Birinchi Kumar Barua’s contribution to the history of Assamese culture, language and literature is equally pioneering and anticipatory of new perspective as his creative writings are rich in human compassion and social ethos. One can find ample scope to argue in favour of such a statement. In fact, historical consciousness has been quite central to his critical and creative energy as revealed in his novels, short stories, analysis of medieval texts and authors, literary and cultural historiography. Apart from his ‘A Cultural History of Assam’ (early part, 1951) which is the crown of his historical research there are quite a few other works that explore with equal intensity the social-religious and cultural history of Assam. Even a slim book Asamiya Katha Sahitya – Puranibhag (1872 Saka), the gold mine of the origin and growth of Assamese prose is historical in its spirit of enquiry and depth of findings. In this chapter an attempt has been made to study and use materials from such works as - A Cultural History of Assam (1951), the third revised edition of Gait’s ‘A History of Assam’ (1963), ‘Asamar Basa aru Samskriti’ (1957), ‘Asamar Loka Sanskriti’ (1961), ‘Temple and Legends of Assam’ (1965), ‘Asamat Buddha Dharma and Sahitya’ (a symposium edited by B. K. Barua with a long essay on

B.K. Barua’s scholarship in these works reveal among other aspects a rare sense of historical concerns in an emerging social situation that held up all activities pertaining to history, literature and culture for further scrutiny and enquiry. Each of his works (mentioned above) contains an intimate scholarly endeavour to delve deep into the subject through careful study of available materials. Being a litterateur of unsurpassed merit, a brilliant student of Pali literature and a pioneer in folklore research, B.K. Barua’s approach to history has been infused with fine emotion and blissful attitude of a visionary (Prof. Barua, 2008; Bora, 2007; 279; Sarma, Satyakam: 2015). He appears to have been quite restless with thoughts that there remains a lot more to explore in our remote past and to use such materials for reconstructing our history. Assam being a frontier province has been in constant and intimate contact with Indian subcontinent on the one hand and the entire Himalayan regions of China, Bhutan, Tibet, Nepal, Burma since time immemorial. This strategic and geopolitical position with its magnificent topography has shaped the history and culture of Assam as a distinct entity. Viewed from an Indian perspective, Assam has been able to make quite a few but solid contributions to the formation of Indian thought and culture. B.K. Barua feels that materials of genuine socio-cultural-religious political history of Assam are lying unnoticed in different corners which require a team work for its exploration and use (article in Ramdhenu, Vol. V111, nos. i and ii: p. 1476).

Nationalist perspective:

Major issues of his historical research admit that it is based on finding a nationalist perspective for society, polity and culture and in this respect B.K. Barua can be clubbed together with Dr. S. K. Bhuyan, though the later had
shown deeper penchant for its political articulacy\(^1\) (Saikia, Rajen in Bora, S.N (Edit.):2008, and Sarma, Manorama and Bora, Shiela *Historiography in North East India* 2000: 1-17).

The nationalist perspective in B.K. Barua’s historical writings emerges from a painstaking study of its culture, language, ethnicity, literatures, archeological finds, sculptural images and so on. There is hardly anything chauvinistic or narrow parochial over-reaching (Saikia, Rajen, Ibid). Instead, what we can learn from him is that a colonial nation in its difficult process of political reorientation has to draw strength and inspiration from its past - the socio-cultural-linguistic aspects that speak a good deal about the evolutionary dynamics and antiquarian elements. Their gradual fusion and interaction through the ages had created in the pre-colonial period a space for political identity-formation. National historiography often makes exaggerated lofty claims to the extent of downplaying the great values of minor cultures of a discursive nature. Creation of heroic myths and metanarrative do not allow the issues of peripheral importance to articulate national perspective. Such bias notions of national or colonial historiography cause huge causalities to regional nuances which are, otherwise, capable of projecting a balanced view of national identities.

This has been found as the core of the basic tenets of B.K. Barua’s historical observation to turn his attention to peripheral realities - the potential power pockets of historical dynamics. Formation of a pan-Indian concept in the writings of the historians starts from a multiple points of view. Sometimes it is Upanisadic in spirit as in RabindraNath Tagore.

1. Shiela Bora and Manorama Sharma have incorporated some papers in a monograph originally written for a symposium synchronising the birth centenary of Dr. S K Bhuyan. Both have identified the fundamental concerns of Dr. Bhuyan with a nationalist approach to represent Assamese history and civilisation far and wide. Manorama Sharma, however, regrets that the Carlylian bent of thought in him has been over-stated.
Nation, as he perceives, is never circumscribed by its physical demarcation; it is, in-fact, a mental state of affairs, a continuous and sustained efforts on the part of the people of the present age to keep up the legacy of our glorious past (atmasakti, Rabindra-Rachanavali: 620-621).

They are also seen in a very reactionary and challenging mood refuting the western views on Indian life and culture. If some colonial British historians and Christian missionaries are accused of blowing out of proportion some of the corrupt practices like the ‘sati’ system, some Indian historians used to glorify the past and distort historical facts in the name of defending their heritage. Fusion of race and culture is the basic lesson of history but religious bigotry and colonial bias lead to the murder of history proper (Ali, B Sheikh, 2011:348-353).

The manner in which B.K. Barua had been engaged in so many diverse works that demanded academic scholarship, critical insight, creative energy and imaginative speculation brings him to the mainstream of Assamese literary and intellectual tradition. It is the same tradition that continues in its unbreakable flux since Lakshminath Bezbaroa. B.K. Barua’s multifaceted talents enabling a cross fertilization of ideas put him in a better position to observe Assamese culture, language, literature, arts, religions and society on a historical perspective. He explores these aspects of our ancient and medieval past in such a precise and critical way that it finds its moorings in Indian identity. T.S. Eliot had made it quite clear in his seminal essay that tradition is a living stream and it has a human dimension. Individual talent and new ideas of each generation save tradition from being a dead and frozen concept (Reprint, 2004).
B. K. Barua’s Legacy:

The creative literary tradition set by Bezbaroa and his contemporary had its cradle in the religious and cultural resurgence of the Vaisnavite movement. Bezbaroa’s greatest contribution is to redefine the Vaisnavite religious-cultural tradition in the light of a modern humanist and philosophical perspective. Representation of unique character of the Assamese language and the Assamese mind in a body of literature ranging from philosophical treatise to folk tales, satirical writings to poetry and drama is the hallmark of Bezbaroa’s genius. Much of its strength lies in the periphery of a society reeling under colonial subjugation and enlivened by the values of an indigenous culture.

Accordingly, B.K. Barua’s creative and critical genius had its cradle in this long cherished literary and cultural tradition. He too tries almost single handedly, with the dream of a visionary to raise the standard of and find new ways to Assamese literature, culture and society. We notice in him a passionate, rather romantic zeal in harnessing ideas from various sources and putting the parts into a whole. The society under influences of colonial modernity which was being shaped gradually during his time is sought to be given a historical mooring. B.K. Barua adds a relatively new dimension to historical research in Assam by exploring the racial make-up, political regimes that excelled in diplomacy, catholicity and liberal attitude moving ahead towards an Indian identity by patronizing Aryan Hindu culture, socio-religious dynamics behind the ancient remains of temples, its architectural designs, sculptural beauty, masonry, religious practices characterized by the belief and customs of the indigenous people, his study of folk culture and Buddhist literature and its philosophy as a source of social history, the socio-cultural renaissance brought about by Sankardeva’s new Vaisnavite movement. These are some of the issues with which B.K. Barua adds a new dimension to history. However, it is true that in most cases, he is only a pioneer pointing to, or opening up a new vista below the palace paradigm of history.
Practice of History and Historical Sense:

The contour of history suggested above owes its debt to Colonial Modernity thoroughly nurtured by the Western epistemological tools. Bezbaroa set an example of total dedication to the cause of an Assamese identity and to the growth of a society that is capable of standing on a social ground. The fusion of tradition and modernity in Bezbaroa had further ramification in the works of Banikanta Kakati and Birinchi Kumar Barua. Based on rigorous scientific approach and analysis B K Kakati established the genius and unique character of Assamese as an Aryan speech. The first part of ‘Basa aru Sanskriti’ by B.K. Barua also contains some seminal essays dealing with different aspects of the Assamese language. Besides, his creative writings ‘Jibanar Batat’ and ‘Seujee Patar Kahini’ retain and further reveal the genius and originality of the Assamese language and the typical Assamese mind. Bhaben Barua has shown how a highly nuanced idiomaticised language intermingling with pathos and humour has rendered ‘Jibananr Batat’ - a classic standard of world literature (reprint in Bora 2008 : 41-67 originally published in Asom Batori edited by Chandra Prasad Saikia, 1964).

A living history of Assamese society passing through various phases of vicissitudes, moral crisis, traditional values and some of its obvious limitations has been fictionalised. Bhaben Barua is of the view that Birinchi Kumar Barua and Jyotiprasad Agarwalla are the two creative geniuses who after Bezbaroa and Chandra Kumar Agarwalla could develop the most fundamental and original vision to see the world beyond. An authentic presentation of the fast changing form of a life-style and a social system is his forte. It is solely by dint of such a vision that B K Barua has proved his lifelong dedication to knowledge and scholarship in such works like Asamiya Katha Sahitya, A Cultural History of Assam, and Asamar Loka-Sanskriti. Quite perceptively Bhaben Barua says that his creative writings contain learned observation of a historian and a sociologist (Ibid, 2008). Thus, B.K. Barua and a group of
leading Assamese intelligentsia sustained and enlivened the legacy inherited from Bezbaroa. I have discussed the sociology of fiction separately in chapter 1. Here I refer to his fictions in an attempt to show that his historical consciousness foregrounds both the creative and critical faculties. For, in his fictional narrative one can easily perceive a clear historical perspective vis-a-vis the encounter of colonial modernity and traditional values.

Behind the surface of the narrative structures there remains a living story of human existence or what Millan Kundera cryptically suggests in the title of a novel - ‘The unbearable lightness of being’. In *Jivanar Batat* Sivanath Barman finds the validation of Frederick Engels’ comment that

> “Realism, to my mind implies, besides the accuracy of detail, the presentation of typical characters in typical circumstances” (quoted in Barman, 2002: 50).

B K Barua, according to Barman, does not depict ‘a make-believe world’ of some abstract, isolated human beings; but in their actions and thought we find a dialectical presentation of the society they belong to. If Kamalakanta represents the emerging gentleman class of urban middleclass devoid of any serious social commitment, Dharani is the spokesman of the writer’s concern for the utterly disorganised village people, the victims of famine, poverty, and the manifold social maladies. Creative literature in its broad framework is an allegory of life and society where history and historical consciousness appears in disguise. All historical arguments particularly in its socio-cultural and literary ramifications appear to have maintained a double role – one is the exploration of the origin, growth and transformation of an Assamese identity which situates at the same time the besetting evils and the other is to evaluate its participation in and contribution to the nation building activities. What is found out as the real historical behind the land and people, culture and society in Assam is applicable to the Indian perspective not because the Bedic and the Epic tradition act as the weaving texture, but mainly because the interpenetration of the racial and cultural components belonging to the Aryan and non-Aryan
varieties breathe life to a democratic worldview. Predominance of tribes and other non-Aryan racial groups prove that they have also a share in forging an Indian identity. With B K Barua’s historical investigation there begins a cultural perspective of historiography of which a major segment has been the folk culture.

**A Review of Historical Literature:**

Assam as a part of the Indian Territory emerges in unique fashion through several centuries and her unique entity is discernible in many ways. One of such great achievements is the rich treasure of chronicles popularly known as ‘*buranjii*’. According to Grierson–

> “The Assamese are justly proud of their national literature. In no department have they been more successful than in history – a branch of study in which the rest of India is, as a rule, curiously deficient. The chain of historical events for the past six hundred years has been carefully preserved, and their authenticity can be relied upon.”

(Grierson, Vol. 1 part 1: 156).

These ‘*buranjis*’ are the indispensable source materials to study the glorious Ahom period for they contain a clear picture of education, society, culture, politics, economic conditions, religious beliefs and practices in Medieval Assam. B.K. Barua’s ‘*Asomiya Katha Sahitya*’ (puranibhag) shows that these *buranjis* (those written in Assamese) are the early specimen of Assamese prose. These ‘*buranjis*’ however cannot claim the basic tenets of history simply because its scope is limited to keeping records of a chronology of events that concern the royal authority and higher nobility. Written under direct supervision of the king and his subordinates, the ‘*buranjis*’ are deficient in impartiality and objective analysis of history today. Sir Edward Gait’s ‘*A History of Assam*’ stands out to be the first serious attempt exploring authentic sources of history. Gait’s meticulous and painstaking research is preceded by several volumes of works on Assam history right from Holiram Dhekial
Phukan to Gonabhiram Barua, from Maniram Dewan to Hiteswar Borbaruah. But the critical reception accorded to Gaits’ work itself proves the incompleteness and lack of objectivity even within their common preoccupation with the political life of the state.

Though a classic work of great intellectual labour, Gait’s ‘A History of Assam’ is in retrospect seen simply as a brilliant documentation of political events during the Ahom period and it leads us straight to the period of colonial occupation. His critics often point to the colonial bias of the British historians or the Assamese historians too who had accepted the colonial rule more as a boon than a curse. The domain of history created by Gait and followed by several Assamese scholars is rich in careful scrutiny of facts deciphered from the hardcore historical materials. As E.H. Carr points out that history does not

“Consist in a mere recital of facts. On the contrary, the process of reconstitution governs the selection and interpretation of the facts.” (2008: p.22)

Carr further mentions that the historians -

“Starts with a provisional selection of facts, and a provisional interpretation in the light of which that selection has been made – by others as well as by himself” (ibid)

History, thus, involves reciprocity between present and past – a dialogia between the historian as part of the present and the facts that belong to the past (ibid). But we must admit that these facts are mainly man-made things – literary, artistic, cultural, and inscriptional and so on. Discovery of such ‘historical facts’ at any point of time and their interpretation may, however, change the nature of history. Moreover, interpretation of facts may be conditioned by the historian’s own ideological position, his own perception. The dialogic relation of the individual and his facts are very much open to preoccupation and bias. That is perhaps the reason why Gait’s history could not satisfy many of us and all great works may leave behind them a shadow of
doubt, biased views. Edward Gait’s contribution to Assam history cannot be downsized by speculating on such points – what he could have done or what he could not achieve. Surya Kumar Bhuyan is a doyen of the 20th century Assamese historians, associated with the regional variety of the Nationalist historiography. His works, quite numerous as they are and dedicated to the cause of projecting the glorious aspect and the heroic cults of Assam history (Bora, Sheila et al, op cit: 2010) failed to bring out the socio-cultural issues with the same intensity. A substantial position of Assam’s early history remains either untouched or ‘receives only a casual treatment’. B.K. Barua says that in all these works a political and dynastic history was reconstructed. N.N. Basu’s ‘Social History of Kamrupa’ contains a good deal of ‘unassorted information’, but it lacks ‘critical examination and historical perspective’. B. K. Barua also refers to Bani Kanta Kakati’s ‘The Mother Goddess Kamakhya’ as “An admirable introduction to the religious history of Medieval Assam.” Though some serious attempts have been made yet we do not find here what B.K. Barua calls “a complete picture of the material, social, religious, aesthetic and cultural conditions of the people of early Assam.” (Preface, A.C.H.A.1951).

