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ACCOUNTS

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Source: *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 68, Part One (2007), pp. 475-481

Published by: Indian History Congress

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44147859>

Accessed: 30-09-2019 10:27 UTC

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# PEOPLE OF PRE-COLONIAL NORTH EAST INDIA: SOME REFLECTIONS FROM PERSIAN ACCOUNTS

F.A. Qadri

References to the North East India in the early Mughal writings are incidental and fragmentary. Abul Fadl mentions in *Akbar Nama* the establishment of a defensive alliance with Kuch Bihar, the break-up of the Koch Kingdom, the events of the Koch-Mughal war imprisonment of Raja Parikshit Narayan and Mukarram Khan's expedition to Assam. Medieval Persian accounts are replete with the description of the region. The fatigue and dangers of various expeditions coupled with the climatic conditions and environmental tensions or the pestilential country. The amazing accounts of magic, sorcery and witch-craft was so impressive that even the Medieval doyen like Abul Fadl while talking of the prosperous silk industry or the region, does not forget to mention that the people of Kamarupa (lower Assam) are good looking and addicted to the practice of magic.

Seventeenth century is a period of crucial significance in so far as Persian writings on Northeast India are concerned. There is a definite shift in the perception of Mughal writers, a result perhaps of direct contact with the land and people of the region. This was also the result of a very significant shift in the realm of historiography. Almost all historians of Medieval India prior to Abul Fadl, were inspired by Persian/ Iranian tradition of historiography where the conspectus was limited to the court and the camp.

*Fathiyah Ibriyah* is the accounts of the exploits of Mir Muhammad Sa'id Ardastani. *Yar-i Wafadar, Mir-i Jumla* during his Kuch Bihar and Assam Campaign in 1661-62 by Shihab al-Din Talish. An accomplished writer and a keen observer of men and environment, he accompanied Mir Jumla as a *Waqia Nawis* (news writer). He was in constant attendance of the Mughal general and was not only an eye-witness but actually shared all the fatigues and dangers of the expedition.

Talish wrote an accurate and detailed account of the expedition and description of not only Kuch Bihar and Assam but of the major parts of present North East. Its economy, geography, people, customs, manners, weapons, method of warfare, bravery, prowess, hardiness, enterprising nature and skills. The author named the work as *Fathiyah Ibriyah*, i.e., victory and admonition as the Mughals gained victory and also learnt lessons from their expedition. Given a choice, I would

prefer to call it Triumph and Disaster, as it is more appropriate.<sup>3</sup>

Talish writes that, Assam is a wild and inaccessible country, cultivated only along the Brahmaputra, which flows through it from east to west. The length of Assam, west to east, from Gauhati to Sadiya is about 200 *kos* of standard measurement. Its breadth north to south, from the hills of Garos, Miris, Mishmis, Daflas and Landas to the mountain of the Naga tribe is seven or eight days journey by guess. Its southern mountain touch lengthwise the hilly regions of Khasia, Kachar and Gonasher, and breadth wise the hills inhabited by the Naga tribe. Its southern mountains run along the lofty ridges of Kamrup (Namrup) and extend between the high hills of Dafla and Landa tribes. The land on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra is called *Uttarkol* and on the southern bank *Dakshinkol*. *Uttarkol* stretches from Gauhati to the home of Miri and Mishmi tribe, and *Dakhinkol* from the kingdom of Naktirani to the village or Sadiya.<sup>4</sup>

The old inhabitants of this country belong to two communities, the Assamese and the Kolita. The latter, in all things, are superior to the former, except where fatigues are to be undergone, and in warlike expeditions, in which the former are better.<sup>5</sup>

No Indian King in former times according to Talish ever conquered Assam. Even the intercourse of foreigners and the Assamese was very limited. They allow no stranger to enter their territories, and prevent their own people from leaving the country. Once a year, at the order of the Raja, a party of Assamese used to visit the neighborhood of Gauhati and the boundary of the country, bringing gold, musk, lingum aloe, paper and silk. These articles they gave in exchange for salt, saltpeter, sulphur, and other things, which the people of Gauhati used to furnish. All armies that entered Assam perished, and no caravan ever got safe out of it. If an army invaded the country, it was exposed to continual night attacks, or the people withdrew to the hills, and waited for the beginning of the rains, when the alien soldiers were sure to die or could easily be cut off.<sup>6</sup>

