



Glimpses of Natural Surroundings of Medieval Assam and Its Impact on Historical Discourse

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ABSTRACT: *Assam had been very unique and strange state from the ancient period. It was full of forest and it was a home for the large number of different species of animals, birds, insects, etc. The Persian chronicles describes about Assam as dangerous land, not only because of its dense forest and dangerous animals but also due to its hostile climate for the strangers. There are a number of references in the medieval sources about the suffering and death of Sultans and Mughals forces, nobles and horses from various diseases when they entered in this state during different course of the medieval period. During rainy season, the rivers and the deep ditches of the state created much difficulties for the Sultans and Mughals when they took campaigns to conquer it. However, this state's land had been very fertile and it produced and provided rich forest resources, fruits, various crops, etc., to the people of Assam and India.*

KEYWORDS: *Natural Resources, Brahmaputra, Environment, Nature, Forest, Fauna and Flora.*

INTRODUCTION

The study of environment and nature developed due to a consciousness among the human beings that the fauna and flora are very useful and beneficial for human lives. The rise of the environment as a political issue encouraged the emergence of an innovative new field of historical study: environmental history. Born out of the activism of the 1960s and 1970s, environmental history analyses the 'role and place of nature in human life'. Its primary goal is to reveal how human action and environmental change are intertwined. Nature, instead of being merely the backdrop against which the affairs of humans are played out, is recognised as playing an active role in historical processes. To grasp fully the complexities of human environment relationships, historical research is generally carried out at four levels: understanding the dynamics of natural ecosystems in time; examining the interactions between environment, technology and the socio-economic realm; inquiry into environmental policy and planning; exploring changing cultural values and beliefs about nature.¹

One of the most challenging things about environmental history is its inter-disciplinarity. Influenced by the holism of ecology, from the outset it has been an inclusive and collaborative endeavor. As well as historians, the field attracts scholars from a wide range of disciplines, from historical geography through to social anthropology and the natural sciences.

¹ Stephen Mosley, *The Environment in World History*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2010, ISBN 978-0-415-40955-1, P. 2.

Explorations of the ways in which climate, soils, forests, rivers and animals act as ‘co-creators’ of histories are blurring the traditional boundaries between the humanities and the sciences. To write nature into historical narratives, environmental historians must often work with both textual records and scientific data.²

John Mackenzie is a British historian of imperialism who pioneered the study of popular and cultural imperialism, as well as aspects of environment history. He writes about the period between the two world wars and says the energy used by the humans in these hundred years of the 20th century was more than the energy used by the humans in past 10000 years of life. The period saw the after effects of World War one where the countries became more attractive to try and take control over the smaller and weak regions of the world in order to take full advantages of the resources, one of country which followed the same steps was America. Rachel Carson was a marine biologist, environmentalist and writer who alerted the world to the environmental impact of fertilizers and pesticides. Her best-known book, *Silent Spring*, (1962) led to a presidential commission that largely endorsed her findings and helped to shape a growing environmental consciousness. Rachel Carson conducted research into the effects of pesticides on the food chain and condemned the indiscriminate use of pesticides, especially DDT (later banned). The study made clear the overuse of DDT in order to overproduce the crops and plantation entered the food chain which had various impact on birds’ animals as well as humans. The environmental issues are now part of the social, economic and political debate across the globe, probably no single individual did more to give them prominence than Barry Commoner scientist, teacher, popular author, public activist and briefly even a US presidential candidate. There were three themes of Commoner's lifelong advocacy. The first was the danger posed by pesticides and toxins and other pollutants generated by industrial technology and progress, none greater than the radioactive fallout from atmospheric nuclear tests then taking place in the Nevada desert and the Soviet Union. Indeed, Commoner's pursuit of the issue, notably a study he led on the perilous accumulation of strontium-90 in babies’ teeth, was a powerful factor in securing the 1963 Test Ban Treaty, forbidding all but underground nuclear tests. The second theme was the ordinary person's right to be informed of these dangers, often concealed by governments lured by the short-term boons conferred by technology. From these concerns sprang his third theme, the need for "sustainability", whereby mankind lives within the limits of the earth's bounty, respecting the unchanging laws of nature, taking no more than an ecosystem could replenish. Later he would sum up his philosophy in what he called "The Four Laws of Ecology". First, he declared, everything is connected to everything else, i.e., humans depend on everything else on planet Earth, be it animal, vegetable or mineral. Second, everything must go somewhere; when wood or anything else is burnt, it doesn't just vanish but turns into smoke and ash. Third, nature knows best – in other words, that technology meant to improve on nature will probably damage it. His fourth and final precept was: there is no such thing as a free lunch. Nothing comes without an environmental price. It was here that the ideas to oppose science and technological development were born out and this movement was given wind by the major oil shocks of 1970s and 1980s. From this time onwards we see now the