Thus, we find that a rich treasure of ‘buranjis’ and histories has been produced in Assam since the 17th century onwards when the Ahom chroniclers started writing ‘buranji’ in Assamese language. From the first decade of the 19th century (Srinath Dowerah’s ‘Tungkhungia Buranji’, 1804) to Padmanath Gohain Baruah’s ‘AsomarBuranji’ (1899), we find a good deal of serious efforts to represent Assam historically with the obvious preoccupations of a century inspired with a rare relish of creativity or provoked by some inherent contradictions of a colonial society. Sir Edward Gait’s ‘A History of Assam’ published in 1905 lays a strong foundation of history-writing. Since then the legacy of historiography has been continued through works of Hiteswar Borbaruah, Benudhar Sarma, Kanaklal Barua, Surjya Kumar Bhuyan and others. Both Bani Kanta Kakati and B.K. Barua had made extensive research
and thereby widened the scope of historiography by incorporating things beyond politics and regime.

Birinchi Kumar Barua’s Historical Writings – His Basic Tenets and Scope:

B.K. Barua’s ‘A Cultural History of Assam’ is a pioneering work which is well known and widely referred to. But there are some other great works including articles published in various journals and books. All these works together offer a fairly clear view about B.K. Barua’s ideas on history and his own practice. His research work ‘A Cultural History of Assam’ (1951), ‘Asomiya Bhasa aru Samskriti’ (1957), the revised edition of Gait’s ‘A History of Assam’ 1963 (with inclusion of four new chapters) can be put into a separate group followed by other works like ‘The Early Geography of Assam’ (1952), his histories of Assamese Literature (four handy vols.), ‘Temples and Legends of Assam’ (1965), ‘Sankardeva: the Vaisnavite Saint’ (1960) and a good number of articles on socio-religious issues. A close study of these works tells us in unequivocal terms and in a fair degree of clarity about an essentially flexible liberal concept of history that draws its vitality and ingredients from diverse sources.

His several writings published in the forties and fifties of the 20th century such as the bulky essay on the Buddhist Tripitak (included in ‘Bauddha Dharma Aru Sahitya’ a symposium edited by B.K. Barua), his introduction to ‘Ankiya Nat’, articles like ‘Arunodoi Sambad Patrat Nagaonar Batari’ (Souvenir, Nowgong 27th Sahitya Sabha, 1959) etc. have clear historical orientation. Readers can glean valuable information about social history. Many new trends of history-writing have been set from the seventies onwards and we are proud to see in B. K. Barua’s writings an anticipation of the new dimensions of history. His monumental work ‘AsamarLoka Samskriti’ contains a good deal of social and subaltern history. Viewed from such a point of view
without any prejudices one can be convinced that all roads lead to history. One of the major approaches to history in Surya Kumar Bhuyan is biographical approach highlighting on the great heroic personalities like Bhaskarverman, Lachit Barphukan and others. This is in-fact a legacy of the 19th century mostly represented in Thomas Carlyle of the English Victorian age. B.K. Barua has also referred to such personalities including Sankardeva, the Ahom rulers. He discovers in Bhaskarvarman and Sankardeva, for example, a social dynamics, the spirit of renaissance and liberal catholic outlook that welcome new ideas.

Buddhism and the principles of New Vaisnavism had nurtured potential revolutionary idealism in a society reeling in orthodox cults. Quite naturally Bhaskarvarman’s liberal religious attitude, his interest in Chinese Buddhist literature and his earnest appeal to Shiladitya to send Hiuen Tsiang to Kamrupa caused discontentment in the prevailing religious hierarchy (see Bora, Sheila et al Historiography in North-east India, and Nath, R. M, Background to Assamese literature). New ideas are always challenged but not eliminated. Its gradual progress and popular acceptance ensures a social mobility which does not remain unnoticed to the historians. Thus, the Buddha, Bhaskarvarman and Sankardeva appear in B.K. Barua’s writings not to propagate any heroic cult of Carlyle but to see its impact on our socio-religious history.

There is yet another significant aspect of this biographical approach in his writings. It might be termed a folk-paradigm. The innocent, illiterate, humble folk who with enormous creativity live a community life rich in beliefs, customs, rituals, festivity, songs, dance, art-forms are also the makers of socio-religious and cultural history. ‘Asamor Loka Samskriti’ remains a pioneering work in this respect. This resourceful folk milieu gets further resonance through refinement and assimilation during cultural renaissance of Sankardeva (Barua, B K Studies in Early Assamese Literature). Medieval Assamese society, culture and religion form an interdisciplinary discourse in the writings of B.K. Barua.
A Cultural History of Assam: A case of racial and cultural fusion.

B.K. Barua’s ‘A Cultural History of Assam’ is a pioneering work in this field and has endured critical reception for more than a half century since its first publication in 1951. The well-documented research work has since remained a unique intellectual property for several reasons – firstly, it reconstructs Assam’s early history through scholarly exploration of rather unconventional source materials of literary, epigraphic, artistic origin. Its ‘methodical treatment and balanced judgment’ paves the way for its entry into the arena of ancient Indian history. Quite justifiably Prof. H.G. Rawlinson greets this piece of industry as a real addition to Indian history. As the mighty Brahmaputra moves westward from its Tibetan highland down to the mainland of India, B.K. Barua’s findings about the Assamese society and its culture as a ‘distinct entity’ contribute to the formation of a greater Indian identity.

Secondly, Barua is convinced that the original Mongoloid inhabitants of Assam having been some isolated groups due to lack of common unifying force were brought under the cultural influence of the advanced Aryans. Expansion of the political boundary of ancient Kamrupa in the western front to the river Kausika to Behar facilitated successive waves of Aryan penetration ‘down to medieval period through Madhyadesa’. B.K. Barua sees this cultural contact between the Aryan and tribal peoples as an initiative towards the formation of Assamese society, culture and literature. Despite predominance of Vedic religion, rites and Aryan language, the Assamese identity is the product of a dialogic interaction. For the Hinduisation of the people including kings and nobility could not completely obliterate the original, ethnic tribal ethos. Consequently the religious-cultural practices and institutions, language and literature were deeply imbued with elements of a mixed variety. These points of cross fertilization suggested in this work of cultural history are elaborately illustrated in works like ‘Asomiya Bhasa aru Samskriti’, ‘Studies in Early Assamese Literature’ and Samar Loka Samskriti. B.K. Barua points to some folk motifs which had initially been a Vedic or Aryan formulation. He cites for
example the popular festival ‘Bhatheli’ as the remnant of the Vedic worship of Indra. But the greatest cultural influence of the Aryans was the Sanskrit language. Besides being a strong medium of expression of the court, poets and philosophers, Sanskrit is the mother root of modern Assamese. As it normally occurs in intercorrespondences between cultures that one borrows from the other, so also the case with language. The Aryan speech when surrounded by numerous ethnic speeches is bound to assimilate resources for its better mobility. The language and its speakers while mobilizing through space and time have to lose much of its dominant features and produce variants like folk-tale travelling across geography and cultures. The immense variety of human culture and languages all over the world bear testimony to a mixed formation.

B.K. Barua gives a rather balanced judgment when he writes –

“Anthropometric researches have not been carried out in Assam. So nothing can be said about the ethnic affinity of these Aryan speakers. It is, nevertheless, certain that before their arrival in the valley of the Brahmaputra these speakers had lost purity of Nordic blood and became almost a mixed race” (ACHA, 1951: 9).

There are ample linguistic evidences and place names to indicate that the Austric speaking Mongolian people began to settle in the province several hundred years before Christ and ‘Certainly anterior to the advent of the Aryans from the West’. The term ‘the Aryans from the West’ is perhaps significant; for, a formulation of non-Vedic Alpine Aryan has been made by some scholars. Parag Paban Sarma Borah has taken up this debate in response to K. L. Barua’s Early History of Kamrupa first published in 1933 and Dr. Nagen Saikia’s recent work Asamiya Manuhar Itihas. (Borah, 2011: 73). They argue that these Alpine Aryans settled here long before the Mongolian tribes and thereby the wagon of Aryanisation is overloaded both from the east and west. It is alleged that facts of history and principles of racial assimilation are distorted in a way that social progress and human civilization is presented in a monologically structured frame. It appears that B.K. Barua while discovering quite different
racial and cultural flows/streams from east and west of the province stands
closer to Rabindranath Tagore’s philosophy of history. Rabindra Nath Tagore
perceived a sea of humanity, a confluence of races and languages which is
more a psychic, emotional process than a product of religious unity, common
language and geographic location. A genuine national spirit does prevail over
great human achievements, nobility and the saga of heroism. Such public
memory of the past and their mutual consent to live together provide the
genesis of a nation or nationality (Atmasakti, Rabindra Rachanavali, 1908 Saka
vol. 2). The ‘heroism’ referred to here consists of sacrifices made by men and
women for promotion of human welfare. Unless there is a desire or an intimate
will to form a confederation, a wholesome unit to sustain and improve, the rich
heritage of the past, no nation comes into being in the real sense. The power to
assimilate diversity is the secret of civilization. He was rather critical of the
content of history text books of his time which fail to fathom the chaos of
politics and reach the underlying sense of spiritual amity and fellowship. He
reconstructs an idea of history as a piece of serenity, integrity – an image of
Upanisadic Brahma that consumes all diversity for recreation of unity.

There is little doubt that Rabindranath’s creative and critical mind had
sustained contact with the teachings of Upanisad and Buddhist scriptures
(Sengupta, Nandagopal in Rabindra Prasanga, 1997: 38). B. K. Barua, it
appears, believes in emotional cohesion, racial harmony and a plural national
ethos forged through a realization of the green grandeur of sociological,
cultural and human values. The green contour of race, culture, language,
legend, myth etc. which are so central to B.K. Barua’s historical consciousness
are found buried in a sort of spiritual meditation in RabindraNath Tagore. B.K.
Barua’s idea of a racial make-up is however free from spiritual abstraction in
the sense that he tries to show with objective clarity a process of cross-
fertilization. What he has suggested without detailed references in ‘A Cultural
History of Assam’ has been illustrated in the second part of his ‘Asomiya Basa
aru Samskriti’ (Sarma Borah 2010: p. 56-62).
Thirdly, epigraphic materials have been used to extract economic history which was indeed a new practice in historiography. Prof. Mignonette Momin has brilliantly analysed the use of inscriptive materials to reconstruct the early history of the North-East. Sir Edward Gait was the first to initiate ‘modern history-writing’ in North-East India exploiting written documents including epigraphic sources. But the representation of the political and pre-colonial period was prejudiced in favour of colonial historiography. As a result, epigraphic sources were not interpreted up to the extent of his merit and much vital aspect remained unnoticed. If colonial prejudices barred Gait from doing full justice to the epigraphic sources, K.L. Barua used the same ‘to champion the cause of early Assam’s distinct identity’ as a part of the nationalist response to history (in Sharma, Manorama 2000: p 50-51). B.K. Barua’s cultural history also follows the same course of nationalist historiography but uses materials in his own style from a diverse source and creates a mosaic of social, cultural, lingual fusion. Besides, as has been suggested by Prof. M. Momin, B.K. Barua and a few others endeavoured to glean socio-economic information from those epigraphic sources.

“Thus they used epigraphic evidence to throw light on aspects of not only polity but of economy as well, in search for political personages, administrative functionaries fiscal terms, types of revenue and prevailing occupations of the people”. (Ibid, 2000).

B.K. Barua refers to some village names found in various inscriptions which certify the existence of villages. The names of villages and provinces ‘generally owe their origin to castes, or tribes as in ‘Tantikuchi’, geographical and physical features such as lakes (Ganga Pukhuri), rivers (Mangaldai), hills (Harupesvara), tree (Guwahati), religious character (Vasudeva Thana), flora (Phulbari) and fauna (Tezpur, which means a city abounding in snakes). Names of places and rivers derived from Austro-Asiatic, Dravidian and Tibeto-Burman roots prove that Sanskritisation could not obliterate the non-Aryan influences. The various land grants recorded on copper plates and stones were
made for economic purposes. It helped in the formation of village unit. Village names like Kumarpara, Ganaka Kuchi stand for allocation of a certain portion to some professional groups. The ‘Subhankasa pataka Grant’ ‘refers to the different domicile of weavers’. Accordingly, the Gauhati Grant of Indrapala and Puspabhadra Grant of Dharmapla both mention villages exclusively inhabited by Brahmanas.

The epigraphs also mention settlements granted on the river banks. For the village as centre of agricultural activities required irrigation and fertile land for production of crops. The donated land of the epigraphs was represented as ‘sajala sthala’ and epigraphic terms like ‘Guginika’, ‘jola’ ‘gasta’, ‘doba’ ‘indicate that the village fields were well supplied with water’. Thus the various grants of Nidhanpur, Vanamala Grant, Gauhati Grant of Indrapala, Puspabhadra Grant are linked to the Brahma putra, Kausiki, Trisrok, Diguma, Jangala. A typical Assamese village as a unit of agricultural production was also divided into three parts – the village proper (Vastubhumi or habitate), arable and pasture lands Ksetrabhumi was called arable land which consisted of a huge open field. There occurs a term ‘go pacara’ in the inscription which means a pasture land located along the village boundaries. Thus the demarcation of a pasture land as ‘go cara bhumi’ remained an undivided common property of the village. All these arrangements as suggested by the epigraphs led to the development of agricultural production and husbandry.

Epigraphic information not only articulates the origin of village but also gives us important hints to the rise of the cities. If the rivers were expected to water the fields and sustain the fertile ‘ksetra bhumi’ it did facilitate transport and communication so essential for growth of towns. Cities commonly known as ‘pura’ ‘nagara’ came into existence. The Grant of Balavarmana uses a term ‘kataka’ to mean city – ‘Harupesvara Namani Kataka’. The cities are said to have served as seats of government, royal camp or of fort. Religious and commercial factors also helped in the creation of the cities or towns at convenient places where trades couldflourish. B.K. Barua concludes that the
towns and cities that rose to prominence during medieval period were conveniently located on river banks. The names of ‘Pragjyotisha’, ‘Durjaya’, ‘Harupesvara’ and ‘Kamrup Nagara’ are found in the Grant of Balavarman, Baragaon Grant (also Gauhati Grant of Indrapala, Banamala and Puspabhadra respectively). Some grants contain magnificent descriptions of the cities like Durjaya which also certify their prosperity, artistry, architectural designs, vocation of the chitrakars or painters. It may be added that the sculptural, architectural, masonry designs and figurative representations in such centers not only refer to occupational opportunities and religious motifs but also to the artistic genius of those unknown creators, designers and art practitioners that Medieval society could produce. It, however, remains a matter of conjecture whether all these architects, artisans, sculptors and painters whose imagination and the delicate touch of their hands could erect such monumental, magnificent art-forms were properly trained, educated, well provided with or just a team of casual wage-earners. But there is no doubt that without these multitudes of art-workers, their creations, the medieval history would have been a loosely connected political account.

The epigraphs referred to here are but royal sources of information. It celebrates and propagates the activities of the ruling classes. The cities being principally a ‘royal camp’ their information is rich in graphic details. Banamala Grant conveys such an impression that it refers to the streets used by the wealthy and eminent people to move on state by elephants and horses. The jewelry and Goldsmith’s shops attracted people from far and near (Baragaon Grant). Amenities in the form of ‘arena’ and ‘upavana’ mean public parks, pleasure groves rich in peacocks, mask deer and also lotus pond (Baragaon Grant).

