribal Societies,” (*No Title*), 1992.

³⁶⁴ Bhuyan, *Satsari Assam Buranji*, 1960, 27.

Ahom kingdom and lured Ram Singh's Mughal army into a tight space between two hills. They ambushed and beat the Mughal army with success, taking great spoils and loot in the process.³⁶⁵

When it comes to women's involvement in public life, one significant figure that is mentioned in traveller accounts is the dancing girl also known as *nati*, who were prevalent in many Assamese temples, particularly those dedicated to Shiva at Biswanath Ghat, Dergaon, and Dubi, Kamakhya, and Hajo.³⁶⁶ Historical accounts also testify to the existence of female dancers who were sent into the Mughal camp by the Ahom Kingdom to act as spies. According to the Buranji, the Mughal army reportedly kidnapped three *natis* from the Biswanath Ghat shrine.³⁶⁷ These young girls and women were devoted to the deity from an early age and were an essential element of the temple's ritual activity. In the mainland parts of India this habit of dedicating young girls to the deity were known as *Devadasis* because they were seen as god's servants. However, there was a noticeable shift in perception of these temple dancers in the second half of the seventeenth century. Even though they were hired to provide for the "pleasure of deities," these dancing ladies were frequently taken advantage of by mortals, notably the priestly ranks, and may eventually have been forced to sell their services to others. Chevalier also observes that these sexual encounters gave the dancing girls some agency because "they willingly share their pleasures with those who are tempted and who can afford them."³⁶⁸ Nevertheless, the separation of the public and private spheres was a recurring theme in these written works, and the presence of women in the public

³⁶⁵ Hemchandra Ed Goswami, *Purani Asam Buranji Ed. 2nd*, 1977, 111, <http://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.452171>.

³⁶⁶ Kali Prasad Goswami, ed., *Devadasi Dancing Damsel*, 1st edition (New Delhi: A.P.H. Pub. Corp, 1999).

³⁶⁷ Hemchandra Ed Goswami, *Purani Asam Buranji Ed. 2nd*, 1977, 64, <http://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.452171>.

³⁶⁸ Jean-Baptiste Chevalier, *The Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India, 1752-1765: Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal, and Tibet* (LBS publications, 2008), 40.

sphere was frequently perceived by travellers as evidence of the lesser moral standards of native women.

There were a few exceptions to the general trend of representing indigenous people in a negative light. Ralph Fitch's views, for instance, depict the inhabitants of the Koch kingdom as so kind and sympathetic that they established hospitals for animals and birds.³⁶⁹ Incongruities between the narratives of various travellers can be observed in descriptions of the physical characteristics of men in Assam. In contrast to Chevalier, who describes Assam's males as tiny, weak, and apparently crushed by misery, Talish describes them as being muscular. Chevalier depicts them as being incredibly frail, with strong, active men being extremely rare, and suggests three possible explanations for such fragility: a natural disadvantage, the nation's climate, and inadequate nutrition. He is perplexed by the fact that all of their neighbours, including the Bhutanese (also known as "Boutes") and the Garos, were powerful and vigorous people who may even have been stronger than the Europeans.³⁷⁰ However, Robinson attributed this perceived weakness not to the climate, but rather to the lethargic nature of the locals, which, he believed, made them more susceptible to diseases.³⁷¹

During his 18-month stay in Assam, Dr. John Peter Wade compiled local historical information and produced a report covering the period from antiquity to 1780, specifically the reign of Gaurinath Simha. In the introduction to the report, Wade offered his insights on the Assamese language, noting that the history of Assam was preserved in two unique languages. The first one, which he termed Bailoongh or Ahum, was identified as the language of the *Swargadeo*,

³⁶⁹ John Horton Ryley, *Ralph Fitch, England's Pioneer to India and Burma: His Companions and Contemporaries, with His Remarkable Narrative Told in His Own Words* (London, 1899), 13.

³⁷⁰ Chevalier, *The Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India, 1752-1765: Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal, and Tibet*, 2008, 178.

³⁷¹ Robinson, *A Descriptive Account of Assam*, 23.

who had invaded Assam, and the second one was Bakha (Bassa), considered to be a dialect of Bengali.³⁷² Intriguingly, this observation was made approximately 36 years before the formal introduction of the Bengali language in Assam, highlighting that a British officer had already conceived of Assamese as a variant of Bengali.³⁷³

5.1.4 Economic Condition of Medieval Assam

The economy of Assam is primarily based on agriculture. The floodplains of the state are famous for their rich produce. The fertility of the land has been extensively discussed in travel writings. Visitors have been impressed by the lush, brilliant green vegetation, the plentiful river waters, and the abundant rainfall. During his visit to the Koch Kingdom under the leadership of Nara Narayana, Ralph Fitch reported on the wealth of commodities such as musk, silk, and cotton fabric in the region. The manufacturing and trading of these goods boosted the robust economy of this area. When the Mughal imperial troops, led by Mir Jumla, trekked towards Gargaon, the capital of the Ahom kingdom, they traversed meticulously cultivated fields, fruit-heavy orchards, and dense green bamboo clusters. Gargaon was portrayed by Francios Bernier as a wealthy city that caught the attention of the Mughals. He highlighted the economic importance of the city, considering its size and commercial potential, and asserted that the vibrant commercial activity in the region was obvious.³⁷⁴

Jean- Baptist Tavernier depicted the kingdom of Assam as a self-sufficient state which did not have to depend on its neighbours for survival. He observed the processing of silk, which he described as being produced by round silkworms that spent the entire year living on trees. He

³⁷² John Peter Wade, *An Account of Assam* (R. Sarmah, 1800), i and ii.

³⁷³ Paramananda Majumdar, "INTRODUCTION OF THE BENGALI LANGUAGE IN 19th CENTURY ASSAM: ROLE OF THE BRITISH," vol. 67 (Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, JSTOR, 2006), 788.

³⁷⁴ Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire, AD 1656-1668* (Asian Educational Services, 1996), 172.

opined that although silk outfits were beautiful, they were very light and delicate. The gold and silver mines of the region also found mention in his work.³⁷⁵ Tavernier identified two different kinds of shellac in the region. The crimson-coloured shellac, which was found on trees, was utilized to dye garments, varnish cabinets and other items after being dyed, and also to make Spanish wax. This shellac was shipped to China and Japan, where it was utilized in the cabinet manufacturing industry. This specific lac was rated by Tavernier as the best in all of Asia.³⁷⁶ There are no references in his works to the other kind of shellac found in the region.

Frans Jansz van der Heiden, in his accounts, emphasized the abundance of gold in Assam. He recounted his arrival in Gargaon, the capital of the Ahom kingdom, only to find it entirely abandoned due to the King's escape. Following the orders of the Mughal general, the naval commander dispatched six boats: two were laden with gold and the other four carried silver.³⁷⁷ Heiden observed that Assamese temples were populated by statues of cows crafted from gold, silver, and brass.³⁷⁸ He also described the encampment of the Mughal army near Mathurapur.³⁷⁹ The Mughal established their base on elevated terrain in a fertile area surrounded by rice fields. The neighbouring hills to the north of Mathurapur yielded a variety of resources like pepper (*Piper nigrum*), agarwood or aloeswood (*Aquilaria agallocha*), and sandalwood (*Santalum album*), all of which were traded by weight in exchange for gold.³⁸⁰

Extensive rice cultivation in the Brahmaputra Valley began when the Ahom state attempted to improve farming by removing dense forests and turning uncultivated areas into agricultural

³⁷⁵ Tavernier, *Travels in India*, 1925, 1:220.

³⁷⁶ Tavernier, 1:220–21.

³⁷⁷ Konwar, "Mir Jumla's Invasion of Assam (1662–63), War Experience of a Dutch Sailor Heiden and Translator Glanius," 50.

³⁷⁸ Konwar, 51.

³⁷⁹ Mathurapur, currently located in the Charaideo district, is close to the royal tombs or 'maidams' of Charaideo. It lies to the east of Gargaon, the capital of the Ahom kingdom, at a distance of about 20 km.

³⁸⁰ Konwar, "Mir Jumla's Invasion of Assam (1662–63), War Experience of a Dutch Sailor Heiden and Translator Glanius," 50.

tracts. The Paik system enabled the Ahoms to facilitate agriculture in huge uncultivated areas in the upper Brahmaputra river. Since rice was produced in large quantities, it was not often considered a tradeable commodity in the Ahom state. On the other hand, it was openly bought and sold as a commercial good in lower Assam.³⁸¹ Chevalier had trouble obtaining supplies for his group when he visited the state in the second half of the 18th century. When he arrived in the Bengali border town of Doubry (Dhuburi), rice was not available for sale. The entire area was deserted, covered by dense forests inhabited by wild creatures.³⁸²

Explorers also noticed an abundance of other agricultural goods such as areca nuts, betel leaves, mustard seeds, pulses, long pepper (pipali), black pepper, cotton, ginger, black sesame seeds, aloes wood, bamboo, timber, and a variety of fruits. Father Stephan Cacella, a 17th century Jesuit traveller, noted that Koch Behar was famous for its fruits, especially oranges, which were superior compared to those from other regions of India.³⁸³ Assam produced large quantities of sugarcane, which, as Captain Welsh reported, flourished everywhere in the state. He also emphasized the superior quality of Assamese sugarcane and its potential for profitable trading.³⁸⁴ Nevertheless, the list of items mentioned in these historical records was neither complete nor comprehensive. For instance, these works failed to mention some commercially significant goods such as *Bor Attah* or India rubber (*Ficus elastica*), a form of gum which was a major agricultural export commodity of the East India Company in the 19th century.³⁸⁵ Names of places such as

³⁸¹ Wali Ahmad Shihab al-Din Talas Ahmad ibn Muhammad Wali Shihab al-Din Talish, *Tarikh-i Asham: récit de l'expédition de Mir-Djumlah au pays d'Assam ...* (B. Duprat, 1845), 48–50.

³⁸² Chevalier, *The Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India, 1752-1765: Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal, and Tibet*, 2008, 131.

³⁸³ Cornelius Wessels, *Early Jesuit Travellers in Central Asia: 1603-1721* (Hague, 1924), 128.

³⁸⁴ Mackenzie, *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal*, 387.