² Ibid., pp. 2-3.

writings of environment were changing hands and going into the legacy of the environment historians who now dominated the growth and problems of environment.

India's environmental history is relatively a new field of history that has emerged over the past few decades. However, the intellectual origins of environmental history as an independent domain of intellectual enquiry may well be traced to the encounter of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European philosophers. Primarily, scholarship on environmental history was concentrated in the Euro-American world. However, with the passage of decolonization, one can well observe the spread of environment history to the scholars in the decolonized nations of Africa and South Asia in the late fifties onwards. Precisely, environment history writings in India took a concrete shape in the mid of 1980s. Some of the prominent environmental historians of India are Ramachandra Guha, Mahesh Rangarajan, Madhav Gadgil, etc. who has taken the various issues of environment history in India.

Human beings have been using natural resources since their existence in this world but they began to realize the importance of natural resources to preserve it and not to overuse and not to interfere much with nature as the World is losing many species of plants, animals and birds' day by day and these species extinction from this beautiful planet. Now we are trying to protect and preserve the natural resources but it seems to be very challenging as we cannot stop technological advancement and the development. We should stop deforestation and rather we should promote forestation. We have also failed to check the population explosion which is over burden on the limited resources of this beautiful planet. The technological advancement and progress have further created a threat for nature which has led the global warming and natural calamities in the world. In one aspect we are progressing and developing but at the same time on the name of development and progress we are digging ditches for ourselves to be trapped in coming time. One side our standard of living has improved with the use of technological advancement but at the same time we are exposed to numerous diseases and our lives are becoming hell, day by day. Now we understand the value and importance of the nature and therefore we are protecting our natural surroundings but still we need to develop better consciousness among the people in absolute sense for protecting and preserving the natural resources on this beautiful planet.

In this research paper I have made an attempt to study about the environmental history of Assam during medieval period in the light of Persian sources. Assam is a strange, self-confined gloomy land inhabited by the people on both sides of the river Brahmaputra situated in the north east of Bengal (now West Bengal and Bangladesh).³ The Brahmaputra River flows through its middle from east to west. In the north south region of Assam, different tribes like *Miri*, *Majami* (*Mishmis*), *Dafla* and *Landa* (*Naga*) etc. live. The southern range of hills of this land consists of *Khasi*, *Cachar* and *Kashmi* hills and adjoins the *Naga* hill in the east. The land lying to the northern side of the Brahmaputra is known as *Uttarkul* and on the southern side of it is known as *Dakhinkul*.⁴ The area of Dakhinkul is stretched from Guwahati to the home of Miri community. The Dakhinkul covers the area Nakirani to the village of Sadna.

³ Shihabuddin *Talish*, *Tarikh-i- Assam*, tr. Mazhar Asif, DHAS, Guwahati, 2009, pp. 56.

⁴ *Ibid*.

