

# European Travelers' Glimpse into 16th-18th Century Assam: Unveiling the Historical Accounts

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## 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

variety of reasons, including colonization, trade, diplomacy, scientific curiosity, and tourism. This encouraged the development of travel writing during this time.<sup>1</sup>

### **Reconstructing Assam's Political Landscape: Insights from Travel writing**

Understanding the complexities of the political systems in the countries they visited was particularly difficult for a traveler. These countries hosted numerous coexisting power dynamics that had a significant impact on historical events. Foreign visitors frequently highlighted the native king as being morally disgraceful and lacking in masculinity. Even though the king had many limitations on his authority, his role as the head of state made him the subject of thorough examination in these strangers' tales.

Ralph Fitch journeyed to the north from Bengal for a period of 25 days, arriving in the region known as Couche, or Quichen. The scale of this kingdom is noteworthy, and its proximity to Cochin China is indicated by their mutual pepper commerce. The principal harbor of this territory is identified as Cacchegate. According to Jean Baptiste Chevalier, the king ruled with an iron fist, spending most of his time overseeing his many harems. He exercised autocratic power over his subjects, treating them as if they were actual slaves.<sup>2</sup> Dr. John Peter Wade describes the ruthlessness of the Ahom ruler, discussing the severe punishments inflicted on those who transgressed, such as gruesome eye gouging.<sup>3</sup> It was widely understood that only the king had the power to have someone put to death by letting them bleed to death. Dr. Peter Wade travelled to Assam in 1792–1794 CE with Captain Welsh's expedition and returned in 1798. He saw the Ahom political system in action during an arduous period. Wade observed that the civil structure of the kingdom was a combination of monarchy and aristocracy, marked by a highly artificial, systematic, and innovative system that, despite its shortcomings, was in many ways successful.<sup>4</sup>

Such evidence can also be found in Chevalier's publications. Chevalier claims that the monarch has a mostly symbolic role in all endeavors and is only distantly involved in kingdom affairs. His first and second viziers, who oversee and direct the government's operations, hold the real power. While this is going on, the monarch himself spends his time living a lavish lifestyle in many seraglios, which harms his stature and reputation as a king. All of the king's subjects

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

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> John Peter Wade, *An Account of Assam* (R. Sarmah, 1927).

<sup>4</sup> Wade, *An Account of Assam*, 1927, 13.

are under his tyrannical rule and are essentially his slaves.<sup>5</sup> The importance of an individual's past in their choice for positions of authority within the Ahom administration is another point Chevalier emphasizes.

When asked about the system of government and the power of the Rajah and many chiefs, Captain Welsh responded that the Ahom state had a dual nature, being both monarchical and aristocratic. The power to conquer was granted to Siu-ka-pha's heirs and main allies. Welsh portrays the Ahom monarchy as having a mix of elected and hereditary elements, particularly in the paternal line. Inheritance did not always follow the law of birthright because the royal ancestor's siblings and cousins had equal claim to the throne.<sup>6</sup>

The influence of the ruling elite, in addition to the king, had a big influence on Assam's pre-colonial states. The ministries and bureaucrats played a crucial role in developing the political situation. They occasionally held enough sway to remove the monarch if necessary in addition to giving him advice. These powerful authorities were the ones who dealt with visitors, including the travellers, face-to-face. The travellers mostly encountered bureaucrats, who gave them insights into the state and administration, with the exception of people like Chevalier and Welsh, who purportedly met the monarchs. The monarchy of the Ahom polity, Captain Welsh highlighted, was largely democratic and gave the nobles a great deal of authority. To put it another way, the aristocracy had the power to choose and remove the king. High-ranking ministers and bureaucrats wielded sway over the government, including Burhagohain, Bargohain, Barpatra Gohain, Barbarua, and others. They often had a substantial influence on the selection of preferred people to be kings.<sup>7</sup>

