

BOOK REVIEW

Assam Was Not a Place: Review of Manjeet Baruah's Hunter, Peasant, Rebel

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One Sunday morning in the late 1930s a *gaon burra* [village headmen] came to a planter's bungalow in Lakhimpur. He had wounded a tiger and required the *sahib* to pick it up. He specifically wanted Mathaloo, a Naga man in the planter's service. Mathaloo had the reputation of never missing a shot. A.R. Ramsden, the planter, came to the verandah rail and said no. He had blackwater fever and could barely stand. But *shikar* was the sahib's prerogative. So Mathaloo packed the guns, drove the planter out, and was sent ahead. Ramsden fell asleep. Mathaloo took the rifle and the dog, tracked the animal through the forest that night, and shot it dead. Later, he drove the sick man home in his car (pp. 34–35). The skin went to Mathaloo. In Ramsden's 1945 memoir this is invoked as a generous master giving up a trophy that was rightfully his. Manjeet Baruah reads it as the night a planter stopped deciding what anything on his estate actually meant.

In 1839, almost a century before this incident, the Assam Company placed a memoir before its shareholders, rhetorically asking where Assam was. The answer that followed was that the province was at the far eastern fringe of the Queen's Indian territory, where a "spirit of enterprise" had recently germinated (p. 2). Charles Bruce, writing about Assam tea in the same year, put English consumption at 31,829,620 lbs annually. He worked out that meeting this requirement would take every hill and valley of Assam put to plantation (p. 2). They had asked the wrong question. Assam under the British was not just a territory. It was an arrangement of land, labour, hills, plains and people; held together so that colonial capital could keep reproducing itself.

The conceptual bulk of Baruah's *Hunter, Peasant, Rebel* comes from Althusser and Balibar. Capital arrives as the dominant mode of production. But it does not sideline the pre-existing peasant and kinship economies. It cannot, in fact. Capital leans on them, cuts them loose from the logic that ordered them, and keeps them impoverished. Because poverty makes accumulation cheaper. Amalendu Guha saw this, and called colonial Assam a plural economy of multiple structures (quoted at p. 7). Baruah's objection is that sitting side by side is not necessarily the same as being combined (p. 15). What looks like disorder on the frontier is the exact shape of its order.

Assam attracted one of the heaviest concentrations of British capital in India. By the 1900s, Assam was among the world's most extensive tea producing areas (pp. 12–13). Almost none of the tea revenue reached the treasury. Leases, taxes and royalties on capital were kept low. The state basically survived on land revenue and opium, both paid by the peasantry (p. 13). The cultivator paid for what the gardens needed, but also for roads and railways, courts and the revenue office, and for the police. Empire did not subsidise the gardens. The men clearing ground three miles away did. Baruah states it without embellishment, that "the burden of producing the British Assam frontier" felt disproportionately on the shoulder of peasants (p. 170).

Colonial reports repeatedly kept returning to the lack of agrarian improvement and blamed it squarely on the peasant's lack of capitalist spirit. The same reports admitted, albeit reluctantly, that revenue assessment, the pricing of land in money and the credit network had made agrarian improvement impossible. While naming the moneylender as the obstacle, they yet advised leaving him alone. Because a peasant without credit could pay no revenue at all (p. 169). One officer even remarked that a cultivator short of cash should walk, rather than indulge in travelling by the railway (p. 170). Making peasants and ruining them were not two stages. They were one policy, and the ruination was perhaps the point.

A CONFESSION, 2012

Baruah's previous work, *Frontier Cultures* came out in 2012. It opens by conceding a point. Baruah's thesis had asked how Assamese fiction between 1940 and 1980 handled identity. It found that the answer rests in how narratives were built, not in what they said (2012: ix). Then the doubt set in. If identity carried that weight, why had eighty years of it produced no common politics? Identity, he decided, cannot explain itself (2012: x). What he reached for instead was spatial. Assam as a pre-colonial crossroad once had a shared cartography of social and spatial relations. Colonialism wore it away, and once differences stood with nothing in between, they turned into contradiction (2012: xi, 169–70). The language carries over into 2025. But the machinery underneath has been torn out.

Lakhminath Bezbaroa appears in both books. The distance between the two depictions measures the change. In the 2012 work he is the outstanding, pathbreaking author of his generation, arguing in *Jonaki* for a standardised register Assamese; before modern thought could be articulated in it. In 2025 he is a timber dealer with

a rifle. His memoir read for what the shooting gives away about the class paying for it. The archive moves down and outward; from printed fiction to peasant songs and a rebel performing in villages. One man, two archives, two frameworks. The later volume does not contradict the earlier. It asks what had been paying for it.

Another 2017 essay by Baruah on Edward Gait's *A History of Assam* sits between them. And the method turns there. Baruah reads an imperial historiography for the seams where ideology comes apart from evidence. He then follows Gait into the hands of rival nationalists historians. A third reader arrives late. Bishnu Prasad Rabha used Gait's evidence against him, arguing that the core of Brahmaputra valley was Bodo-Kachari. And hence, he imagined a society made of class relations rather than one monolithic body (2017: 467).

