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Hierarchy of sources in exploring the Brahmaputra River

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Abstract

This paper more or less attempts to critically analyse the various primary sources and knowledge used by colonial officers during its which is called one of the long and arduous endeavours of knowing the unknown. This is followed by completion of their colonising mission. This papers also throws light on the Brahmaputra River and the role it plays in shaping the lives of inhabitants around it.

Keywords: Brahmaputra River, Tsanpo, terra incognita, Abors

Introduction

It's been more than 70 years since India officially set free from the clasps of the 200 years long colonial rule. This is the time after independence that corroborates the various efforts over the time by the scholars to scrutinize the colonial impact in Indian scholarship. In a process, they did try to break the several typecasts created over time. In modern times Ritupan Goswami in his thesis *Rivers and histories of Brahmaputra Valley in the Last Two Centuries* attempts to relocate and critique the colonial projects of map making, surveys, and observing the Brahmaputra valley and look it through the frame of Rivers. He cautiously critiques the entire project on the grounds of being biased, presumptive towards the other sources of knowledge. He drew a comparison between the practical and theoretical knowledge of the river where the former one was a result of the long process of productive activities that sustained and reproduced life in its valley while the latter was a cognizant attempt of producing that Knowledge by studying the river. We see a palpable dissertation going on between those two throughout the course of projects. I have attempted to trace a pattern and the hierarchy amongst the accumulated and gathered information and knowledge about this vast Brahmaputra River and its surroundings. This is evident in the broad categorization of knowledge amassed through the native informants as 'non-Scientific' and the later supervised colonial surveys and 'modern' cartographic projects as 'scientific'. I have tried to further elaborate my observation by carefully going through a few of the many primary sources such as journals of a colonial official, letters, texts, etc. used by Ritupan in his work.

As a part of a mission of colonizing this vast Hinterland colonial officers started expanding towards the Brahmaputra valley which was incentivized through the gaining of political and military control of important commercial routes. This colonial project of expansion was based on the projects of mapping, surveys, and collecting information of this geographically advanced unknown land. These means of accumulation of knowledge and its treatment undergoes change with time which could be traced through the works of medieval chronicles, Jesuit cartographers, and later surveyors. It became more scientific-oriented with a much clearer distinction with native informants' work.

As a part of one big Oriental project of understanding these people, the early medieval narrative of royal chronicles, travellers, explorers, missionaries, mendicants, etc., also the Buranjies were discovered, studied, translated, published, and debated in journals of Oriental scholars ^[1]. David Zou and M.S Kumar in their work talk about the creative tension between indigenous ways of picturing the world and European cartographic culture ^[2].

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¹ Ritupan Goswami, 'Rivers and Histories; Brahmaputra Valley in the Last Two Centuries', Unpublished PhD Thesis, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2010, Chapter 1, p.41

² Zou, D.V. and M.S. Kumar. (2011). 'Mapping a Colonial Borderland: Objectifying the Geo-body of India's Northeast', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 70, no. 1, p.148.

They mentioned how Thongchai Winichakul attempts to show the comparison between the cosmography which classifies local geography and the whole globe as a separate category in the indigenous knowledge about space entirely separate classification in the modern science of geography and astrophysics. The effect of this could be seen in a manner these cosmographic knowledges dealt with earlier – For instance, the Hill societies of North East had a rich oral tradition of cosmography and the creation of myth. The sheer correlation with myth and legend made these sources unreliable and subject to question and their historical value gets ignored^[3]. According to Anderson the Verticality of local Cosmograph such as Ahom Buranji stands in sharp contrast to horizontal map of bounded territories delimited by modern state interest.

Phillimore in his historical Records complains about the absence of knowledge of the geography of Assam before the days of Rennell and argues most of the available Maps depicts the Brahmaputra as a short River, then he mentions of MD Anville, Jesuit missionaries who challenge Wilford assumption of being originated from the Chiamay lake and connected the Tsanpo to the river of Ava^[4]. Du Halde using the “Lamas map of Tibet” also describes the course of Tsanpo to the capital of Assam^[5] but as the map came from the Lamas so Halde was not at confident of his assumption and so did his contemporaries.

By assessing the Phillimore and Montgomery accounts I could sense out the hypocrisy of colonial officials who being reliant on native informants and not so scientific and systematic Jesuit missionaries’ maps, discarded them later as unreliable and “sadly wanting in geographical interest^[6].”