³⁸⁵ Gunnel Cederlöf and Willem Van Schendel, *Flows and Frictions in Trans-Himalayan Spaces: Histories of Networking and Border Crossing* (Amsterdam University Press, 2022), 146.

Athahbari (meaning ‘gum/rubber garden’), suggest that attempts to cultivate rubber trees and extract gum might have begun before or during the 18th and early 19th centuries.

In pre-colonial societies, the question of ownership of land has always been contentious. Ownership and private property are complex ideas that must be understood in their specific social and chronological settings. Rights and duties in the pre-colonial economy were frequently fluid and interwoven. The Western understanding of property ownership, private property, and proprietary rights is very different from that in the Indian context.³⁸⁶ Similar divergences can be observed in the Western and Indian perceptions of tribal societies through the lens of caste. Such variations in perspective might have led to discrepancies in the accounts of travellers. The convictions of European travellers about ownership, possessions, rights, and obligations often diverged from those of non-Europeans. For instance, Bernier claimed in his writings about the Mughal empire that the idea of private property did not exist and that the state and society were adversely affected by the crown's ownership of land.³⁸⁷

Occasionally, outsiders misinterpreted the obligatory service to the state and portrayed it as slavery. Chevalier described the monarch as tyrannical and maintained that he had control over all his subjects, whom he considered his slaves. According to his narrative, the subjects were at the King's disposal and obeyed his orders without being adequately compensated. In return, the King gave them land for cultivation, enabling them to support their families as well as themselves.³⁸⁸ Although Assam was primarily a tribal civilization, the social structure was far more complex than the travellers realized. The *Paik* system was very organized, with the *paiks* being arranged into *khels* which were constituted by a number of *gots*. Besides, the *paiks* were divided

³⁸⁶ Irfan Habib, “The Agrarian System of Mughal India: 1556-1707. 1963, Reprint,” 2010.

³⁸⁷ Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire, AD 1656-1668*, 1996.

³⁸⁸ Chevalier, *The Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India, 1752-1765: Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal, and Tibet*, 2008, 187.

into *kanri* (general) and *chamua* (professional) paiks, with internal categorisations such *apaikan chamua* (those exempt from mandatory services).³⁸⁹

Contemporary Mughal sources mention a radical transformation in the Assamese land relations owing to continued interaction with the Mughals and the establishment of the Mughal land revenue system in the region. The *Baharistan-i Ghyabi* was given charge of tracking the recruitment of revenue officers and procedures related to tax collection in the Koch area. The *Bakshi* of these lands, Mirza Hasan, was entrusted with the task of systematizing the collection of taxes by Abdus Salam, the commander of the Mughal army. He made twenty separate circles out of the parganas of the Koch realm. The imperial karoris and faujdars received some of the lands in exchange for tax collection. A *kabuliyat*, or deed of acceptance, for parganas was produced by the *mustajirs*, or revenue farmers, who also received portions of the land.³⁹⁰

Many of the travellers who elaborated upon the economic customs of Assam prior to colonization had business interests. Their major goal was to locate lucrative trading prospects in this unexplored region and elsewhere. During the mediaeval period, the trade and economic operations in Assam were not as extensive as those in other parts of India, owing to a variety of reasons. The location of the state made it inaccessible. The area was extremely remote, surrounded by mountains and dense forests inhabited by wild animals. The rivers, which functioned as the major routes of transportation and communication, were difficult to navigate as the water flow was unpredictable and often very heavy. Besides, from a socio-economic perspective, the small population functioning in a self-sufficient tribal economy could not create significant demand for large-scale consumer products. Captain Welsh argued that due to governmental restrictions and

³⁸⁹ Guha, *The Ahom Political System*, 64.

³⁹⁰ Nathan, *Bahāristān-i-Ghaybī: A History of the Mughal Wars in Assam, Cooch Behar, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa during the Reigns of Jahāngīr and Shāhjahān*, 273.

the general suspicion towards outsiders, commerce in Assam could never have been substantial.³⁹¹ The government regulations and the indifference of the Ahom state towards foreigners greatly hindered the development of a trade-friendly environment. Nevertheless, many foreign traders were drawn to these areas by the prospect of profitable trade in natural resources and the opportunity to access undiscovered markets.

Quantitative information about Assam's trade prior to the 18th century is scarce, but the priceless insights gained from the accounts of overseas travellers significantly fill this knowledge gap. Assam has had a long history of commerce with neighbouring states and mountain people, using both land and water routes. This region was crucial to larger commercial networks, as well as to the mobility of people, exchange of goods, and religious relations. Although cash-driven trade was not frequent in Ahom territories, the barter system was popular. This was made possible by the numerous roads and mountain passes. The river channels that penetrated the country from Bengal provided easy routes which were frequently used by travellers. In his letter, the Jesuit priest Stephen Cacella noted that canals were used extensively for trade with Bengal in the 17th century. Large boats travelled frequently throughout the year from Gaur to the city of Koch Behar. The metropolis was populated and well-stocked with both regional goods and those imported by travelling merchants from Patna, Rajmahal (Rajamol), and Gaur. Jean Baptiste Chevalier maintained a meticulously documented journal of his travels from Bengal through Goalpara to Assam, and the capital of the Ahom state. These routes were described in detail in subsequent documents, which were produced mostly by the officials of the English East India Company in the 19th century.³⁹² According to Captain Walsh, the majority of trade occurred along navigable

³⁹¹ Mackenzie, *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal*, 390.

³⁹² Chevalier, *The Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India, 1752-1765: Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal, and Tibet*, 2008, 5.

streams that formed a network spread across Assam. The 7-8 month long rainy season witnessed the highest movement of commodities across the streams.

Travellers viewed Assam's close proximity to China, Tibet, and Burma as a strategic advantage that could pave the way for future business endeavours. Assam functioned as a gateway to China for Western travellers. Chevalier stated that he was entrusted with a new task by the French East India Company, which considered the unexplored regions of Tibet, China, Assam, and other locales as prospective markets. He was instructed to use every means at his disposal to obtain the ruler's consent for a block of land. The intention was to construct a lodge from where they could launch their search for new sources of riches if Assam was actually as affluent as it was believed to be.³⁹³

Although our understanding of the kingdom of Assam remains vague and hazy, it was well known that the region was wealthy and offered a number of trading opportunities. The proximity of the kingdom to China, Tibet, the kingdom of Ava, and other nearby countries offered a market unlike any other for French goods as also for commodities from other European countries.³⁹⁴ Investigating related histories has become a growing trend in historical research. Trade and the pathways it created allowed for the exchange of ideas and knowledge along with the movement of products and people. In addition to serving as channels for the exchange of goods, these routes also possessed social significance.

A wide variety of commodities, mostly regional goods, were traded along the routes. Assam traded lac, dried fish, and muga and eri silks for salt and cowrie shells from Bengal, woolens from Bhutan, musk, horses, yak tails, and Chinese silk. Traders from the Koch kingdom, who once

³⁹³ Chevalier, 23.

³⁹⁴ Chevalier, 23.

imported pepper from China, were mentioned by Ralph Fitch.³⁹⁵ Chevalier remarked that the amount of trade at *Canar Choqui* (Kandahar Chowki), the border between Assam and Bengal, was not very significant during the period following his visit. Limited supplies of morphine, an opium-derivative, lacquer, and crushed cotton with seeds were the major items delivered by Assamese traders.³⁹⁶ The Mughal officer stationed at the border crossing monopolized the meagre trade in morphine, which was bought and sold in small quantities.

During the reign of King Lakshmi Singha (1769–1780CE), Barkendazes in Beltola (near Guwahati) was the first to grow opium. Captain Welsh observed that the reigning monarch, Gaurinath Simha (1780–95), was addicted to opium, and that poppy cultivation flourished in many of the lower districts of Assam. The manufacture of marketable opium that could be obtained locally in large amounts was not yet known to the Assamese. Welsh consequently proposed that a few boatloads of opium be shipped from Bengal for sale. Later, Welsh's several hundred men were blamed for introducing opium smoking in Assam. A sizeable number of Bengali Hindustani ex-soldiers who joined King Kamaleswar Singha's army (1795–1811) also contributed significantly to the spread of opium use and poppy cultivation.³⁹⁷

Captain Welsh's report on Assam serves as a vital contemporary historical document, grounded in the direct observations of a responsible British official. This on site study emphasized the state of the economy, including trade and commerce. The countryside was under extensive cultivation. Large tracts of land were held by aristocrats and worked on by their slaves. However, the crop was hardly ever sold in the market, which made it extremely difficult to buy grain. Opium

³⁹⁵ Ryley, *Ralph Fitch, England's Pioneer to India and Burma: His Companions and Contemporaries, with His Remarkable Narrative Told in His Own Words*, 13.

³⁹⁶ Chevalier, *The Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India, 1752-1765: Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal, and Tibet*, 2008, 138.

³⁹⁷ Amalendu Guha, "Imperialism of Opium: Its Ugly Face in Assam (1773-1921)," vol. 37 (Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, JSTOR, 1976), 338–46.

and salt were found to be more useful than money for purchasing goods. During the auction of goods seized at Rangpur, unprocessed rice was priced at six hundred rupees per pound, while buffalos were sold at five rupees each, and cows at two rupees each. Despite low prices the resources of the state were sufficient, which made it possible for Gaurinath to propose a significant subsidy to maintain the presence of British troops in the area.

Shihabuddin Talish made an intriguing observation regarding Assamese trade customs. Once a year, trade was allowed on the border of Guwahati with the consent of the King. Products such as salt, sulphur, and brimstone were exchanged for gold, musk, aloe wood, pepper, sazaj (bay leaf), and silk apparel. He observed that the Assamese people were self-sufficient in terms of food production and did not buy any food or delicacies from stores.³⁹⁸

Chevalier discussed the duties of the Assamese *duaria barua*, who was given charge of collecting customs charges on all commodities and had the sole authority to trade with Bengal. The main product imported from Bengal was salt, which was extremely popular in Assam and provided profitable business opportunities for Bengali traders. It was stored in Yogighopa, and substantial taxes were levied on merchants in Alamganj and Rangamati at the rate of 20% per transaction.³⁹⁹ In this region, they exchanged salt for various items like cotton and wood from the Boutouas or the inhabitants of Assam. Due to the multiple taxes that traders had to pay at chowkis, checkpoints, and customs houses, the trade was not very profitable. Chevalier claimed that the restrictions imposed on merchants by the chiefs of chowkis led to a general decline in trade throughout Bengal.⁴⁰⁰ During his travels, he himself had faced innumerable bureaucratic obstacles.

