

**EDWARD GAIT'S A HISTORY OF ASSAM: A STUDY ON  
THE ANTIQUITY OF ASSAM**

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**Abstract**

History, by nature, is the description of an event happened in the past. In this phenomenon there includes all the good and evil deeds done by people. The portrayal of the historical event also depends upon the historian. The most important task for a historian is to depict the event in a clearer, truer and a logical way. The sole aim of the author is to illustrate how an outsider is very much successful in the depictions of others' history. Though Sir Edward Gait was by birth a colonialist, he understood the social, political and economical conditions of Assam. He was the counterpart of Assamese historians like Gunabhiram Borua (*Assam Buranji*), Kanaklal Borua (*Studies in the early history of Assam*). In his masterpiece *A History of Assam* he very beautifully revealed from the prehistoric era to the British rule. Thus to project his interest of writing *A History of Assam* is prime concern in this paper.

**Key words:** History, Imperial history, Outlander's version

**1. Introduction**

History is a study of the past or any event which is recorded in any form (written, inscribed, recorded, video). Along with that, according to Foucault it also includes how, when, where, who made the history. At this moment we cannot ignore T. S. Eliot's concept of Historical sense. He, in his monumental work *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, argues that historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past but of its presence. According to him

historical sense is a perception that past is not something that is lost or invalid, rather it has its function in the present.

In my paper, “Edward Gait’s *A History of Assam: A Study on the Antiquity of Assam*”, special focus is put on the antiquity of Assam, that too from an outlander’s point of view. In my paper Sir Edward Gait is regarded an outsider. He came to India as an administrator and he wrote five books on Assam and its geography, archaeology, forests, flora, religion and races. In this context a question arises that is why a foreigner is so much obsessed with writing history of some other people rather than his own. If we look at the histories of the great historians then we notice that many of Chinese travelers like Fa Hian, Huan-tsang and Muslim scholars like Al Beruni, Abdul Razzak, British scholars like Thomas Roe, Sir William Norris etc travelled a larger part of India and contributed many historical treatises. The prime reason behind the cause might be- either the outlanders are good observers or they are well educated as well for which they are very much successful in encapsulating every aspect of the society rather than the native historians. Colonial expansion is another reason behind this matter. Because, to capture the matters of others’ land one has to have knowledge of their culture, beliefs, rituals etc. Gait's *A History of Assam* was published in 1906, in which period India was being ruled by the British. Thus one can say that it helped the British to know the history of Assam or to explore the heritage of Assam through the lens of Edward Gait. In the introduction part, Gait very beautifully depicts how the Mongolian race in western China came to Assam and ruled here. The Ahoms were a tribe of Shans who immigrated to Assam early in the thirteenth century. In this prologue he said that he had taken help from the *Jogini Tantra*, *Kalika Purana*, *The Mahabharata* through the assistance of Indian friend.

## 2. Objectives

Prime objectives of my paper are-

- i) To analyze Gait's *A History of Assam* as the initiation in the history writing tradition of Assam.
- ii) To examine the impact of Gait over the native historians.

iii) To illustrate the imperialistic view of the historian as reflected in *A History of Assam*.

### 3. Hypothesis

History, by nature, is the unbiased version of some event given by the historian. But, while preparing the version moulding form and matter, the author feels compelled to write something of his own, to reproduce the events from a unique perspective. As an outlander, Gait could not help freeing his history of his impressions. There are obvious differences between his version and native writers' versions.

### 4. Methodology

Both primary and secondary data were consulted to prepare this paper. A complete reading of Edward Gait's *A History of Assam* was done for making out this paper. Besides, some reviews and articles were also studied before the preparation of this paper.

### 5. Results and Discussion

In the book *What is History?* Carr (1886) revealed how historians make historical facts. According to him "facts of the past become historical facts in due course of time". He cited a clear example that millions of human beings crossed the Rubican River in Northeastern Italy, but the historians have only chosen to treat the crossing of the Rubican by Julius Caesar and made it an important historical fact. Historians must have certain creative faculties to pick out important events out of a whole lot of incidents happening around. Edward Gait, the great historian of Assam and the making of Assam, wrote a full-fledged history of a land totally new to him.