The Assam Rajas, he continues, have always been insolent and proud of their power and the number of their men. The present Raja, Jaidhaj Singh, was called *Sargi* Raja, because *Sarg* in Hindi means 'heaven.' He believed that one of his ancestors commanded the heavenly host, and descended from heaven on a golden ladder; and as he found the country beautiful, he remained there instead of returning to heaven. The present Raja is much prouder than his ancestors; for a slight fault he will destroy a whole family, or on suspicion throw people into fetters. His wife only gives birth to daughters, and has no son; hence the word 'succession' has a bad name in Assam, especially as there is no male

relation in the whole family. He professes to be a Hindu; but as believes himself to be one of the great emanations of the deity, he worships no idols. The inhabitants profess no religion whatsoever. They eat whatever they get, and from whomsoever it be, following the bent of their uncivilized minds. They will accept food from Muslims and other people, they will eat every kind of flesh except human, whether of dead or killed animals. They hate butter, so much so that they refuse food, if it only smells of butter.<sup>7</sup>

The language of the Assamese differed entirely from the dialects spoken in eastern Bengal.<sup>8</sup>

The men are strongly built, Talish says. They are quarrelsome, fond of shedding blood, fearless in affrays, merciless, mean, and treacherous. Their women have mild features, but are very black; their hair is long, and their skin soft and smooth; their hands and feet are delicate. From a distance the people look well; but they are ill-favoured as far as proportion of limbs is concerned. Neither the women of the Raja, nor those of common people, veil themselves; they go about in the bazaars without head coverings. Few men have less than two wives; most have four or five. The several wives of a man carry on sales and barter among each other.<sup>9</sup>

In paying respect, the Assamese bend the knees; and when the subjects go to the king or the *phukans*, they bend their knees, sit on their haunches, and fix their eyes on the ground. They shave the head and beard and whiskers; and if a man only departs a little from this custom, they call him Bengalised and kill him.<sup>10</sup>

To sell an elephant is looked upon as a heinous crime. The Raja and the Phukans travel in *singhasans*; and chief and rich people in *dulis*, made in a most ridiculous way. They use a kind of chair instead of *hawdahs*. Turbans, long coats, trowsers, shoes and sleeping on *charpais*, are quite unusual. They use a coarse cloth for the head, one for the waist, and a sheet for the shoulders. Some of the richer people wear a kind of half coat, which resembles our *Ya'qubkhani* jacket. Those who can afford it sleep on a wooden cot.<sup>11</sup>

They chew *pan* in large quantities with unripe *supari*, unshelled. They weave excellent lowered silk, velvet, tat bands, and other silks. Boxes, trays, stools, chairs, are cleverly and neatly made of one piece of wood. Talish saw several stools belonging to the Raja, two cubits broad; even the feet were cut out of the same piece of wood, and not merely joined to it.<sup>12</sup>

The people of Assam bury their dead with the head towards the East and the feet towards the West. The chiefs erect funeral vaults

(*dakhmah*) for their dead, kill the women and servants of the deceased, and put necessities etc., for several years, viz. elephants, gold and silver vessels, carpets, clothes and food, into the vaults. They fix the head of the corpse, rigidly with poles, and put a lamp with plenty of oil and a torchbearer alive into the vault, to look after the lamp. Ten such vaults were opened by order of Mir Jumla, and property worth about 90,000 Rupees was recovered. In one vault in which the wife of the Raja about 80 years ago had been buried, a golden *pandan* was found, and the *pan* in it was still fresh. This fact was related by Painsdah Baig, Assistant News Writer (*Waqia' Nawis*), and by Shah Baig, at an evening party; and Rasmi Baig, who received the *pandan*, told me the same.<sup>13</sup>

The Muslims whom Talish met in Assam, were, he felt, Assamese in their habits, and Muslims but in name. In fact they liked the Assamese better than us. A few Muslim strangers that had settled there, kept up prayers and fasts; but they were forbidden to chant the *azan* and the word of God in public.<sup>14</sup>

