

Book Review

Monastic Order: An Alternate State Regime

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Indrani Chatterjee (2013)Forgotten Friends : Monks, Marriages, and Memories of Northeast India, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2013, pp. 451, Rs. 1025 (hardcover)

As the title of the book suggests, *Forgotten Friends* implies an overlooked or ignored past of mutual co-operation, dependence and inter-connectedness across geographical spaces which has now been replaced by strictly bordered spaces. The book is an attempt to unearth memories of a past that ran deeper. But this is somewhat made to look almost invisible beneath layers of vehemently dense nationalist and regional ideological writings and political propaganda which desires to present the past in a particular way. The distinction of the book is marked, particularly by its break away from the large corpus of regional literature and history generated for the time period comprising the thirteenth up to the seventeenth century with particular focus of scholars being an examination of the political economy of the Ahom dynasty.¹ This book has looked at the possibility of an alternative and simultaneous form of state structure, thus paving a departure from the portrayal of a monolithic nature of the state not only in the eastern part of the sub-continent but the general idea of the state itself which is usually a representation of a centralized government guided by principles of law and politics.

A reference made by Indrani Chatterjee in her acknowledgment to Buddhist populations who were described as 'tribal' in anthropological scholarship (p. xiii) reflects an intention of dismantling the 'tribal' nomenclature that populations in the hills are often referred to, more so, as they are usually represented as a population without the experience of the state.

Chatterjee follows the trajectory of historical study set as a precedent by Willem van Schendel and James Scott who engaged in the study of transcending borders and

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¹ Guha, Amalendu (1991), *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity, Economy*, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta; Bhuyan S.K. (2009), *Studies in the History of Assam*, Bani Mandir, Guwahati; Gogoi (Nath), Jahnabi (2002), *Agrarian System of Medieval Assam*, Concept Publishing Co., New Delhi; Gohain, U.N. (1942), *Assam Under the Ahoms*, Spectrum Publications, Guwahati; Sarma, Amulya Chandra (1986), *Tai Ahom System of Government*, B.R. Publishing Corporation, Delhi and Karna, M.N. (2004), *Agrarian Structures and Land Reforms in Assam*, NEHU Publications, Shillong to name a few.

developing a new concept of regional space through the idea of 'Zomia'. These works were an attempt to undo the concepts surrounding the 'nation state' while exploring the idea of 'statelessness' as a choice by populations residing in the Zomia landscape.² Chatterjee, however, differs from Scott and Schendel in the domain of adhering to the idea of an alternative form of state structured through the networks of a monastic militia rule and co-operation in contradiction to the idea of 'statelessness' as pursued by both Scott and Schendel. If one were to make a comparison with her earlier book *Gender, Slavery and Law in Colonial India*, the seeds of interest in North East India surrounding the themes of service, labour and slavery and the notice of a 'conceptual apartheid' that had segregated women and the family from the domains of men were already sown in the first book.³ If the previous book threw light upon how 'slavery' was camouflaged under the garb of kinship, there was a shift in the way pre-colonial cultures were looked at in the new work. Subjectivities like 'slavery' was seen as part of a communitarian need and the maintenance of a geographic monastic order. She highlighted the inability of the British to comprehend pre-colonial cultural ties perceiving them under the categories of 'slavery', 'savagery' and 'feudalism'. This was in contrast to the earlier work where Chatterjee viewed pre-colonial cultures through this very colonial paradigm. *Forgotten Friends* can be viewed as an attempt to fill in the voids that she had noticed while exploring her ideas and sources in the earlier work.