There was abundance of betel vine which might give pragjyotisa the present name, Gauhati (rows of betel nuts). Rajmohan Nath’s opinion about the origin of ‘Gauhati’ as derivative from Austric ‘Koi-hati’ also suggests that there developed trade and commerce between the people of hills and plains.
Betel-nut has a commodity of daily use amongst the hill people. The great mart where the commodity was catered to the hill people was named by them as ‘Kuai-hati’ or betel-nut mart and this has since been known as Gauhati. B.K. Barua gleans some important points of economic importance from Hieun Tsang’s account such as his mention of a great road to the east leading to China and horticulture farming was properly irrigated by channels drawn from the river or tanks. ‘Water led from the river to form banked-up lake flowed round the towns of Kamrupa’ (quoted from Buddhist records of the western world in ACHA)

The little information so far deciphered from the inscriptions cannot give a clear view about land ownership and land tenure. Though the Balavarmana’s Grant mentions that the king while alienating land communicated the order to the state officials, the donee (Brahman) and also to the men of the district. But this is not universal practice. Instead, the king reserved all rights to own land and alienate it at his will. He could even resume the land already granted. The major part of the cultivable land was held by the agriculturists and the right of land holding was hereditary. Payment of taxes or dues for land holding was, however, compulsory. But the land granted to the Brahmans by issuing copper plates was free from taxes. Such royal patronage enjoyed by the Brahmans in Medieval India may serve as an important matrix to some contemporary social issues. The Brahmans were assigned with the task of imparting education, introducing new modes of agricultural production, maintaining religious cult etc. Considering Bhaskarvamana’s renewal of the copper plate regulating the Mayura-satmala– agrahara once made by Bhativarman we can surmise that the land Grant might have been occasioned by some pious sentiments of the royal power. The Grants made by the rulers with some vital information inscribed on stone or copper plate obviously follow some royal achievements which the rulers would like to keep on records. The Nidhanpur copper plate among others celebrates Bhaskarvamana’s victorious campaign up to Karnasuvarna. Such incidents are rendered memorable by gift and patronage to the Brahmans. Granting of land
and encouraging Brahmanical settlement through it might have served purposes other than religious. The village owes a great deal to the innovative knowledge of this class, for the advanced system of cultivation was processed by the Brahmans or the Aryans.

Besides land Grants to the Brahmanas, the epigraph gives clues to land Grants for temples and ‘special religious purposes’. Except the land granted to the Brahmanas and other institutions, general tax was levied on land periodically. This is also called ‘the crown’s share of the produce’. Apart from this ‘Bhag Kara’ there was also a practice of imposing irregular tax on the tenants who had no proprietary right over the soil. Such information deciphered from epigraphs may also be a pointer to social disparity, because the landless tenants bearing the burden of additional taxes appeared in sharp contrast to the landed Brahmanical fraternity privileged enough to get royal patronage. The rulers’ liberal views in granting land to the Brahmanas and also for institutional use do not match with the plight of the tenants who did not enjoy ownership of lands. B.K. Barua’s presentation of the decipherable inscriptiveal facts leaves scope for further enquiry beyond its general idea of land ownership and land tenure in ancient Kamrupa.

The epigraph further authenticates issues like survey of land and demarcating holdings by officials of the state revenue department. The state departments surveyed the land and kept record of agricultural produce and the revenue collected out of the paddy fields. Such records of pre-Ahom land survey and revenue left its legacy to the Ahom period when Ahom rulers largely following the Mohammedan system of land measurement conducted detailed survey of lands.

Besides lands and revenue, B.K. Barua gleans from the epigraphic texts and also some Brahminical and secular texts a variety of information relating to rich flora that could surface in the description of Indian literary text, travelogue, and economic treatise of Kautilya etc. The mode of cultivation by the hill people popularly known as ‘Jhum Cultivation’ has been archeologically
proved after the discovery of stone-built sharp pointed stakes in the seventies of 20th century (see Asamar puratattvik charsar agragati ed. by R D Choudhury). The epigraph provide further information about cultivation of food crops like pumpkin, cucumber, sugarcane and cultivation of fruit trees like jack-fruit (kantaphala in the Grants Indrapala, Dharmapala), mango (amra, in grants of Balavarma, Indrapala), jambo, sriphala, dumbari (fig tree, in the Grant of Balavarma) etc.

B.K. Barua carefully records how the epigraphic and literary sources provide a clear outline of Assam’s forest resources. A large variety of trees like timber, bamboo, aromatic woods including agaru, and sandal has been mentioned. Assam forest had great potential to occupy world market with a variety of aromatic and sandal woods. One Gosirsa sandal capable of stealing fiercest inflammation away formed a part of Bhaskarvarman’s valuable royal gift to Harsa. Sancipats prepared from the agaru bark was used as paper for writing. A major part of our intellectual, religious, artistic history still lies in manuscript forms; ‘Tezpat’ is another product of Assam forest having great trading potentiality.

The silk industry of ancient Kamrupa is said to be an import from China. Greek and Mohammedan historical sources (peripels) trace its origin to China and it suggests Assam’s trade links to its eastern part or a legacy being preserved from its ancestral Mongolian soil. B.K. Barua suggests that the three varieties of silk products besides being a sustainable source did introduce Assam to the rest of India with a piece of unique textile.

Abundance of minerals particularly gold and copper is certified by the epigraphs. The Tezpur Grant of Banamal states that the river Lauhitya carried down gold dust from legendary gold bearing boulders of the sacred Kailasa mountain. Besides inscriptive evidence, there are some authentic native accounts of Robinson, Butler, Wade etc. which suggest that the best and purest gold was found in Subansiri, Dichang and Jaglo rivers. B.K. Barua, then refers to the brilliant account of the finest jewelry in Harsacarita and Arthasastra.
Pottery was another important village craft. Inscriptional expressions like ‘Kumbhakaru’ and Kumbhakarugarta’ meaning potter and potter’s pit respectively in ‘Kamauli’ and ‘Nidhanpur’ grant correspond to the discovery of a large number of terracotta figurers.

From such an account of Assam’s rich treasure of forest and mineral resources B.K. Barua suggests that forest and mineral products ‘found their way into Tibet, Barma and China. Trade communication with the neighbouring provinces must have been facilitated through various rivers routes to Magadha. B. K. Barua quotes from the ‘Buddhist records of the western world’ that Bhaskarvarmana proposed to send his officials to escort Hieuen Tsiang in his return journey to China through ‘the southern sea route’. Moreover there existed a land route to China through the Northern Mountains of Assam. For obvious reasons these mountain passes were extremely difficult for movement and transportation. But these routes had served the purpose of migration; expansion of trade and commerce and cultural contact. It is said that Kumar Bhaskarvarmana had been in touch with Chinese literature even before the visit of Hieuen Tsiang to his court, for during conversation with the pilgrim Bhaskarvarmana enquired about some Chinese songs.

Thus, B.K. Barua suggests that Bhaskarvarmana who is found to have great curiosity about Buddhist philosophy and religion had been in contact with the literature produced in China. Assam’s history is predominantly a history of Mongolian migration – the successive waves of tribes of Austric, Tibeto-Burmese and Shan origin. The land and sea routes used by these invaders also served in expansion of trade and cultural mobility. Referring to Sir Arthur Phayre’s ‘History of Burma’, B.K. Barua writes that the Burmese government wanted the people to cut the jungles and to remove all other obstruction from the path. Further it felt that there should be a village on a military settlement every twelve or fifteen miles along the route. It is not impossible to see a new Burmese design to occupy the Brahmaputra valley at that time.
Fourthly, reflecting on the trend of social change and social organization in ancient Kamrupa as suggested by the inscriptions B.K. Barua comes to the conclusion that the varnasrama system of ancient India was widely diffused or disintegrated. It lost its original significance and began to be replaced by the evolution of caste system. Varna became synonymous with caste. A whole substratum of ‘Jati’ had evolved gradually under influences of tribal, racial and religious factors at work.

The Brahmans enjoyed special privilege and social mobility during the period of Kamrupa dynasties. A large number of Brahmanas migrated to Kamrupa following the decline of the imperial power of the Guptas. The royal patronage was also a strong factor behind this migration. Primarily it was clear that donation and patronage to Brahmanas was the part of a royal policy to settle the Brahmanas in Kamrupa. Thus they showed their commitment to the cause of religion. Barua rightly observes that ‘on account of this constant royal patronage Kamrupa seems to have become a resort of the Brahmanas’ (ACHA: p. 105). The factor which combined with the royal patronage behind this social mobility was the rise and fall of the tide of Buddhism. Its rise gradually weakened the Gupta regime and made the Brahmanas to move eastward and declining tide of Buddhism in Northern India encouraged the Brahmanas to migrate from Kamrupa to places like Bengal.

With the growth of various gotras, the Brhmanas of Kamrupa gave rise to various social institutions and customs relating to marriage, inheritance, worship, sacrifice etc. Anyway the Brahmans emerged through as a formidable force or social unit with their study of Vedas and cultivation of various ‘sciences and art’. Cultivation of fine arts which was traditionally a domain of the Ksatriya passed on to the Brahmanas as the ‘Puspabhadra Grant’ of Dharmapala suggests that the grandfather of the donee possessed ‘knowledge of the fine arts’. Besides, the members of the Brahmana community had been engaged in administrative offices as ministers, administrators and court poets.
They even contributed to the defense mechanism of the state with superior skills and technique.

The Brahmans are followed by other castes such as Ksatriyas, Kalita, Koc, Kaivarta, Suta etc. Their detailed account is interesting in the sense that interracial marriages led to the creation of some castes like Baishya – a term derived from Brahmana widow, Kaivarta, born of Ksatriya father and Vaishya mother; Kumbhakara or Kumara (potter), the offspring of clandestine union of Brahmana with a Baishya female. Sudras broadly encompass professional artists like potters, weavers, boatmen, Hira etc.

That the Brahmanas of Assam unlike their counterpart in other provinces used to eat meat and fish proves that the food habits of the Mongolian tribes prevailed upon them. The Yogini Tantra enjoys the worship of goddess kameswari with wine, meat and blood. Some other practices which have survived in this part of the country are preparation of ‘laopani’ or rice bear and chewing of ‘tambula’ (areca-nut), both ripe and unripe with betel-leaf and lime. ‘Tamul-pan’ a popular expression for ‘areca-nut’ and ‘betel-leaf” occupies a honoured place in Assamese society and is offered to show hospitality and perform ceremonial functions. The Khasis offer ‘tamul-pan’ to the dead person on the burial ground. Such wide use ‘tamul-pan’ owes its origin to Austro-Asiatic peoples in Assam.

Assam has a rich tradition of producing varieties of pat and muga silk. The garment manufactured with such silk involves labourious process of cultivating the particular worms, producing yarns from them, weaving and dying. An exclusively indigenous textile industry based on the flora of Assam and developed and sustained with a tapestry of floral designs and brilliant colour. The section on society presents a detailed account of the various castes, institutions of marriage, family, status of women, food, articles of luxury, dress, ornaments, games and amusements, conveyances, education and learning etc. B.K. Barua collected information about Assamese dress and ornaments from his observations of sculptures. The dress of the peoples, he writes,
consisted of a single unstitched undergarment like present day ‘dhuti’. For the head-gear we have to go to the sculptures. Most of the neck ornaments (hara) seen in the sculptures wore necklace made of beads. “Some sculptures wore bangle that look like modern ‘kharu’, an ornament worn both by men and women, especially on the wedding day”. ‘Bracelets are seen in the sculptures were heavy………’. His study of the sculptures also provides him with some idea of hair arrainment and their decoration by the women.

He also touches on the subject of imparting education by the Brahmanas either at guru-griha or at village schools provided by the Brahmanas already settled by the royal authority in allotted land. Spreading education to the people through the institutions conducted by Brahmanas was perhaps one of the main concerns of the rulers while patrosonising them with plenty of land and gold. Education at such schools was not restricted to the Brahmaana students alone, Sankardeva, a non-Brahamana receiving education at a ‘tole’ maintained by Mohendra Kandali proves that the Non-Brahamans too had free access to these centers of learning. Besides, these schools, the temples were also the centre of popular education and the ‘scene of festive gatherings and communal rejoicings.’ It is the love of learning in Bhaskarvarmana that makes him an extraordinary figure in history. His contact with the Chinese pilgrim, the conservation that followed between the two, though not a Buddhist himself Bhaskarvarmana could engage himself in doctrinal issues and the Chinese professor getting highly impressed by the latter’s catholicity and the knowledge of Sastras. All these prove that academic zeal glorified and inspired kingship, brought quality to governance. An antiquarian piece of Chino-Indian relationship remains attached to the history of this period. There developed various schools of philosophy and got mutually attracted for debate with teachers of rival sects. B.K. Barua writes –

“Learning flourished well in Assam and made it attractive to scholars of other countries. Hiuen Tsian rightly remarked that ‘men of abilities came from far to study here’. This is evident from the visits of such
scholars as Sankaracarya (788-820 A.D.), Nanaka ((1649 – 1538) and Guru Teg Bahadur (17th Century). Sankaracarya is said to have come to Assam to hold learned discussion with the reputed Sakta teachers Abhinavagupta. The author of ‘Rajtarangini’ credits the King of Kamrupa, possibly of the 1st Century A.D. as being the patron of Buddhist Sramana from Loh country of Tibet. As elsewhere, in Assam also, both Brahmana and Non Brahmana scholars and teachers used to wander about the country holding debates and disputations with teachers of rival sects. They, thereby, improved the philosophical and classical learning, asserted their influence and increased the number of their adherents”. (ACHA: p.135)

Sankardeva’s scholarship and versatility forms a glorious chapter in Medieval Assamese history. We will refer to B.K. Barua’s views on the creative genius of Sankardeva in a separate section. Brahmana scholars from Banaras and other religious centers of Northern India are said to have been defeated by Sankardeva in the court of Koc king Naranarayana. It was Sankardeva’s erudition and scholarship that could earn honour and patronage in the royal court.

The chapter VI on religion in ‘A Cultural History of Assam’ states how the rulers of pre-Ahom and Ahom periods had made some special arrangement for setting the Brahmanas in Assam for promotion of education and religious practices. From the Naraka-Bhagadatta myth of the epics to the epigraphic texts, the immigration of Brahmanas from ‘Madhya desa’ to Assam and also their migration from Assam to other provinces form a long process of Brahminical realignment. History gives evidence to the great royal patronage of a Brahminical order as approval by the Vedic tradition. The kings and the common tribes were converted to Hinduism by adopting a policy of exploring their divine ancestry. Thus, the divine or mythical ancestry consisted of Siva, Bhima, and Indra respectively for the Koc, the Kachari and the Ahom. But conversion in this historical situation is not to be understood as imposition.
B.K. Barua is of the view that the non-Aryan contact made the Vedic tradition to undergo radical changes mainly in two ways:

a). In the creation of a gallery of defied personages.

b). In the adoption of deities, religious myths and cults derived from the races beyond the Brahminical fold. (ACHA, 1951: 143).

The many names and forms of Siva and Siva- worship along with the fifteen numbers of places associated with Siva point to the fact that Siva was the most popular god. Both the aboriginal Kiratas and the Aryanised people worshiped Siva in their own beliefs and customs (who was even worshiped secretly by the people when Naraka introduced the mother cult here), temples, places and temple dancers associated with this primitive god, we can surmise that Assam had a fairly unique contribution to the formation of the triple image of God – Brahma, Visnu, Mahesvara. Naraka who is believed to be the first progenitor of the Aryan Hindu religion and who had initially wanted to reform the aboriginal Saivite practices of the Kirats had to bear the worth of the creator for becoming himself a devotee of Siva under influences of Bana. B.K. Barua shows in graphic details how from the worship by the common people to the time of the copper plates grants ranging from the 4th to 12th centuries, there has been a constant acceptance of the supremacy of this aboriginal god in many forms and myths.