³⁹⁸ Wali Ahmad Shihab al-Din Talas Ahmad ibn Muhammad Wali Shihab al-Din Talish, *Tarikh-i Asham: récit de l'expédition de Mir-Djumlah au pays d'Assam*, (B. Duprat, 1845), 53.

³⁹⁹ Chevalier, *The Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India, 1752-1765: Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal, and Tibet*, 2008, 131–34.

⁴⁰⁰ Chevalier, 131.

At local markets or fairs, barter trade with neighbouring hill tribes was also practiced. A variety of minerals, fabrics, and forest products from the hills were exchanged for commodities like rice, mustard seeds, areca nuts, betel leaves, ornate umbrellas, knives, silk, black pepper, salt, and gold.⁴⁰¹ Furthermore, trade of the mineral riches of Yunnan, Burma, and the hills that delineate the Burmese, Assamese, and Bengali flatlands made these regions appealing. European traders also engaged in the buying and selling of commercial items such as salt, elephant tusks, horses, spices, bell-metal vessels, silk, opium, woolen fabric, lumber, cane, and bamboo,⁴⁰² in addition to the commodities such as marble, limestone, amber, jade, silver, gold, copper, and tin. Tavernier maintained that silver and gold existed in the Kingdom and that exporting gold out of the realm was forbidden. Gold was not struck into coins, but was utilized as a medium of exchange by traders. However, the King's gold was cast into various shapes. On the other hand, silver could be moved outside the domain and was shaped into octagonal-shaped coins.⁴⁰³ Related activities such as gold washing, metallurgy (particularly that of bell metal), and sericulture were prominently mentioned in travel narratives. The rivers of Assam carried abundant gold dust and Chevalier claimed that while on his journey, he had seen people cleaning gold. He asserted that since everyone was required to make a prepayment of four golden rupees, which was an exorbitant amount, the majority of the gold obtained this way was given to the monarch.⁴⁰⁴

Captain Welsh mentioned that a significant amount of gold could be found in the sands of the Burrampooter and other rivers flowing from the mountains in the north and the south. It was a substantial source of revenue for the King.⁴⁰⁵ The main sources of gold dust were the rivers

⁴⁰¹ Lakshmi Devi, *Ahom-Tribal Relations: A Political Study* (to be had at Assam Book Depot, Calcutta, 1968), 4–9.

⁴⁰² Guha, "Imperialism of Opium: Its Ugly Face in Assam (1773-1921)," 168.

⁴⁰³ Tavernier, *Travels in India*, 1925, 1:221.

⁴⁰⁴ Chevalier, *The Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India, 1752-1765: Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal, and Tibet*, 2008, 172–73.

⁴⁰⁵ Alexander Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier of India* (Mittal Publications, 1995), 388.

Subansiri, Bharali, Dissoi, Jaglo, and Dikrong. Coin circulation was limited because of the lack of a dominant money economy. All the acquired gold was not cast into coins by the government. Instead, a sizeable amount was used to make deities, jewelry, and to adorn the royal court. Chevalier remarked on the enormous number of golden statues in the Kamakhya temple, saying that it was difficult to count them all.⁴⁰⁶ However, by the end of the 18th century, when the Western influence rose gradually, the price of gold began to be determined in terms of Koch narayani coins, Mughal coins, and then company rupees. Wade claimed that gold of the greatest quality from River Borgang fetched Rs. 18–20 per tola, whereas that from River Dikrong fetched only Rs. 12 to 14 per tola.⁴⁰⁷

As different from the areas under Ahom rule, commercial activity was more vigorous in Western Assam, particularly in the regions bordering Bengal. The market and monetary economies of the Ahom kingdom were underdeveloped in the 18th century. The barter system prevailed and periodic markets were established along old trade routes between neighbouring hill communities. Travellers, particularly those who visited these regions for business reasons, offered precious insights about the economic life, that were often overlooked in traditional sources like chronicles and religious texts. Their reports provided details of the market norms and regulatory frameworks.

5.1.5 Landscapes and Production Patterns in Assam and the Brahmaputra Valley

The abundance of food, the beautiful surroundings, and the fertile soil were predominant themes in the narratives. The Mughal Imperial army, led by Mir Jumla, traversed well-tended fields, fruit-filled orchards, and brilliant green bamboo forests on its way to Gargaon, the seat of the Ahom

⁴⁰⁶ Chevalier, *The Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India, 1752-1765: Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal, and Tibet*, 2008, 40–41.

⁴⁰⁷ Wade, *An Account of Assam*, 1927, 20.

state. Since rice production was plentiful in the Ahom state, it was seldom used as an item for trade. In contrast, rice was openly bought and sold as a commodity in lower Assam. Other agricultural goods mentioned by travellers include areca nuts, betel leaves, mustard seeds, lentils, long pepper (pipali), black pepper, ginger, black sesame seeds, and other fruits.

Ralph Fitch described the landscape of this area as largely characterized by bamboo or cane structures, sharpened on both ends and rooted in the ground. These structures, combined with water, could transform the terrain into marshy land above knee level, making it impossible for either men or horses to cross. This method was employed mainly during times of war to poison the waters and hinder enemy movements. Jean Baptiste Chevalier provided descriptions of the landscapes as well as the local plant and animal life. Initially, he found the sights along the riverbanks to be unvarying. As he travelled by boat along the river, he mostly saw sandy banks, leading him to characterize the scenery as monotonous.⁴⁰⁸ However, as his journey progressed, he noticed that the panorama on both sides of the river changed to an unbroken line of trees or reeds, occasionally punctuated by human settlements. This variation in scenery led him to change his perception of the landscape being monotonous.

Although Chevalier was notably impressed by the forests of Assam, he observed that the local wildlife posed a continuous threat to farmlands. He implied that although Assam's plains were suitable for agriculture, cultivation efforts were hindered by the presence of wild animals. But it is crucial to remember that since the beginning of the 18th century, the area had been witnessing significant changes. Farmland was expanded by clearing jungles. Later, Chevalier found that these cleared lands were utilized for cultivating jute, a discovery he made through comparing the land to that of Bengal, which was then the world's primary jute producer. He

⁴⁰⁸ Chevalier, *The Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India, 1752-1765: Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal, and Tibet*, 2008, 23.

observed that Assam was also engaged in the production of the material. He also recounted an unusual hunting practice involving wild boars and fishing, and explained how water levels could rise up to 10 meters during floods, drowning several islands. Animals who had sought refuge in these islands during the dry season had to swim to the bank, where they were then caught by the villagers. This vivid depiction of the hunting methods of the local inhabitants suggests that Chevalier had not encountered such practices elsewhere in India, reflecting his preconceived notions regarding the people he encountered during his travels.

Father Stephan Cacella, a Jesuit traveller of the 17th century, observed that Koch Behar was known for its fruits, especially oranges, which were superior to those from other regions of India.⁴⁰⁹ Chevalier expressed surprise upon discovering strawberry plants that resembled the wild varieties found in Europe.⁴¹⁰ Tavernier discovered sweet grapes in the kingdom, but was disappointed by the absence of wine. He also described how salt was produced locally. The process involved collecting vegetable waste, which was then dried and burned. The ash was subsequently boiled and strained to produce salt. He also detailed an alternative method of salt production, wherein salt was derived from tree leaves. The salt from leaves was harsher on the tongue and needed to be boiled before use. He added that these leaves were also used in the dyeing of silk.⁴¹¹ As the only inland regions, Bengal focuses its trade activities primarily with the provinces of Oud and Assam. While tobacco, beetle nuts, and salt are the main commodities traded between Bengal and Assam, Bengal also receives substantial quantities of silk, Mugadutties, and lack (lac) from Assam.⁴¹²

⁴⁰⁹ Cornelius Wessels, *Early Jesuit Travellers in Central Asia: 1603-1721* (Hague, 1924), 128.

⁴¹⁰ Chevalier, *The Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India, 1752-1765: Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal, and Tibet*, 2008, 184.

⁴¹¹ Tavernier, *Travels in India*, 1925, 1:221–22.

⁴¹² Alexander Dow, *The History of Hindostan* (Taylor & Francis, 2000), cxv.

According to Captain Welsh's descriptions, Guwahati was a large, thriving metropolis that reached the nearby hills and spanned both banks of River Brahmaputra. A portion of the river bank was protected with a rampart holding 113 guns of various sizes, three of which were manufactured in Europe. The only other fortification in the city was a sizable rectangular enclosure that was positioned one hundred yards from the river. A six-foot-high brick wall surrounded it, and on either side were small, wet ditches. A thatched building large enough to house the entire detachment was located inside this stronghold.

Heiden recounted that they endured continuous rainfall and subsequent flooding, likely due to the monsoon season, which led to a shortage of food. This forced the Mughal army to resort to consuming the flesh of camels and elephants for survival. Furthermore, Heiden and his companions had had to drink boiled water, as the river water was contaminated by a considerable number of corpses of people killed in the war.⁴¹³ According to Bernier, Assam received heavy rainfall, which inundated all areas except for villages situated on higher ground. The presence of mountains posed a significant barrier for the Mughal forces during their campaign against the Ahoms. This led to the Mughals retreating from the region. The challenging situation caused by the water and deep mud further complicated their situation.⁴¹⁴ Mir Jumla and his troops were confined to their camp throughout the rainy season, and even after the rains stopped, the soldiers were exhausted and demoralized due to severe fatigue. Eventually, Mir Jumla had no choice but to abandon his plan to conquer Assam. Tavernier asserted that the people of India could not tolerate cold weather and that Assam was not an exception to the norm.⁴¹⁵

⁴¹³ Konwar, "Mir Jumla's Invasion of Assam (1662–63), War Experience of a Dutch Sailor Heiden and Translator Glanius," 51.

⁴¹⁴ Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire, AD 1656-1668*, 1996, 172.

⁴¹⁵ Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Travels in India*, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, H. Milford, 1925), 217–18.