Bodhisattva Kar in his work: *Welsh's Fallacy: Rereading the Eighteenth-century Ahom crisis* talks about how people who possessed knowledge of routes across hills are represented by British officials and other native informants as secretive, evasive, and jealous about this knowledge. He further adds that the strong aversion to European survey was not only about defending territory but also was a struggle over knowledge^[7].

Unanimously discarding the early works of Jesuit cartographers and medieval chroniclers as fabulous and metaphysical, it was the 18-century works of James Rennell which were to an extent was accepted by the European Scientific community.

Phillimore while writing about the endeavours faced by Rennell in collecting a detailed river survey (1764-5) praised it and pointed out that his works were being compared by the modern map of the 12M southern Asia series.

Renell challenged the earlier D' Anville and Du Haldi work and bring forward his assumption and observations that it was the Brahmaputra river not Chiamay lake or Irrawaddy river which connects to Tsanpo from Tibet. Renell was commissioned for constructing the vast map of Bengal at the time when there was yet “no all-seeing eye” of modern map

“that views everywhere at the same time^[8]. So, Renell in this mission was forced to move away from employing and accepted the tested rules of geography to the very means which were later dismissed as conjectural, fabulous, or simply Non-scientific^[9].

Even though says Kar, Renell’s cartographic, survey works did lay foundations of the scopic regime which we have become so accustomed to. He further argues these surveys, got due validation of being certain and true, just because being able “to fitted in the graticule of the geographical map”^[10]. Renell’s knowledge of Assam and Brahmaputra was thus a concoction of scientific and non-scientific, of factual and fabulous where the line of demarcation often got blurred.

British occupation in the north eastern frontier of India was a long journey that started in the 1790s with Rennell’s river survey and thought to be completed with the so-called Abor expedition of 1911-14 in the north-eastern frontier of the British Indian Empire^[11]. After 50 years of Renell’s works, the quest to find the unknown continues, and the colonial officials who hitherto were restricted to Goalpara look for the entry window to the mainland. They found their first opportunity with the momoria rebellion which was to be quelled by Employing Welsh who carried expedition. In an attempt to collect first-hand information Thomas Wood, Bengal Engineer was sent as a surveyor to the expedition. Joining Welsh detachment at Guwahati in 1792, Wood picked up from the point where Renell left^[12]. Surveys and observations of the Brahmaputra and surrounding were carried out bringing the mission of “collecting information about Assam close”. But before Wood, as Ritupan points out there was an attempt made by Hugh Baillie which again didn’t get the due attention from colonial officials as he failed to produce any “systematic survey of Assam^[13].”

With the second expedition known as the first Anglo-Burmese war, these ongoing projects boosted and gained much more attention and importance by the colonial regime. Surveyors, cartographers were employed increasingly in newly acquired territories to build a good inventory of geographical knowledge of these lands and various rivers specially to exploit them.

The compulsion and necessity to collect more reliable and detailed information than hitherto achieved were further increased with the rise of threat from the Burmese kingdom and for this control of the Brahmaputra, river route became instrumental to curb Burmese assault on Bengal.

This confrontation of the British with the Burmese as the first Anglo Burmese war was seen as an opportunity for gathering knowledge of this “*terra incognita*”. So, the various surveyors from different parts of the British Empire

⁸⁸ John Pickles-a history of spaces cartographic reason, mapping, and geo coded world (London and New York: Routledge, 2004) p.80

⁹ Ritupan Goswami, ‘Rivers and Histories; Brahmaputra Valley in the Last Two Centuries’, Unpublished PhD Thesis, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2010, Chapter 1, p.45

¹⁰ Kar, Bodhisattva. “Welsh’s Fallacy: Rereading the Eighteenth-Century Ahom Crisis”, in Subhas Ranjan Chakraborty (ed.), *The Eighteenth Century in South Asia: New Terrains* (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 2012), p.147.

¹¹ Ritupan Goswami, ‘Rivers and Histories; Brahmaputra Valley in the Last Two Centuries’, Unpublished PhD Thesis, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2010, Chapter 1, p.62.

¹² Phillimore, Historical Records, Vol. I, pp 398-399

¹³ Ritupan Goswami, ‘Rivers and Histories; Brahmaputra Valley in the Last Two Centuries’, Unpublished PhD Thesis, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2010, Chapter 1, p.49

³ Ibid, p.148

⁴ Cited in Phillimore, Historical Records, vol 1 p.78.