Siva emanating from its rich tradition of customs, institutions, temples, female temple dancers, sacrificed rituals, saivite images, sculptures, provides a solid basis to Assam’s social history of ancient times.

The next most influential religious practice, popularly known as Saktism centered around the Kamakhya temple. Saktism prevailed around the people ‘through out the Medieval period, even down to 18th century’. But despite being a pervasive phenomenon the inscriptions give no ‘trace of Sakti worship, except the valid references in the inscriptions of Banamala and Indrapala to
temples of *kameswara, Maha-gauri and Maha-gauri Kameswara*. B.K. Barua explains this silence in the following words –

“The silence may, however, be explained by the fact that Saktism represents a particular phase of religion which was in the main personal and esoteric. Consequently it had no connection with any public religious order or establishment. Personal in origin its tenets and history were preserved in a special class of magical and sacramental literature, commonly known as Tantras.” (ACHA: p.148)

The silence of the copper inscriptions on the wide spread prevalence of tantrism justifiably articulates a question of royal indifference but a religious practice resorted to by a good number of people for so long a time cannot be dismissed simply as personal observances without any public connection or sanction. The inscriptive literatures basically offer a palace paradigm of history exclusively deficient in folk penetration. It might be the folk imagination widely diffused in modifying or transforming the mother cult of Kamakhya into some mundane, worldly, virgin and dreadful images of parvati, Tripureswari, ‘Kacai-Khati’. The charms and magic incantations constitute the domain of the illiterate folk, and Tantric Buddhism, procreated ‘ugratara’ in her dreadfully attractive shape – one who is to be satisfied with strong spiritous liquor and human sacrifice. It would not be difficult to believe that the myriad forms of worship till the evolutions of vaishnavism represented social stratification.

The silence of the inscriptions about Tantrism or Saktism contrast with the fact they contain information about worship of visnu. The Badganga Rock inscription of Bhutivarman is believed to be the earliest recorded reference to the worship of visnu. It has received origin after prolonged period in the puspabhadra Grant of Dharmapal in 1200 A.D. The boar avatara of visnu has been represented in the inscriptions Banamala. Balavarmana, Ratnapala, Indrapala, Dharmapala,. The Haigriba-Madhava temple at Hajo bears written to the incarnation of visnu with a horse-head.
B. K. Barua sums up the detailed account of the religions prevalent in ancient Kamrupa and concludes that there existed tolerance among the religions prevalent in ancient Kamrupa and concludes that there existed tolerance among the various sects of Saivism, Saktism, Vaisnavism and many other sects. He holds Bhaskarvarman as the unique example of being curious and extremely loyal to all sects and faiths. But Bhaskarvarman’s tolerance of the patronage to Buddhism was perhaps a major irritant to social peace and mutual understanding at that time. Rajmohan Nath offers a different reading of the situation. A possible rise of Buddhism due to Bhaskarvarmana’s open support and patronage did create great unrest amongst the followers of Brahminical Vedic religion. They are even said to have concocted a story of Bhaskarvarman’s secret planning to establish a relation with China with the help of the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim and they somehow let it to be known to Harsa. Consequently Harsa sent message to Bhaskarvarmanana demanding immediate return of the pilgrim to his palace. The stone image of Buddha carved on the bank of the Brahmaputra near Sukreswar temple was converted into the image of visnu (known as Buddha Janardana) when ‘one Avanti Varma ascended the throne of Kamrupa’. (Rajmohan Nath: p.39-40)

The historian in B.K. Barua is a man of diverse interest and capability. The last chapter of ‘A Cultural History of Assam’ on Fine Arts is so nicely documented and it reveals such a rare insight and appreciation that he rightly deserves to be called an art-critic of great merit. In a review article on B.K. Barua’s ‘A Cultural History of Assam’, Prabhat Bora draws our attention to this point (in Viswakos, 2007). His in-depth study of ancient Indian aesthetics and his minute observations on the architecture-sculpture-temple arts and dance forms establish him as an art critic. He has convincingly analysed a good number of images of different gods and goddesses scattered in the Brahmaputra valley to show that these art-forms bear witness to the spread of Indian culture and civilization in Assam.
It is established beyond doubt that a large number of shrines dedicated to Siva, Surya, Vishnu, Devi and other deities lie scattered in the Brahmaputra valley. The travel account of Hiuen Tsiang and the epigraphic sources also bear witness to the existence of the art-forms. The following points may be deduced from his account:

- Almost all the monuments and edifices got damaged or eliminated in the passage of time. Both human activities and natural calamities have reduced them to some “jungle clad mounds” that lie scattered elsewhere in Gauhati Tezpur, Nowgong, Sibsagar, Sadiya. Here he supports Gait’s views as noted in his A Cultural History of Assam.

- There is reason to be proud of a great achievement of its ancient artists that has been recognized as the fourth school of Indian arts. The stone frame discovered at Da Parbariya is a unique piece of the archaeological remains of a lost heritage. This window frame along with other stone sculptures and rock cravings not only indicate the parameter of the spread of Hindu culture but also reveal the exquisite perfection and artistry of Assamese artists in following ‘the general art tradition and motifs of Northern India. The few art specimens found in Assam are so rich in their ‘beauty, dignity and appreciation in standard works by the renowned art critics.

- B. K. Barua mentions another startling discovery that convinces us as it occurs in other spheres of the Mongolian traits/motifs penetrating into the Assamese art. From the 12th century onward Assamese art came to be characterized by its provincial idioms following the domination of Tantric rituals over the Brahminical religion. The Tantric, Mongolian influences are manifest in different art expressions. One is ‘the horrid figure of bhairava and camunda’ and the other influence can be traced in ‘the figures having high cheek-bones and flat noses, both being mongoloid ethnic peculiarities’. B. K. Barua while appreciating the fusion of the traditional Indian and indigenous local conceptions
concludes that ‘this can satisfy the requirements of a new national soul’.

B. K. Barua’s *A Cultural History of Assam* establishes in a very compact way the unique character of the Assamese people, culture and society. The great epic legends of Naraka and Bhagadatta serve as an allegory. The former bearing Aryan blood got absorbed in the racial and the cultural confluence while the other could shine with his outstanding Mongolian might and courage in the domain of Aryan supremacy (the battle of kuruksetra). Thus, the Naraka-Bhagadatta legend stands more prominently for cultural assimilation than the politics of Aryan dominance. It is a metaphor of synthesis that dispels any prophecy of an Aryan colony.

History tells us that all mankind moved steadily from the stage of barbarism to civilisation leaving behind footprints of labour, culture and knowledge. Knowledge of history as argued by Will and Ariel Durant, teaches us about the collective efforts irrespective of any colour and race prejudice; that civilization is a cooperative product that nearly all peoples have contributed to it. It is our common heritage and debt. And civilized soul will reveal itself in treating every man and woman, however lowly, as a representative of one of these creative and contributory groups. It is quite natural that diverse human groups possess varying abilities producing goods and ideas of different scale. But the role of race in civilization is –

‘rather preliminary than creative. It thrives more on geographical opportunities, economic and political development than anything else. Besides, it becomes extremely difficult in a changing geopolitical environment to retain purity of blood’ (Durant, 1996: 31).

Rajen Saikia identifies B. K. Barua as a pioneer in cultural historiography of Assam who observed the history of this province from a nationalist perspective. But unlike the confusion created by the European nationalist historians B. K. Barua’s historical writings stood above such parochialism and that his historical consciousness could well scintillate a
A historian’s forte of rational approach, liberal attitude and above all a moral impartiality. But Saikia also sees a reflection of Gordon Child’s idea of diffusion in B. K. Barua’s perception of the culture and civilization of Assam (in Bora 2008:113). It is however difficult to accept that Assamese culture is a product of diffusion far from being a fusion of various racial elements and evolution of the same as a unique regional contribution to national identity. It is true that B. K. Barua in his cultural history has not elaborated those beliefs, customs and institutions of ethnic origin which could survive through the ages and could not be obliterated in the process of Aryanisation. His findings in other works particularly Asomar Bhasa aru Samskriti, Asomar Loka Samskriti, need to be correlated with those of his cultural history (Sarma Bora 2010: ). Such correlation of facts does not support the idea of diffusion in matters of Assamese culture as a transfer of materials, ideas, institutions. (Saikia, Rajen in Bora 2008:113). Archaeological finds of material culture bear witness to the form of life actually lived, a set of ideas that evolve through a plural ethos. In fact Dr. Saikia takes up Gordon Child’s theory of diffusion in a way that seems to have strengthened the Meta narrative of Aryanization. The Epic and Vedic civilization of India attains different and distinct shape in this frontier province of Mongolian dominance. This is reiterated through his historical studies. Assam with distinctly Mongolian socio-cultural ethos and regional evolutionary character forms an integral part of Indian Civilisation.

Revision of Sir Edward Gait’s A History of Assam -

B.K. Barua brought out a third revised edition of Gait’s A History of Assam in association with his research scholar prof. H. V. S Murthy in 1963. This significant work of Gait is said to have enormous impact on the later studies of the history of this part of our country which needs to be continually revised in the light of new materials. The authors made their points clear in the preface to the 3rd edition –
“But history, if it has to be alive, has to be not merely continually revised but even rewritten. Every age brings to bear on the past its own attitudes, depending upon its own unique preoccupations. Sir Edward Gait’s work no doubt, was unique and adequate when it came out. But the fact that certain new material has become available since its publication, and the fact that the whole attitude of a modern historiographer has had to undergo a reorientation, it became necessary that Gait’s history had to be revised. This is true, not merely of re-thinking and re-appraisals, but of whole mental adjustments” (Ibid, Preface).

The third edition of Gait’s ‘A History of Assam’ was brought out with additional chapters on:

- Social Conditions (Chapter X)
- Economic Conditions (Chapter XI)
- Progress of Literature (Chapter XII)
- Religion (Chapter XIII)
- Fine Arts (Chapter XIV)

Besides these five new chapters they rewrote chapters II and IX by looking at the subject from new perspective. Their intention was not to write a new history of Assam or even improve on Sir Edward Gait’s book. What they attempted to do was to ‘bring standard work up to date’.

The thoroughly revised chapter II covers a long pre-Ahom period from the 7th to 12th centuries which had not received any serious treatment in Gait. Both literary and Inscriptional materials like ‘Si-yu-ki’, ‘Harsacarita’, Nidhanpur copper plate Grant and the Dobi plates give valuable information about the social-political and cultural events of the pre-Ahom period. Sir Edward Gait, a ‘sober and meticulous historian and a resourceful civilian’ has been accused of having colonial bias and could not devote to the task of
historical enquiry up to his merit. Despite being a comprehensive and pioneering work his history failed to elaborate on the pre-Ahom period – i.e. the glorious chapter of ancient Kamrupa. B K Barua and Prof. Murthy however did not try to see critically the reasons behind Gait’s casual treatment of this period. There are some scholars who see in Gait’s work a deliberate intellectual exercise towards consolidation of British colonial power in this part of the country and creation of a conviction amongst people that the colonisers were the great benevolent reformers and the messangers of modern civilization. Even Assamese historians of the stature of S. K. Bhuyan were not free from such mental adjustment (Guha1994:10).

Some others see in Gait’s monumental work a misinterpretation or willful distortion of facts which locate Assam and its polity in a state of barbarism and indolence. Gait’s interpretation of the causes leading to the decline of the Ahom rule and his mild, liberal attitude towards opium addiction have been identified as the typical weakness of colonial historiographer (Tripathi, Chandra Dhar in Choudhury, Dr. N. D 2005:69-77).

Barua and Murthy were interested in incorporating new materials not in correcting the lapses as suggested by Tripathy. B. K. Barua and Murthy’s revised and enlarged edition had no intention to rectify such lapses which might have been an undue tampering with the original text. The chapters ii & ix, being completely rewritten, deal with the political, social, cultural and administrative issues of ancient Kamrupa and the Ahom dynasty. Certain figures and events are identified in the pre-Ahom period of ancient Kamrupa as conspicuously lacking in touch with the grass-root life. Yet the glory and prosperity at certain phases of this protacted dynastic rule, its celebrated kingship known for prowess and academic excellence raised the image of the Hinduised Mongolian Empire. Hiuen Tsiang’s appearance in the scene adds another dimension to the reign of Bhaskarvarmana. We get to know from his travel account some vital information about the people, their language and
occupation, its flora and fauna, its ruler evincing great interest and liberal attitude to religious faiths etc.

It is perhaps mentioned elsewhere that B. K. Barua finds in Kumar Bhaskarvarman, the Ahom rulers and Sankardeva the three great pillars of the ancient and medieval history of Assam. The Assamese people, their language and civilisation, their society and culture had achieved a phenomenal rise and growth during these three different phases. B. K. Barua while incorporating new ideas of politics and governance of the royal dynasties draws substantially from S.K.Bhuyan’s already published works such as *The Anglo-Assamese Relation, Aton Buragohain and his times*. The revised chapter on the *system of government* under the Ahom rulers deals with some institutions and portfolios created for smooth governance. The Ahom had superior skills and knowledge in matters of social organization with which they could introduce and gradually expand their rule in a foreign place. It, however, required a considerably long period of time, for social mobility in a feudal set-up of tribal predominance was not easy due to insularity and confinement. The revenue collected from the agricultural lands and military and civil services rendered by the Paiks along with the organizing skill of the officers had provided strength and stability to the government. But the Paik system in course of time had come under heavy pressure and was utterly disorganized mainly due to the fact that the Ahom royal power began to come under the influence of the Hindu ideology. Large amount of land was granted to the Brahmanas, to temples, and other religious institutions. Pikes had to be engaged in various other works of constructing temples and taking care of the holy places and so on. It is obvious from B K Baarua’s account of the Paik system that the Paiks as soldiers and labourers had to bear heavy burden in the course of the expansion of the Ahom empire. The peace and stability of such an empire depended largely on the socio-economic sustainability of the paiks. But many factors conspired against it. The authors write –
“As the Ahom kings came more and more under the influence of the Hindu priest, large number of paiks were removed from their khels and assigned for the support of temples or Brahmanas. Some Paiks purchased exemption from service. In no other way could a man escape from the control of the officers of his khel whose jurisdiction was personal and not local. In course of time, as the members of a khel became dispersed in different part of the country, this system grew more complicated and inconvenient” (AHA1963:250).

The authors comment on Paiks though different from those of Dr. Amalendu Guha and others throws light on the fact of the royal patronage of the Brahminical cult.

The chapter X on ‘Social Conditions’ reflects on the dynamics of social behavior. The Ahom preferred a liberal social co-existence to maintaining a separate identity with feudal superiority. The original settlers initiated interracial marriage, proliferated their number and the new entrants of non-Ahom families used to enjoy same privilege. The original Satghariya Ahom families forming a broad exogamous group had many subdivisions some of which were of inferior phoids like Chaodang, Likchous etc. the non-Ahoms were divided into two classes – orthodox caste and professional caste. The Brahmanas, Kayasthas and kalitas, Koches, Bariya, Kaivarta belonged to the orthodox caste. The professional castes included Kumara, Tanti, Kamar, Sonar, Kahar, Mali, Natis, Dhobi, Haris, Chandals.