The book *A History of Assam* is a process of enquiry in Assam's heritage through the process of Assamese ethnography, historiography etc. This book is also a consequence of Gait's curiosity to know about Assam. Thus we have found that he has captured a vast period ranging from the prehistoric time to the emergence of tea industry in Assam. As an outsider he had faced great difficulties to get acquainted with local languages like Tai, Sanskrit and Assamese languages as

well and to get mingled with the local people through interaction. The state of Assam has a rich ancient history, the foundation of which can be found in the Vedic and Tantric literature, Assamese folklore and Buddhist literature. Through the reading of old manuscripts Gait proves that there has been a confluence of the Indo-Aryan, Austro Asiatic and Tibeto Burman origin in the state. Manuscripts and medieval texts, which are becoming extinct, are being found in the different parts of the state. Thus *A History of Assam* can be regarded as a historical book, which reconstructs the attic manuscripts and inscriptions. In the first chapter he very clearly justifies the history and emergence of the Indian state, Assam. He believes that it has mythological roots. Gogoi (1991) wrote in his book *The History of the System of Ahom Administration*, “The tradition of the Ahoms themselves is that the present name is derived from Asama, in the sense of unequalled or peerless.” The earliest mention of the area can be found in epics like *The Mahabharata* and other such legends and medieval texts like *The Kalika Purana* and *Yogini Tantra*. Assam was called Pragjyotishpur or Kamrupa. Prag means former or eastern and Jyotisha means a star, astrology or shining. It can also be called a city of East or Eastern Astrology. He has also taken out of cause for small number of monuments of ancient times in Assam and it is that Brahmaputra and her tributaries have frequently changed their channel and destroyed a larger part of Assam.

Choudhury (1985) revealed in his book *Archeology of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam*, “the regimes of Aryan affiliation were ended by the beginning of AD 13<sup>th</sup> century as soon as the Shans also known as the Ahoms, overrun and conquered Assam.” From this book we can assume a definite time of the beginning of Ahom’s kingdom. Regarding the authentic sources of history he told that firstly the Chinese Hiun Tsiang’s account of travels, which gives a fair description of various kingdoms in the first of the seventh century. Apart from that there were many inscriptions on the copper plates which were inscribed by the pundits in Sanskrit verse. The inscription signifies basically the rulers’ ancestry, and also gives some account of his personal qualities, his capital and the extent of countries or provinces ruled by him. As I have already mentioned that Gait had faced great trouble in reading these inscriptions, he employed native people of Assam like Babu Gulap Chandra Boruah, an employee of Lakhimpur Judicial Court,

who was also trained by five deodhais of Ahom kingdom. Along with the familiarization with these inscriptions he personally went from place to place to explore more inscriptions. The Nowgong Grant was a good example of it. This grant was discovered by Edward Gait in 1895 and later it was deciphered by Dr. Hoernley in 1897.

In *A History of Assam* Gait has very beautifully examined the origin and emergence of Ahom dynasty. The Ahom ruled Assam for nearly six hundred years from 1228 to 1826 which is unprecedented in the history of the world. During their long rule Assam attained a new height in terms of cultural, economic, and medical field. Gait stated that the Ahoms had the great historic sense and many of the priests and nobles maintained Buranjies or chronicles which were written up from time to time and which contain a very careful, reliable and continuous narrative of their rule. The Ahoms used to write history from the beginning. Tsu-kapha, the founder of the Ahom Kingdom in Assam directed his two ministers – the Buhagohain and the Borgohain, to go on writing the happenings, good and bad, lost and gained. Thus it can be known that the writing of history in Assam got started in the year 1228. The word *Buranji* itself was derived from Ahom's languages. Gait was also very much interested in the mythical origin of Ahoms. According to the Deodhais, Lengdon directed his son Thenkham to descend to earth and establish a kingdom there. Unwilling to leave heaven himself, he sent his son Khunlung and Khunlai. Lengdon presented them with an idol called Somdeo, a magic sword, or hengdang, two drums to be used for invoking divine aid and four cocks for telling the omens.

Gait's observation of the Ahom kingdom and the *kimvadanti* is very much similar to other Assamese historians like Dr. Surjya Kumar Bhuyan, Gunabhiram Boruah, Kanaklall Boruah. Their study shows that between history and myth, there is an untraceable and indefinable boundary line. In the process of making of history, myth and history overlap. This attracts our view regarding myths which go into the making of history. A nation is a result of molding of narration. Discourses create reality in course of time.