Jean Baptiste Chevalier notes that in addition to the unfavourable vegetation, the area's environment was unusually dry and unpleasant. He mentioned abrupt climatic changes, saying, every day we would change from stifling heat to bitter cold five to six times. We had to cover up as though it were winter when there was a breeze, and as soon as it stopped, the heat became nearly intolerable.⁴¹⁶ "The fog in the morning was so vast and dense that we were forced to wait for it to lift before setting out. As we progressed, we were hit with an extreme chill so intense that all of my companions, both Europeans and others, could barely withstand it."⁴¹⁷ Continuing his account, he observed: "During the rainy season, which commences in April and concludes in September, the locals succumb to a debilitating illness that gradually weakens them until they pass away."⁴¹⁸ He projected the climate of Assam, and by extension, that of India, as extremely unpleasant, and juxtaposed it with that of France, locating stark differences.

The food habits of individuals are influenced by their social and geographic contexts. Differences in caste and class are revealed by food items and consumption patterns. Seasonal fruits, honey, wild vegetables, and hunted animals were among the commodities obtained from forests to supplement agricultural products from fields. The numerous water bodies in the area supported a large population of fish, which formed a major component of the Assamese fare. However, despite this abundance, the average person consumed a meagre diet. Chevalier noted that the people were content with basic food items that could be obtained from nature with little effort. A small piece of dry, coarse rice is often served with meals, and occasionally, herbs flourishing naturally in the lower region were also included in the diet.⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁶ Chevalier, *The Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India, 1752-1765: Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal, and Tibet*, 2008, 146.

⁴¹⁷ Chevalier, 174.

⁴¹⁸ Chevalier, 134.

⁴¹⁹ Chevalier, *The Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India, 1752-1765: Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal, and Tibet*, 2008, 187.

The dietary habits of the average person were very different from those of the affluent. Current local records reveal information about the diet of upper-class subjects. For instance, it is mentioned that King Gadadhar Singha engaged in compulsive eating and is believed to have devoured an entire calf in one sitting, along with other dishes. During the British era, the eating habits of both the common people and the elite changed in several ways. As money was gradually introduced, markets became more commercialized and food transformed into a marketable good. However, the eating habits of a majority of the indigenous population remained intact and relied heavily on agricultural output and locally accessible foods.

Contrary to popular belief, the agricultural development of the Brahmaputra valley was not stagnant even before the establishment of British administration. In Asian countries, the notion that the agricultural sector is static and self-sufficient has been challenged.⁴²⁰ This idea frequently ignores a variety of changes and improvements in areas such as shifting land relationships, the size of the farming area, the introduction and adoption of new crops and methods, and other factors.

5.1.6 The Military System of Assam: A Comparative Study of European and Indigenous Sources

Warfare played a major role in the political history of early colonial states. The composition and tactics of the army, the strategies implemented during battles, and diplomatic interventions shaped not only the outcomes of conflicts, but also the historical trajectory of states. In the context of mediaeval Assam, travellers accounts serve as valuable resources to understand its military past. Ralph Fitch, Jesuit priests Father Stephen Cacella and John Cabral, and Jean Baptiste Chevalier documented their experiences when they visited these regions primarily for exploration or business pursuits. Additionally, others involved in the military excursions in these regions, like Talish,

⁴²⁰ Kate Currie, "The Asiatic Mode of Production: Problems of Conceptualising State and Economy," *Dialectical Anthropology* 8 (1984): 251–68.

Heiden, Mirza Nathan, and Company officials like Captain Welsh and Dr. Wade, also recorded their observations. Their publications offer in-depth information on a variety of subjects, including military tactics, conflicts, diplomatic efforts, accords, and other aspects of conflict management.

The Brahmaputra valley of the mediaeval times experienced multiple military incursions from the west. These included frequent invasions by the army of Gaur, the Turkish Sultanate of Bengal, beginning from the 12th century, and the Mughal imperial army from the 15th-16th centuries, targeting the kingdoms of Kamarupa, Kamata, Kachari, Koch, and Ahom.⁴²¹ Frequent battles with neighbouring hill tribes not only kept these kingdoms in a state of constant military preparedness, but in the case of the Ahoms, it also led to a policy of deliberate isolation from the external world. This isolationist attitude persisted until the 19th century CE, when Assam's political and demographic environment was drastically transformed by two successive Burmese invasions, as well as the intervention of the English East India Company.⁴²² The narratives of travellers, which provide detailed information on military history, thus serving as excellent resources for historians, greatly aid in the historical study of these changes.

Travellers, especially those who accompanied armies into uncharted territories, left behind records that are vital to understanding the history of the region. The “*Tabaqat-i Nasiri*” (1260–61 C.E.) by Minhaj-us Siraj contains information about military campaigns that took place before the 16th century AD. Bakhtiyar Khalji’s assault of Tibet in 1205–1206 C.E through parts of the city of Kamrud is described in this document. Siraj provides a full account of this disastrous journey, during which Bakhtiyar's army encountered numerous challenges and sustained significant losses.

⁴²¹ Sudhindra Nath Bhattacharyya and Sudhindra Nath Bhattacharyya, *A History of Mughal North-East Frontier Policy: Being a Study of the Political Relation of the Mughal Empire with Koch Bihar, Kamrup and Assam* (M/s. R.N. Bhattacharya, 1994).

⁴²² Mahendra Bara and Bimalakanta Barua, *Weissalisa: Containing Two Independent Chronicles of the Burmese Invasions of Assam, Written Originally in Thai Language* (Department of Assamese, Dibrugarh University, 1977), 22.

Although the author himself had not travelled to Assam, his research was based on eyewitness accounts.⁴²³

The characteristics and consequences of the military campaigns were greatly influenced by the local climate and ecology. Notably, the formidable Mughal imperial army encountered numerous defeats in its eastern campaigns against the Ahoms. Furthermore, the hostile environment and impregnable terrain presented formidable obstacles for the invading army. Their problems were made worse by the long distance from their main military mobilization bases and the distinctive military tactics used by local governments. As a result of the numerous rivers, channels and dense forests that served as natural barriers, armies had to cross jungles to transport their troops. The local forces attempted to take advantage of the circumstances as the imperial army struggled against these environmental obstacles. They were at an advantage because of their familiarity with the terrain and traditional knowledge of handling adverse weather conditions. Epidemics like cholera, malaria, and dysentery also had a significant impact on the physical and mental health of the imperial armies. In his own account, Mirza Nathan give vivid descriptions of these ordeals. These contemporary sources include details about the nature of the armies that fought in these conflicts, in addition to military tactics. These accounts offer a reliable assessment of the numerical power of the armies, despite the fact that the exact number of enrolled soldiers is still unknown.

The Buranjis also do not offer an exact count. It is important to remember that the Ahom state lacked a permanent army comprising paid soldiers. Instead, they had *Paiks*, who are best described as armed peasants. They were actually regular farmers who had a duty to the state under

⁴²³ N. N. ACHARYYA, *Northeast as viewed by Foreigners*, (Omsons publications, 1985), 25.

the *Paik* system. They were expected to serve as troops when there were conflicts, and when the situation returned to normal, they worked in agriculture and other types of public service.

John Peter Wade asserted in his work that the military structure of the Ahom kingdom was founded on a system of feudal tenure for the vassal princes, and like a militia outside the borders of the kingdom.⁴²⁴ This implies that the Ahoms did not maintain a large permanent army. Instead, they utilized a system of *Paik*-based militia recruitment as needed. This strategy worked effectively for the state until the 18th century when Assam was overtaken by internal strife. During the Burmese invasions in the 19th century, the Ahom state was forced to enlist people who used the weaponry they were accustomed to in the fruitless wars.⁴²⁵ To defeat the hostile Burmese soldiers, the king was forced to depend on the troops of the English East India Company.⁴²⁶

The testimony of the Dutch mercenary Frans Jansz van der Heiden, who served the Mughals, described the army led by Mir Jumla. His account states that Mir Jumla's Mughal army included 300,000 units of cavalry, 500,000 units of infantry, a sizable naval force, and a large non-combatant force comprising traders, blacksmiths, potters, dancers, and others. Additionally, the officers' wives and inmates of their harems accompanied the troops. The Mughal army appeared like a vast sea of people in motion due to the enormous number of soldiers. The Ahom militia was known for its proficiency in guerilla warfare. Owing to the difficult terrain and weather in these areas, they formed a formidable defense against the advancing troops, which suffered huge losses. During battles, the standing army and support groups such as spies and messengers played key roles.

⁴²⁴ Wade, *An Account of Assam*, 1927, iii.

⁴²⁵ Mahendra Bara and Bimalakanta Barua, *Weissalisa: Containing Two Independent Chronicles of the Burmese Invasions of Assam, Written Originally in Thai Language* (Department of Assamese, Dibrugarh University, 1977), 43.

⁴²⁶ Bara and Barua, *Weissalisa: Containing Two Independent Chronicles of the Burmese Invasions of Assam, Written Originally in Thai Language*, 1977, 48.

The Mughal General, Ram Singh, was greatly impressed by the military prowess of Ahom soldiers during the Ahom-Mughal war. He observed that Assamese soldiers had a variety of skills, including the ability to dig ditches, construct forts, and engage in land and sea combat. He also issued a warning to potential conquerors of the Ahom land. The formidable Mughal army, which would have been difficult to defeat in open combat, was troubled by night attacks and sporadic encounters. The Ahoms attacked the imperial forces from all sides under the cover of darkness, destroying their outposts, defensive structures, bridges, and grain warehouses.⁴²⁷

The Ahom spies, who were extremely efficient, were also greatly feared. Various instances bear testimony to their competence. They were known by several names including *char*, *chariya*, *chorangchua*, and *chorbacha*, and they were capable of infiltrating enemy camps to obtain information.⁴²⁸ The *bairagis*, a different group, were posted in border regions to gather information and communicate with foreigners who came to these posts for trade or other purposes. The *bairagis* were members of the five khels - *bairagi*, *khaund*, *doloi*, *kakoti*, and *kotoki*, which were established by the Ahom ruler, Rudra Singha, during the pre-colonial period.⁴²⁹ They were spies and informers who mostly operated close to boundary posts. Chevalier stated that they contributed significantly to the drafting of trade deals, in exchange for payment.⁴³⁰

Travellers' narratives provide details of the weapons used during this period. Bows and arrows, hangdangs or half-swords, and dutas, a small javelin that could pierce a man or a horse,

⁴²⁷ Wali Ahmad Shihab al-Din Talas Ahmad ibn Muhammad Wali Shihab al-Din Ṭalish, *Tarikh-i Asham: récit de l'expédition de Mir-Djumlah au pays d'Assam ...* (B. Duprat, 1845), 87–102,

⁴²⁸ Harakānta Baruwā and Kaśīnātha Tāmūlī-Phukana, *Asama burañjī: Kāśīnātha tāmūlī-phukanara "Āsāma burañjī puthi"ra paribardhita saṃskaraṇa. Assam buranji ; or, A History of Assam from the commencement of the Ahom Rule to the British occupation of Assam in 1826 A.D., being an enlarged version of the chronicle of Kasinath Tamuli - Phukan*, [2nd ed.] (Gauhati: Dept. of Historical and Antiquarian Studies [Assam], 1962), 164.