The authors commenting on the condition of the women during the Ahom period seem to have made a casual reference or offered a generalized view. The women were known for gallantry, temple dancing. That ‘the women were placed under no disability in their social life and activities’ (ibid) may be an idealized view. The women serving as ‘ligiris’ and temple dancers were vulnerable to social evils and aristocratic prejudices. The women in the villages had been engaged in harvesting and weaving. The authors take note of the growing influence of the Hindu religious ideology on the original Ahom rituals.
and customs. The Hindu system of marriage began to penetrate while Vedic cremations of the dead began to replace the traditional system of burial. Since the death of Rajeswar Singh in 1769 the practice of burning the dead and performing sraddha ceremony had begun.

Though the society in Ahom period steadily moved towards greater social mobility, its feudal hierarchy and class division received further impetus from its lineage to Brahminical order. Even the patterns of houses used by the king, nobles, deodhais and the common people were different and clearly reflected the class distinction. The house built with brick and mortar was the special privilege of the king whereas the houses of the commons were set up on the earthen plinth. B K Barua and his co-author Prof. Murthy are found to be free from social snobbism in their estimate of the social conditions of the Ahom period. The heroic cult of our ancient history and some of its great achievements did not blur their vision and the plight of the social margins did equally attract their attention. They also refer to the prevalence of the system of slavery during the Ahom period. The slaves were the exclusive possession of the chief nobles and were employed to cultivate their private estate. But the position of the slaves was better than that of the Paik and the Paik did happily accept slavery in private estates for better accommodation. Slave owning did no longer remain the exclusive possession of the chief nobles. It became a sign of aristocracy for every respectable family.

Anyway, the slaves and the Paik constituted the bulk of the work-force so essential for sustaining a feudal economy, public works and a standing militia. The authors further mention that most of the slaves were ‘free men who had lost their liberty by mortgaging their persons for a loan.’ The sad plight of the slaves can be guessed from such facts that ‘they were brought and sold in the open market, the price ranging from about twenty rupees for an adult male sex of good caste or three rupees for a low caste girl’ (Aha1963:265). The authors also refer to a deepening social crisis. The social distinction between the aristocracies, higher castes on the one hand and the common people and
lower castes on the other began to be observed in matters of social codes, dress and caste identification.

‘None but the highest nobles had a right to wear shoes, or to travel in palanquin, but the last mentioned privilege might be purchased for a considerable sum. Persons of humble birth, who wished to wear the chaddar, or shawl, were obliged to fold it over the left shoulder, and not over the right, as the upper class did. Mussalmans, Morias, Domes and Haris were forbidden to wear their hair long and members of the two later communities were further distinguished by having a fish and a broom, respectively tattooed on their forehead” (ibid: 265).

Finally the authors detect some famines caused by a swarm of locusts in 1569, a severe drought in 1665 and floods that occurred in 1570 and 1642. These famines and the devastating Moamoria rebellion had had its debilitating effects on the agricultural economy of the country.

The eleventh chapter is on economic conditions during the Ahom period. The authors here make a general survey of the agriculture, trade and commerce, indigenous industry, formation of Assamese villages as some self-sufficient composite units, the different types of rent-free estates granted to the Brahmans and others for religious and charitable purposes. Most of its accounts are already recorded in the cultural history of Assam. The nature of the economy was predominantly agricultural. The soil and flora of the country were favourable enough for intensive cultivation. The Ahom rulers, as it appears, evolved a well-planned system for establishment of villages with people of different professions so that a self-sustaining, self-sufficient village-unit might contribute to the overall progress of the country. Accordingly, the Assamese people excelled in numerous other professions besides cultivating the land and producing all the essential commodities. Weaving, spinning, gold-smithy, gold washing, pottery, carpentry, brick making, engineering works like erecting roads and stone bridges etc. were the common activities of the people living in the village and town. The craftsmanship and the skill of the
professional groups reached a high degree of perfection. Brick-making, stone images and stone bridges, temples, tanks, burial mounds stand as proof of such artistic and engineering achievements.

“The bricks were burnt almost to the consistency of tiles. several storied palaces and the discovery of a large number of stone images and remnants of old stone structures clearly prove the attainment of architects and sculptors of the period. An outstanding example of the engineering skill of the people of Assam in older times was the construction of the stone bridges” (AHA1963:272).

Besides meeting the household needs some domestic products could earn good reputation in foreign markets.

“Assam silk, specially muga, was very much in demand in Europe and it formed the staple of trade of East India Company during the 18th and the early 19th centuries” (ibid:271).

Gold washing and iron extraction in Khasi and Naga hills remained a profitable source of revenue. The export business carried through numerous passes and ways known as Duars. The route to Tibet runs parallel to the course of the Brahmaputra. Mc Cosh is said to have mentioned as many as five roads leading from Sadiya into Tibet or China proper. ‘The most important and easy route was on the north-eastern side over the Patkai to the upper districts of Burma and thence to China. Through this route the Shan invaders came to the Brahmaputra valley.’ B K Barua while referring to the trade route to Burma also hints at a secret Burmese plan to capture the province for colonial exploitation which might have its culmination in the Burmese invasion in 1816. Behind the politics of foreign intervention in this frontier province by the successive Mughal rulers, Dr. S. K. Chatterji apprehends a design to capture the lucrative trade opportunities with Tibet (see Chatterji’s Kirata Jana Kriti). B k barua mentions that there existed marts in two places called chauna in Lhassa and
gegunshur in Assam. Rice, silk, iron lac, otter skins, buffalo horns, pearls etc. were imported from Assam to Tibet.

The chapter well introduces the economic conditions of the state. All the sections of the people had been engaged in different activities – cultivation, weaving, manufacturing of consumption goods, inland and cross-border trade along from the resource generated from such sources.

The twelfth chapter on literature takes note of the royal patronage received by the men of letters. Along with translation of the Sanskrit epics and the Puranas, secular literature in the form of love-romances, kama-sastra, mantra-puthis, medical treatise developed to a great extent. The rich treasure of the royal Buranjis is another significant milestone in the development of Assamese literature, particularly prose. As records of some concrete facts the buranjis were written in a language “which is ordinarily free from sentimental rhetoric. Couched in easy, straight-forward and unambiguous language, they are charming and admirable writings. Scattered throughout the entire Buranjii literature are bundles of political wisdom and original thoughts” (AHA1963:285).

The spirit of historical writings was being continued in the form of Carit-puthi and Vamsavali. If the caritputhi contained the lives of the saints in their immediate ‘social surroundings’ and in the light of their contemporary men and women, the Vamsavali like ‘Darang Raj Vamsavali’ preserved an authentic record of the noble families, their lives and career. Thus the hagiographical writings and Vamsavali ‘supplement and corroborate information in the Buranjis’ (ibid: 284).

B K Barua is of the view that royal patronage and good governance during the Ahom rule had its impact on ‘the vast mass of literature’ of different types and the artistic and creative expressions as well. The manuscripts of this period constitute another priceless treasure of art for its production ‘demanded
much calligraphic and orthographic ability.’ The authors sum up the account on literature with a reference to such points as –

- The distinctive features of the age comprise the growth of prose and secular literature and the emergence of scientific curiosity.
- Along with prose there developed fresh interest in the field of utilitarian and scientific enquiries. ‘In the treatises on Ayurveda, pharmaceutical, botanical and zoological observations were also made together with the enumeration of remedies for popular ailments’.

We have already referred to the magnificent dimension of fine arts that had its most vibrant flourishing in this part of the country. The revised and enlarged volume of Gait’s history of Assam by B K Barua et al includes a chapter on fine arts which remain inseparable from proper historical observation. And it has not been a customary inclusion with just passing comments but offers a careful description with insight into its sociology and artistry. His A Cultural History of Assam also contains a detailed account on this particular aspect of socio-cultural history. Assam’s excellence in this field is studied in some minute details. B.K.Barua’s account of fine arts adds obviously a new perspective to look at our ancient history. Reviewing the critical opinion on the Manuscript paintings of Assam, B.K.Barua sums up-

“The dancing and musical scenes (of manuscript paintings) are full of charm and have been beautifully handled by the artist. In short, the lyrical craftsmanship, composition, dramatic narration and splendid colours give the Bhagavata illustrations a charm which distinguishes them from similar Bhagavata paintings from Udaipur and elsewhere” (AHA: 297).

B. K. Barua rightly comments that the glory of the Ahom rule did not confine itself to the field of the statecraft, organization and literature, but it extended to the field of fine arts as well” (ibid:292). All the art-forms with their splendid
composition certainly bear witness to a superior state of affairs, and a general temperament of the age.

**Asomiya Bhasa aru Samskriti – its historical importance:**

B.K.Barua’s ideas on history draw its strength from diverse sources. History has been more and more interdisciplinary in these days. Even a political account is expected to have its socio-cultural and economic moorings. This is one of the scholarly works of B. K. Barua which takes up issues related to Assamese language and culture in a historical framework. This could also be read as a complementary piece to his *A cultural history of Assam*. It has already been explained, B.K.Barua adds a fresh outlook to historiography with a genuine nationalist perspective. In this book we find the projection of Assamese society, culture, and language as a product of fusion - a highly nuanced and unambiguous representation which still remains uncontested. B K Barua’s contemporary scholar-historians having excellence in social historiography remained either silent or put some casual focus on matters of ethnic, non-Aryan elements in the evolution of Assamese culture, language and faith. Bishnu Prasad Rabha despite his over emphasis on the mongoloid or Kirata origin of the Assamese socio-cultural history, had genuine misgivings about the unscientific and bias historical approach in the academic exercises carried on by the university scholars. B K Barua is said to have been greatly inspired with the scholarship of Banikanta Kakati which is however not entirely pointless. What is significant at the same time is that B K Barua could see into the depth of an Assamese identity in its plural ethos and historical authenticity by virtue of his being open to the peripheral realities. The study of folklore provides him with an unorthodox worldview and unlike others B K Barua was bold enough to find out a long-drawn process of racial and cultural fusion. The secular multicultural credential of our national identity has been infused with such honest intellectual honesty and clarity.

In its language section (Part-I) Dr. Barua states a time consuming process of linguistic changes or historical evolution of a language. Language
changes its form and content through diffusion - expansion over time and space. Its phonetics, grammar and vocabulary begin to change while coming into contact with other languages. The Sanskrit language over the years came into contact with many a non-Aryan speech. Thus, the ancient Aryan languages developed into a group of changed Aryan speeches in the middle stage. The Prakrit languages of ancient India are found in the middle stage of the change of its original Sanskrit form and are characterized by their sweet, soft and simple forms. The Aryans of subsequent ages could not remain insular to the non-Aryan influences. The prakrit languages developed from the old Sanskrit origin as a result of its contact with the non-Aryan speeches continued to create other language sub-groups. Creation of a language is invariably the result of fusion and synthesis (ABS1985:5-6) .The Magadhi Apabhramsa is accepted as the origin of modern Assamese language. B.K.Barua illustrates from the Assamese language and literature how the newly formed language achieves distinction through simplifications of the root in so many different ways. A living language, according to him, resembles a running stream. As a mighty river flows along with the streams from various directions, the Assamese language also strengthens itself by drawing resources from Austro-Tibeto-Burmese language families (ABS: 17). Besides the ethnic sources within the province, the Assamese language has borrowed and assimilated numerous words from foreign and Indian regional languages. His chapter on ‘Asomiya Sabdamala’ is a brilliant study on such issues of cross-fertilization.

The second part of this work deals with the different elements of Assamese culture. His treatment of the subject way back in the fifties of the previous century on a wider socio-ethnic and geographic context touches on the bedrock of Assamese culture. The nationalist approach to history attains further nuances from such regional cultural orientation which enumerates the enormous contribution of smaller communities in its gradual process of evolution. B K Barua’s basic thesis on Assamese culture is that the unique geographic position of Assam as a frontier province sharing its border with several ethnic states shapes its culture with multi-racial, ethnic elements before
coming into contact with the Aryan influences. Hence, the principal character of its formation and evolution is of a mixed nature and does not conform to any theory of diffusion. The fact that Assam has been in close contact with the people and culture of Burma, China, Tibet and several other places of the foothills of the Himalaya since time immemorial is also attested by the epic and puranic texts.

B. K. Kakati, S. K. Chatterji and others have used a generic term *Kiratas* to denote these ethnic groups penetrating into the Brahmaputra valley. The most commonly used word in Brahminical text to represent the non-Aryan group of people is *mlecha*. B K Barua’s contention is that there had been migration of people from the north, east and south through some difficult mountain passes besides transacting trade and commerce. It is said that the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsiang during his sojourn in the court of Bhaskarvarman had listened to a song celebrating the heroic exploits of a Chinese prince. That some anonymous singer of Kamrupa could make songs on an event of recent history of China was a strong point of reference to the existence of relation between the two countries (ABS1957:2).

Thus, the geo-physical location of Assam has its bearing on the demographic and cultural formation. Availability of connecting ways to the frontier province of Assam had led to several waves of ethnic migration till the penetration of the Shan tribe in the 13th century. The Austric speaking peoples are found to be the earliest settlers who had been scattered in places close to the rivers. While enumerating the contributions of these Austric settlers B K Barua reviews the findings of some renowned scholars like S K Chatterji, B K Kakati, P C Bagchi and others. Words denoting hills and mountain or place names related to it, words representing numbers such as *kuri, pon, ganda* etc. are of Austric origin. Ancient and Medieval Assam has been known for its village life and agrarian civilization. Towns and urban life did not flourish to that extent. The agrarian civilization of Assam owes a great deal to the Austric people and cultivation is the unique gift of this tribe. Besides rice cultivation
the Austric used to produce *banana, brinjal, gourd, areca nut, coconut, turmeric, ginger* etc. Hand-loom has remained an indispensable part of the tribal life in Assam which is again an Austric contribution. Hunting instruments like the bow and arrows, and floating devices like wooden boat, barge etc. are derived from the Austrics. In matters of religion too, the Austrics had important contribution which still survive among us as the phallic cult and animistic worship.

The Tibeto-Burmese group while entering Assam followed the downstream of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries. These riverine people got scattered in different river banks of the province. The bodos of Assam are the largest branch of the Tibeto-Burmese group. B K Barua says that most of the river names in upper Assam bear the Bodo words *di* and *doi*, and rename the rivers as *dikhou, dichang, dihing, dibong, bhogdoi, mangaldoi* etc. The habit of fish eating and fishing devices belong to the Bodos. The fish culture has become so wide spread that all sections of people started taking fish including the Brahmins. Next to fish the Bodos made large use of the bamboo for building platform houses, boundary fencing, making musical instruments, and household goods, preparing traditional foods from the bamboo shoots. *Marong or deka chang* is the greatest social institution which is the sacred place for the youths of the village assigned with the task of safeguarding the village. It is accepted by some that the *Namghar* of the Vaisnavite period was modeled after this *deka chang*. The advanced idea of social organization with community life, mutual caring and fellow feelings, equal dignity of man and woman owes exclusively to the Tibeto-Burmese people. Apart from such aspects of material culture and social life the Tibeto-Burmese have left to Assam a vast treasure of fine arts, architecture, sculpture, dance-forms, traditional garments and indigenous mode of worship.

