

## Early Phase of European Writings on Medieval Assam: A Critical Study

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### Abstract

In this paper a critical study on medieval Assam as reflected in the early European writers, viz., Nicolo Conti, Ralf Fitch, Peter Heylyn and Stephen Cacella have been attempted. Except Peter Heylyn, the other three travellers' narration are based on on-the-spot study. These are valuable for corroborating and supplementing additional information regarding the history and culture of medieval Assam.

**Keywords:** European Writings, Medieval Assam, Nicolo Conti, Ralf Fitch, Peter Heylyn, Stephen Cacella.

### Introduction

For the reconstruction of the history and culture of medieval Assam from Early 15<sup>th</sup> to Early 17<sup>th</sup> Century, the European repositories are very less. Non-travelling by the Europeans to the land like Assam during medieval times is the main reason for lacking of write-up in this regard. The known sources in this respect from where we can gather information are analysed henceforth.

### Discussion:

Followings are the discussion regarding the authors and their writings of the early phase of European writings (from Early 15<sup>th</sup> to Early 17<sup>th</sup> Century) on medieval history and culture of Assam.

### Nicolo Conti:

Historians like S.K. Bhuyan and Jean Deloche believes that the Italian merchant, explorer and writer Nicolo Conti (1395-1469) had gone as far as Assam during his visit in India in the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Bhuyan 58; Deloche 11). Conti was the first European who specify the abundance of aloe wood and carbuncles towards the east in his travel account.

Born of a noble mercantile family in Chioggia, a seaside town south of Venice, Conti realized in his youth that international trade offered boundless opportunities for adventure. Hence he travelled as a merchant to numerous places in Asia and spent a quarter century travelling in the East. Conti's narrative was documented in 1444 in Poggio Bracciolini's Fourth Book *De Varietate Fortunae* (i.e., *On the Vicissitudes of Fortune*) in Latin. His accounts bore all the appearance of being true, and not fabrications (Jones 4) and constitutes one of the best accounts of the East by a 15th-century traveller (Oaten 31). The first printed edition of Conti's account was made in 1492 in the original Latin by Cristoforo da Bollate.

The first English edition was translated from the Spanish, and printed in 1579 by John Frampton, using a combination of Marco Polo's and Da Conti's narrations (Wikipedia).

Conti at an early age decided to follow in the family tradition by establishing a lucrative trading operation in the East. Conti departed from Venice about 1419 and established himself in Damascus, Syria. From there he travelled further east, went overland to Persia and took a dhow to go Malabar in India. From there, he came to the Vijayanagar kingdom. He then sailed, along with his wife and two children, to the Island of Ceylon, Sumatra, Andaman and reached Tenasserim on the Malay peninsula. Proceeding thence to the mouth of the Ganges, he sailed up to the river till he came to Cernove, which is identified as Sonargaon in Bangladesh (Banglapedia). Within three months, he navigated up to the river Ganges, leaving behind him four very famous cities, and landed at a very famous city called Maarazia, where he found abundance of aloe wood, gold, silver, precious stones, and pearls. He, for the intention to acquire carbuncles, some kind of expensive stone found there, proceeded to some mountains of the east (Jones 10).

Though the city Maarazia could not be identified, but according to Bhuyan Conti perhaps travelled up to the river Brahmaputra, which he miscalculates as the river Ganges, and arrived at some town in Assam, because aloe wood was the special produce of Assam, and because his eager to procure rubies directs his having visited the north-eastern frontier adjoining Northern Burma which was the only area where rubies were known to be found (Bhuyan 58).

### **Ralf Fitch:**

But keeping supposition aside, the earliest European source on the medieval Assam, according to many scholars, was the narrative of Ralph Fitch (1550-1611). He was one of the earliest English travellers and traders to visit the Indian Subcontinent, apart from east and south-east Asia. He left an account that gives us information on its administrative set-up and social as well as economic conditions on Koch Bihar, which was then ruled by king Naranarayan (1540-84).

Son of a merchant of London, Fitch in 1583, being desirous to see the countries of East India, set foot in the country (Ryley 48; Foster 8). Financed to Fitch and other fellow merchants by the Levant Company, this was the latest in a series of English attempts to penetrate the trade of the Indian Ocean and Far East. At first Fitch was not a chronicler but he eventually wrote descriptions of the south-east Asia he saw between 1583-1591 and after his return to England in 1591, became a valuable consultant for the British East India Company. The earliest printed editions of Ralph Fitch's account of his adventures appeared first in *Principall Navigations, Voiages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation* in volume II (1599-1600) by Richard Hakluyt (1553-1616).