Despite being nominally acknowledged as the kingdom's ruler, the Ahom king's actual power and influence appear to have been somewhat restricted, according to a number of traveller stories. In reality, the king was required to delegate some of his power to the nobility. Within the Ahom state, there was some latitude in how those things were perceived as being. Despite the monarch's claims of complete control, actual power was divided among a number of people in various levels of authority. Chevalier admits that the grandeur and magnificence enveloping the king greatly

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<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> Kalitā, 8–9.

amplified his perception of the monarch's power and position. This impressive display of authority had a profound influence on him.<sup>8</sup>

Despite everything, the state emphasizes the concept of monarchy and its significance by employing a range of conspicuous symbols, including the ceremonial act of royal sacrifice. The Court, through intricate rituals, customs, and planned activities like royal hunts, seeks to impart a divine quality to the monarchy. It's noteworthy that these characteristics are often referred to in the traveler accounts we've examined. The narratives of these travelers often underscore the power groups, which acted as influential bodies within the deeply stratified pre-colonial kingdoms.

### **Exploring Assam's Vibrant Society Through Travel Writings**

Early modern travelers were fascinated by the physical, ethical, and social differences of the people they encountered, and they relayed these experiences to their audience. Often, they painted those from unfamiliar cultures as peculiar individuals with extraordinary customs and traditions, and their stories were frequently magnified.<sup>9</sup>

Captain Welsh's depictions underscore the physical attributes, social habits, and religious ideologies and practices of the local people, drawing from their societal structure. The interchangeable use of terms like "tribe" and "caste" is seen in these writings. Due to the overlap between tribes and castes, the early colonial periods made it difficult to depict the social structure purely in terms of caste, unlike the rest of India. This state of constant change fostered high social adaptability, leading to the formation of a multifaceted and flexible societal framework.

In his report of Kamrup, Jean Baptiste Tavernier refers to it as the King's residence. Despite not collecting taxes from his subjects, the King owned all the gold and silver mines, the author observes. Instead of forcing his citizens to work in these mines, he hired laborers from nearby nations. This wasn't always the case, though, as washing gold required the assistance of locals. Tavernier expands on his story by claiming that the Assamese people were extremely wealthy.

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<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Gosch and Peter Stearns, *Premodern Travel in World History* (Routledge, 2007), 4.

Their homes were usually scattered among their extensive property holdings. Every home frequently had a fountain surrounded by trees, and elephants were frequently present, especially for the use of the female family members.<sup>10</sup>

One may argue that Tavernier's portrayal of people's dwellings mostly exhibits an elitist mindset that ignores the living circumstances of those who are less fortunate economically. He continues by saying that polygamy was a social norm even if idol worship was commonly practiced. An individual would assign different duties to each of his many wives in order to keep peace among them.<sup>11</sup> Through Tavernier's lens, this could be seen as the objectification of women. But it is clear that women enjoyed a higher status in the framework of the prevailing traditions of the time.

Furthermore, the practice of polygamy raises moral questions, and the tactics employed to ensure the contentment of a man's multiple wives make the entire process of overseeing such international journeys appear somewhat ludicrous.

Frans Van der Heiden and Francois Bernier both shared the same opinions about Gargaon. Heiden praised the town's extraordinary beauty, emphasizing its women's unique attraction in particular. Bernier also emphasized the town's notable prosperity, portraying it as a sizable, alluring metropolis with a booming economy. He, too, emphasized the well-known allure and attractiveness of the women of the city, contributing to its prominence.<sup>12</sup>

Jean Baptiste Chevalier provided a somewhat negative picture of the communities, claiming that they lacked structure and order. The 'picturesque environment of Guwahati' was successful in drawing his attention, nevertheless. Chevalier held the Assamese people in particularly low regard, accusing them of trying to take advantage of him. He classified them as corrupt and untrustworthy, thinking they were more dishonest than any other group he had encountered. He even asserted that they thought of him as simple-minded, uncultured, and prone to deceit.<sup>13</sup>

As an example, Ralph Fitch's viewpoints offer a sharp contrast. He noted that the inhabitants of the Koch kingdom were so kind and sympathetic that there were even hospitals for animals and birds.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Travels in India*, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, H. Milford, 1925), 223.