The book under review contains some other articles on the Ahom period and its literature, the Namghar as a social institution which we have already been referred to in some other context in this chapter. What we try to
focus here is a thesis that remains so central to B K Barua’s ideas on history. The regional ethos that had been shaped through a prolonged period of historical contact with races and culture of Mongolian origin has its potentiality to redefine the Brahmanical Aryan domination. The name of Assam has also been associated with the breakaway Buddhist religious philosophy in an intricate network of royalties and relationships through Bhaskarvarman, Hiuen Tsiang, Harsa Barddhana, Hajo’s Haigrib Madhav, place names, Meen Nath, the Buddhist siddhacarya and so on. We have taken up B K Barua’s pioneering works in the field of cultural studies and his proposition of cultural exchange separately in chapter 3.

The indigenous, agrarian ethnic groups contributed a good deal towards evolution of language, culture, social institutions, religious practices, the mother cult and Saivism. In course of time and space when colonization and statecraft evolved the ethnic groups came out from their cultural confinement and barriers. Such social changes and formation of greater identities however took longer time to take place. B K Barua deserves credit for initiating a broad-based critical analysis of those socio-cultural and religious issues which illuminate some dark corners of our history. In other words he paves the way to historical research from an interdisciplinary perspective. A dispassionate and objective approach to the history and civilization of Assam is to be made with a careful estimate of the dialogic interplay of the subaltern voices. In this respect B K Barua is the pioneering inspiration for the academicians who followed him.

Historicity of folklore studies:

One of the significant achievements of B K Barua is his pioneering work on the folk culture of Assam. His monumental work on Assamese folk life and culture popularly known as Asomar Loka Samskriti, several seminal articles published in various journals and his supervision of many a research project conducted by the eminent folklore scholars like Dr. Prafulla Datta Goswami can be primarily referred to as a pointer to his studies in folklore.
Folklore is the domain of a vast multitude of people with their numerous oral forms of songs, riddles, proverbs, tales, lyrics, beliefs, customs, practices, and a good number of material products, festivities and celebrations. Continuity and pervasiveness of folklore make the subject historically vibrant; provide insight into a collective psyche. The progress and advancement of human civilization do not necessarily segregate the people from its root. Viewed historically, the study of folklore presents before us a roadmap of a civilizational mission from antiquity to modernity. Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* contains an enormously rich treasure of the pastness of our primitive parenthood, their beliefs and practices and suggests how man progresses from ‘magic through religious belief to scientific thought.’ But this so called unscientific past is not at all disposable garbage. Frazer enumerates a good deal of traditional knowledge which could provide a way out of rampant consumerism that poses a serious threat to sustainability of the earth’s biodiversity (Frazer1993:113-115). Historicity of folklore is based on the fact that it provides a paradigm shift in historiography. It prepares the ground for subaltern perspective of history. The data-base of folklore has potential fireworks for reconstruction of history and it can provide ‘more extensive data than conventional historical sources’ (Sen, Saumen1987:141).

Folklore materials remind us of some survivals and continuity of a collective lifestyle. Folktales, myths, legends, ballads etc. provide insight into human history though they lack objectivity of other historical sources. As has been put by Robert A. Georges and Michael Owen Jones, “phenomena associated with past and passing lifestyles came to be conceptualized as artifacts. They were valued because of the insights they could potentially provide into a people’s roots, heritage, and continuity” (folkloristics1995:34). Finally folklore as ‘historical artifacts’ occupies a living space in human experiences and anything that falls into that range bears historical significance. Folkloristic resources are supposed to have potential popular links with cultural heritage, racial and national identities for which they get ‘intergenerationally’ transmitted through an oral tradition (ibid:40). The social customs, rituals and
beliefs have their historicity in so far as they have been practised and intergenerationally transmitted sharing at the same time the issues concerning the human race through the ages. It forms a part of our living past and reorients the present.

Having made a plea in favour of folklore as source of history let us see how far B K Barua’s *Asomar Loka Samskriti* and several other writings of same nature lead us to its validation. The folk culture of Assam has been analysed in some details spreading over nineteen well documented chapters. It takes note of the form, content and nature of the popular culture being preserved by the ethnic communities. The plan of the book is comprehensive enough to make a holistic approach to almost all the aspects of the subject. He refers to people’s beliefs about animals, birds, trees, agriculture; the rituals connected with birth, marriage, death, folk festivals. That he had got involved in the project with meticulous study of the folklore research in the western academia is very clear in every chapter. Though it is difficult to identify the sources he had consulted due to lack of a bibliography there, the readers can feel the wealth of folklore scholarship in this book. He refers to its historicity when he says that folklore is the sum total of the religious institutions, worship, beliefs, taboos, tales and legends, myths, dance and folk-drama, games and jokes etc. Such a wide range of issues related to the traditional life of the communities have been preserved and orally transmitted in the form of prose and songs. Thus, folklore or folk literature tells us all about the experiences achieved and the things learnt and practiced through the ages. He further believes that folk literature provide the fundamentals for realizing the religious, social, psychological issues of a nation (ALS1985:1-2). Dr. P. D. Goswami says that B K Barua makes a very significant statement in this book which, he feels, is not worked out – “of all the influences on the folk literature and culture of Assam the chiefest is Chinese or Tibeto-Burman” (Datta, Bulletin of DFS1993-94:22).
What we find is that B K Barua has very clearly articulated the Tibeto-Burmese influences on Assamese society and culture and also its subsequent contact with Hindu myths and beliefs in nearly all his historical and cultural studies. B K Barua makes another important point very clear that his cultural history (early part) was mainly written with data gleaned from copper and stone inscriptions, and some Sanskrit-Assamese texts which however lack in any authentic and detail information about the folk-life. Moreover, he says, the limited scope of a few inscriptions and written literature cannot adequately represent the history of the nation (ALS1985:231).

B K Barua further analyzes the geographical factors affecting distribution of population, building of bamboo houses, use of fish as food, worship of snake goddess. There are more sociological than literary elements in folk literature. Folk beliefs concerning the snake, fish, fowl, areca-nut build up in an intricate way the worldview of the people and society of Assam. As for example, B K Barua’s findings about the tamul-pan which is a typical contribution of the Austic people to Assamese culture take us to a wider socio-cultural space. Tamul becomes tambula in Sanskrit and remains an important item in Brahmanical rituals, it comes to be used as guwa in Vaisnava monasteries. The habit of chewing areca-nut being widely prevalent in South East Asia has come back to the Assamese society as an important cultural component and identity. Moreover the Brahmaputra Valley has remained a fertile ground for cultivation of gardens of areca-nut as suggested by the old inscriptional sources. Dr. Prafulla Datta Goswami who had completed a major research work for his D.Lit. degree under B K Barua further writes – “late in life his mind turned to things sociological, and he started writing essays on themes like fishlore, mantras, serpent worship – customs and beliefs with which he had been not quite unfamiliarsince his early life but which he seemed to notice afresh all about him in a state which is a melting pot of various racial elements with their diverse and sometimes overlapping beliefs, customs and rituals” (ibid1993-94issue:22).
B K Barua’s folklore studies anticipates subalternity not in its Gramscian line of presentation but more precisely in what Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak has stated in one of her essays ‘The New Subaltern – A silent interview’: “Subaltern studies consider the bottom layer of society, not necessarily put together by capital logic alone”. Applied to Indian colonial context Gramsci’s ‘own project appears flexible’. For, Spivak argues, “the historians of SouthAsia who took the word from Gramsci, subaltern came to mean persons or groups cut off from upward – and, in a sense, ‘outward’ - social mobility” (in During 2007: 230). Folk life in a village or also in an urban location with its own value and practices has remained loyal to land and nature. Those people ‘cut off from upward social mobility’ are the sole producers of a nation’s cultural goods. Their ballads and elegies, folk songs and drama are really imbued with certain sentiments and pathos which register a protest against the hegemony of pre-modern feudal lords or elitist democrats of our time. Conceptualization of the subaltern in cultural discourse as representation of the ‘bottom layer of society’ brings folklore to the foreground of history.

Assamese literary historiography: Perspective of a critic and its socio-cultural reflection.

Dr. Birinchi Kumar Barua’s history of Assamese literature and his contribution to Assamese historiography reveals yet another field of his scholarship. His creative genius and his research in folklore, medieval literature and cultural history of Assam have already attained a wider critical reception both from the critics and the general readers. But his literary historiography and his absorbing interest in pure history itself are yet to be fully explored. Except some casual references to his literary histories, particularly his History of Assamese literature, posthumously published in 1964, no serious study has so far been made in this field. Interestingly his literary histories, though in slimy volumes have remarkable critical insight.
The four books on Assamese literary history in English (along with other works of historical importance) by B.K Barua with which he had been engaged since the early forties of the 20th century prove that he had absorbing interest in studying society, culture and literature on a historical perspective. Dr. Maheswar Neog prepared a bibliography of the works of Birinchi Kumar Barua for the book Professor Birinchi Kumar Barua Commemoration Volume, (1966) and mentioned the names of B.K. Barua’s literary histories. They are as follows-----a) Assamese literature, 1941, b) Studies in early Assamese Literature, 1951 c) Modern Assamese literature, 1957 and d) History of Assamese literature, 1964 (Neog. M. in Appendix 1)

The Volume History of Assamese literature posthumously published by Sahitya Academi, New Delhi is a compact volume bringing together his basic ideas and analyses in the earlier works. Dr. Maheswar Neog observes that this is ‘a great work in the study of Assamese literature’ (Neog. M (Edit.), 1966). B. K. Barua perhaps intended to introduce the resources and achievement of Assamese literature in the long process of its historical evolution to the non-Assamese readers. Barua has proved his wide reading, critical insight and genuine scholarship in undertaking this project with presentation and analysis of source materials in a much disciplined way. As is the case with all great histories of literature Barua’s literary historiography is graceful enough to invite its readers to more intimate and enlivening appreciation of a literary work (Phukan. K, Garioshi 2008: 56). Prior to B K Barua’s History of Assamese Literature, Dimbeswar Neog had published his New Light on the History of Asamiya Literature in 1962. Sashi Sarma in an essay on the history of Assamese literature has reviewed B. K. Barua’s contribution to literary historiography. He is of the view that B. K. Barua had written his three separate volumes on some special occasions. His Assamese Literature was written for the International Book House, Bombay; Modern Assamese Literature on the occasion of the conference of the National Congress in Guwahati and the History of Assamese Literature was written for Sahitya academy, New Delhi. He must have followed, according to him, certain
restrictions from the sponsoring agencies and his own choice working out the plans was limited. These histories taken together reveal among others his catholicity, power of multiple focus, critical insight and love of reading. Eschewing the biographical detailed accounts of the literateurs and avoiding any harsh comments, B. K. Barua maintains calm intellectual composure, impartial critical approach all through. After Bhabananda Datta, B K Barua also appears in his literary history as one who introduced the new poets with critical focus on their poetry (Sarma, Sasi, in Ali, Tafazzul edit. 1974, Italics added).

A literary historian has to cultivate a rare discerning critical faculty that subsumes accurate historical sense, scholarship and knowledge, and a sense of humour in order to attain mastery over literary historiography. By the time B.K Barua began to write the histories of Assamese literature he had trained his mind with a brilliant academic career and before completing the fourth compact volume B.K. Barua was recognized as one of the towering figures of Indian scholarship in Assam and abroad, especially in his study of folk literature and culture, his excellence in creative writings and cultural historiography. The obituaries written by some eminent scholars like S.K.Chatterjee and Richard M. Dorson leave no doubt about the quality and scholarship of this man. Chatterjee mourned the ‘sad and untimely demise of such a fine scholar who brought kudos to Indian Scholarship’. Dorson, a famous American folklorist, concluded his obituary with these words “his sudden death is a heavy blow to his American as well as his Indian colleagues, and to the cause of international folklore scholarship.” (Appendix 3).

His research in the field of folklore, cultural history of Assam, medieval Assamese literature, evolution of Assamese prose and editing of magazine and journals must have given him a rare insight and academic skills. Besides, B.K.Barua could comfortably deal with the resurgence of the old tradition and the various aspects of modernity that had gradually grown up in a colonial set-up. His History of Assamese Literature, (1964) and Studies in early Assamese Literature (1953) deserve to be called great work in the study of Assamese
Literature for they possess the power of presenting in a very compact and succinct style the entire range, depth and variety of Assamese literature with due stress on the socio-cultural and religious forces operating through the ages. Besides it gives fair representation to the generation of modern literary practitioners and the factors ushering in new form and style.

It would not be difficult to suggest that B.K.Barua’s keen interest in the socio-political and cultural history of Assam as well as India, his involvement in several academic projects such as, preparation of text-books on history and literature, bringing out a revised edition of Sir Edward Gait’s History of Assam, his systematic research and study of folklore and tradition, his visit to some of the leading academic centers abroad and close contact with renowned scholars and academicians there---all these must have enriched his critical insight. He had got ample scope for acquiring the western epistemological tools and also for applying the same to understand his own society and culture. It is equally interesting to note here that colonial modernity had changed the very character of social discourse. Articulacy of marginality in social and literary discourse sensitized knowledge to liberal humane values and plural cultural ethos.

The first half of the 20th century was greatly characterized by a mass resistance to and acceptance of the package of European liberal education. B. K. Barua was one of those Assamese intellectuals who dedicated whole heartedly to the noble cause of reawakening a nation and its people to the new challenges and its old values. It was B.K.Barua who single handedly took the whole responsibility on his shoulder to assess the folk elements in Assamese identity and relentlessly engaged himself in research of Assamese language, culture, literature and its antiquarian history. He published in 1937 a slim book named Chintakosh with brilliant analysis of the origin and evolution of Assamese prose literature on broad and critical lines. This book alone claims his originality of scholarship and much of its fundamental tenets are also incorporated in his literary histories. Though a tiny volume, the book could inspire some of his students to make further research into the subject. (Saikia.K.C.2008:125). Thus, it becomes quite clear that B. K. Barua’s creative
genius, scholarship and research-based studies are of immense help to engage him in literary historiography.

His ‘History of Assamese Literature’ is divided into ten chapters and each chapter is devoted to a critical study of the literature produced in a particular age, its socio-economic background with expository notes on the canonical authors and their works. His critical survey also provides a clear observation on the origin and development of Assamese language and literature, its religious tradition, political patronage, the impact of English and European literary traditions in cultivating innovative way of recycling contemporary realities and shaping of the Assamese mind and intellect. This compact volume is rich in many such brilliant observations put in the frame of lucid prose. An amazing quality of the literary history is that it not only places the authors and his works in their socio-political and cultural contexts but also finds out how there has been an engaging assimilation of the folk with the classical elements and how the plural cultural ethos retain its flavor without getting lost. B.K Barua’s mind being already trained in folklore researches could add a rare critical insight into his interpretation. He was particularly aware of what can be termed as ‘transcultural mobility’ (Ashcroft.B et al: 1996). B. K. Barua while offering a chronological narrative of the history of Assamese literature takes note of the various phases of ethnic migration, the Aryan and the non-Aryan elements mingling together, the early geography of Assam, the oral folk songs and narratives, the enduring Ahom rule that had given a secular character to Assamese literature.

Most of his views on the formation of an Assamese identity, migration of the early settlers to Assam belonging to the Tibeto-Burmese group, Assam’s early geography, the mighty Brahmaputra determining the socio-economic and cultural identities of Assam and its people are, however, available in his other writings too. B. K. Barua’s findings and arguments may be broadly organized in the following way:
1) He has argued that the Assamese literature has had royal patronage for its growth since the early period and it is during the period of the Ahom regime that Assamese literature began to appear in its secular credential. What we see in the literature of the Ahom period is an expression of the worldly affairs and social realities through narratives based on the Puranas. As the authors belonged to the common strata of the society their Puran-based renderings subsumed the popular myths, legends and folk traditions. The literature of the Ahom period is represented by the Buranj-sahitya (historical writings), historical ballads, books on medicine, astrology, dance-forms, architecture etc. and they prove the emerging secular credential in contrast to the earlier devotional nature of the Assamese literature.