As the author acknowledges Sumit Guha, the latter's influence is clearly visible in the current study as both the scholars have attempted to explore how political economy and states impacted the formation of social identity in South Asia⁴ especially as the opening lines of the introductory chapter begins by stating, "The backbone of this book is a political and economic order centering on monastic teachers" (p. 1). Chatterjee introduces the book by highlighting the broad nexus between monastic teachers and disciples which contributed towards the construction of a wide organisation reflecting a state that brought diverse populations across different geographies under one rubric across the sub-continent. Through an examination of Bon Tantric and Buddhist lineages and their role in the political economy in the eastern part of the sub-continent, Chatterjee brings out the lacuna in Indian history writing with the tendency of scholars to follow the footsteps of colonial predecessors in the process of knowledge production. This imitation of colonial forms of producing knowledge gets reflected in the linear fashion of presenting facts and events without taking into consideration the circularity and simultaneous presence of varied forms of state structures and the mutual interaction between these forms. Such circulation and mutual interaction enabled the sustenance of life and events of the everyday in difficult geographical terrains like that of North Eastern India and regions around its vicinity such as Bhutan, Tibet, Nepal, Burma,

² Van Schendel, Willem (2002), "Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance : Jumping Scale in South East Asia", *Environment and Planning D : Society and Space*, Vol. 20, pp. 647-668 and Scott, James (2009), *The Art of Not Being Governed : An Anarchist History of Upland South East Asia*, Yale University Press.

³ Chatterjee, Indrani (1999), *Gender, Slavery and Law in Colonial India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

⁴ Guha, Sumit (2013), *Beyond Caste: Identity and Power in South Asia, Past and Present*, Brill Publications, Leiden & Boston.

China and Bangladesh. This reflects upon dynamics of circulation and co-dependence of people, such as soldiers and monks and material resources like land.

Initiation into a monastic order ran much deeper than what meets the eye. It has been portrayed as a process through which the spirit of the individual was made to merge and co-opt into that of the community. Such initiation of the self into the community ordained important aspects of the political, economy and the military. It initiated the individual into a kind of subjectivity which contained a nexus of the cultivator-labour-warrior identity that helped in building a strong connection between land, state and ideology under the rubric of monasticism. The latter not only brought these entities together but the inter-connectedness between them seems to have been maintained across regions through a process of decentralization, thus, creating a pattern of localized sovereignties. Her particular focus on the power of the priest to ‘control’ (p.10) resonates with the present scenario of politics in the country today as priests and self-styled godmen have been invested with tremendous power and influence to mobilize populations and hold reins of political power.

The shift from the first to the second chapter is marked by highlighting pre-colonial ways in which monastic regimes functioned and how the complex of monastic governments, militias and marriages became the domain of power politics by the East India Company. A unique aspect of the book lies in Chatterjee’s recognition of women’s agency over landed estates and grants thus, playing a significant role in keeping the network of monastic geographicity functional across regions. She portrays that in pre-colonial society, many cohabitations established as ‘marriage’ were treated more like a strategy by ambitious individuals and lineages to simultaneously generate and acquire prestige while not being treated as an institution solely for biological or social reproduction (p. 129) – a theme that has been explored extensively in the third chapter. It, therefore, brought forth the utility of an institution for political gains such as diplomacy, strategy and a measure of value tied to accumulation and expansion of resources, power and prestige. Chapter 4 looks at the process of transformation which monastic governments and the land resources under them had gone through under colonialism by viewing these native forms of rule through the prism of ‘feudalism’, ‘slavery’ and ‘savagery’ while at the same time mimicking these monastic estates which it very much tried to uproot. From here on, she tries to explore a tussle about subjecthood through the reformulation of total relationships from one under plains and Himalayan monastics to that under the British through the process of ‘frontier making’ in the eastern part of the sub-continent (p. 204). While the fifth chapter explores the contribution of the tea plantation industry in dissolving the monastic geographical order of the seventeenth century as it created militarized colonial fraternities around the advance of tea plantations, Chapter 6 delves into the penetration of colonial military politics of undoing monastic codes of gender transcendence, household formations and the intrusion of the public into the private that culminated into the final conquest of the colonial state over a monastic one.