<sup>11</sup> Tavernier, 1:223.

<sup>12</sup> Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire, AD 1656-1668* (Asian Educational Services, 1996), 172.

<sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> 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.

During his one-and-a-half-year stay in Assam, Dr. John Peter Wade collected historical data from the locality and compiled a report spanning from ancient times to 1780, particularly focusing on the reign of Gaurinath Simha. In the preamble of his report, Wade provided his thoughts on the Assamese language, observing that the history of Assam was maintained in two distinct languages. He classified the first, which he called Bailoongh or Ahom, as the language of the Swurgedeo, the Assamese invaders. He regarded the second one, known as Bakha (Bassa), as a Bengali dialect. It's interesting to note that this realization occurred around 36 years before Bengali was formally adopted in Assam, indicating that a British officer previously thought of Assamese as a variant of Bengali.<sup>15</sup>

### **Economic Landscape of Pre- Modern Assam**

Assam's floodplains are well known for their wealth and productivity. In the writings of travellers, the fertile nature of the region frequently comes up. They have frequently been in awe at the lush, emerald-green foliage, the copious river waters, and the abundant rainfall. Ralph Fitch saw the wide availability of goods like musk, silk, and cotton fabric during his visit to the Koch Kingdom under Nara Narayana. The region's robust economy has been greatly boosted by the manufacturing and trading of these items.

As Mir Jumla's Mughal Imperial armies advanced on Gargaon, the centre of the Ahom kingdom, they marched through meticulously managed fields, fruit-laden orchards, and dense clumps of lush bamboo. According to Francios Bernier, Gargaon was a thriving city that the Mughals found intriguing. He highlights the city's economic importance by highlighting its size and commercial nature. Bernier claimed that the city's thriving economy was readily apparent.<sup>16</sup>

Beginning with the claim that Assam was self-sufficient and did not require anything from the surrounding area, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier continues to describe the Assamese kingdom. He observed the manufacture of silk, which he claimed came from round silkworms that spent the entire year living on the trees. Although he thought the silk clothing made was exquisite, he felt it lacked endurance. He emphasized the region's gold and silver mines in addition to its silk industry.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Paramananda Majumdar, "INTRODUCTION OF THE BENGALI LANGUAGE IN 19 TH CENTURY ASSAM: ROLE OF THE BRITISH," vol. 67 (Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, JSTOR, 2006), 788.

<sup>16</sup> Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire, AD 1656-1668* (Asian Educational Services, 1996), 172.

<sup>17</sup> Tavernier, *Travels in India*, 1925, 1:220.

In his accounts, Frans Jansz van der Heiden emphasized the abundance of gold in Assam. He described their arrival in Gargaon, the Ahom kingdom's capital, when they discovered it to be virtually empty as a result of the king's flight. The naval commander sent out six boats in response to the orders of the Mughal general, two of which were carrying gold and the other four silver.<sup>18</sup> Heiden also noted that cow figurines made of gold, silver, and brass could be found inside Assamese temples.<sup>19</sup> Heiden also described the Mughal army's campout in the vicinity of Mathurapur. They built their base on a fertile, somewhat elevated piece of ground that was surrounded by rice fields. Black pepper, agarwood or aloeswood, and sandalwood all of which were produced in the close-by hills to the north of Mathurapur, were among the resources that were traded for gold by weight.<sup>20</sup>