⁴²⁹ Harakanta Barua and Harakanta Barua Sadaramin, *Assam Buranji, Or, A History of Assam, from the Commencement of the Ahom Rule to the British Occupation of Assam in 1826 A.D.: Being an Enlarged Version of the Chronicle of Kasinath Tamuli-Phukan* (Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Assam, 1930).

⁴³⁰ Chevalier, *The Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India, 1752-1765: Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal, and Tibet*, 2008, 144.

were mentioned by Nathan. Firearms, including muskets, cannons, and matchlock guns (khoja bonduk) were also in use. Jean Baptiste Tavernier, in his work *Travels in India*, asserted that the region produced high-quality gunpowder. He maintained that firearms and gunpowder were first discovered and used by the Ahoms and that this knowledge was transmitted to China by Pegu.⁴³¹

Ranabir Chakravarti disagreed with the theory that China first learned about weapons from Assam. Instead, he contended that Assam, Tibet, and Yunnan had long-standing commercial ties, and that information about weapons was probably transmitted along these trade channels. Tavernier claimed that Assam was the birthplace of firearms, but other historians, such as Iqtidar Alam Khan, disagree, blaming the arrival of the Mughals under Babur for the widespread use of firearms.⁴³² During the Ahom period, various types of cannons and weapons were used. According to Chevalier, who also emphasized the extensive usage of firearms and artillery by Ahom soldiers, flintlock guns were first used during Captain Welsh's mission.⁴³³ As Chevalier and his team moved closer to the Ahom city, these armed soldiers were positioned along the riverbanks. Guns and cannons, however, were utilized for ceremonial purposes also. The use of these weapons was a sign of respect. For instance, an Ahom minister once asked Chevalier for a three-gun salute to honor the King during a royal procession. Chevalier agreed, but only if the Ahoms would show him the same respect in return, explaining that it was necessary to preserve the honor of the French people. His true goal, though, was to find out if the Ahoms had any cannons. His account states: “one of the motivations prompting me to engage in this minor dispute for the nation's honor was to determine if they owned any cannons.”⁴³⁴ It is evident that Chevalier's main goal was to build a

⁴³¹ Tavernier, *Travels in India*, 1925, 1:277–79.

⁴³² Ranabir Chakravarti, “Early Medieval Bengal and the Trade in Horses: A Note,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 42, no. 2 (1999): 194–211.

⁴³³ Edward Gait, *A History of Assam* (Thacker, Spink & Company, 1906), 214.

⁴³⁴ Chevalier, *The Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India, 1752-1765: Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal, and Tibet*, 2008, 186.

commercial base. He also hoped to learn more about the Ahom governmental system and military prowess in order to advance French imperial ambitions.

Largely due to the geographical features of the region, which demanded the adoption of maritime battle during pre-modern times, naval warfare played a prominent role in Assam's medieval military history. The Ahoms and the Mughals engaged in a number of conflicts on waterways that were significant for both the sides. The naval strength of the Ahoms depended heavily on their superior boats and the ability of the troops to navigate them across treacherous river waters during combat. Since rivers were the main routes of travel and communication in mediaeval Assam, boats, as well as the boat making industry, were quite significant. Boats played an important role in warfare during that time, in addition to being used as means of transport for people and commodities. Mirza Nathan mentioned a number of regional vessels that were part of the Mughal navy. He asserted that *bachari*, *kosah*, and *maar naos* were the three principal types of boats used by the Ahoms.⁴³⁵

The report of Chevalier mentioned a variety of boats, including *bazaras*, *moutouas*, and *panchoes*. The shallow water and sandy path of the river presented difficulties for him as he travelled with the heavier boats (*moutouas and bazaras*).⁴³⁶ He also provided a realistic account of the royal parade that included big boats, each of which had a length of roughly a hundred feet, lofty extremities, and a midsection that barely touched the surface of the water. This design was especially suitable for use on the rivers of Assam, where the dry season caused a severe decline in water levels.

⁴³⁵ Mirza Nathan, "Baharistan-i Ghaybi," *A History of the Mughal Wars in Assam, Cooch Behar, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa during the Reigns of Jahangir and Shah Jahan*, 1936, 488.

⁴³⁶ Chevalier, *The Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India, 1752-1765: Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal, and Tibet*, 2008, 125, 132, 139.

The boats could travel at great speed and were conspicuously lightweight. Some of them were coloured elaborately and even had little dwellings inside.⁴³⁷ Chevalier observed that the royal boat factories were located in the Diralki settlement, which is located on the banks of the Kakodonga or Dilkhiri rivers.⁴³⁸ Since rivers and other waterways were the main means of travel and communication, strong boats were essential. The forests of Assam, located on both sides of the Brahmaputra, were home to a wealth of wildlife, particularly to herds of wild elephants, since the Himalayan foothills and dense forests located in the state served as natural environments for these animals. Visitors were deeply impressed by the wide variety of species in the area. Chevalier gave a detailed description of his experience of spending a night on the riverbed. He recounted how the nocturnal chorus of buffaloes, tigers, rhinoceros, and elephants created a terrifying symphony that echoed throughout the mountains. The animals would approach the river's edge close to their boats. This caused such terror among the rowers that they would seek refuge in the bottom of their boats. Yet, the soldiers managed to ward off these wild animals with a few rifle shots and cannons.⁴³⁹

Since it was challenging to navigate the terrain, elephants served as a valuable resource for the transportation of goods and people. Due to their size and strength, they served as the equivalent of tanks during mediaeval warfare. Securing a consistent supply of elephants for troops was a major reason for the eastward advances of the Mughal empire into Bengal and beyond. Elephants also served as status symbols for their owners. *Kheda sikar* and *Mela sikar*, two hunting techniques, were used in Assam to capture these elephants.⁴⁴⁰ Although Assam did not employ horses frequently, Chevalier watched horse races and was astounded by the riders' prowess. They

⁴³⁷ Chevalier, 185.

⁴³⁸ Chevalier, 180.

⁴³⁹ Chevalier, 181.

⁴⁴⁰ "Itihase Soaura Chasahata Bachar by : Sarbanada Rajkumar"(BANALATA)," , 181–82 -.

were able to remain atop galloping horses without grabbing their harnesses. Although the use of horses was acknowledged, it was hardly seen in Assam due to the locals' typical way of living. Chevalier was nonetheless impressed by horse racing, especially by the riders' ability to stand atop speeding horses without using stirrups.⁴⁴¹ In addition to horses and elephants, several other draught animals were used in battle. A detailed description of the scope of mediaeval military missions is provided by the eastward expedition of Mir Jumla, emphasizing the vast scale of such endeavors. The commander advanced, encircled by horse-riding soldiers and preceded by elephant-mounted trumpeters and drummers beating on animal-skin drums. Twenty elephants followed him, each carrying two toy cannons, two gunners, and a number of ammunition transporters. An army of 3000-4000 expert mounted warriors came behind them. Numerous horses, infantrymen and camels pulling hefty loads also arrived. They were followed by traders, craftsmen, and courtesans riding camels and horses. Historical accounts provide conflicting data regarding the number of troops. For instance, Gait's account suggested that the Mughal general had 12,000 horsemen and 30,000 infantries at his disposal in Jogighopa.⁴⁴² In contrast, J.N. Sarkar provided a much larger estimate, asserting that the general's army consisted of 300,000 mounted warriors, 500,000 foot soldiers, and a sizeable number of pack animals.⁴⁴³

5.1.7 Religious Traditions and Practices in Medieval Assam

Religion frequently embodies the essence of a society. Religious beliefs and practices, rather than being restricted to spirituality, frequently serve as signifiers of identity. The narratives of mediaeval explorers highlight the religious affiliation of the people they encountered in distant

⁴⁴¹ Chevalier, *The Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India, 1752-1765: Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal, and Tibet*, 2008, 194.

⁴⁴² Gait, *A History of Assam*, 132.

⁴⁴³ Jagadish Narayan Sarkar, *The Life of Mir Jumla, the General of Aurangzeb* (Rajesh Publications, 1979).

lands. Authors of travelogues documented their experience of crossing into new territories-physical, ideological, or cultural especially when these areas were inhabited by subjects with varied religious beliefs and customs. In their accounts, they described their engagement with the actual, perceived or fictional dissimilarities between their culture and that of the ‘alien’ civilization, which were framed through the lens of preconceived notions.

Mediaeval authors opined that religion was more nuanced than a simple devotion to the divine. Their narratives provided deep insights into religion and demonstrated a fascination with rituals, ceremonies, celebrations, and the hierarchical structure of religious organizations. In the past, Assam, also known as Kamarupa, had been recognized as a centre of tantric practices. It was a cultural melting pot, where elements of tantric Buddhism, Shaivism, and Shaktism coexisted alongside devotion to several indigenous gods. The peculiar tantric worship practiced in the area gained a formidable standing as a result of this synthesis.