2) The Bhakti literature preceding the literature of the Ahom period with predominance of spiritual contents and religious nuances is in-fact, a brilliant rendering of the classical sources of Sanskrit literature. This is not a literal translation, but endowed with local color and flavor. Madhav Kandali’s Ramayan is a classic work in as much as it effects a fusion of local landscape and idiom, enhances the beauty and wealth of the Assamese language and above all, a regional replica of Indian tradition could be moulded through it. According to B.K.Barua, the Manasa Kabya of Mankar-Durgabar-Narayandev is built around the myths and superstitions of ‘both the Assamese and the neighbouring tribes’, and contemporary social life are woven into the ‘tapestry of the Behula theme’. In his own words “Whatever may be the literary merits of the Manasa poems; they have the great value of preserving our cultural heritage, sustaining an interest in the old myths and legends and in strengthening the ties of our cultural life and literature.” (Barua.B.K. 2003: 16). B.K.Barua’s interpretation of the religious tradition, sociological vision and unique poetic quality in the literary works of both Sankardev and Madhav Dev shows his critical power and insight. He draws our attention to the simple, innocent, popular form hidden within the serious spiritual ideology. Despite being a distinguished Sanskrit scholar himself Sankardev wrote mainly in Assamese in order to familiarize the illiterate village folk with the rich treasure
of Sanskrit lore. His poetry, songs and plays had an amazing popular reception and brought about a cultural renaissance besides infusing new life and rhythm to Assamese literature and culture. B.K Barua’s comment on Sankardeva’s *Kirtana* appears quite significant when he writes that a modern reader is delighted to find in this work literary form, picturesque descriptions, originality of treatment, and rhythmic felicities beyond its moral and theological content. “Sankardeva’s poetry fell upon Assamese ear with a cadence and music as familiar as their dialect” --- such comments on the poetic qualities remind us of Dr. Hiren Gohain’s brilliant interpretation of this outstanding work in *Kirtan Puthir Rasa Bichar*. B. K. Barua also points out that the first specimen of Assamese prose is found in the *Ankiya Nats* – a prose which is ‘sinewy, musical and elevated’. Sankardeva’s *Ankiya Nats* have also ‘dovetailed the dance tradition of the soil into the classical tradition of drama and music along with occasional gleanings of art fragments from different parts of India’ (Barua 2003: 41). The recent research made in the field of Satriya Dance form has significantly found out elements of the various indigenous dance forms of our ethnic tribes. What we can draw from B. K. Barua’s findings is that Sankardeva’s contribution can be seen in the simple, innocent, rural environment and folk ways of life independently of its classical context. However, the influence of classical tradition upon the literature of the Vaisnavite period is a pervasive phenomenon. It gave such a distinction and vitality to Assamese language and literature that is expected to stay for all times. As B. K. Barua puts it, the Sanskrit or classical tradition “also tempered, refined and polished the manners and character of the Assamese society, built of diverse elements.” (Barua2003: 72).

3) B. K. Barua gives a separate treatment to the literature of the modern period categorizing them as Poetry, Drama, the Novel and the Short Story and Prose General. This section also constitutes the literature of the Assamese Romantic age. Though the western education and its newly formulated ideas helped in ushering in a phase of Romanticism in Assamese literature with certain innovative forms and tone, B. K. Barua claims that Assamese literature
could retain the flavor of its own soil. Our plural cultural ethos and the magnificent source of folk-tradition offered immense diversity to Assamese Romanticism.

4) Modernity in Assamese literature is also a part of its wider European epistemological package. The psycho-philosophical and communist ideas of Freud, Jung, Karl Marx and Darwin had caused the Romantic disillusionment. Besides the influence of modern English poetry the modern phase of Assamese poetry also responded to the various experiments made in the poetry of France, Russia, Germany, Japan and China. But no significant change has been noticed in the form and content of Assamese drama under the English influences. The reason he finds is that a dramatic genius born of a national consciousness and native milieu is an important requisite for depicting social condition and narrating historical events. ‘Failing this’ according to him, ‘drama is bound to be effete. This basic resistance qualifies foreign influences that may have found their way in’ (ibid, page: 163).

Thus, we can deduce from the above that B. K. Barua’s literary historiography enjoys a scholarship and theoretical base that distilled through his research and serious study of Assamese literature, society, culture and history. He has made a sustained attempt to understand with sociological vision and a humanist perception the undercurrents of various socio-economic and political forces working behind the literature of a particular age. His criticism has been penetrating at a time when the literature touches the life of the people and when a classical tradition attains an indigenous flavor being endowed with the subaltern cultural values.

Secondly, as a literary historian, B. K. Barua is found to be more interested in evaluating the socio-aesthetic values, literary form and technique than overwhelming the readers with a confusingly huge gallery of the authors and literary masterpieces. He successfully explores how the folk-aesthetics, myths and legends, subaltern realities can provide to the literature of different ages an amazing variety and nuances.
Thirdly, B. K. Barua’s survey of the growth, development and the unique features of Assamese literature in such a compact volume focuses on the basic tenets of the medieval Assamese literature, the modernity developed through many vicissitudes of a colonial regime, exploration of some innovative means of expression under European and Asian literary influences towards the later phase of the modern period. There is however no point to suggest that the book can claim perfection in all details. This work of B. K. Barua, when read thoroughly would endorse the view of John Peck and Martin Coyle expressed in a preface to their *A Brief History of English Literature* - “We wanted to write an account that a reader with a degree of stamina might wish to read as a whole. It is sometimes the case that histories of literature, aiming for encyclopedic inclusiveness, overwhelm the reader with detail; almost inevitably, it becomes impossible to see the shape or direction of the material being discussed. What we have sought to present is a clear narrative, with a strong backbone of argument” (Peck.J, Coyle.Martin.2008: ix).

Finally to conclude, it would be relevant to refer to Andrew Sanders, a celebrated English historian of literature. He is of the view that importance laid on canonical works and authors often consigns many issues and personalities to marginality and in due course of time they are picked up from the periphery, and silences are made to speak by way of transmuting new ideas. Such ‘discovery of neglected articulacy’ will certainly change the character of literary history (Sanders, *Introduction*, 1996). There is no point to contest Sanders’ views. We are also expecting such changes in literary historiography in the days to come. But B. K. Barua’s literary historiography is not going to lose its relevance. Emile Ligouis *A short History of English Literature* had remained in use for decades together since its first publication in 1934. But Andrew Sanders admits that his *The Short Oxford History of English Literature* was written targeting authors and issues left in the periphery and thereby to meet the imperfections of Ligouis’ work. It would be a great service to Assamese Literature if some literary historian of Assam follow the work of B. K. Barua and write a new history to address its imperfections.
Temples and Legends of Assam: A Glimpse of Assam’s Socio-Religious History.

B K Barua’s another rare piece, Temples and Legends of Assam (co-authored with his research scholar Prof. H. V. S. Murthy of Gauhati University) published by Bharatiya Bidya Bhavan in 1965 traces the various temples of Assam and a complex web of legends associated with them. The reconstruction is done in a way that lends its support to the formation of a religious history in this part of the country. As in the field of culture and politics, the various religious cults also underwent modifications and assumed a distinct feature because of racial and topographic factors.

“The existence of numerous shrines dedicated to Siva, Surya, Vishnu and Devi and other deities is fully attested to both by inscriptions and contemporary literature. But today, none of these early edifices exist, and the only memorials of ancient times consist of jungle clad mounds scattered in such places as Gauhati, Tezpur, Nowgong, Sibsagar, Sadiya and a few big temples belonging to a comparatively late period” (Murthy, Preface, TLA 1965: viii).

In tracing the factors responsible for ‘this total obliteration of old sites’ the authors accept those given by Gait in his ‘A History of Assam.’ B. K. Barua mentions elsewhere that the Brahmaputra is the chief artery of Assam and its blessed water has continued to water the history and culture of the Assamese people. But the mighty Brahmaputra waters our history in its ruins too. The topography and Geography of Assam leave its irresistible impact in shaping and destroying the history and civilisation rather arbitrarily. The mighty snow-fed rivers in its downstream courses find no resistance on the plains and cut away its banks. The temples erected on their valleys had succumbed to the silent oppression of nature except those erected on a strong rock piercing alluvium.
Besides, the life line of the temples was cut short by the wrath of invaders, earthquakes, and luxurient vegetation.

The *Kalika Purana* and the *Yogini Tantra* – the two medieval Brahmanical texts speak a lot about religious beliefs and practices in ancient Kamrupa. A substantial part of them consists of Tantric worship. Behind the phenomenal rise of Tantra and Saktism, B K Barua supports the views expressed by historians like R. K. Mukherji, B K Kakati, Eliot, H. H Wilson etc. their view is that ancient Kamrupa cradled Saktism and that the Tantric and Sakti corruptions of the religion proceeded from this part of the country. The genesis of this cult in Kamrupa and also in the Indus Valley society lies in animism. *Prakriti*, the mother of men, animals and plants formed the prominent deity of ancient India. Thus the mother Goddess became the prototype of diverse and subsequent emulations.

Sakti epitomizing Divine energy, power of knowledge, existence and bliss is inseparable from *Brahma*. ‘Siva without Sakti is sava, a corpse.’ Saktism in medieval Assam had found a veritable goldmine due to animistic practices of the various tribes. The debased forms of Tantric rituals facilitated the growth of revolutionary Vaisnavite renaissance. That the Ahom monarchs patronised Saktism may be partly due to their lineage to Tantric Buddhism of the Shan ancestry (Bhuyan, S. K, *Ahomar din*) or a tendency to glorify their royal power with emotional identification with the Siva-Sakti cult. Saktism in Assam has another stage of its association with magic charm. At this point a large number of people came under its influence. B K Barua is of the view that all these debased forms of Tantric rituals (as represented by *Kalika Purana* and *Yogini Tantra*) further degenerated into blood sacrifices and various esoteric rites. Besides gratification of the senses through observance of ‘*Pancha tatta*’ (wine, meat, fish, mudra, maithun) the followers also ‘sought salvation through sexual intercourse with women’.quoting from Bhandarkar’s ‘*Vaisnavism, Saivismand minor religious systems*’ the authors tried to establish the point that the esoteric religious exercises even provoked some males to feel like
becoming a woman, at least to find a womanhood within themselves (TLA, 1965: 14). The following lines from TLA justify such crude forms of tantric rituals –

‘As a frontier region Assam appears to be a veritable asylum for all kinds of uncanny beliefs and superstitions. Since early the province happened to be a melting ground of the Austric, Dravidian, Aryan and Sino-Tibetan speakers, and the aboriginal beliefs, cults, and myths of these races and tribes mingled together as if in a witch cauldron and formed the foundation of the orthodox religion of the Tantras. For these reasons, Assam in the medieval period became a fertile soil for the Tantric worship’ (TLA, 1965: 18).

The authors narrate in detail the legends hoary with antiquity and associated with the temples in its original forms. Such legends as layered and varied in themselves bear strains of both Aryan and indigenous tribal entities. The stone built Kamakhya temple of these legends was rebuilt in the same place, at Nilachal hill top with bricks by the famous Koc general Chilarai. One Rajib Lochan Roy, a Brahmana, eventually became a Mohammedan under a new name Kalapahar. Kalapahar had been engaged in a demolition campaign against kamakhya and Jagannath temples as a part of his protest against the Brahminical order who did not allow him to remain a Brahman after his marriage to a Mahammedan girl. This piece of social history behind demolition of the original stone built Kamakhya temple is significant. The Kamakhya temple has around it many a secret of attraction. A rich tapestry of sculptures is found engraved on the panels of its walls. Right from its pattern of the beehive at the top to the sculptural figures at the base are witness to the practice of fine arts and the aesthetics of religion. The authors (Barua and Murthy) supporting Gopinath Rao assign the sculptures of Assam to the fourth school. The four different schools of Indian art represent four different regions of the country. The sculpture of Bengal,
Assam and Orissa falls in the fourth school which is characterized by round faces, oblique eyes, broad forehead with thin lips and a small chin.

**Buddha Dharma aru Sahitya (Buddhist religion and literature), Bharat Buranji and a few articles on Buddhist theme – A Bottom-up view.**

The new perspective of B K Barua’s historical research traces its origin in his lineage to the Buddhist philosophy which he had attained through rigorous academic training in one of India’s leading centres of letters – the University of Calcutta. He has now been recognised as one of the few scholars of Pali language and literature in India. The top-down social mobility and peripheral realities are well reflected in the whole range of Pali literature. It is not difficult to surmise that B K Barua’s creative and critical mind was moulded to a great extent by the teachings and philosophy of Gautam Buddha. Buddha’s religious philosophy adds another glittering feather to the crown of India’s spiritual energy, besides being widely disseminated to the various segments of the Himalayan communities. There is no doubt that the gradual obliteration of Buddhism in its mother land and its powerful entry and expansion in Tibet, China, Burma, Shyam, Ceylon, Bhutan, Japan etc. still remains an uninvestigated domain of our social history. India’s struggle for independence found in the Buddhist philosophy a source of inspiration in the form of Gandhi’s Principles of Non-violence or Ahimsa and Satyagraha. It articulates with resonance the Buddha’s sermons as enshrined in the Tripitak. Buddhism returns to India as a symbol of national identity. The two streams of India’s spirituality e.g. Hinduism and Buddhism meet and merge in the creativity and critical genius of the great Indians like Rabindranath Tagore. Moreover Buddhism reaches out to the masses and teaches them in simple allegorical language the ways to **Nirvana** which can be achieved by all – the king and the clown, rich and poor through deliverance from the pains of birth, death, disease, of separation from the near and dear ones, evil contact and unfulfilled desires. Total abandonment of desire is the way to **Nirvana.** Capacity to stand still in the
midst of fleeting desires is considered a matter of inculcating values of sacrifice and *Ahimsa* for promotion of common good.

B K Barua edited a symposium *Buddha Dharma aru Sahitya* synchronising Buddha Jayanti celebration in 1956. Among others including Bhabananda Datta, Barua contributes to it a lengthy essay on Pali-Sahitya elucidating on the teachings of Buddha, based on the famous Buddhist literature – *Tripitak*.

B K Barua refers to various Buddhist sermons, religious discourse and advices in his elucidation of Sutta pitak. Mazjhima Nikaya is said to be the most famous and revealing of all the Buddhist texts. It comprises according to B. K. Barua discussion on all the aspects of Buddhism – the four holy truths (arya satya) e.g. *Karma, trishna, atma, nirvana, dhyana*. Besides, Mazjhim Nikaya deals with Buddha’s life and the social, national and geographical accounts of contemporary India. It also contains contemporary philosophical debate among the Brahman as to which way is the great and Buddha’s intervention. In simple colloquial idiom Buddha illustrates his idea of a *Brahmana* as a man of wisdom, not of caste – one who excels in the power of meditation, is free from sins and prejudices differentiating between the self and the other. Instead of seeking after the unreachable, *Brahma* or *atma* Buddha in the Mazjim Nikaya reiterates its belief in the existence of ideas. It is not essential to Buddha’s religious philosophy to pronounce in unequivocal terms whether the world is finite or infinite, whether the body and soul are the same or different, whether or not there is entity of the *Tathagata* after death; because the knowledge of these things remains an irritant to honest living, truth and peace. Peace and knowledge are achieved through an awareness of the truth of pains, its causes and the way of cessation. So what the Buddha has not explained is something inexplicable. Those inexplicable mysteries of the world have very little to do with the realisation of truth, avoidance of extreme worldly affairs and also the attainment of *prajna-buddhi-nirvana*. 