Rice was not frequently utilized as a commodity for business because the Ahom polity produced a large amount of it. In contrast, rice was frequently purchased and sold as an agricultural good in lower Assam.<sup>21</sup> The abundance of various agricultural goods, in addition to rice, was noted by travellers. These included areca nuts, betel leaves, mustard seeds, pulses, long pepper (pipali), black pepper, cotton, ginger, black sesame seeds, aloes wood, bamboo, lumber, and a variety of fruits. A Jesuit traveller named Father Stephan Cacella noted that the kingdom of Koch Behar was well known for its fruits, which were superior to those from other regions of India, particularly its oranges.<sup>22</sup> Sugarcane was widely grown in the area, according to Captain Welsh, and Assam produced a substantial amount of it. He also emphasized the superior quality of the sugarcane and the likelihood of successful trading.<sup>23</sup>

Chevalier noticed that the French East India Company had given him a fresh assignment. They viewed China, Assam, Tibet, and other unexplored nations as possible markets. His instruction was to use every means at his disposal to gain the ruler's consent for a plot of land. If Assam turned out to be as affluent as expected, the plan was to build a lodge there in search of a new source of wealth.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the fact that our knowledge of the kingdom of Assam is incomplete and unclear, the area was renowned for its richness and a wide range of trading opportunities. If access to the nation was practicable, the development of a

<sup>18</sup> Konwar, "Mir Jumla's Invasion of Assam (1662–63), War Experience of a Dutch Sailor Heiden and Translator Glanus," 50.

<sup>19</sup> Konwar, 51.

<sup>20</sup> Konwar, "Mir Jumla's Invasion of Assam (1662–63), War Experience of a Dutch Sailor Heiden and Translator Glanus," 50.

<sup>21</sup> 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.

<sup>22</sup> Cornelius Wessels, *Early Jesuit Travellers in Central Asia: 1603-1721* (Hague, 1924), 128.

<sup>23</sup> Mackenzie, *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal*, 387.

<sup>24</sup> Chevalier, 23.

firm base in the area may result in major benefits. The kingdom's closeness to China, Tibet, the kingdom of Ava, and other nearby countries may open up sizable markets for other European commodities while also creating an unrivalled market for French goods.<sup>25</sup> Along the trading routes, a wide variety of goods were exchanged, primarily local goods. In long-distance trade with Bengal and other nearby countries, Assam exchanged its lac, dried fish, and muga and eri silks for salt and cowrie shells from Bengal, wool products from Bhutan, musk, horses, yak tails, and Chinese silk. Ralph Fitch referenced the Koch kingdom traders who had previously imported pepper from China.<sup>26</sup>

After his visit, Chevalier observed that Canar Choqui (Kandahar Chowki), the border between Assam and Bengal, had a relatively low level of trade. Assamese traders' main products included lacquer, crushed cotton with its seeds, and morphine, an opium-derived drug, in small amounts. This small-scale morphine traffic, which took place in tiny amounts, was dominated by the Mughal officer posted at the border post.

King Lakshmi Singha (1769–1780 CE) was the first to cultivate opium at Barkendazes in Beltola (close to Gauhati). Captain Welsh observed that opium addiction plagued the then-reigning king Gaurinath Simha (1780–95), and that poppy crops were growing in numerous of Assam's lower regions. The manufacturing of commercial opium that could be obtained in sizable amounts locally was still unknown to the Assamese. Welsh then recommended importing some tonnes of opium from Bengal for sale. Subsequently, it was widely speculated that the introduction of opium use in Assam was largely attributable to Welsh's several hundred men. Similarly, a substantial group of Bengali Hindustani former soldiers, who enlisted in King Kamaleswar Singha's army (1795–1811), played a significant role in promoting opium consumption and the cultivation of poppy.<sup>27</sup>

The report on Assam written by Captain Welsh, a respected British commander, is an important piece of modern history. His extensive, first-hand research highlights the health of the economy, with a focus on trade and commerce in particular. He discovered that a lot of the area had been intensively farmed. The aristocracy held enormous landholdings, and they used their slaves to plough the fields. However, the crops that were produced were rarely sold

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<sup>25</sup> Chevalier, 23.

<sup>26</sup> Ryley, *Ralph Fitch, England's Pioneer to India and Burma: His Companions and Contemporaries, with His Remarkable Narrative Told in His Own Words*, 13.