Ancient writings from 10th to 11th century C.E., such as the *Kalika Purana*, and those from the 16th century C.E., such as the *Yogini Tantra*, testify to the widespread practice of Goddess worship in Assam. The rituals and ceremonies associated with the worship of Goddess Kamakhya are the focus of other works of tantric literature such as the *Kamakhya Tantra* and *Devi Bhagavata*. Buddhist works, such as the *Hevajra Tantra*, and travelogues such as Yuan Chang’s, offer insightful analyses of the deep-rooted religious practices in the area.⁴⁴⁴

Along with Shakti worship, Saivism, which had prevailed since the ancient times, and neo-Vaishnavism, which emerged in the mediaeval era, contributed to the variety of religious beliefs and customs in the region. Concurrently, the rich and varied tribal populations of the state maintained their unique spiritual beliefs and rituals. Through a thorough process known as

⁴⁴⁴ Kakoli Gogoi and Kakoli Gogoi, “Envisioning Goddess Tara: A Study of the Tara Traditions in Assam,” vol. 72 (Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, JSTOR, 2011), 232–39.

Hinduization, these indigenous practices were eventually assimilated into the social order and came to be seen as belonging to the larger category of Hinduism. This integrative process continued well into the colonial era. Religion became an important criterion for categorization during the census conducted by the British. Despite the predominance of tribal people and the widespread impact of tribal traditions in mediaeval Assam, Hinduization continued unhindered. The integration of significant sections of the populace into the Hindu fold was largely facilitated by temples and the neo-Vaishnavite satras. As a result, numerous tribal components, such as deities, worship locations, customs, and rituals, were adopted by the larger Hindu tradition, as illuminated by the historical adoration of Goddess Kamakhya. One of the major centers of Shaktism, which experts say had definite tribal roots, was the Kamakhya temple, which held such significance that even the Ahom kings, after adopting Hindu practices, regularly offered sacrifices to the Goddess.⁴⁴⁵

The British explorer Ralph Fitch highlighted the flourishing and patronage of Vaishnavism and related literature in his works. He noted that most of Nara Narayana's subjects adhered to Hinduism. Throughout his reign, which lasted for half a century till he passed away in 1584, practices such as animal and human sacrifices were prohibited. Historical records mention that the construction of the Kamakhya temple took place during this time.

The Kamakhya temple features prominently in travellers' accounts. The writings of Jean Baptiste Chevalier provided a thorough account of religion in 16th century Assam. He discussed an animal sacrifice in Kamakhya Temple, which he claimed to have witnessed firsthand since he was with the monarch. The Kamakhya temple was described as a highly revered pagoda in the city of Goaty (Guwahati), perched on a hill by the bank of the Barampoutou (also known as the

⁴⁴⁵ Hugh B Urban, *The Power of Tantra: Religion, Sexuality and the Politics of South Asian Studies* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009).

Brahmaputra).⁴⁴⁶ However, since many of his observations seem erroneous, the accuracy of the description has been challenged. For instance, his description of the idol is incongruous with that in other sources, and the features he described are very different from those in common depictions of goddesses in the Hindu pantheon. The depiction of the goddess with a sword and a book appears to be more European than native in origin. A massive idol built completely of gold, which Chevalier wrote of, would definitely not escape scholarly attention. However, no other accounts of Kamakhya mention such a statue. According to tradition, the goddess is worshipped in the sanctuary of divinity as a yoni built of rock, housed inside a natural cave. Chevalier's account, therefore, should be viewed with skepticism, as significant exaggerations and creative embellishments abound. These might have been added later to validate his ambitious journey in the face of criticism.

Chevalier was interested in decoding the purpose and history of the ritual of sacrifice. To understand the significance of the ceremony, he approached scholars, temple priests, and even the monarch himself. The king spoke in favor of the rite, warning that failure to observe it could result in terrible catastrophes, sickness, and famine. Chevalier was unconvinced and dismissed it as a peculiar and superstitious custom.⁴⁴⁷

Alexander Dow's observations indicated the strong influence of religion and priestly authority over the various castes in India. People belonging to non-Brahmin castes were restricted from reading the Vedas (Vedas), which were considered extremely sacred by the Brahmins. This was a testament to the prevailing superstitions and the dominance of the priestly caste. The Brahmins were obliged by religion to keep these writings within their own caste. Dow maintained

⁴⁴⁶ Chevalier, *The Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India, 1752-1765: Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal, and Tibet*, 36.

⁴⁴⁷ Chevalier, 37.

that if any Brahmin was found to have shared these sacred texts with others, they would face immediate excommunication.⁴⁴⁸

According to Robinson, the temple of Kamakhya was the site of the most heinous rituals, featuring the lewdest acts that reached the lowest levels of wickedness. Muslims were a minority in the region. Bakhtiyar Khalji's voyages in 1206 marked the beginning of Assam's interactions with Islam. This meeting, coupled with additional Mughal incursions throughout the succeeding centuries, led to the emergence of a population that subscribed to Islamic principles, but was quite similar to others in terms of daily practices.⁴⁴⁹

Talish believed that they were only Muslim in name and remained Assamese in their behavior. They had more affinity with the Assamese than with the Mughals, who shared their religion. It is interesting to note that mediaeval travel accounts do not contain much information about neo-Vaishnavism or the Satra institutions, especially considering the significant impact the neo-Vaishnavism movement led by Sankaradeva had on the social and cultural landscape of mediaeval Assam. Since this movement had deeply influenced the lives of local people, its absence from historical records is surprising. The likely explanation is that despite the popularity of neo-Vaishnavism among the common people, the elite class primarily worshipped Shakti and Shiva. Since medieval travellers had limited interaction with the ordinary populace and their observations were largely based on the practices of the elite, their works focused on more renowned temples such as Kamakhya and Dergaon. This explains why such key cultural shifts were overlooked in their writings.

Besides, the travellers frequently avoided local communities due to strategic reasons, and the local populace had an attitude of indifference, if not animosity, towards foreigners. The

⁴⁴⁸ Alexander Dow, *The History of Hindostan* (Taylor & Francis, 2000), xxi.

⁴⁴⁹ Robinson, *A Descriptive Account of Assam*, 259.

villagers made conscious efforts to avoid any contact with visitors, since they perceived them as sources of contamination. This pattern prevailed even in the 18th century. Ramkumar Vidyaratna's description of a Bengali traveller who voiced his shock at the natives' hostility to outsiders illustrates this. He explained how Assamese people were so intolerant of Westerners that they would not even give them water, instead instructing them to fetch it from the river. As a result, European historical sources do not provide a comprehensive and thorough picture of Assam's religious environment prior to colonialism. However, during the colonial period, records began to use terms like *Mahajons* and *Chatras* to denote the Satradhikars and Satras respectively, providing insights into the religious institutions of the time.⁴⁵⁰

Granting land to Brahmins and temples not only elevated their political standing, but also reinforced their religious and ritualistic significance. At the same time, local indigenous deities were integrated into Brahmanical Hinduism through state sponsorship. This assertion is supported by the adoration of Kechaikhati and Kamakhya in Sadiya and Kamarupa respectively. The tribal ancestry of the goddesses and their role in efforts towards building the Assamese state have been examined by scholars.⁴⁵¹

Due to the incorporation of numerous regional non-Brahmanical components, the worship of Shakti and Shiva in Assam has taken on a tantric aspect. The act of making offerings to the gods was inextricably linked to ritual worship. Even when the reigning elites accepted Brahmanical ceremonies and practices, the process of absorbing indigenous aspects into Brahmanical Hinduism continued. According to B.K. Barua, the Koch monarch Naranarayana paid homage to Lord Shiva in accordance with Brahmanical customs before his expedition against the Ahom realm, which rankled his tribal soldiers. The king was forced to alter his strategy and return to tribal customs for

⁴⁵⁰ Robinson, 261–62.

⁴⁵¹ Urban, *The Power of Tantra: Religion, Sexuality and the Politics of South Asian Studies*, 86, 169.

worship.⁴⁵² There is a rich historical background to the association between royalty and blood sacrifice. The chapter titled “*Rudhiradhyaya*” in the *Kalika Purana* mentions the custom of offering blood sacrifices to the goddess in order to defeat enemies in war.⁴⁵³ According to the scriptures, only a monarch was authorized to carry out human sacrifices. The religious texts also maintained that a ruler who performed this act would enjoy all of life's joys and, after passing away, would live in the goddess's domain for three kalpas (huge periods of time in Hindu cosmology) before returning to the earth as a sovereign ruler.⁴⁵⁴ The argument that human sacrifices were common in early Assam has recently come under scrutiny due to lack of evidence. However, a handful of people maintain that such practices existed and support their claims with archaeological data.

The Ahom ruler Rajeswar Singha detailed the long history of sacrifice and how the goddess herself had prescribed it. The founder of the dynasty had been commanded by the goddess to offer sacrifices, and she had forewarned him and his heirs that the kingdom would continue to enjoy happiness and wealth as long as they obediently followed this order. Discontinuing the practice in defiance of her instructions would offend the deity, causing terrible tragedies, widespread illness, and starvation.⁴⁵⁵

In his account of the grand sacrifice at Kamakhya temple, Chevalier wrote about his amazement at the spectacle before him - a pair (both male and female) of every species of four-legged animals and birds in the kingdom were kept in a large park surrounded by fences. Every three years, animals were to be sent to the temple by provincial governors and village leaders as

⁴⁵² Birinchi Kumar Barua, *A Cultural History of Assam* (Lawyer's Book Stall, 1969), 165.

⁴⁵³ Biswanarayan Shastri, *Kalikapurana* (Motilal Banarsidass Publ., 1994), 501.

⁴⁵⁴ Shastri, 514.

⁴⁵⁵ Chevalier, *The Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India, 1752-1765: Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal, and Tibet*, 2008, 36–37.

their contribution to the ceremony. The animals and birds were sacrificed on the goddess' altar on the chosen day.

According to Chevalier, the practice of human sacrifice was abolished by King Rajeswar Singha's grandfather.⁴⁵⁶ However, some scholars attribute this pronouncement to King Gaurinath Singha or King Gadadhar Singha. Regardless of the source of the decision, it is generally accepted that the disappearance of such ceremonies was the result of tribal traditions losing their significance due to widespread Hinduization and the rising influence of neo-Vaishnavism. As such, it is reasonable to assume that the Ahom and Koch rulers offered sacrifices to demonstrate their dominance over other tribes and tribesmen, and to identify intimately with strong deities. In essence, this was an effort on the part of the Ahoms to win over the allegiance and support of the people who lived in pre-Ahom polities, like the Chutiyas and the Moran-Barahis, by adopting the customs and rites of the indigenous tribes. The King acted as an agent for making this link manifest, and numerous stories fashioned to justify this process were articulated. The King, who was considered a sacred figure with a significant role in ritual performances, solidified his claim to sovereignty through these actions.