The book therefore, highlights the clash of different forms and ideas of state and subjectivity which resulted in conflict and one which acted as a deciding factor of

triumph of one above the other. Where one was more flexible in its relations with its subjects, the other aimed at fixity of these relations, eradication of the former and transfer of the former relations towards its own.

An interesting aspect of the book is that the author does not confine the idea of 'North East India' to the eight modern states of the region from a Delhi centric geographical directional perspective but instead, Dhaka becomes the centre from which she tried to understand the political economy of regions that lay 'north' and 'east' of it. Her attempts at a 'civilizational' treatment of the region, however does not really do away with the peripheral treatment of the 'North East'. Hence, the idea of peripherality remains intact while there is a shift in the centre of reference from Delhi to Dhaka.

Chatterjee's is an attempt to write a history through an endeavour to do away with the vagaries of nationalism and nationalist history writing by focusing upon the fluidity of populations and cultures in order to entrench an idea of borderlessness across geographical spaces. The point of contradiction however, lies in the fact that although the author intended to dismantle the conventional idea of a state structure, but the running theme of the book focusing on an alternative structure of the state based on monasticism defies the very purpose that she intends to fulfil. The book, therefore, pertains to establish the structure of a different kind of a state itself. Though one cannot possibly deny the colonial politics in reducing pre-colonial state structures to the term 'feudal' but works such as this book, pushes one into the pitfall to romanticize a past glorifying native forms of hierarchy based upon religious adherence and devotion. It only provides leverage and momentum to a scenario of Indian politics in which attempts are made to go back or recreate a past based on a certain sense of subjectivity in the name of religiosity, thereby, making claims to a need for a cultured past.

Although there is an attempt to do away with the category 'tribal' attached to Buddhist populations, yet while giving detailed attention to Tripura and Sylhet she speaks of the 'hills in between' (p. 100). The lines between over-simplification and complication gets blurred while trying to incorporate a subaltern like Zakapa within the rubric of 'Bengali speaking intelligentsia' leaving the reader confused instead of leaving one with clarity (p. 300).

Though there is an effort to establish the power of women's agency in monastic lineages but to what extent could they be considered as agents? After all, such arrangements were meant to cater to the masculine pursuits of land acquisition, prestige and power over a vast expanse of territory well beyond one's own. It is highly questionable whether even decisions related to marriage were taken by the women themselves. Consent itself is a matter of dispute as the death of the husband did not end the relationship between two households but extended it as the girl would then be married to any male member in the family.

A wide array of sources have been used including some interesting ones such as maps of trade routes, thus, truly living up to the theme of her book on 'geographicity' cutting across territorial spaces from London, Pennsylvania, Wales, New Brunswick, New

Delhi, Kolkata, Guwahati as well as Aizawl. The sources have been primarily based upon colonial documents written in English with a dearth of original documents written in the local languages. One can therefore, assume a sense of bias in the utility of original documentation for the subject matter of the book. Also the citation of the source while making claims such as “connection with other monastic centres up and down the rivers of Assam and Bengal” (p. 68); the usage of terms like ‘Bengali Cosseahs’ (p. 97); an ‘Endoo Bhutia’ as a holder of a landed estate (p. 105), mentioning marital and military-diplomatic bonds seem to have been missing. The sources are not enough to establish her claims about women’s authority over raising alternative militias through land grants (pp. 98-101).

Indrani Chatterjee’s *Forgotten Friends* provides an innovative and fresh insight into the history of North East India and compels one to break away from the categories through which traditional history writing has viewed the history of the region for decades. Her admission in the acknowledgment section that the book would not be free of failures and shortcomings is in itself a reflection of the deep insight, introspection, engaging spirit of constant review beyond one’s own confines speaks volumes about the book. Chatterjee’s observations about an alternative history of the state cannot be ignored, thus, opening up a wide corpus of possibilities for scholars of history to pursue further research in unexplored terrains related to North East India.