

JAMES JOHNSTONE'S ACCOUNT OF CAPTAIN WELSH'S EXPEDITION AND THE POLITICAL CONDITION OF EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines James Johnstone's account "*Captain Welsh's Expedition to Assam in 1792, 1793 and 1794*" and evaluates its importance for reconstructing the political and socio-economic history of late eighteenth-century Assam. The study aims to analyze Johnstone's narrative as a colonial historical source, focusing on the Moamoria rebellion, the decline of the Ahom polity, and the nature of early British intervention. The methodology is based on qualitative textual analysis of Johnstone's work, supplemented by contemporary official correspondence and supported by modern historiography. A comparative approach is used to identify discrepancies between colonial narratives and later scholarly interpretations. The findings indicate that Johnstone's account provides valuable empirical details on administrative structures, military developments, and regional instability. However, it is shaped by colonial biases that portray British intervention as necessary and indigenous rulers as inefficient. His narrative underrepresents socio-economic causes of rebellion and overlooks indigenous agency. The study concludes that while Johnstone's work is indispensable as a primary source, it must be critically evaluated within its colonial context. Its significance lies in contributing both factual data and insight into colonial knowledge production, thereby enriching the historiography of Assam and early British expansion in Northeast India.

Keywords: Assam history, Captain Welsh, James Johnstone, Moamoria rebellion, Ahom kingdom, colonial historiography

INTRODUCTION:

The late eighteenth century was a period of profound transformation in Assam, marked by political instability, internal conflict, and external intervention. One of the most important sources documenting this era is James Johnstone's account "*Captain Welsh's Expedition to Assam in 1792, 1793 and 1794*", first published in 1877. The narrative provides a detailed description of the Ahom kingdom during a time of crisis, particularly in the context of the Moamoria rebellion and the weakening authority of Gaurinath Singha.

Johnstone's work is based on official British correspondence and local information, making it a valuable yet complex historical source. While it offers detailed insights into political events and administrative structures, it also reflects colonial perspectives and biases. This paper seeks to critically analyze Johnstone's account, examining its historical value and limitations while situating it within broader historiographical debates on Assam's past and British colonial intervention.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

The historiography of Assam has been shaped by both colonial and modern scholarly works. Early writings such as Gait (1906) provide foundational narratives of the Ahom kingdom, while Barpujari (1994) offers a comprehensive indigenous perspective on Assam's political and administrative systems. Guha (1983) reinterprets the Moamoria rebellion as a socio-economic movement rooted in structural inequalities rather than mere political disorder. Colonial accounts like Johnstone (1877) tend

to justify British intervention and emphasize indigenous weaknesses. Recent scholarship critically reassesses such narratives, highlighting their biases and limitations. This study engages with these works to evaluate Johnstone's account within a broader historiographical framework.

METHODOLOGY:

This study employs a qualitative historical methodology centered on textual analysis of primary and secondary sources. The primary source is James Johnstone's account, supported by references to contemporary correspondence between British officials and Assamese authorities. Secondary sources include modern historical studies on Assam and colonialism. The analysis identifies key themes such as governance, rebellion, and intervention, followed by critical evaluation of narrative bias. A comparative approach is used to contrast colonial interpretations with modern historiography. This method enables a balanced understanding of the reliability, limitations, and broader implications of Johnstone's narrative within the historical context of eighteenth-century Assam.

DISCUSSION:

1. Nature of the Ahom State and Governance Structure

Johnstone's account begins with an outline of the political condition of Assam in the eighteenth century, emphasizing the administrative sophistication of the Ahom kingdom. The Ahom polity was characterized by a centralized monarchy supported by a hierarchical nobility and a well-defined administrative structure. Offices such as the Buragohain, Borgohain, and Barphukan played crucial roles in governance, military organization, and regional administration (Gait, 1906).

The paik system was central to the functioning of the state, ensuring a continuous supply of labor for agriculture, military service, and public works. Johnstone's description of extensive infrastructure, including roads, tanks, and temples, reflects a high degree of administrative organization. However, modern historians argue that this system, while efficient, was also coercive in nature, placing heavy burdens on the population (Barpujari, 1994).

Thus, Johnstone's portrayal of administrative efficiency must be balanced with an understanding of its limitations and inherent inequalities.

2. Economic Prosperity and Its Structural Limits

Johnstone presents Assam as a prosperous region with fertile land, abundant cattle, and flourishing silk production. He emphasizes the absence of famine and the general well-being of the population. Such descriptions suggest a stable and self-sufficient economy prior to the onset of political instability.

However, this narrative requires critical examination. The apparent prosperity masked underlying vulnerabilities, including dependence on agrarian production and the rigid structure of the paik system. Scholars such as Guha (1983) argue that economic exploitation and lack of social mobility contributed to widespread dissatisfaction among the lower strata of society.

The decline in agricultural productivity and the occurrence of famine during the rebellion indicate that the economic system was not as resilient as Johnstone suggests. His account, therefore, reflects a partial view shaped by colonial perceptions.