5.1.8 Esoteric Practices and Popular Religion in Assam

Travellers' testimonies highlight the significance of state institutions, mythologies, and beliefs surrounding the institution of kingship. The pre-colonial states in Assam intrigued contemporary travellers, who were fascinated by the origins of the ruling dynasties, which frequently claimed their ancestry from revered deities or mythical figures of Brahmanical Hinduism, aiming to enhance their recognition and legitimacy. Explorers were captivated by the narratives, since the

⁴⁵⁶ Chevalier, 36.

creation of mediaeval nations in the Brahmaputra valley was closely related to legends and fables.⁴⁵⁷

Stories related to the mythical origins of ruling dynasties were quite common and attracted the attention of travellers. In Shihabuddin Talish's account, he gave considerable attention to the Ahom king and the concept of Ahom kingship. He notes that the Ahom kings used the title *Sarki* ('swargadeo, meaning 'the heavenly king') to claim divine ancestry and justify their reign. The concept was based on the notion that the Raja's ancestors were the sovereign rulers of angels who descended from heaven using a golden ladder.⁴⁵⁸ The royal Ahom house in Assam, founded by Siu-ka-pha, was part of the *Chao-Pha* ('noble' or 'royal') *Su/Tsu* ('tiger') clan of the *Mao-Shan* sub-tribe. The Burmese chronicles, "*Weissalisa*," present an origin myth stating that a tiger raised the ancestor of the Ahom kings.⁴⁵⁹

Apart from Talish, a number of explorers engaged with the theory of divine origin. Chevalier was able to see the rituals firsthand because he had had the opportunity to visit the court of the Ahom ruler, Rajeswar Singha. He stated that the first member of the dynasty was believed to have been sent from above. It was said that he arrived atop a thick cloud, amid flashes of lightning and thunder, bearing a shield, a crown, and a book that included both their legal code and religious beliefs, which have been utilized to control them ever since.⁴⁶⁰

Such origin myths were common in ancient and mediaeval communities whose members believed in the divine- right theory of Kingship. For instance, royalty was usually associated with

⁴⁵⁷ Bara and Barua, *Weissalisa: Containing Two Independent Chronicles of the Burmese Invasions of Assam, Written Originally in Thai Language*, 1977.

⁴⁵⁸ Ahmad ibn Muhammad Wali Shihab al-Din Talish, *Tarikh-i Asham*, 1845, 54.

⁴⁵⁹ Bara and Barua, *Weissalisa: Containing Two Independent Chronicles of the Burmese Invasions of Assam, Written Originally in Thai Language*, 1977.

⁴⁶⁰ Chevalier, *The Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India, 1752-1765: Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal, and Tibet*, 2008, 37.

divinity, and was considered indispensable and incontrovertible in mediaeval Europe. As such, Chevalier might have been familiar with the notion of divine kingship, wherein a combination of both spiritual and temporal power was crucial to attain and remain on the throne, as was the case with the Assamese rulers who were believed to have descended from gods. The King functioned both as the ruler and as the high priest, making choices not just about religious issues, but also about other concerns pertaining to their realm.⁴⁶¹ They utilized myths to legitimize their claims to authority. They established a lineage linking them to various deities in the Hindu pantheon, in order to maintain the devotion of the people. The “*Buranjis*”⁴⁶² and “*Vamsavalis*”⁴⁶³, two works produced by royal authorization, contain tales of these mythical origins.

Heiden depicted the Assamese as a deeply superstitious people, who revered cows and never harmed them. When European explorers attempted to buy cows during their journey, the local residents were reluctant to sell them, needing assurances that no harm would come to the animals. Heiden also documented his interaction with Indian slaves who served the Mughal army with great diligence. These individuals subsisted solely on rice and practiced strict vegetarianism, even in extreme situations. They chose not to consume meat or fish, believing that their dietary habits would grant them eternal life. Heiden also mentioned encountering a fierce-looking, uncouth tribe, which allegedly practiced cannibalism. Although the tribe offered to help the Mughal army in the battle against the Ahoms, the general declined, labelling them as untrustworthy. However, Heiden's depiction of this tribe could be an overstatement, as Assamese

⁴⁶¹ Chevalier, *The Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India, 1752-1765: Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal, and Tibet*, 2008, 38.

⁴⁶² Suryya Kumkar Bhuyan, *Satsari Assam Buranji*, 1960, 21–22

⁴⁶³ Surjyakhari Daivajna, *Darrang RajVamsavali*, (ed) N.C. Sarmah, Pathsala, 1973

historical records do not mention the existence of such a cannibalistic tribe. It's plausible that Heiden was referring to either the Bodo-Kachari tribe or the 'head-hunting' Naga tribe.⁴⁶⁴

Frans van der Heiden stated that many treasure-filled tombs (known as 'maidam'), belonging to Ahom kings and nobles had been found, and that the Assamese buried their dead with their clothing, wealth, and even servants. Surprisingly, the servants were allegedly interred alive and they accepted this fate with happiness under the firm belief that they would attain a high status in the afterlife within three days. Mir Jumla had these tombs opened and found an immeasurable amount of treasure. He acquired approximately 3,900 tons of gold from these graves alone.⁴⁶⁵

Jean Baptiste Tavernier asserted that the Kings of Assam and their families were buried at Azoo. He observed that the Assamese, whom he classified as idolaters, preferred burial to cremation when disposing of corpses. He went on to discuss the Assamese views on death. According to their belief system, the afterlife was divided into two sections. While individuals who lived wicked lives were expected to suffer in the afterlife, those who lived good lives were believed to enjoy a state filled with joy. He mentioned death rituals and customs, observing that when a King died, his jewelry and the most priceless goods were placed in his tomb. Some animals were also buried next to him, since it was thought that they would share his afterlife and reincarnate with him. Usually, the King was interred in a room that he himself had built. Mir Jumla found abundant treasures on excavating these tombs. He also recounted instances of what he termed brutality, such as the King's women fatally poisoning themselves.⁴⁶⁶

⁴⁶⁴ Konwar, "Mir Jumla's Invasion of Assam (1662–63), War Experience of a Dutch Sailor Heiden and Translator Glanius," 51.

⁴⁶⁵ Konwar, 52.

⁴⁶⁶ Tavernier, *Travels in India*, 1925, 1:219–20.

A sense of superiority and the tendency to ‘Other’ native populations are visible in pre-colonial travel accounts. Visitors from other parts of the Indian subcontinent frequently perceived the region beyond Bengal as a mysterious locale. Their reactions ranged from amazement at the stories of rivers flowing with wealth, to disgust at its portrayal as a place steeped in black magic capable of turning people into lambs. It was described as a deadly place known as *Baharistan-i Ghyabi* (‘Garden of Mystery’), where black magic was practiced extensively. Mirza Nathan believed that it was his responsibility to warn his readers about this location.⁴⁶⁷ Due to such captivating tales, even Abul Fazl observed that the people of Kamarupa (lower Assam) were allured by and strongly inclined towards performing magic.⁴⁶⁸ The prevalent esoteric religious practices associated with Tantric Buddhism and Shaktism in these areas might also have led to this perception of black magic.

The people of Hindustan regarded the inhabitants of this region, which Talish referred to as the land of talismans, as sorcerers outside the realm of the human race. They believed that talismans and magic were used extensively here, and that visitors were subjected to a magical spell which prevented them from leaving.⁴⁶⁹ The obscurity and relative gloom of Hinduism found frequent mention in ethnographic records discussing the religion and its numerous gods and goddesses, written as recently as the 19th century.⁴⁷⁰

⁴⁶⁷ Nathan, *Bahāristān-i-Ghaybī: A History of the Mughal Wars in Assam, Cooch Behar, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa during the Reigns of Jahāngīr and Shāhjahān*.

⁴⁶⁸ FA Qadri, “People of Pre- Colonial Northeast India: Some Reflections from Persian Accounts,” vol. 68 (Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, JSTOR, 2007), 475–81.

⁴⁶⁹ Wali Ahmad Shihab al-Din Talas Ahmad ibn Muhammad Wali Shihab al-Din Ṭalish, *Tarikh-i Asham: récit de l’expédition de Mir-Djumlah au pays d’Assam ...* (B. Duprat, 1845), 54.

⁴⁷⁰ Robinson, *A Descriptive Account of Assam*, 256.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

The present research titled “European Travel Writing and the Representation of Assam (16th – 18th Centuries A.D)” aims to provide a thorough understanding of the interactions between European travellers and indigenous sources and the society in relation to various themes including society, culture, economy, and polity. It emphasises the diversity of viewpoints in the portrayal of the subject matter while recognising the existence of many perspectives and approaches.

Examining pre-colonial narratives of people who travelled to Assam and left written records is the ultimate objective of the research. Ralph Fitch (1585 CE), Fathers Stephen Cacella and John Cabral (1626 CE), Frans Van der Heiden (1662 CE) Jean Baptiste Tavernier (1664-1668 CE), Francois Bernier (1660's), Jean Baptist Chevalier (1752–1765 CE) Alexander Dow (1769 CE), Captain Thomas Welsh (1792 CE) and John Peter Wade (1792 CE) are just a few of the travellers whose accounts are included here. The objective of the study is to understand more about these travellers viewpoints and experiences during their time in Assam by analysing these narratives and how these writings became a part of the later written histories of Assam and continue till date.

Travellers' accounts had a significant impact on world historiography in addition to providing future historians studying Indian history with useful factual knowledge. These travellers returned with new information, viewpoints, and philosophies that they conveyed through their written narratives, thereby making an enormous impact. Images that were used to symbolise India and other colonies also contributed to the shaping and reshaping of their respective countries'

cultures. Instead of dismissing the travellers' claims as ordinary tales from far-off locations, academics have started noticing the connections between them.