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According to Buddha, a woman’s share of worldly worries is greater than those of a man. Hence, the women need to perform *brahmacarya*. He has identified five types of worldly pains that the women suffer from. They have to leave their parental home, have to live in the house of the husband, they have to bear child and labour pain, and take care of the males. Interestingly, B K Barua introduces the gendered content of Buddha’s religious teachings which has already been sensitised in his own creative writings.

B K Barua draws our attention to the *dharmapada* – an invaluable Buddhist text, a classic piece of world literature. It contains in attractively simple style the substance of all religions of the world. Dharmapada is the sum total of 423 slokas – all in the form of maxims of great poetic and epigrammatic brilliance. A few examples of them in free translation may be as follows –

a). ‘A cow herder cannot be the owner of the cattle simply by tending them. So also a proud man who recites many a scripture but do not follow their advice cannot be a monk’.

b). ‘As a wide variety of garlands can be wreathed from a flower garden so also the people born can perform many honest works’.

c). ‘Fools have only sweet taste of sin until it is ripe; but when it blossoms turns sour’

d). Rocky mountains stand unshaken by the wind, so also a wise man is not moved either by blame or praise.

e). As rust produced from iron destroys iron so the infidels are endangered by their own evils.

f). He who is not involved in sensuality, like water on a lotus leaf or a mustard seed at the tip of a needle is a real Brahmin.
Like the Dharmapada, *thergatha* (the songs sung by *ther* and *theri*) reveals the personal life of the monks, their intimate feelings in terms of similies of the familiar world. Worldly desire is hidden in everyone’s heart like a sharp hook in the throat of a fish. As the deer caught in a net allows the rope to be further tightened by his efforts to get released, so also a man lost in the wilderness of desires gets headlong involved in it. Our Vaisnavite saints, Sankardeva and Madhavdeva also see life of man tossed up and down in the wilderness haunted by worldly desires.

The profound lessons of Buddhist religious philosophy are found in the form of parables, maxims and conversation. *Sutta Pitak* can be read as interesting source of India’s social history. One of such Suttas narrates the humble life and domestic peace of a cow herder. Barua explains that this Sutta speaks about the life style and happiness of common people in ancient India. The most important *Sutta*, according to him, is the *Basetth Sutta*. It offers a social dialectic between Basistha and Bharadvaj. Bharadvaj defines a real Brahmin is one who is a descent of nobility and ancestral purity, whose family is innocent and irreproachable. But the former argues that a person of noble character capable of performing meditation can claim this honour. Not being able to resolve the debate they approached the Buddha for reconciliation. Now the Buddha sketches the character a true Brahmana in a series of Suttas. Some of them are translated by Barua which can be summarized as follows –

“No one is a Brahmin by virtue of his birth or caste. The man becomes a farmer, artist, trader, clergy and also wears the crown by dint of his specific work. He makes him a Brahmin by performing meditation, Brahmacarya, being restraint and soft-mannered. One, who excels in knowledge, is modest and free from the burden of rebirth is recognised as a Brahmin”.

B. K. Barua analyses the various *Suttas* of the *Tripitak* in such a way that it arouses historical interest and throws insight into the roots of our social history. All the songs of *ther* and *theri* or the *thergatha* may be termed as
articulation of peripheral miseries – some painful accounts of anguish, loss and alienation which produce profound human compassion in the readers. Some other thergatha pays rich tribute to nature, its beauty and peaceful ambience. Meditation requires serene peaceful atmosphere. It bears upon mental disposition of the monks. The first group that articulates peripheral realities of the nuns, therigatha relates to the biographies of the theris. B K Barua comments that therigatha is the only source to learn about the women of the Buddhist period. Apart from the common women, it also reveals the lives of beautiful damsels, skilled dancers, prostitutes etc. Every gatha narrates how they become disillusioned about the worldly affairs and being sick of it how they are attracted to the Buddhist religion. Thus it is clear that Buddhism kept its door open to all the suffering humanity irrespective of caste, creed and social position. Barua translates Bimala’s confession who was a prostitute of Baishali –

“I have my head shaved today and have worn kashya cloth. I sit meditating at the root of a tree. I am free from all the fetters of fate and man. I have got rid of all the sins that debased my mind. I have attained peace and nirvana today” (Pali Sahitya, 124).

The therigatha is observed by B. K. Barua as a gendered archetype of sufferings subsequently absolved in the acceptance of Buddhist ideology. Bereaved mothers who lost their own sons and daughters; desolate women who lost their parents and had to live by begging alms; rich and young damsels like Anupama who had become quite indifferent to family ties though many a prince wanted to marry her offering gold eight times greater than the weight of her body – form the gallery of women. All these women regained their peace of mind and were given shelter. The other gathas of mukta and ambapali reveal Tathagata’s arya-satya as the only alternative to escape patriarchal tyranny and transience of beauty. Thus the acceptance of Buddhism by the women of that age is a pointer to some social truths and aspiration for greater realisation. Salvation, respect for the Buddha, relief from the worldly worries, indifference
to matrimonial obligation, death of near and dear ones, loss of faith between father and son are some of the causalities behind this social phenomena. Every song of terigatha is found to be imbued with rare pulsation of life – each of them is just poetry of life (*Pali Sahitya*, 128-135).

Accordingly the *Jatakas* of Buddha embody some anecdotes and tales which had been in vogue in ancient India to spread certain events of Buddha’s previous life and his religious philosophy among the common people. Besides, the nature and topography of India were minutely observed by the monks while continuing their itineracy. The songs of thergatha celebrate the mild and violent aspects of nature. Nature description occupies a center place in the gatha. The itinerant monks had been in close contact with rivers, mountains, caves, trees and grassland.

This somewhat detailed account of Pali Sahitya by B. K. Barua definitely adds a dimension to his idea of and approach to history. The wide range of Pali Sahitya which is claimed at the same time as the most original and first hand source of Buddhism contains much material for reconstructing India’s ancient social history. It perhaps teaches him that the real history of a society remains in people’s own creation, their socio-religious faiths and activities, a major source of which lies in the literature. The common touches of *thervadi* pali worldview draws him closer to the masses, the typical Assamese rural milieu, the tragic rhythm of life, the beauty and anguish of the women, life and struggle of a secular cultural zone of the tea garden (as in *Jivanar Batat* and *Seujee Patar Kahini*); the study of folk culture of which B. K. Barua is the pioneer. All these details when reconstructed and categorised form the new historical perspective that looks ahead of his time.

In the article *Notices of Buddhism in Assam* B. K. Barua concludes that Buddhist Monks used to wander about the province showing magic performances elsewhere and ‘the vast mass of writings in early Assamese known as *Mantras*’ contained ‘names of later-day Buddhist gods and goddesses’ besides bearing ‘distinct stamp of Vajrayana tenents’. These
Mantras (charms), according to him, were composed in mystic words and syllables containing magic formula against snakebite, evil spirits. The popular belief was that its various spells could ensure healing of diseases, winning of good fortune and desired ends. “Most of these Mantras” he writes, “bear the impress of the Buddhist Dharani Suttas” (Racanavali, Vol. 3, 2015: 2716). B. K. Barua wrote several other articles besides the Jataka Stories which conceal behind their simple narration a genuine concern for the peripheral existence of life or a social allegory that exposes the evils of caste prejudice and importance of the so called outcastes as in Baudha Sishya Ananda. Ananda once felt a need to drink water while preaching around the villages. On seeing an apparently low caste girl named Prakriti lifting water from a roadside well Ananda asked for water. Prakriti was surprised and told him that a low caste girl cannot give him water to drink. At this Ananda replied, “Sister, I haven’t asked for your caste, I just want you to give me a little water to quench my thirst” (Ibid, Vol. 1, 631).

Sarameya presents an intricate piece of human social behavior and beliefs about the dog associated with acts of utilitarian and fertility origin. Quite interestingly B. K. Barua refers to some historical speculations about the arrival of this animal in India and the fossil evidences in the archeological finds of Mahenjodaro and Harappa. All these suggest an intimate relationship between man and dog signifying a social character in it (Ibid, Vol. 1, 627-630). B K Barua wrote another scholarly article Bauddhadharmar Bikashar Batat Bhitaruwa Sampradaya (Internal Sects obstructing the growth of the Buddhist Religion). It offers a graphic outline of the rise of Buddhism in India at a very critical phase of religious chaos concerning the expansion of Aryan religious ideas and practices and equally powerful resistance built up by those of the non-Aryan aborigines.

He makes a very perceptible comment. Like other matters, emergence of a new religion is dependent upon man’s mental or social needs. Non-violence as a precept is not an exclusive feature of Buddhism; it is found in the Bedic
literature and the scriptures of Jainism much before the rise of Buddhism. The central precepts of Buddhism, according to him, are amity and kindness (Moitri and Karuna). Casteism in Indian society had got a strong base long before Gautam Buddha’s appearance; self mortification and retirement into solitude had been the common practices under strict control of the Bedic religion, rituals and beliefs. Thus, it became a phenomenal event in the history of world religion that a simple monk like Gautam could develop a parallel religion. In opposition to the Bedic system Gautam professed the simplest way to human salvation through one’s own knowledge and manners. It is Buddha’s middle way carefully avoiding the two extreme ways of Epicureanism and selfmortification (Ibid, 638-640). One of the reasons behind the fall of Buddhism in India, as suggested by B. K. Barua is the fact that it did not enjoy royal patronage due to its underlying democratic principles of equality, fraternity and social justice with little scope for totalitarian polity (Bharat Buranji, Vol. 1, 697). Lack of patronage from royal authorities except Ashoka, the emperor, is a distinctive sign of Buddhism’s Commitment to the common masses and how the liberal human principles could change the very character of imperial power has remained a great example in Ashoka (Ibid, 710).

His Bharat Buranji (the enlarged 7th edition, 1956), though a text book for class IX and X, reveals B. K. Barua’s typical approach to history and historiography. The sustained efforts to represent Assam in the Indian perspective can be noticed even here in synchronizing events of Assam history along with its nature and demography to those of the other parts of India. Written in a very lucid language it contains a fascinating factual account appropriate for the students. A text book designed for the students of Assam on pan Indian context should incorporate regional aspects of which B. K. Barua’s work can be a model. We produce below a few excerpts in free translation –

“That the Himalaya has left its immense impact upon India becomes clear when we consider the source of the various rivers of the country. All the three major rivers - the Sindh, the Ganges and the Brahmaputra,
emerge from the Himalaya. These three rivers along with their tributaries constitute the life streams of India. If the river is the mother of a riparian country, the Himalaya is the father figure of India” (678, emphasis added).

“Moreover, the mountain passes like Khyber and Bolan paved the way for migration to India. The successive waves of Persian, Greek, Shak, Hun, Turky migrants from various parts of the world came to India. On the North too, there was pass or trade route from Tibet and China, and the Mongoloid tribes followed it to arrive at India through Assam. According to the scholars, this route in the North-East is one of the world’s major routes for the refugees” (emphasis added).

“Since the long past the big and small mountains of India have been the shelters for the refugees and the tortured. The scions to the aborigines of the ancient Nisad and Kirata tribes like Santhal, Kol, Mundas, Khasis etc. could not resist the Aryan Pressure and used to live in the mountains and hills. Of these mountain dwellers some migrated through the North-East corridor and others are supposed to be inhabitants from Cambodia, Malaya and the Indian Islands” (Ibid, 675, emphasis added).

“The word buranji is derived from the Ahom; it means a store that informs the unknown facts. In Sanskrit this discipline is called Itihas which literally means ‘it was said like this’; .... In buranji or itihas things that happened in the past are narrated. Earlier buranji stood for the chronology of ancient political events. Mainly statement of the king and his dynasty, battles fought and polity occupied the subject of history. But the modern historians are of the view that buranji does not simply narrate a few fascinating stories of the country; the real goal of historiography is to represent in exact terms the culture and thought that had flourished among the peoples, the type of polity and administrative
systems that had been developed and the beginning, growth and consequences of all these things” (free translation, Ibid, 673).

*Early geography of Assam* (1952) is another pioneering work of B. K. Barua bearing significance on the study of historical geography of ancient Assam. Here the author attempts to present ‘a religio-geographical picture of early Assam’ entirely based on three major literary sources of medieval Assam, namely – *Kalika Purana*, *Yogini Tantra* and *Haragaurisamvada*. Geographical information of early Assam abounds in the the two medieval texts *Kalika Purana* and *Yogini Tantra*, in the land grant copper plates of the early kings of Assam and in the biographies of Sankardeva. The medieval Assamese religious texts contain descriptions of places, *tirthas*, rivers, rivulets, hills, hillocks, lakes, ponds, groves and forests sacred to various gods and goddesses. They are commonly known as the *topographia sacra*. Besides the topography sacred to the gods and goddesses, the geographical informations in the inscriptions and the early Assamese literature refer to the cities and villages of Assam. Barua writes,

“Thus in all these we not only get a comprehensive list of topographical names but also a picture of the entire country of the time when these texts were compiled, the grants were recorded and the literature was composed. Further, they furnish us with information about the gradual process of Aryanisation of the country. In this respect the names themselves are significant as most of the topographical names are Sanskrit with a sprinkling of Prakritic elements” (E.G.A, 1952: 1-2).

Most of the places had come into prominence due to expansion of religious activities. Myths and religious beliefs in themselves do not offer any precise historical knowledge and any scientific analysis of the topographical variety; but the various elements of topography attained distinction with the growth of religious beliefs and activities and pilgrimage made by the people to these places increased geographical knowledge. Whatever geographical information gleaned from these literary and inscriptive sources are identified as correct
and accurate though certain variation in shape and size is admissible. The shapes and figures upon earth surfaces are subject to change and even decay. Some features of the topography ‘totally disappeared from the face of the earth due to natural and political cataclysms’. B. K. Barua has recorded a list of topographical names with brief notes about their location, origine and religious significance. Such a survey based on religious texts takes us on to the socio-religious history of medieval Assam besides certifying interracial links behind the names of topography. Nirode Baruah writes,

“It deals with some of the major areas of historical geography of early Assam such as the pithas and tirthas, the name of state Pragjyotisha and Kamrupa, shape size and boundary of the state, division of Kamrupa and important topographical names found in the literary sources and inscriptions so far discovered till his times” (2010: 17).

B. K. Barua undoubtedly brought new perspective to historical research in Assam. Besides his interest in the political regime he tried his hand in a relatively new area of socio-cultural and religious history. What we can surmise from the above is that the very boundary of historical enquiry had got further expanded when issues literary and cultural in folk and classical dimensions began to be explored. While attempting to review the history of our culture, language and literature, B. K. Barua set aside the privileged insularity and the notions of a pervasive Aryanisation. It was both pioneering and anticipatory of new perspective. The palace paradigm gives way to a sort of bottom-up investigation. Without any serious concern for the economic system and mode of production which may be an obvious lacking in B. K. Barua, he otherwise brings to light many issues concerning the evolution of the Assamese mind. There is an authentic reflection of contemporary events and the underlying factors in the socio-cultural and literary texts which bear significance to understand the present. The point that gives distinction to B K Barua’s historical writings is the place of the common people and the peripheral realities in the nationalist perception of history.