

Exploring the History of Empirical Science at Regional Level: A Focus on Koch-Kamrup Kingdom

Anita Bagchi*

Abstract: *Growing interest in Indological researches from the end of the 18th century gave birth to new approaches in the study of the oriental culture. The society had deep impact on the intellectuals of the country and it became a self-imposed task of the academics with nationalist feeling to discover and preserve the knowledge and cultural achievement of the past. The work was more or less related to history, language literature etc. Likewise Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti's work was to discover and preserve different antiquarian text produced in Assam. In the study of material culture of a country at large regional texts are of inestimable importance. In the present article an attempt will be made to throw light on a few regional manuscripts dealing with empirical study.*

Keywords: Indology, Enlightenment, Orientalism, Anglicists, Utilitarians, Sinology, Ayurveda, Vrikshayurveda, Hastividyanava, Ghora Nidan, Ecumenical Science.

Growing interest in Indological researches from the end of the 18th century gave birth to new approaches in the study of the oriental culture. There is no doubt that the hard job was first undertaken by the Asiatic Society under the leadership of Sir William Jones in 1784. Most certainly it was a collective effort. Jones was deeply influenced by European enlightenment and the East India Company needed the service of bright and enlightened Englishmen for pushing forward the imperial as well as commercial interest. Jones's appointment as a puisne judge of the Calcutta Supreme Court might have been a step forward by the company.¹ On January 15, 1784 a meeting was convened by William Jones where he stated that Asia was the 'nurse of sciences' and the 'inventress of delightful and useful arts'. Jones addressed as follows; 'you will investigate whatever is rare in the stupendous fabric of nature, will correct the geography of Asia by new observations and discoveries will trace the animals...'² In fact Charles Wilkins translation

*Professor, Department of History, University of North Bengal

¹ Chakrabarty, R. K., *Time Past and Time Present: Two Hundred and Twenty Five Years of the Asian Society*, The Asiatic Society, Kolkata, 2008, p. 2.

² *London Encyclopedia: Or Universal Dictionary of Science, Art, Literature and Practical Mechanics*, Vol. 20, London, 1829, p. 562.

of the *Bhagavatgita* in 1785 brought to light a simple truth that thought idolatrous the Indians were not as 'uncivilized' as supposed by the Christian Evangelists.

The Memorandum of Articles of the society prepared by Jones shows no radical bias. It contained the following statement: 'the bounds of investigations will be the geographical limits of Asia and within these limits its enquiries will be extended to whatever is performed by man or produced by nature' (Time Past & Present). The result of such investigations and enquiries founds expression in the publications of the Society. These researches constituted a serious challenge to the Euro-centric view till were dominant among the western scholars. It was the greatest achievement of Sir William Jones that the Memorandum shows no indication of European superiority. It directly expresses the indebtedness of mankind to Asian cultures and civilizations. In course of time, the terms like Orientalism, Indology, Sinology etc. were coined with the progress of Asiatic Studies.

Now an automatic question may arise what is the relevance of the Asiatic Society or Jones with regard to the study of science and culture practiced in Koch or Kamrup kingdom i. e. Assam in the colonial and pre-colonial time. There is no denial that, William Jones's conviction that Asia was the 'nurse of sciences' was concrete and in no way illusion. Even the question as to what extent the Hindu revivalist movement was influenced by the Indological researches, the plausible answer should be that Hindu Revivalism has its root in the psychic of the Indian people whereas the researches of the society were entirely inspired by the spirit of discovery. Jones lived only for ten years for his stupendous activities but his team saved the Indic studies from the attacks of the Anglicists, the Missionaries and the so-called utilitarians only with their commitment to the mission initiated by Jones.

The work of the society had deep impact on the intellectuals of the country and it became a self-imposed task of the academics with nationalist feeling to discover and preserve the knowledge and cultural achievement of the if possible institutionally or sometimes on personal initiatives. In this context we may remember the contribution of *Barendra Anusandhan Samiti* of Rajshahi and the *Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti* of Assam. In 1910 the *Barendra Anusandhan Samiti* was founded by Akshay Kumar Maitra. Maitreya tried to discover glorious past of North Bengal. But the work was more or less related to history, language literature etc. Likewise *Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti's* work was to discover and preserve different antiquarian text produced in Assam. I shall make a modest attempt in this article to throw some light on a few Ayurvedic and a botanical text which, it is held had some organic relations with the history and culture of Kamrup and Cooch Behar kingdom as well.