To the northern side of Assam is Bhutan and Tibet and the eastern side lay the Mishmi Hills and Manipur. In the southern region of it lie the Lushai Hills and the Hill Tippera and the western boundary touches the river Karatoya. The river Brahmaputra runs through the heart of the province, an extensive tract of territory being on either side. Assam has a number of rivers which extent and covers almost all areas of province. In context of natural scenery Assam is unrivalled and one of the richest lands in the world, “studded with numerous clumps of hills rising abruptly from the general level and surrounded by lofty mountains, and intersected in all possible directions by innumerable streams and rivulets, which, issuing from the bordering mountains, at length empty themselves into the great channel of the Brahmaputra.”⁵

The soil of Assam is fertile and adapted to some kind of agricultural purposes. The soil of Assam may be divided into three great different categories on the basis of the water level of Brahmaputra. The first division consists of the great mountain chains skirting from the north to the south together with their continuations and independent and isolated hills or hillocks. From the north-east to the north-west there are different offshoots of the Himalayas, the Mishmis Hills, the Abor Hills and the hills bordering Bhutan. The Garo Hills, the Khasi Hills and the branches of Naga Hills stretch through the southern boundary of Assam. There are hills lying in groups, large and small, on the plains of the Brahmaputra valley, sometimes isolated and sometimes continuations of the northern and southern ranges, the largest group of which is the Mikir Hills, insulated from the southern mountains and covering an area from Sibsagar to Nowgong. The expansions of the Khasi and Jaintia Ranges touch the Brahmaputra Valley at Guwahati. Other such extensions reach to Boko, Chayagaon and Palasbari as well as from Karaibari to Habraghat in Goalpara. A projection of the northern groups is marked on the north of Baliapara in Darrang. There are also some independent hill ranges in Darrang, Kamrup and Goalpara.⁶

The second division of the lands is the diluvia plain of the valley, its level being generally above the ordinary inundation of the Brahmaputra or its tributaries. The breadth of this plain varies from place to place, depending to in great measure on the number and the height of the rocks or hills that protect the land from the devastating current of the great river. One of the projecting points is at Bisvanath, above the maximum flood level of the Brahmaputra. The low hills encircling Tejpur and Singri likewise prevent encroachment of the Brahmaputra upon the plains of Charduar and its western region. On the south bank the width of the diluvial plain is the greatest immediately east of the Dhansiri, at a distance of 30 miles from the Naga Hills. Owing to the great projections to the north of the Mikir Hills and the absence of the rocks on the North Bank, the river takes a northerly course forming a great plain on the south.⁷

The alluvial deposits of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries comprise the third land division of the state. These tracts are very extensive, especially along the channel of the main river, and are of great elevation and fertility. They are subjects to annual inundation and as a result are raised high by drift sand and deposits of vegetable matter brought down by the adjacent streams. The most typical of the alluvial plains is the vast land of Kajali in Nowgong, lying

⁵ W. Robinson, *Descriptive Account of Assam*, Calcutta, 1841, p. 4

⁶ N.N. Acharyya, *The History of Medieval Assam*, Omsons Publications, New Delhi, 2003, p. 9.

⁷ Ibid, p. 9-10.

between the Brahmaputra and its tributary the Kalang. Another of almost equal extent is the Majuli Island forming the northern border of Sibsagar. Besides these, there are numerous islands of smaller extent throughout the whole course of the Brahmaputra, which are liable to the destructive deviation of the great river. The alluvial tracts on the bank of the Barnadi and the Manas can be classed in this category.⁸

Tarikh-i-Assam records the period of 1660s and mentions about a number of flowers and fruits in Assam. However, some of the varieties of flowers and fruits, both wild and cultivated were found in Assam were not noticed in any other part of the country as it is mentioned in Persian chronicle. The coconut and *neem* trees were rare. But saplings of pepper, Sazaj (tezpat) and various kinds of lemons grew in abundance. Mango was full of worms but it was sweet and juicy and no fibrous. Here it is important to talk about a general perception of worms in Mango in Assam that one day one person was carrying a basket full of mango and one poor old lady asked for mango but he refused and did not give mango to poor lady. Then that lady cursed that the mangoes of Assam would be rotten or it would full of worm or useless. Then onwards the mangoes are rotten in Assam. But it seems that the climate of Assam is not suitable for mangoes. Pineapple found in large quantity and was very juicy and tasty. There were three kind of sugar canes: black, red and yellow. All were sweet but very hard to chew. Gingers were big, soft, and fibreless and had good flavor. *Panyal*, a variety of Amla, was so delicious and tasty that men of taste preferred it to damson. The chief crop of Assam was paddy. But the thin and finer variety of rice was rare. The soil of Assam was so fertile that whatever was cultivated or planted grew very fast and in abundance.⁹