⁵ Ibid, p.79

⁶ T. G. Montgomerie, ‘Report on the Trans-Himalayan Explorations, in Connexion with the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India, p. 169

⁷ Kar, Bodhisattva. “Welsh’s Fallacy: Rereading the Eighteenth-Century Ahom Crisis”, in Subhas Ranjan Chakraborty (ed.), *The Eighteenth Century in South Asia: New Terrains* (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 2012), p.144.

were entrusted with this task. They were backed by the imperial army in order to curb the hitherto resistance from the natives.

Phillimore in his account make contrasting statements by on one hand mentioning Schalch's instructions of taking into account any information irrespective of its source^[14] and on the other hand spent an entire section on noting the instructions given to the surveyors to carry forward a detailed and accurate survey to produce geographical information and sketches which were explicitly asked to be separated from the one that was received through a native informant.

Of the course of the rivers in Assam, instructions were issued by the Survey of India that the surveyors would have to "be careful in ascertaining by actual survey to the greatest practical distance, & you will endeavour to supply from information the general direction of the streams beyond the limits of your survey, the names of the towns and villages near which they flow, the situation of their sources, and their junction with other streams...The section of rivers of any magnitude should be taken, showing the depth of water in the dry season & during the floods^[15].

Wilcox at the frontier of Goalpara made anxious inquiries respecting the source of Brahmaputra from natives^[16]. In addition to this, the native informant was asked about the distance and course of the navigable river (which was not beyond Sadiya)

In the process, Wilcox procured an indigenous map in Goalpara "drawn by native" so was easily characterized as drawn in "incorrect style" showing sites of the tributaries of the Brahmaputra, important villages, etc. Indicating the source of Brahmaputra to the east

One of the many reasons behind the continuation of the survey by Wilcox, as I could think of was either that he chose not to believe in the information gained by native informants, or even if he uses this knowledge the main aim was to conquer the entire Brahmaputra region and this obsession with precise and detailed information was the pre-requisite to it as once they mapped the entire region creating inner spaces as we know of today, they can begin with its actual colonial projects of subjugation.

Ritupan argues that for Wilcox, the process of scientific observation was a part of military marches into the less-known Territories, even though not without improvisation and compromises in the rigorous standards of the professional surveyor^[17].

By 1814 a proper institution was developed that despatches copies of surveys and other cartographic material to London. With the involvement of the court of Directors in 19 century the "adherence to strict accuracy" was now demanded in contrast to early 18 century administrators^[18]

With the greater emphasis on experience and presence of the professional surveyor, oriental local sources although still used but got much more side-lined from the cartographic representation.

Wilcox, like Rennell and many others, anticipated the

connection between Tsanpo and Brahmaputra^[19], but it was not considered to be scientifically proved^[20] till the military campaign against the 'Abors' in 1911, through direct and objective observations by surveyors attached to the campaign^[21].

Even Before the Abor expedition, Ritupan Goswami work traces the various Trans-Himalayan expedition which was carried exclusively to scientifically proved the origin of the Brahmaputra and to solved mysteries around it^[22]. In this expedition, the native pundits who had knowledge of the place like Nain Singh, Manee Singh, Kintup, etc. were employed who in disguise traveled from Assam to Tibet following the course of the river. They were as T.G Montgomerie reports tells us, were carefully trained for this above-mentioned expedition in the British scientific factory and were asked to observe and note down even the minute details of the course.

These explorations, however, enthused the mysteries of the most imaginative and speculated falls^[23] of Tsanpo amongst the colonial surveyors, geographers as they were intrigued by the drastic fall in the level of water.

It was kintup,^[24] who testified in his memorial mentioned the falls on the Tsangpo that feed the imagination of a generation of geographers. But due to the absence of proper evidence, its veracity was questioned.

After 10 years of exploration in 1895 Surgeon-Major L.A Waddell in his geographical journal reported that the fall has been placed about 29°36N latitude and 94°1711E longitude between districts of Kong-bu and Pema-koi^[25]. Waddell then mentions the interesting drawing made by a lama artist who claimed to be a native of the Pema-koi district. The veracity and authenticity of the sketch, however, argues Waddell was checked and confirmed by showing it to the Tibetans who recognized the general correctness of its leading feature^[26].