In a ship called the *Tyger* with a letter from Queen of England Elizabeth I (1558-1603), Fitch first boarded for Tripoli in Syria with fellow merchants in February 1583. Subject matter of the letter was concerning a request for safety of Englishmen's trade and travel. On their way towards the East, suspecting as spies, Fitch and his companions were arrested in the Iranian port of Hormuz and were taken to Goa under Portuguese custody. They were jailed until they were released on bond provided by two Jesuits. Story chose to remain in Goa, but in April 1584 Fitch and two of his friends escaped and began their journey across India. After an adventurous journey overland by Bijapur, Golkonda, Sirpur, Burhanpur, Mandogarh, Ujjain and Sironj, they reached the court of the Mughal emperor Akbar at Fatehpur Sikri near Agra, where they presented the letter from Queen Elizabeth to the Great Mughal. They

stayed there up to 1585. Fitch decided to visit Bengal being advised by his friend Newbury. So he continued his journey of exploration. Fitch, now alone, left Agra in 1585 and went on and made his journey across the rivers Jamuna and Ganga, passed the cities of Prayag (Allahabad), Banaras, Patna, Tanda (in Malda district) (Raleigh et al. 187-188). So, after visiting Tanda, Fitch visited Bengal and the kingdom of Koch Bihar between 1585-86.

Regarding the Koch Bihar and the king, Fitch states, “the king is Gentile (Hindu); his name is Suckel Couse (Sukladvaj); his country is great and lieth not far from Cauchin China; for they say they have pepper from thence.” (Ryley 111-12; Gait 61) But William Foster opines that the above statements, regarding Koch Bihar, about the closeness of China and the import of pepper from there must be based on some misinterpretation (Foster 24-25).

About the king of Koch Bihar, not Sukladvaj (alias Chilarai) but Nara Narayan, the elder brother of him was the reigning king at that time. According to a custom rendered by Gait, the astrologers of Nara Narayan believed that Nara Narayan came under the influence of Saturn. Nar Narayan, believing his astrologers, went for wandering for a year before assigning the affairs of the state to Sukladvaj and probably at that time Fitch entered Koch Bihar. Gait states that this story may be true because there is another story during the reign of the Ahom King Siva Singha, who, tried to prevent an alike forecast, allotted the state’s affairs to his queens (Gait 61). However refuting the explanation of Gait, Foster opines that there is the difficulty to belief this fact as Sukladvaj had died a few years before the arrival of Fitch in Koch kingdom (Foster 24).

Relating to the defence of the country, Fitch mentions that they adopted a self-protective strategy against any invasion. He says, “all the country is set with bamboos or canes made sharp at both ends and driven into earth, and they can let it in water and drown the ground above the knee deep, so that neither men nor horses can pass. If any wars occur, they poison all the waters.” (Ryley 112) Regarding economic properties of the country Fitch states that they have considerable silk, musk, and cloth made from cotton.

Regarding religion and tolerance, he observes that all people were Hindu and they never kill anything. Fitch also saw the humanitarian approaches of the people of Koch Bihar. He notices that they had hospitals for sheep, goats, dogs, cats, birds and for all living creatures. When they became old and lame, they keep them with themselves until they die. Fitch writes again, “If a man catch or buy any quick thing in other places and bring it thither, they will give him money for it, or other victuals, and keep it in their hospital or let it go.” (Ryley 112-13)

Gait again explains that the statements of Fitch regarding the excessive sympathy revealed by the people for animal is hard to belief, as it is far away from being reality. Himself shown as a religious tolerant person and might be encouraged by some Vaisnava or Jain followers to establish hospitals for animals, it may be assumed that the effects defined was owing exclusively to the own accomplishment of Nara Narayan (Gait 61-62).

Though there is a lack of accuracy in the writings of Fitch and it is considerably to be fated that his account of Koch Bihar is very inadequate, but William Foster opines that Fitch’s visit to Koch Bihar is very fascinating event (Foster 24).

**Peter Heylyn:**

The next European writer on the history and culture of Assam was Peter Heylyn (1599-1662). He was an English clergyman and author of many critical, historical, political and theological areas. He was a high-volume writer, who wrote *Cosmographie in Four books* an attempt to define in thorough detail every aspect of the known world in 1652, viz., the geography, climate, customs, achievements, politics, and belief systems (Wikipedia). In 34 large pages of the third book of *Cosmographie*, an account of India is given, divided by the writer into *India Intra Gangem* and *India Extra Gangem*. He states, “another Kingdome of this tract, frontier upon *Gauchin-China*, beyond *Ganges*; so called *Couche*, the chief town it. The country rich, by reason that it may be drowned, dried up again, when the people will; full of good pastures that means, those well stored with Sheep, Goats, Swine, Deer, and other Cattel, though the poor neither kill or not eat them. But on the contrary build *Hospitals* for them, in which when lame and old they are kept till they die.” (Heylyn 234; Bengal 50)

Heylyn never visited India but wrote above some lines about Koch Bihar in *India Intra Gangem*, which is, but, the replica of the last few lines of Ralf Fitch. So this text had seems to be extracted from Fitch.