From the village of Kaliabor to the city of Kahargaon fruit trees surrounded every place and house. On either side of the road there were shady bamboo trees raising their height to the sky. There were varieties of wild and cultivated flowers that bloom and add fragrance to gardens. Besides the cane field, there were cultivated lands and gardens up to the foot of the hills. The route from Lakhogarh to Kahargaon was inhabited and covered with cultivated land. A high and wide road had been constructed up to Kahargaon for the use of the people. The agricultural fields and gardens were planted so systematically in the plains in this country that one could not see any depression or elevation in the field.

The good varieties of oranges in Assam were superior and delicious to any other fruits of India and Bengal. Pepper's thin shoot like climbers climbed trees or trellis put up around them and their bunches hanged on the branches like almond. According to Talesh, if Assam had been governed properly, then its revenue might had crossed eight lakhs of rupees in a year.¹⁰

Many kinds of birds like duck, goose and fighting cock were found in Assam. Among the animals, gigantic and dreadful elephant, deer, stag, nilgaye, ram and francolin were found both in mountains and in plains. One could also find he-goat and she-goat. In the capital city of Kahargaon some cage like small but very strong structures supported by heavy wooden posts at the four corners, were constructed. It appears that these were used for different purposes. On enquiry it was found that there was some expert *Mahuts* (elephant keepers) of the Raja who

⁸ Ibid, p. 10.

⁹ *Tarikh-i-Assam*, tr. Mazhar Asif, DHAS, Guwahati, 2009, p. 50.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 12

rubbed a particular herb on the body of a female elephant. Then she was taken to graze in the grazing grounds, where wild and mast elephant smelt that herb rubbed on the female elephant, it became uncontrollably mad and followed her. Then the *Mahut* skillfully brought back the female elephant to the cage like structure. The moment the mast elephant entered the enclosure, was trapped to be trained and domesticated later on.¹¹

The musk deer was also found in the hills of Assam. The size of the musk deer was very big. Many varieties of aromatic, heavy and colorful aloe (agaru) wood were found in abundance in the hills of Namroop, Sadna and Lakhogarh.¹² Donkeys, camels and horse like the mythical bird phoenix and alchemy were very rare in Assam.¹³

In Assam gold was sifted out from the sand of Brahmaputra. Around ten to twelve thousand men were engaged in this work. Each of them had to deposit one tola of gold annually to the treasury of the Raja. But this gold was considered of substandard in quality. One tola of gold was sold for 8-9 rupees only. It was said that the gold was found everywhere in the sand of Brahmaputra. But only the people of Assam knew the exact location where gold was found.¹⁴

The Mughals also faced a lot of difficulties of the terrain to advance only two and half Karoh in a day. Every step walking on the route of expedition was full of danger and risk. The sharp point of broken Khakhar (Khagri), which was just like the tip of spear, pricked the feet of any living being it appeared as if it had pierced the heart. Every horseman who tried to pass through this route got injured from the dense undergrowth cane and sometimes even fell down on the ground. Even the gunmen with their extraordinary courage and power, could not succeed in traversing this extremely dense forest of Khakhar. The archers also with all the power of their arrow, failed to make any headway through the dense jungle. The horsemen and the foot soldiers getting stuck into the mud were beating their heart with their hands. During a whole day even, a narrow path could not be cleared despite so much difficulties and physical pains. Someone injured was badly affected with the fatal diseases like pleurisy. The majority of the affected soldiers suffered heavily from a contagious venereal disease like syphilis.¹⁵ The heavy rain of Assam and ditches full of water were other problems for the Mughal army.