In the study of material culture of a country at large or a region in particular, such texts are of inestimable importance. If the texts written in regional languages or other are examined being grafted in their own cultural frame, their inherent ingenuity comes to the fore and help us to construct an idea of the intellectual level of the concerned people. Besides, these sources seem as if different flows coming out of different sources are comingling together in the ocean of Indian culture and providing it multifaceted dimensions as well. Here I like to remember Needham. He used the metaphor of rivers flowing into the sea in the context of ecumenical science. He refers to an old Chinese expression of 'rivers going to pay court to the sea'.³ It fact on can well consider the older streams of science in different civilizations like rivers flowing into the ocean of modern science. Modern science is indeed composed of contributions from all the people of the old world and in it, Needham stated China and India had definite contributions.

Needham's approach makes an inducement to understand history in a new way and consequent upon this we can extend our inquisitiveness to explore the area hitherto very little known to the people of mainland civilization of the Indian subcontinent. This will help in recording, analyzing and acknowledging the contributions of different nutrient agencies of the Indian civilization.

Marxist historiography and the work of the Annales school in France have encouraged the reformulation of the notion of civilization which are characterized both by changes from an internal dynamic and by a process of exchange. In India there was always the hegemonic pressure of the so-called Hindu science and the dominance of Sanskrit texts but there was still the existence of a parallel body of knowledge preserved in texts composed in regional languages which are to be treated with due importance. This may provide us with an alternative scope of writing history of science, keeping in view the whole gamut of the social and cultural situation and thereby giving birth to a novelty in historiographical approach. Traditional knowledge system or empirical knowledge had developed in different pockets of this subcontinent. As example of such developments, a few texts composed or preserved particularly in Cooch Behar or Kamrup may be cited here.

First of all, reference may be made to the *Vrikshayurveda* of *Parasara*.⁴ This is an exclusive treatise on the *Ayurveda* of *Vrikshas* or trees which may alternatively be called 'plant science'.

'An Introduction to the *Vrikshayurveda* of *Parasara* by the late N. N. Sircar appeared in the journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal vol. XVI, No I, 1950. In this

³ Needham, Joseph, *Science and Civilization in China*, Vol. VII, Part – 2, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 25.

⁴ Sircar, N. N. and Sarkar, R., *Vrikshayurveda of Parasara*, Sri Satguru Publications, Delhi, 1996.

article a preliminary account of the contents contained in the manuscript was furnished. From it we came to know that the original manuscript was discovered by the late *Vaidyasastri Jogendranath Sircar Visagratna*. He was father of N. N. Sircar.

This is an interesting information that the provenance of the manuscript was probably Cooch Behar. J. N. Sircar spent long span of time in Cooch Behar which was under the rule of the Mahārajas from the late 13th century onwards. He was an *Ayurvedic* physician under the direct inspiration and royal patronage Cooch Behar court became a repository of traditional knowledge. The manuscript of the *Vrikshayurveda* of *Parasara* bears a very old tradition and it was discovered sometimes in 1928. Possibly this is a single copy of the manuscript ever found. It may be said the text of the *Vriksayurveda* and its preservation by J. N. Sircar in Cooch Behar prove the connection and cultural contact with the rest of India, a reality. We have another *Vriksayurveda* of *Surapala* which is said to have been composed somewhere in Bengal. But the content is radically different. The manuscript of J. N. Sircar is now in the custody of Roma Sarkar.