Husain Shah, one of the kings of Bengal, invaded Assam with 24000 foot and horse and numerous ships. The Raja withdrew to the hills. Husain Shah, therefore, took possession of the country, left his son there with a strong detachment, and returned to Bengal. As soon as the rain set in, the Raja came down from the hills and, assisted by his own people, who had of course submitted to Husain's son, killed the prince, starved the army, and managed to capture or kill all of them. It is said that the people who are now called Muslims in Assam, are the descendants of the captives of Husain's army.<sup>15</sup>

While Mughal-Ahom conflict has received considerable attention from modern scholars of pre-colonial north East on the basis of Persian writings and the *Buranjis* of Assam, it is a matter of great surprise the other minor groups within Assam, Kamarupa and in the contiguous areas have been marginalized. Mughal writers have left enough interesting and matter of fact information about various tribal groups of the region both in hills and plains. These are in all probability the earliest references to the tribal communities of the region, much before the British imperial officers and ethnographers became interested in the tribes of the north-eastern region of India. Talish records that there are innumerable number of smaller chiefs in the hills and plains of Assam and its environs. Most of them are tributary and have received the title of Raja (*Khitab-i Rajagi*) from the Raja of Assam, Talish says.

The expression used by Talish for the tribal people of Assam is *qaum* (tribe), for instance, he uses the expressions such as *Qaum-i Miri w Mishmi*, *Qaum-i Daflah*, *Qaum-i Landah* (Akas or Ankas) in present day Arunachal Pradesh. *Qaum-i Naga* and *Qaum-i Garoh* and so on

and so forth for other groups. The hill and plains people can easily be distinguished as for hill people expressions like *Sakna-i Jibal*, *Sakna-i Kohistan*, *Maskunu-i Jibal* and *Mutawattinin-i Jibal* all meaning hill dwellers have been used. Hills and hill people were considered strategically important, no wonder, therefore, why the Mughals in the Treaty of Ghilajorighat in January 1663 demanded from *Dhakhinkol*, the territories of Naktirani, Nagas, Beltola and Dimapur. It is here that in course of writing treaty stipulations that we are told about the Garos:

The territory of Naktirani is adjacent to the Garo Hills (*Kohistan-i Garoh*). Garos are group of valiant people, who are gentle by nature .... and the hill of this tribe (*qaum*) is contiguous to the hills of Karabari which is part of the imperial territory.<sup>16</sup>

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

Mother of Raja Dimarua, who is most prominent and distinguished amongst the zamindars of Dakhinkol, which is now appended to the imperial territory, called on the *Nawab*. She presented a huge elephant chain and apologized to the *Nawab* that due to serious illness her son is unable to move and hence missed the opportunity to call on the *Nawab* personally. She was presented a gift and a robe of honour (*khil'at*).<sup>17</sup>

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

Raja Dimarua, who is one of the subordinates of the Raja of Assam submitted through his nephew, presented an elephant chain and requested for pardon on the pretext of illness. He deputed his nephew in the *Nawab's* camp.<sup>18</sup>

It was during this march that Makardhaj, the Raja of Darrang joined Mir Jumla:

Makardhaj, the Raja of the country of Darrang, a subordinate of the Raja of Assam joined the *Nawab*, presented two elephant chains and received *khil'at* (robe of honour) and joined the *Nawab* in his march.<sup>19</sup>

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

She too was felicitated with a *doshala* and three pieces of brocade (*Abresham*). Makardhaj's son who was hardly eleven or twelve years of age, was given a well decorated dagger and the *Nawab*, by his own hand put the *tika* of kingship on his forehead.<sup>20</sup>

Mir Jumla's officers established matrimonial relations with the Garos, which led to the formation of *Momin* clan of the tribe. There is a strong tradition based on Garo folk-tales that two sisters *Aje* and *Gilje* married

Muslim officers from Bihar with the surname Momin and, therefore, their descendants took up this surname and ever since a separate clan of *Momin* emerged among the Garos. The author of the Folktales of the Garos on whose authority Milton S. Sangma<sup>21</sup> has referred to the Momin officers of Bihar, has mistaken these officers for the Momin community of Bihar. There is such community in Bihar and elsewhere no doubt. But the officers of Mir Jumla did not bear the surname Momin rather it was the proper name of at least two officers under the Mughal General. Our authority mentions Muhammad Momin Beg, a naval officer in charge of Mughal flotilla (*nawwarah*) and Muhammad Momin, who was a news-writer (*waqia-nawis*).