Frontier Cultures names Rabha nearly a hundred and forty times, and ends hopefully on him (2012: xii). He returns in 2025 as the subject of the longest chapter. This time, the analysis takes the ground from underneath him.

THREE WINDOWS

The work is built around a triad of three categories: the eponymous hunter, the peasant and the rebel. David Harvey's reading of *Capital* provides the method here. The question becomes not what a text shows but what it is able to show (p. 9). Ramsden's *Assam Planter* came out in 1945. Nothing in it treats hunting as sport. Hunting is part of a way of ordering space. It is the apparatus that turns wild country into a managed [or manageable] industrial-era gardens (pp. 27, 30). But the memoir was written during 1930s and 1940s, a turbulent time. With protests, labour trouble and war around it, the planter's account reaches for a form from the previous century. A form that will not hold. No planters' genre existed in which Ramsden could say what was being done to him (p. 165). And the tiger skin comes back. Mathaloo said he would give it to his bride, as custom required. Ramsden's "magnanimity" was the only shape his lost authority could take, which is why Baruah reads it as a symptom, not a change of heart (p. 165).

Where Ramsden is gallant, Bezbaroa's *Mur Jivan Suaran* of 1944 turns to the comic path. One particular episode has him firing into a bloated fox carcass, certain that he has a python in his sights (p. 54). For a native bourgeoisie shut out of the ideology of *shikar*, hunting as a sport is what Baruah calls an accumulation of form. It is a cultural capital bought to shore up a class, albeit in a 'bumbling' form (p. 55). Bezbaroa presents his life as a passage from a monastic boyhood that forbade killing; to an adulthood that allowed it. Baruah finds this periodisation difficult, since Bezbaroa's father was in the colonial revenue service by the 1860s; and the family comprised of tea planters before the turn of the century. There was no childhood before capital and no adulthood inside it, only a "long capitalist moment" (p. 166). This turns mimicry into a question of rank within the dominant mode; rather than an affliction of the colonised mind (p. 167). Nationhood allowed Bezbaroa survive the crisis that destroys Ramsden.

While talking about form, three genres of historical ballads hold up the third component of the triad, the peasant. The first is *Barphukanar Geet* on the Burmese invasions. The second is *Moneeram Dewanar Geet* on the eponymous publicist-planter's execution in 1858. The third is *Doli Purana* on the killings of peasants at Patharughat in 1894. They follow the agrarian world closely, the boat trade, the village markets, the mustard and paddy, the revenue and the ruin it brought (pp. 82–86). *Doli Purana* names the peasantry's greatest fear exactly, that the countryside would be led to ruination so the tea estates could have access to destitute labour (pp. 71–72, 100). Then the firing starts against the congregating peasants in Patharughat. The ballad blames the killing on confusion on both sides, and the furthest it goes towards peasant agency is *mane guni saila, lahe lahe bhabi-sinti*, the peasants under fire having thought it over (p. 101). But nobody is ever named as the adversary.

Baruah argues this in terms of four inverse relations across the genre. The ballads mark a collapse without critiquing it, carry events as memory, describe them, and give the peasant something to do but with no past worth returning to. In each pair an attempt to represent is set against an inability to. And it never resolves (p. 94). That is not a defect in the genre. It is the genre.

Why the balladists stopped short is a question for literary history perhaps. The pre-colonial *Buranji* chronicles were equipped to deal with *paiks*, and the neo-Vaishnava writings with *bhakats*. Colonialism emptied both of them of content (p. 97). And, as a consequence, nothing written or sung in Assamese framed colonialism as a problem in ideological terms until the twentieth century (p. 172).

At this point, the transition to Bishnu Rabha feels almost inevitable. Saniram Kachari, Rabha's grandfather, rose from the ranks of sepoy to *jemadar* in the Gurkha Rifles. His son Gopal Chandra joined the Lakhimpur Armed Police Battalion, became aide-de-camp to the Governor of Bengal, and retired as a Rai Bahadur with a substantial property at Tezpur (pp. 118, 122). This is not old gentry easing into the colonial bourgeoisie. It is a peasant and tribal family carried into that class in two generations by the very soldiering that built the frontier. The grandson took a different path. He travelled between 1942 and 1944 collecting music among the Dimasas, Karbis and Nagas (p. 130). He gave away the land he held in Tezpur to peasants (p. 174). Later he joined the communists, which put him outside the law (p. 115). Relatives told him the people of Assam wanted him in the "cultural field". He asked who these people of Assam were, and whether they meant people like themselves (p. 132).

In hiding Rabha tore up whatever he wrote almost as he wrote it. Others who were with him took to 'recuing' his manuscripts, which is why the collection *Mukti Deul* exists (p. 151). Literature sold as a commodity was inaccessible to the poor, so he gave up the reader for the listener and told his stories aloud in the villages (p. 175). What he opened up was the gap between writing about peasants, a form Bezbaroa's *Bhadari* started in 1892, and a peasant writing meant to change things, not describe them (p. 176). But the chapter is no tribute. Rabha could imagine a peasant who crossed ethnic and tribal lines because he saw a shared domain underneath them,

held together by neo-Vaishnavism. But that domain was itself built by the nineteenth-century ideals (p. 178).