<sup>27</sup> Amalendu Guha, "IMPERIALISM OF OPIUM: ITS UGLY FACE IN ASSAM (1773-1921)," vol. 37 (Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, JSTOR, 1976), 338–46.

in the markets, making the process of buying food challenging. In this situation, it was discovered that commodities like salt and opium were more useful for acquiring requirements than money.

Unprocessed rice was valued at 600 pounds per rupee at the Rangpur auction of confiscated items. Cows cost two rupees per animal, whereas buffaloes cost five rupees each. Assam had plenty of resources despite the generally low costs and the ensuing high value of money. This gave the ruler, Gaurinath, the opportunity to suggest a sizeable stipend to ensure the presence of British troops.

Chevalier discusses the responsibilities of the Assamese *duaria barua*, who were entrusted with the collection of customs duties on all goods and held exclusive trading rights with Bengal. The primary import from Bengal was salt, which was highly in demand in Assam and presented lucrative business prospects for Bengali traders. Chevalier emphasizes that the salt was kept in *Yogighopa* and that merchants had to pay heavy fees, totaling to 20% of each transaction, in *Alamganj* and *Rangamati*.<sup>28</sup>

Salt was traded in this region for other goods like cotton and wood, as well as for a charge of 4 rupees per person from the *Boutouas* or the indigenous Assamese population. However, the trade operation was not as successful as one might have anticipated because there were many taxes imposed at every *chowki*, checkpoint, and custom house. Chevalier asserts that the limitations placed on merchants by the chiefs of *chowki* caused a widespread fall in trade throughout Bengal.<sup>29</sup> In addition, Chevalier faced severe bureaucratic challenges while on his own travels.

Tavernier provides that the Kingdom had silver and gold. He claims that although it was illegal to transport gold out of the realm, tradesmen frequently utilized it as a medium of exchange. The King retained it in various forms rather than having it struck into coins. In contrast, silver was produced into octagonal-shaped coins and could be moved outside of the realm.<sup>30</sup>

According to Captain Welsh, significant amounts of gold might be found in the sand of north and south-flowing mountain rivers like the *Burrampooter*. The king benefited greatly from this as a big source of income.<sup>31</sup> However,

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<sup>28</sup> 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.

<sup>29</sup> Chevalier, 131.

<sup>30</sup> Tavernier, *Travels in India*, 1925, 1:221.

<sup>31</sup> Alexander Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier of India* (Mittal Publications, 1995), 388.

the government did not coin all of the gold that was acquired. In contrast, a sizeable percentage was used to create gods, create jewelry, and adorn the royal court. Also noted by Chevalier is the Kamakhya temple's profusion of golden figures, which he describes as being challenging to count.<sup>32</sup>

Western Assam, particularly the parts bordering Bengal, had more active economic activity than territories governed by the Ahom. The market and monetary economies of the Ahom kingdom were comparatively underdeveloped in the eighteenth century. The most common method of exchange was barter, and nearby hill communities were connected by sporadic markets that were set up along old trade routes. Travellers, especially those who came to these places on business, provided important insights into economic life that were frequently missed in traditional sources like historical accounts or religious literature. Their writings provided insight into market practices, such as customs surrounding the purchasing and selling of things, as well as the accompanying legal frameworks.

## Conclusion

The perspectives expressed in the descriptions offered by these travellers varied widely, from awe-inspiring wonder to scathing and condescending criticism. It is critical to understand their limited and scanty representations of the state and its institutions in the countries they visited. Due to their brief tenure, they frequently missed out on crucial factors like the complicated interactions between the state and society and the delicate relationships between political and religious institutions. But the descriptions of many ceremonies and occasions provided by these travellers serve as priceless resources for historians, illuminating the past. These narratives captivate the interest of visitors while offering researchers insights into the socio-political structure and customs of the locals.

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<sup>32</sup> 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.

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