After the Mughal occupation of Gargaon, while referring to the flight of the Raja of Assam, a very interesting piece of information emerges about the Nagas, an information which the British ethnographers noticed much later:

The Raja had first intended to fly to Naga Hills, but for the fear of the Mughal might the Nagas refused him asylum. The Nagas live in the southern mountain of Assam, have a light brown complexion, are well built but treacherous. In number they exceed *Yajooj* and *Majooj* (*Qur'anic* people of treacherous nature) and in hardiness and physical strength resemble *'Adiyan* (an ancient Arabian tribe). They go about naked like beasts and do not mind copulation with their Women in the streets and markets before common people and chiefs. The women cover only their breasts and say it would be absurd to cover those parts which every one might have seen at the time of birth. But this was not the case with the breasts, which since then had formed and should, therefore, be covered. Some of their chiefs call on the Nawab (Mir Jumla), they wore black hip-cloth above which they wore quilt (*gudri*), round their head they wore a belt of boar's tusk allowing their black hair to hang down the neck. Their chief weapon is short mace (*zuhin*).<sup>22</sup>

Like-wise talking about the Miris and Mishmis, Talish records:

In the hills of Miris and Mishmis, who live in the eastern Assam, in Uttarkol, about eleven days journey from Gargaon, musk deer and wild elephants are found. Silver, Copper and Tin are also obtained in the hills. The way these people live resemble the way of the Assamese. Their women are generally better looking than the women in Assam.<sup>23</sup>

These people until about 1662-63, when Talish obtained his information had perhaps not encountered any matchlocks. He observes:

They (the Miris and Mishmis) dread matchlocks, and say, a matchlock is a thing that makes a great noise, and does not stir from its place, whilst a child issues from its womb that kills a man.<sup>24</sup>

The information recorded by Shihabuddin Talish are unique and historically corroborated when compared to the *Buranjis* and other sources. It also helps in identifying the routes and tracks, which the people of pre-colonial North East India used and inhabited.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. K.A. Nizami, *On History and Historians of Medieval India*, New Delhi, 1983, p.1532.
2. For various MSS of the work see, F.A. Qadri, *Pre-Colonial North East India: A Portrait From Persian Accounts*, Guwahati, 2005.
3. *Ibid.*
4. In this passage Landah is a scribal mistake for Akas, Gonsher is near Garo Hills and Namrup is mistaken for Kamrup.
5. Talish perhaps meant Chutias whom the Ahoms over powered.
6. Elsewhere in the account referring to Mir Jumla and his army being surrounded by water due to rain, Talish in a somber mood writes that being imprisoned by water is harder than being in chains (*Qaid al-Ma'a ashadd min al-qaid al-hadid*) f.2a.
7. On such occasions Talish becomes quite contemptuous of the Assamese.
8. *Fathiyah Ibriyah*, ff.25b-26b.
9. *Ibid.*, f.27b.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. In this context the efforts of an Assamese Sufi Shah Milan alias Azan Faqir appears genuine and praiseworthy, F.A. Qadri, "Sufis and Process of Islamization in Pre-Colonial North East India", F.A. Qadri (ed.), *Society and Economy in Pre-Colonial North East*, Vol.2, New Delhi, 2005.
15. F. A. Qadri, "Perso-Arabic Inscriptions of Pre-Colonial North East India", NEIHA, *Proceedings*, 27<sup>th</sup> Session, Shillong, 2007.
16. S.N. Bhattacharya, *A History of Mughal North East Frontier Policy*, Delhi (Reprint), 1996 is silent about these groups.
17. *Fathiyah Ibriyah*, ff.77a-b.
18. *Ibid.*, f.80b.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. *History and Culture of the Garos*, New Delhi, 1981, p.143.
22. *Fathiyah Ibriyah*, f.35a.
23. *Ibid.*, f.34a.
24. *Ibid.*