He based sketch argues that the fall could be approachable from below the gorge where a rude monastery is located. The length was estimated is to be 70 feet. Then he refers to various legends associated with this mystic fall which if carefully observed, do give us information for instance about the etymology of the river.

But again, even Waddell's account also like kintup's speculation did not get due attention and acceptance from the British officials. Even though Waddell was so far successful in locating the Fall geographically but just because the source of it was the Tibetans, not the trained Indian surveyors who were not able to penetrate in this

¹⁹ His surveys were compiled into maps in 1828, where Tsanpo was shewn dotted line as falling into Dihang connecting to Brahmaputra valley.

²⁰ As still big loop to the north-west round Namcha Barwa yet to be unravelled.

²¹ Ritupan Goswami, 'Rivers and Histories; Brahmaputra Valley in the Last Two Centuries', Unpublished PhD Thesis, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2010, Chapter 1, p.65

²² T. G. Montgomerie, 'Report on the Trans-Himalayan Explorations, in Connexion with the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India, p.146.

²³ There was speculation being made of existence of the highest waterfall in the world somewhere between unknown or unmapped to be precise 100 miles.

²⁴ a pundit from Darjeeling employed for the trans Himalayan expedition.

²⁵ Surgeon-Major L. A. Waddell, 'The Falls of Tsang-po (San-pu), and Identity of that River with the Brahmaputra,' The Geographical Journal, Vol.5, No.3, (March 1895), p.258.

²⁶ Waddell, 'The Falls of the Tsang-po,' p.258. He goes on, "This devil is placed there under a spell by the Lamas, and when the river is low, the faithful can see his figure looming dimly through the falling waters, as indicated in the picture.

¹⁴ Phillimore, Historical Records, Vol. III-p.198

¹⁵ Cited Ritupan from Phillimore, Historical Records, Vol. III, p. 198 emphasis added.

¹⁶ River emanated from east.

¹⁷ Ritupan Goswami, 'Rivers and Histories; Brahmaputra Valley in the Last Two Centuries', Unpublished PhD Thesis, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2010, Chapter 1, p.58

¹⁸ Phillimore, Historical Records, Vol. III-p.85

region yet. Even the sketch whose veracity was confirmed by Tibetans just because it was made by a native lama artist and was associated with legends remained a mere sketch in Waddell's works who seeks for its legitimacy.

Soon after Waddell's work, The Royal Scottish Geographical Society adopted a resolution to be presented to the British government, where it proposed that an expedition be arranged and carried out to explore the 'still-unknown and uncharted territory. The connotation of unknown and uncharted used proves the biases and prejudice of the colonial regime against native knowledge. So, after these myriads of successful, unsuccessful explorations came the last full-fledged and intensive expedition made by the British Raj to solve the last riddle and to complete its project of mapping was against Abors in 1912.

Ritupan shows by citing from many colonial officials' reports, journals that they saw the Abor expedition as a defensive act as a response to the offenses of Abors and other tribal groups, who were showing vehement resistance to this forced colonial intervention. But in my opinion, it was the other way around it was these so-called 'civilized', modern people who forcefully penetrate the homeland of the Abors by sugar-coating it.

The survey and the exploration works were backed and supported by full-scale military 'expedition', which clearly is 'a euphemism for invasion'²⁷. So, by the second decade of 20 century, the river and valley were almost completely mapped and annexed with the removal of the dotted lines showing *terra incognita*.

Conclusion

The British policy of conquest and subjugation of the natives in the north-eastern Frontier was no different than any other part of the country. However, its vast and geographically advanced terrain played a very crucial role in checking and keeping these foreign conquerors at bay for a very long time. If it weren't for the knowledge accumulated by the native informants which colonizers abased as metaphysical, fabulous, and unreliable they wouldn't have been able to complete this colonial mission. It is evident in the information of the course of the river that was mapped by earlier Jesuit Missionaries were again later confirmed by the labours of the native Pundit who were employed in this colonial mission of conquest. These undine's hierarchies of the pieces of knowledge associated with power need to be challenged and relooked carefully.

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²⁷ Ritupan Goswami, 'Rivers and Histories; Brahmaputra Valley in the Last Two Centuries', Unpublished PhD Thesis, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2010, Chapter 1, p.79