Next mention may be made of two invaluable texts: (i) *Hastividyarnava* (ii) *Ghora Nidan*. *Hastividyarnava* is a comprehensive medical text as well as a manual for the elephants. Under the order and inspiration of the Ahom king *Śiva Sinha* and his queen *Ambika Devi*. The writer of the text was *Sukumar Barkath*, The manuscript was illustrated by two painters *Dilbar* and *Dosai*.⁵

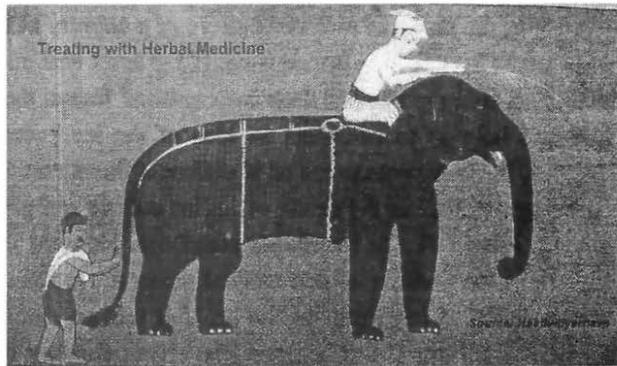
The illustrated manuscript copy of the *Hastividyarnava* was in the custody of late *Mahidhar Buragohain*, the grandson of *Purnananda Buragohain*, the legendary Prime Minister of Assam (1783-1817). The late pundit *H, C, Goswami* recovered this manuscript as early as 1912 and the copy of the manuscript was handed over to the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Assam. The original manuscript had 193 folios out of which 135 still remain. The folios are of the measurement of 58×16 cm. The folios till 163 deal with the types of elephants and from 164 to the end with their ailment and treatment. From the colophon we come to know that it was composed in Saka 1656 i. e. 1734 A. D.

⁵ Choudhury, P. C. (ed.), *Hastividyarnava*, Publication Board Assam, Gauhati, 1975.

Studies on different aspects of behaviour as well as of the types of elephants constitute the main contents of the *Hastividyantarva Sarasamgraha*.

The huge store-house of knowledge in herbal medicines for the elephants as preserved in the

Hastividyantarva reveals that as Kamrup or Assam constitutes the natural habitat of elephants, behavioural study of elephants, was a principal area of interest of the people. From the content it appears that the author was fully conversant with the features and characteristic of different types of elephants coming from different corners of the Indian



sub-continent. Their whole behaviour and method of taming and training have been documented with corresponding paintings in the text.



Source: Hastividyantarva



Medicines have been prescribed for curing diseases like diarrhea, jaundice, heart disease, loss

of appetite, syphilis and others. There is also mention of medicines for cooling the temperament of elephants. All the medicines were to be prepared using the native herbs and plants.

In a discourse on animal science a text on Horse lore of Assam deserves special mention. The text is known as *Ghora Nidan*.⁶ The date of its composition is not definitely known. The original manuscript was handed over to T. C. Bhattacharjee (editor) by pundit Hemchandra Ghoswami on behalf of the Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti. Bhattacharjee after a careful examination of the text forms an opinion that this treatise has not any connection with the Sanskrit text on Horse of ancient India. It should be treated as an original product of Assam. The Puthi is written in old Assamese script and was

⁶ Bhattacharjee, T. C. (ed.) *Ghora Nidan*, 1932 – This book on horse lore of Assam was originally edited by Bhattacharjee. The current edition has been published by the Society for Appropriate Technology, Gauhati, with a scientific analysis of diseases and medicinal plants in the preface by Dr. D. Baishya.

discovered from Mangaldai sub-division in Western Assam, which was the main centre of horse trade. Rulers of Assam probably procured horses from Bhutan. Amalendu Guha has shown that Ahom trade with Tibet and Bhutan was favourable and the Caravan trade was carried between Assam and Lasa and was negotiated at a place in the foothill.⁷ Thus the western part of Assam particularly Mangaldai and Kamrup became the main center of horse trade and their developed traditional veterinary practices for the horses in this part of the land. We get information about two more puthis on horse known as *Ghorar Lakkhana* and *Ghotaka Ratna*.

There is hardly any doubt that these manuscripts reflect the distinctive local character of these hand books containing the traditional knowledge. These lores cannot be equated with other ancient Sanskrit texts, but from a new historiographical approach, it may be stated that the people of Assam had the capacity to develop a traditional knowledge system which constituted a part of cultural and social formation.

⁷ Guha, A., "The Medieval Economy of Assam" in T. Raychaudhuri and I. Habib (ed.) *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, Vol. 1, (C. 1200-C, 1750), Orient Longman, Delhi 1984, p. 492.