### Stephen Cacella:

The Portuguese Jesuit priest and explorer Father Stephen Cacella (1585-1630) along with Father John Cabral, both under S.J. Missionary in India and Ladakh (Whowaswho), visited Kamrup up to Pandu and Koch Bihar in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> on their way to Shigatse (now in the autonomous region of Tibet) in China via Bhutan. On 4<sup>th</sup> October 1627, Cacella wrote a lengthy letter in Portuguese, rather a report named *The Relacao*, from Chagri Dorjeden monastery of Thimphu to his senior in Cochin in Malabar Coast, which gives information on the little-known history of Koch-Mughal relation as well as that of Mughal Kamrup in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It is noteworthy to note here that during their visit in Assam, Ahom-Mughal war was going on and the governing of Kamrup was at the hand of the Mughals.

Very little is known about the earlier life of the two missionaries. Born at Aviz of Portugal in 1585, Cacella joined the Jesuits at the age of 19. In 1614 he went to India and worked for some years in Kerala. On the other hand John Cabral (1599-1669), born in Celorico de Basto of Portugal, joined the Society of Jesus in 1615 and sailed to India on 1624, was fourteen years junior to Cacella (Baillie 2-3; Wessels 121). To spread Christian religion in India up to the Far East was their prima facie motto, but because of their great interest they were eager to go to the Tibetan regions (Baillie 2). Earlier Father Atonio de Andrade, while staying in Tsaparang in Tibet in 1625, gathered information on Utsang and showing his desire to establish a mission there, he wrote to his Indian counterpart by suggesting that this and other places of that area should be adventured from Bengal. Hence entrusting importance to his advice, the two missionaries Father Stephen Cacella and John Cabral arranged their way for a trip (Wessels 120).

Since Bengal was another province of vast Jesuit mission in India apart from Malabar and since Bengal had been suggested as the starting point, (Wessels 121) so Cacella together with Cabral travelled to Bengal from Cochin on 30<sup>th</sup> April 1626. The two travellers set out from Dacca by boat on 5<sup>th</sup> September 1626 and arrived at Hajo (Cacella writes as Azo) on 26<sup>th</sup> September on the pretext to reach Cathay (an alternative European historical name for China). Having by-passed Hajo, they arrived at Pandu, where Raja Satrajit of Busna was the commander general of the Mughal Army. He cordially received them and after knowing their aim, Satrajit investigated among his people but no one heard of Cathay kingdom except a

person who said that once they cross Bhutan, they were sure to find roads. In order to find the best way to enter Bhutan, Rajah Satrajit took them to Hajo to meet Lakshminarayan (Cacella writes as Liquinarane), the king of the Koch kingdom, who would know more about it as the people who came down to his dominions through various points of entry. The Koch king informed them that they should go to Koch Bihar which was governed by his son Gaburra and then to Rangamati (Jaigaon) in order to go to Bhutan (Baillie, 1999, p. 10). He then gave them the reference letter to his son asking him to help them in every way he could. Setting out for Koch Bihar on 8<sup>th</sup> October, Cacella and Cabral arrived there on the 21<sup>st</sup> of the same month (Wessels 127).

Cacell in his letter gives us a very informative observation. Cacella states that in the waterways from Dacca to Hajo there were more than sixty *chockeyes*, i.e., check posts and customs houses where duty was paid in form of goods (Baillie, 1999, p. 10). Up to Hajo the *chockeyes* were on cool and bracing rivers with rich habitations on either banks (Baruah 87). Hajo was a rich area with a large population and the principal city of the kingdom of Koch as well as, once, the residence of the Koch king. Hajo and its neighbouring land had to pay taxes to the Mughals. Regarding Pandu, Cacella stated that the population density of Pandu was high since its area was not very large. It did not stretch far into the interior but extended along with the beautiful river Brahmaputra (Cacella writes as the river of Koch), and was the cause of the war which the Mughals were always carrying on against the Assamese, who border on Pandu, the last district of the kingdom in that direction (Wessels 123-124).