Edward Gait's *A History of Assam* can be called a true example of western contribution to Assamese life. Gunabhiram Borua, the notable historian and reformer gives acknowledgement in English language and said that “when the people of this country were suffering under the tyrannical rule of the king and the atrocities committed by the Burmese invaders, God heard their prayers and sent the British here” (Vijayshree, 2004). Historians like Bose (1989) in his monumental work argued that “the new education provided by the English added a new dimension in society.” When Edward Gait took the project of writing modern history of Assam, *A History of Assam* (1905), he had taken help from many Assamese people as well as clerks in the process of collecting materials from different sources like manuscripts, *Buranjies*, coins, travel accounts etc. This involvement of the Assamese people in this project became so intense that this book has become one of the authentic sources to explore history of Assam. What is most important is that Assamese intellectuals like Lakshminath Bezboruah got influenced from Gait's *A History of Assam*. Because Gait's views of Assam regarding its boundaries, beliefs, rituals, customs and traditions became the base for Bezboruah's debates with the other intellectuals at different platforms like lectures, journals etc. Thus the western teaches us to see our own history through their eyes. The Assamese researchers of the colonial project used their collecting materials in their own writings. Rajanikant Bordoloi's first social Assamese novel *Miri Jiyori* (1894) was based on the materials collected by him from Gait's history. In the book *Primitive Culture* (1871) British anthropologist Edward Taylor, tries to prove the theory of Darwin which was based on the tag that 'survival of the Fittest'. Indirectly Taylor tries to show that westerners were at the top positions in the hierarchical system of human history.

Gait's *A History of Assam* is sometimes termed an imperial history. The matter is often complicated by our thinking of Gait as a colonizer having some occident zeal. No one can deny the fact that Gait's history has colonial motive. Until and unless something goes on in oral form, there is no problem. When it is articulated in black and white, the flexible truth becomes rigid. As we have already talked about the importance of narration in the creation of historical fact, we realize how Gait's role was in creating as well as modifying the tale of our antecedents. Today we know and remember what Gait wanted us to know and remember. Sir Thomas Holdich, a

notable geographer showed the relation between knowledge and imperialism. In this regard he says that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century how expansions of the discipline are tied up with the imperial expansion. Gait's book *A History of Assam* is also a progress of imperialism and knowledge. Holdich's argument is somewhat similar to Edward Said's views. Edward Said, who was an influential figure in the post-colonial studies, in his book *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) tries to show the relation between culture and imperialism. He said that "The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them" (Said, 1994). He insisted not to forget imperialism while discussing culture. Thus, *A History of Assam* has some hidden imperial attitudes.

## **6. Limitations**

Gait is very much successful in joining the roles of an administrator of Assam and of historical narrator of Ahom. Like others Gait depicted the Ahoms as Shan invaders and Tsu-kapha was the founder and he established the territory in the Brahmaputra valley in 1228 A.D. He added, Ahoms ruled nearly six hundred years with large groups of ministers and administrators. What is more ironic in this book is that we found neither any mention of economy nor any reference which shows the development of Assamese community through the colonial administrative and revenue policy. Later S. Holdich, S K Bhuyan reconstruct and expand Gait's history through repetition of the same story line (Boruah 2016). Though *A History of Assam* was the first modern independent history of Assam, many people raised questions on its accuracy. As an outlander it is not easy to know others' place in a short time. They argued that he had made many exaggerations while portraying Assam. Historians like K. L. Borua condemn him for his lack of the engagement with the early historical period. He claimed that "the golden phrase of Assam was the early historical period, which was associated with the Genetic Sanskrit culture" (Boruah, 2016). On the other hand S. K. Bhuyan admires Gait's history. Bhuyan also praises the way in which Gait handles the chronicles and his dedication in making out thus a wonderful treatise (Boruah, 2016).

## 7. Conclusion

History, being someone's version, engages the incidents and aspects the historian was interested in. In the present day context, a large amount of archives are there to examine the truth value of the vents that were recorded. Edward Gait's version of history involved an optimum amount of readings of earlier jot-downs. Being the first ever historian in Assamese historical scene, Gait might have certain drawbacks or limitations in presenting the dominant dimensions of Assam's history. Though he was an outlander, he showed an immense interest in initiating a history writing tradition of Assam (does not matter, whatever motive he cherished inside). His well planned chapterization of each aspect opens up a new world of construction of history in which myth and history are inseparably bound, a matter of further concern. This creates a platform to realize an untrodden world and explore a so called 'gothic' land in front of the world audience.

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