Travel accounts go beyond merely recording the everyday activities of a traveller with dates. As evidence of victory, exploration, and adventure, they are very valuable. Travel writing serves as a historical record for future generations by describing the writer's encounters with the societies they visit and thereby indirectly revealing information about their past. Travel writing has had a significant positive impact on ethnography and history because it enables travellers to compare their experiences with the "other" to those of their own civilization. These stories contain portrayals of the social, economic, and political circumstances of the locations the writer visited, making them important historical sources.

The travellers' views and descriptions of the rituals and activities they witnessed provide as concrete examples of the political beliefs that predominated at the time of their travels. It was difficult for outsiders to understand the complex dynamics of the country's political structure. The simultaneous operation of several power relations had a long-lasting impact on historical events. It required significant sensitivity to unravel the complex relationship of different factors inside the polity in order to comprehend these complexities. One can learn more about the nature of the state and the ideologies guiding it by examining these narratives. These outer manifestations provide significant clues for deciphering and comprehending the larger political environment as well as the underlying values governing administration at the moment.

By contrasting travellers' opinions with information gathered from local vernacular sources, academics have attempted to fill in the gaps in their knowledge of early colonial Assam's political setting. Many of the travellers at that time were interested in Medieval Assam because of the institution of kingship there. It is important to note that the immoral treatment and

dehumanisation of the native king was frequently discussed in the accounts of these travellers. This was based on a moral standard that was Eurocentric and also later employed by the imperialists in the post 18th century to legitimise their claims of rule over Assam. These accounts, however, often failed to demonstrate a thorough knowledge of the socio-political situations around them and tended to provide a linear perspective, focused on the locations visited, people met, events viewed, and ceremonies observed. In spite of their limitations, the travellers' descriptions of rituals and events may still be useful to historians researching the past. The politico-military circumstances of precolonial states in Assam and their relations with the outside world can be better understood when these narratives are contrasted to the in-depth accounts found in Buranjis (historical chronicles of Assam). Scholars can get better insights into the historical framework, political dynamics, and foreign interactions of early colonial Assam by synthesising the viewpoints provided by both the traveller's reports and the local historical sources. This comparative approach improves our comprehension of the historical intricacies and relationships in the region as a whole. Further the whole system of administration that existed between the core agrarian regions and far of areas what is mediated by many different systems of government like the *posa* system where tribute was given by the villagers to the marauding hill people like the Tani tribes in the borderlands of Assam like Tinsukia and many other such systems that was overlooked misunderstood by the British another writers.

Due to their preconceived ideas about the other cultures and peoples they encountered on their travels, the European travellers often became victim to stereotyping and generalisation. They had been socialised to view these locations as unusual, and they often struggled to understand the local populations beliefs, habits, and practises because they saw them as deviating from accepted standards. The idea that the visiting explorers were racial superiors was supported by the

depiction of the native population as being physically and morally weak. The peculiar and strange nature of the native people's customs and rituals were highlighted as important traits, underscoring their alleged superstitious nature and moral degradation. The stories of the travellers also included information on the native population's eating habits. These narratives demonstrate how ideas about food's purity and contamination were rather malleable. The people's eating habits were influenced by long-standing dietary customs and relied on locally sourced ingredients because the society was predominately tribal and agrarian. One of the important points is that race was not a dominant category till the 18th century and only later did the idea of race become an important category of difference during the British rule.

Pre-colonial India's economy was frequently characterised as having a self-sufficient agriculture system, strong trading networks, and a thriving manufacturing industry. However, Assam does not have as many references to its economic history during the Medieval period. This was hindered by a number of problems, including Assam's unfavourable physical location, political restrictions, and a sociocultural resistance to embracing new methods of manufacturing, commerce, and other commercial activities. The Ahom state's isolationist attitude also restricted communication between the Brahmaputra valley and the outside world. It would be inaccurate to believe that trade and commerce were totally absent in these locations notwithstanding these restrictions. On the contrary most of the fairs and festivals which were held were occasions for trade since there was not enough surplus for permanent markets and we had fairs that linked people from Bengal, Bhutan, Nepal and other regions to Assam and most notably the hill regions where a wide variety of products were exchanged since a full scale exchange economy had not evolved.

An effort has also been made to comprehend several economic aspects of pre-colonial Assam, including the agricultural sector, commercial activity like trading, and craft production as

recorded in early Indian traveller narratives. Since the travellers' primary routes of travel were the Brahmaputra and its tributaries and they were typically prohibited from travelling into the interior, their reports primarily reflect the conditions in these riverine belts of the Brahmaputra. The lavishness of these regions, with their rivers teeming with gold and their beautiful, fertile terrain, caught the imaginations of traders and adventurers alike. Thus, a large number of regions of Assam escape the notice of the travellers and their generalizations were based on data available from only the Brahmaputra valley.

The traveller's accounts offer a vivid picture of meticulously kept rice fields and orchards full of fruit trees. In addition to seeking out new markets, the explorers of that era were also interested in gaining authority over uncharted territory in Southeast Asia, particularly China and Burma. The accounts of the travellers show how pre-colonial commerce networks were connected and how items were transported along these routes. They shed light on the customary methods of purchasing and selling things in the marketplaces.

One particularly noteworthy element that stands out in these narratives, especially among those travellers looking to forge business relationships, is their interaction and cooperation with others who were crucial in helping to make these connections. Surprisingly, historians frequently ignore the existence and significance of these intermediates in Assam's economic system. These narratives describe situations where travellers encountered obstacles while on their missions and how they overcame them, giving us new insights into financial negotiations and business practises. The natural world and landscapes are heavily emphasised in a number of colonial writings. It's interesting to note that these landscapes are frequently portrayed as deserted, essentially denying the existence of the human world even though they are inhabited by humans. Remains of human

activity are occasionally noted in these descriptions, but the people themselves are either neglected or ignored.

In the Ahom and Koch kingdoms, women actively participate in public life, including politics, religion, culture, and the economics. Despite the presence of patriarchal conventions, the travellers' narratives shed light on the relatively better freedom that women in Assam experienced when contrasted to civilizations that are ruled by rigid caste and religious laws. This is explained by the predominance of tribal customs and the importance of women in labour-intensive jobs in an agrarian society. The travellers memoirs make sporadic mentions of gender dynamics in pre-colonial Assam, reflecting the dominant patriarchal worldview of medieval times. The narratives frequently use the dichotomy of "public" and "private" worlds, depicting women in the latter as being representative of indigenous women's allegedly lower moral standards.

When explaining the "other" culture, in particular, the travellers' understanding of the area they have seen entails a conscious manipulation of perspectives. It is clear that travel writing does not offer a neutral perspective. In fact, it frequently demonstrates voyeuristic tendencies, enabling the exploitation of the civilizations being described. Self-reflective travel narratives are produced as a result of the writing, which projected fears and fantasies about the cultural "other" and discloses the traveller's own subject position. These narratives use a variety of rhetorical devices and strategies to describe the "self". Travel discourse ultimately contributes to the process of "othering," reinforcing colonial dominance and claiming cultural superiority.

From the writings, it can be inferred that European visitors to Assam had some preconceived conceptions through which they attempted to contextualise their voyage. The many purposes of the visitors to Assam help to define the region's unique personality. This indicates clearly the need for additional sources and the inadequacy of using travel accounts alone. For a

thorough understanding, it is crucial to carefully review and compare travel narratives with different sources. Despite the fact that the travellers reached Assam for a variety of reasons and under the influence of some delusions, they shed light on intriguing facts that enable us to examine the time period during which they travelled. It emphasises the necessity for a careful analysis of the facts to gain an accurate picture of the events that the descriptions provided by these travellers cannot often be taken at a glance. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the importance of trip narratives in historical study since they offer insightful viewpoints and useful insights that can help us understand the past better. Travel writings contributed a lot to the emergence of Assam as a historical region and in this process brought about many stereotypes and generalisations that was perpetuated in later writings leading to misrepresentations and contestations over the same which continue till date. Therefore, travel writing has to be re-examined to understand its nature on the later historiographical trends concerning the region of Assam and the large impact of travel writing in creating the regional particularity and privileged some forms of knowledge and at the same time marginalised the indigenous sources and their representations of Assam.

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European Travelers' Glimpse into 16th-18th Century Assam: Unveiling the Historical Accounts

MONALISHA KHAKHLARI

Abstract

Travel accounts are considered as excellent main sources for researching the past, especially when combined with more recent sources. It come in a variety of formats that reflect the varied experiences and objectives of many travellers. Conquerors, explorers, traders, scholars, tourists, missionaries, job seekers, exiles, immigrants, refugees, and pilgrims are just a few of the people and groups represented in these chronicles. While Assam, an intriguing state on India's strategic frontier, was not a popular travel destination in earlier times, a small number of foreigners, including travellers, scholars, invaders, traders, soldiers, religious reformers, and missionaries, ventured into this area, motivated by business interests and a sense of adventure. Without a doubt, the writings of British explorers like Ralph Fitch, Alexander Dow, Jean Baptiste Tavernier, Francois Bernier, Frans Van der Heiden, Captain Thomas Welsh, Jean Baptiste Chevalier and John Peter Wade have made a considerable impact on our understanding of mediaeval Assam.

Keywords- Travel writing, historical accounts, representation, exploration,

Introduction

History and travel writing share a deep-rooted connection in many respects. Travel writing has long been recognized as a trustworthy source of historical data. These travel accounts are very useful to historians. Travel writers frequently include information that local authors would overlook as unimportant or routine in order to offer a wider or different perspective. Travel writing was a crucial early method for Europeans to gather information about, and shape their understanding of, nations outside Europe. Travelers were able to express their opinions and provide light on some aspects of their own communities through the diaries of their voyages. People embarked on journeys to unknown lands in various roles, including as merchants, ambassadors, conquerors, administrators, soldiers, artists, philosophers, missionaries, mariners, scholars, physicians, and professionals. Explorers travelled the globe for a

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Dear Prof./Dr./Mr./Ms. **Monalisha Khakhlari**

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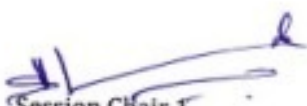
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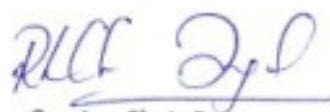
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