The revolutionary's universal was built out of the ideology he was running from. Baruah's account of why he believed it is arguably the most well-argued part in the book. The past survives only as a likeness, and inside that likeness a way of seeing finds whatever it needs to keep believing what it already believed (p. 178). Where the likenesses ran out the writing failed with them. As in the case of the story *Kuri Basar Jail*, set by Rabha among plantation workers with no folk material to draw on, whose protagonist cannot carry the weight put on him (p. 149).

AMONG THE HISTORIANS

Placing the book in the wider historiography starts with Ranajit Guha and the autonomy of insurgent consciousness, and Baruah's question is hard to shake off. If the peasant is a knowing subject who crafts his own culture, why does that culture keep reaching for forms that do not fit his condition (p. 15)? Dipesh Chakrabarty comes second. Baruah denies that Chakrabarty's "History 2" passes through capital untouched; and follows Chibber in arguing that a mode is changed by being kept subordinate (p. 6). Crisis is redefined to match. It is the point where the relations holding a form's contradictions together give way.

Planter-Raj to Swaraj by Amalendu Guha came out in 1977, and any work on political economy of colonial Assam is still measured against it. What Baruah owes is plain. Revenue and opium, the labour trouble of the 1940s, peasant politics from the 1860s on, all of it rests on Guha's archival endeavour. But the break is conceptual, and it is most explicit in the case of Maniram Dewan; a figure who appears in multiple registers: native planter, publicist, and anti-colonial resister. Guha noted that Dewan had started two small tea gardens, which were confiscated after he was hanged for treason in 1858. His politics, according to Guha, fell short of an ideology progressive even by the standards of his day, and yet folk-song has kept his anti-imperial image alive all the same, for his role in 1857 (1977: 21). Baruah moves the lack off the man onto the form, from what Dewan thought to what a nineteenth-century ballad could say.

Jayeeta Sharma is never taken on, and *Empire's Garden* does work quieter and heavier than Guha's. The turning of a pre-British gentry into a colonial bourgeoisie, on which the Bezbaroa chapter stand on, goes to her (p. 66n). Where Baruah parts from her he does it in a note, remarking that her account of gardens cut from jungle runs mainly through labour relations (p. 60n). Sharma reads the frontier through the bodies brought in to work it, Baruah through the structure that needed them. That note names the book's largest silence without being explicit about it.

Bodhisattva Kar states the same paradox from the other side. The tribal frontier of the northeast had the fewest garrisons, least mapping and thinnest administration. And yet it carried more capital than anywhere else in the British Indian empire (2016: 41).

He gets out of it through a culture of contracts tying communities, joint-stock companies and the frontier administration together. Baruah gets out through articulated modes. Both conclude that a light hand in government made the frontier profitable rather than limiting its profits. Gunnell Cederlöf has engaged with the same territory, however in an earlier phase, over the Company's trading decades from 1790 to 1840, and finds the fiscal subject of the *diwani* lands to be exactly what could not be made there (2014). Baruah's peasant is that subject a hundred years later, the beam that holds the plantation economy up.

THE SILENCES

The ballads survive only in versions nationalist scholars took down and printed. S.K. Bhuyan's *Barphukanar Geet* among them. Baruah admits in an appendix that the linear structure of the printed texts of the collections may be an arrangement collectors made out of pieces that once stood on their own (p. 196). The defence holds as far as it goes, because the same generic features turn up in ballads collected separately, by different men. But the difficulty is not hidden. Arupjyoti Saikia's study of Bhuyan has him building an archive while writing for two publics that wanted different things (2008). An argument resting on what these texts could not say ought to face their handling in the chapter, perhaps not the back matter.

Plantation labour gets no window of its own, and the book's own logic makes that absence structural. Workers appear as *coolies* inside other people's texts. The labour lines had forms of their own, the cultural repertoire above all, and none of it gets in. Since the argument turns on relations between forms, a missing form is where the framework goes untested. Gender is thinner again, with a tiger skin ending as a marriage gift and Rabha's plantation story turning on Phulmoni. In addition, Baruah counts ecology among his approaches; while leaving must more potential untapped.

The prose is the last difficulty. Its formulations come round again and again, and will try a friendly reader. But Baruah has seen the objection coming. Unless the many local arrangements are put into conceptual order, he writes, there is no colonialism to talk about, only a heap of features that never amounts to one (p. 188).

Two claims in his conclusion travel far past Assam. The first is that a periphery is never there in advance but always made. This turns metropole and periphery from a cause into a result mistaken for one (p. 187). The second is more unsettling. Colonial rule worked by refusing the subject any universal essence, so that the subject was never more than a creature of local qualities. And his resistance never more than a local disturbance; never a claim anyone elsewhere might share (p. 188). Taking from people the capacity to think past the local was one of the most silently devastating instruments of rule.

Since Guha, the political economy of colonial Assam has been written as economy, its cultural history as identity. This is the book that insists they are one subject.

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