3. The Moamoria Rebellion: Reinterpretation of Causes

Johnstone attributes the Moamoria rebellion primarily to the misrule of Gaurinath Singha, portraying the king as cruel, inefficient, and morally corrupt. While such descriptions provide insight into the immediate causes of unrest, they fail to capture the deeper socio-economic roots of the rebellion.

Modern historiography interprets the Moamoria movement as a complex uprising involving marginalized groups who resisted the exploitative structures of the Ahom state. It was not merely a reaction to individual tyranny but a broader challenge to systemic inequality.

The rebellion led to widespread destruction, depopulation, and economic decline. Johnstone's account of violence and famine, though possibly exaggerated, highlights the severity of the crisis. However, his failure to analyze structural causes reflects the limitations of colonial narratives.

4. Political Fragmentation and Rise of Local Powers

The weakening of central authority during the rebellion resulted in the emergence of multiple power centers. Local leaders, insurgent groups, and opportunistic actors began to assert control over different regions. Johnstone describes a situation of "anarchy," where individuals with small followings established themselves as independent leaders.

This fragmentation was both a cause and consequence of political instability. The inability of the Ahom monarchy to maintain control over its territories accelerated the decline of the state. At the same time, it created opportunities for external intervention, particularly by the British.

5. The Barkandazes and External Military Influence

The Barkandazes represent a significant element in Johnstone's narrative. These mercenary forces, recruited from Bengal and northern India, were initially employed to support local claims but soon became agents of disorder. Their involvement illustrates the increasing interconnectedness of regional politics and the growing influence of external actors.

Johnstone provides detailed descriptions of their activities, emphasizing their role in plunder and violence. While these accounts are supported by contemporary correspondence, they also serve to highlight the inability of indigenous rulers to maintain order.

From a critical perspective, the emphasis on disorder may have been used to justify British intervention. Nevertheless, the Barkandazes undeniably contributed to the destabilization of Assam's political and economic systems.

6. British Intervention: Motives and Strategies

The expedition led by Captain Welsh is presented by Johnstone as a response to a request for assistance from the Ahom king. The official objectives were to expel the Barkandazes and restore the king's authority.

However, the instructions given to Welsh reveal broader strategic interests. The British sought to gather information about Assam's resources, trade potential, and geopolitical significance. This aligns with the expansionist policies of the East India Company during this period.

The intervention thus had dual purposes: immediate military objectives and long-term strategic goals. Johnstone's portrayal of British actions as benevolent must be critically evaluated in this context.

7. Military Campaigns and Administrative Measures

Welsh's campaigns against the Barkandazes were largely successful, demonstrating the superiority of British military organization. His efforts to reform the administration, including the dismissal of corrupt officials and the issuance of proclamations, reflect an attempt to stabilize governance.

However, these measures were limited in scope and duration. They did not address the underlying structural issues that had led to the crisis. Moreover, they reinforced British influence over local administration, raising questions about sovereignty.

8. Restoration of Gaurinath Singha and Its Implications

The restoration of Gaurinath Singha was a central objective of the expedition. Johnstone's portrayal of the king as weak and dependent reinforces the colonial narrative of indigenous incompetence.

While the restoration temporarily stabilized the region, it did not resolve the deeper issues of governance and legitimacy. The king's reliance on British support undermined his authority and highlighted the changing dynamics of power in the region.

9. Policy Shift and Withdrawal of British Forces

The change in British policy under Sir John Shore marked a turning point in the expedition. The decision to withdraw reflects a shift towards non-intervention, driven by administrative and financial considerations.

This withdrawal limited the long-term impact of the expedition. Although immediate objectives were achieved, the absence of sustained support allowed instability to resurface.

10. Colonial Knowledge Production and Narrative Bias

One of the most significant aspects of Johnstone's work is its role in colonial knowledge production. His account reflects the perspectives and priorities of British administrators, emphasizing order, efficiency, and control.

The portrayal of indigenous rulers as weak and rebels as disorderly serves to justify colonial intervention. At the same time, the detailed documentation of political and economic conditions provides valuable historical data.

This dual nature highlights the importance of critically engaging with colonial sources. By recognizing their biases, historians can use them more effectively to reconstruct the past.

CONCLUSION:

James Johnstone's account of Captain Welsh's expedition offers a detailed and valuable narrative of a critical period in Assam's history. It provides insights into the political instability of the Ahom kingdom, the impact of the Moamoria rebellion, and the nature of early British intervention. As a primary source, it is indispensable for understanding the events and administrative conditions of the late eighteenth century.

However, this study demonstrates that Johnstone's narrative is deeply shaped by colonial perspectives. His portrayal of British intervention as necessary and beneficial, along with his depiction of indigenous rulers as weak and inefficient, reflects the ideological framework of colonial historiography. Such biases limit the explanatory scope of his account, particularly in relation to the socio-economic causes of rebellion and the agency of local actors.

By engaging with modern historiography, this paper highlights the need for a critical and balanced approach to colonial sources. Johnstone's work must be read alongside indigenous perspectives and contemporary scholarship to achieve a more nuanced understanding of Assam's past. Ultimately, the study underscores the importance of integrating multiple viewpoints in reconstructing historical narratives.

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