Mirza Nathan in his book '*Baharistan-i-Ghayabi*, gives an interesting information during Jahangir's expedition of Assam. "Two strange things were observed at the place where elephants were captured. First in the forests where elephants lived and where the *paiks* were posted for *pali* i.e., to watch that the elephants might not go away, they used to sit constantly in their *chawkis* to guards the elephants and would not go to any distant place even for the purpose of drinking water lest the elephants might get away. They used to procure drinking water in the following manner: --- there was a king trees in that forest. As soon as a branch of this tree was cut off with the stroke of a sword, water began to flow in such a quantity that two jars may be filled up. But what a clear water it was! In beauty, taste and sweetness, it was just like the transparent and pure water of a river. The only difference was that if a man drank to

¹¹ Ibid., p. 51.

¹² Ibid., p. 52.

¹³ Ibid., p. 56.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 51.

¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 18-19.

his full, he was immediately attacked with fever owing to extreme coldness and suffered for a long time. If on the contrary, he drank to satisfy only half his thirst, it did no harm.”¹⁶

Nathan further mentions, “the *palis* were posted from the beginning in batches by them in this: --- they cut bamboos and thrust into them at either side a piece of bamboo of the size of one cubit. These were heaped together. Dry straws were placed beneath them and these were spread from one end of a chowki to the next *chawki*. When the elephants tried to get out of the enclosure, one of these (*palis*) immediately ran from the left and another from the right with fire in their hands and set fire under these heaped up bamboo pieces. The fire made the joints of the bamboos crack in such a way that they produce sounds like the reports of big guns, and at this the elephants turned back into the enclosure. Thus, they were stopped from going out. Besides these they used an entire stump of bamboo, half of which was cleft in the middle and a rope was tied to one of its halves. One of these two *palis* pulled that rope and it produced a sound at all hours. It was called *Taka*. They also used two pieces of bamboo, one of which was carved and the other was carved in the middle and these were perforated at every two finger’s breadths. These were beaten with sticks like a kettle-drum. In the language of the Kuch it was called Dank-Danka. The second strange thing was this: - there was a stream in that place named Lupani. The special characteristic of this stream was that from four *gharis* before morning till six *gharis* after morning it rose very high so that in some of the deep places the water came up to the waist of a man; and then it gradually dried up to such an extent that if a man walked in it, the water would not reach even up to his ankle. Six *gharis* before evening, it became absolutely dry. Then again, the water began to rise up to the end of one *pahar* of the night and after that the water disappeared.”¹⁷

CONCLUSION

Historically Assam has been a strange land for its diverse fauna and flora, hostile climate for strange people, various diseases, full of forest and uneven land, ditches become very dangerous when filled with water during rainy season. Geographical features of Assam are one of the important aspects that the Mughals could not succeed to establish their rule in Assam for a long period of time. It seems that from the very beginning Assam was having abundance of natural resources and the various kingdoms of this regions were also nature friendly people as presently Assam is able to keep good percentage of forest reserve land in comparison to others states of India. Assam is the land of various tribes like Karbis, Dimasas, Kacharis, Missings, Chutiyas, Bodos, etc. and right from the ancient period they are very much depends on the forest resources of Assam. They also preserve and protects the fauna and flora as their economic and social lives fully depends on the forest resources.

It also appears that during Medieval period, the natural resources were used or misused in a very limited way and these natural resources were available in abundance, therefore there was no question of extinction of the animals, birds, plants, etc. But during Modern period with the industrial development and population explosion over the world led to over use of the natural resources and this process multiplied many folds during 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries. Now it

¹⁶ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi*, tr. M.I.Borah, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Narayani Handiqui Historical Institute, Guwahati, 1992, vol. II, pp. 680-81.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 681-82.

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has become a great challenge for the World to save the natural resources (balance of nature) as we understand the causes of global warming, natural calamities, air and water pollution, etc. It is necessary to solve this problem before it is too late. In this way Assam is one the ideal states in respect of keeping the forest reserved areas in India.