Cacella not only highly praised the culture of hospitality of Raja Satrajit, but he compares the ruler and the people of Assam as well as their rich culture with other parts of India. He narrates, "One cannot exaggerate the kindness of the Rajah of Busna, the honours he bestowed on us and the care which he took regarding our endeavour – you cannot imagine the prestige of these rulers, the pomp and splendour surrounding them, as seen only in some parts in India; here it is very different, these rulers treat themselves very well enjoying royal status, their men do not go about naked, rather they are well dressed and carry themselves with dignity, whether on foot or on horse; it was noticeable how Rajah Satargit, because of his wisdom and personality, is well loved in the whole of this kingdom, as we observed in Hajo where he was acclaimed by the people in the streets as if he were their own King - no doubt a show of appreciation for his generosity in sharing with many people the rents he receives, which does him much credit, even though the total amounts to less than two hundred tangas (coins) per annum." (Baillie 9)

Describing a visiting house, probably a part of the palace of the king of Hajo, Cacella narrates that one had to undergo three vast courtyards, to enter the palace, bounded by wide porches, big strong locked doors and watched by many guards and soldiers grouped in such a properly arranged way that if they were going for the battlefield. After crossing all these an attractively adorned villa, where the king visited the visitors, was located surrounded by beautiful big garden. (Baillie 9-10)

Regarding location, population, markets and floods of Koch Bihar, which was once the part of Assam, Cacella observes "the town is situated on a river (tributary of the Brahmaputra) with nice views stretching over several leagues; it covers an area which is as wide as long; with the exception of the more humble houses as found in other kingdoms of Bengal, there is much that is worthwhile seeing; it has a big population, being well provided with all kinds of goods from the kingdom itself as well as from goods that come from Patna, Rajmahal and Gaur; there are many bazaars with everything that the land produces; in



particular, there are pine- apples which are better than the ones found in India - and there are oranges of every kind. The Prince was not in Koch Bihar as, on account of the floods which occur regularly in that town, he had moved inland a few months earlier to a cool location on one of the small channels of the same river. The place was previously called Kalabari. In order to please the Prince, the merchants of Koch Bihar were quick to develop the new town, and by the time we arrived there, it compared favorably with Koch Bihar in its beauty and the well laid out streets". (Baillie 10)

The letter of Cacella need to be scrutiny. Since Hajo was at that time under the Mughal dominion, so it is difficult to ascertain who was the king of Hajo during the visit of Cacella and his co. If Lakshminarayan, the vessel king of the Mughals in Koch Bihar, who also took the charge of Koch Hajo or Kamrup along with the attachment of Shaikh Kamal, the leader of the Mughal army of occupation in Kamrup, is true then it is also true that in absence of Lakshminarayan in Koch Bihar, his son Gaburra (Birnarayan) governed that territory. (Baruah 91-92) Again Raja Satrajit was not the commander general of the Mughals army as mentioned by Cacella, but was the thanadar of Pandu.

As informed to us by Luiza Maria Baillie, Raja Satrajit took the Portuguese travellers from Pandu to the king of Koch in Hajo by boats instead of horses as appears in the text of K.L. Baruah, whose authority on the statement based on the translation of the manuscript from Portuguese arranged to him by J. Araujo (Baillie 9; Baruah 88 & 91). But C. Wessels does not mentioned the mode of transportation in this respect. Again in Cacella's text, Luiza Maria Baillie found pineapple in Koch Bihar, (Baillie 10) while C. Wessels and K.L Baruah did not wrote anything about it.

### **Conclusion:**

The Mughals under Babur came to India upon the victory of the battle of Panipat in 1526, but the Europeans under Portuguese mariner Vasco da Gama landed in Calicut of India in the year 1498. So the Europeans came to India much before the establishment of the Mughal rule in India. Since there were no restraints, the flow of the other European races increases gradually during the Mughal rule in India, as we can witness the coming of the Dutch (1605), the English (1600), the Danish (1620) and the French (1667). But it was a common statement of all European writers that during medieval period, the foreigners were not allowed to enter Assam as restrictions were imposed upon them. This attitude developed as Assam was regularly attacked from Bengal since the time of the invasion of Bhakhtiyar Khalji in 1206 and hence all the people outside Assam was regarded as a possible origin of threat by the Assamese - were the main causes that the Assamese were opposed to the entrance of outsiders into their country, whether they were Europeans or other native Indians (Bhuyan 56). At a time when many of the Europeans penned down their literary labour throughout India, the non-travelling of them to Assam greatly obstructed on the effect of their literary exercise on Assam. Only at the time of the Mughal dominance over Kamrup during the 17<sup>th</sup> century opened the chances of the Europeans to visit Assam as well as to collect thorough data.

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