

Colonial Knowledge and Indigenous Polity: A Critical Study of Captain Thomas Welsh's 1794 Report on Assam

Dr. Imdad Ali Ahmed

Associate Professor

Department of History, Pub Kamrup College
Baihata Chariali, Kamrup, Assam

ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the 1794 report of Captain Thomas Welsh, an official of the East India Company, as a crucial colonial document on late Ahom-era Assam. Prepared under the directives of Lord Cornwallis and later addressed to Sir John Shore, the report provides insights into the political, administrative, military, and economic structures of the Ahom kingdom. Using a critical historical approach, this study analyses Welsh's observations on monarchy, aristocracy, the paik system, and resource production. It also evaluates the biases inherent in colonial knowledge production. By engaging with existing historiography on Assam, the paper situates Welsh's narrative within broader colonial interests in trade and governance. The study argues that while Welsh's account remains a valuable primary source, it must be interpreted cautiously, as it reflects both empirical observations and imperial motivations.

KEYWORDS: Assam, Ahom Kingdom, Thomas Welsh, Colonial Narratives, Paik System, East India Company

Introduction:

The late eighteenth century marked a critical phase in the interaction between the Ahom kingdom of Assam and the expanding influence of the East India Company. Among the early colonial observers, Captain Thomas Welsh stands out for his detailed account of Assam during his mission in 1792–1794. Deputed initially to restore Gaurinath Singha to power and expel external forces, Welsh went beyond his military objectives to document the region's governance, economy, and society. His report, prepared under administrative directives, offers a structured description of Ahom polity, including monarchy, aristocracy, and military organization. However, such colonial records were not neutral; they were shaped by imperial interests in resource extraction and political control. This

paper aims to critically analyse Welsh's report, examining both its historical value and its limitations, while situating it within the broader scholarship on Assam's pre-colonial and colonial transition.

Methodology:

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretative historical methodology based on textual analysis of Captain Welsh's 1794 report. The report is treated as a primary source and examined alongside secondary works by historians such as S. K. Bhuyan, H.K. Barpujari, and Amalendu Guha. A critical approach is employed to identify colonial biases and contextualise Welsh's observations within the political and economic objectives of the East India Company. Comparative analysis is used to evaluate the accuracy of Welsh's descriptions of

Ahom administration, military organisation, and economy.

Discussion:

Captain Thomas Welsh's 1794 report represents one of the earliest systematic colonial attempts to document the political, administrative, and economic structure of Assam under the Ahom rule. Prepared in response to queries from colonial authorities such as Lord Cornwallis and Sir John Shore, the report was not merely descriptive but also strategic in intent. It aimed to assess the viability of trade, governance, and possible political intervention in the region.

- **Colonial Context and Motivations**

The late eighteenth century was marked by the territorial expansion of the East India Company. Assam, though geographically distant, attracted colonial attention due to its rich natural resources and strategic location. Welsh's mission to reinstate Gaurinath Singha was thus intertwined with the Company's broader interests. As scholars like Amalendu Guha argue, colonial interventions in Assam were often motivated by economic prospects, particularly in commodities such as silk, elephants, and mineral resources.

Welsh's report reflects this orientation. The questionnaire format, consisting of thirteen detailed queries, reveals the administrative priorities of the colonial state. These included governance structure, military organisation, revenue systems, and trade potential. Such inquiries demonstrate that knowledge production

was closely linked to imperial control.

- **Ahom Polity: Monarchy and Aristocracy**

Welsh characterises the Ahom state as both monarchical and aristocratic. According to him, the king functioned as the supreme executive authority, with powers over land, justice, and warfare. However, his authority was not absolute; it was mediated by an influential aristocracy known as the Patra Mantree.

The aristocratic structure included key officials such as the Bar Gohain, Burha Gohain, and Barpatra Gohain, along with the Barbaruah and Barphukan. Welsh describes these officials as counsellors who played a significant role in governance, including the selection and deposition of kings. This observation aligns with the findings of Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, who emphasises the collective nature of Ahom political authority.

However, Welsh's account contains certain inaccuracies. For instance, he simplifies the composition of the council and overlooks the complexity of Ahom administrative hierarchies. Historians like H.K. Barpujari note that these positions were embedded in a broader socio-political framework that evolved over time. Thus, while Welsh provides a useful outline, his description lacks depth and nuance.

- **Administrative Structure and Justice**

Welsh's report offers valuable insights into the administrative machinery of the Ahom state. He highlights the role of various officials, including Phukans and Baruahs, who managed

different departments such as trade, revenue, and royal household affairs. The administrative system appears decentralised yet coordinated, with significant autonomy granted to local officials.

In the judicial sphere, Welsh notes the absence of codified laws, stating that decisions were based on customs and the discretion of judges. The Nyay Hodha Phukan served as the highest appellate authority. This description suggests a flexible legal system rooted in tradition rather than formal legislation.

Modern historians have debated this characterisation. While Amalendu Guha acknowledges the importance of customary law, he argues that Welsh's portrayal underestimates the sophistication of Ahom legal practices. The absence of written laws does not necessarily imply a lack of legal structure; rather, it reflects a different mode of governance.

- **Military Organisation and the Paik System**

One of the most detailed sections of Welsh's report concerns the military organisation of the Ahom state, particularly the *paik* system. This system required each family to provide manpower for state service, creating a form of organised labour and military mobilisation.

Welsh categorises *paiks* into different groups based on their roles during peacetime and emergencies. He also describes the hierarchical structure of military officers, ranging from Bora and Saikia to Hazarika, Rajkhowa, and Phukan.

This classification provides a clear picture of the military organisation.

The *paik* system has been widely studied by historians such as H.K. Barpujari, who emphasise its dual function as both a military and economic institution. Welsh's account captures its operational aspects but does not fully explore its social implications, such as its impact on agrarian production and labour relations.

- **Frontier Administration and Political Control**

Welsh identifies the appointment of frontier governors, such as the Sadiyakhowa Gohain and Marangikhowa Gohain, as a significant development in Ahom administration. These officials were responsible for managing border regions and maintaining relations with neighbouring tribes and kingdoms.

This system reflects the strategic priorities of the Ahom state, particularly in maintaining territorial integrity. Welsh interprets these appointments as measures against rebellion, highlighting the political challenges faced by the kingdom.

However, his interpretation is influenced by colonial assumptions about governance. As Suryya Kumar Bhuyan points out, these frontier positions were also part of a broader system of integration and diplomacy with diverse ethnic groups.

- **Economic Resources and Commercial Potential**

A significant portion of Welsh's report is devoted to the economic resources of Assam. He provides a detailed inventory of agricultural,

mineral, and animal products, including rice, sugarcane, mustard, silk, gold, and iron. This information was crucial for the East India Company, which sought to expand its commercial activities.

Welsh's emphasis on resource abundance reflects the colonial gaze, which viewed regions primarily in terms of their economic utility. His description of silk production, particularly muga silk, highlights the potential for profitable trade. Similarly, his references to gold extraction from rivers indicate an interest in mineral wealth.

Historians such as Amalendu Guha argue that such accounts played a key role in shaping colonial economic policies. By documenting resources, Welsh contributed to the process of integrating Assam into the colonial economy.

- **Biases and Limitations of the Report**

While Welsh's report is rich in detail, it is not free from biases. As a colonial official, his perspective was shaped by the interests and assumptions of the East India Company. This is evident in his focus on administrative efficiency, resource extraction, and political stability.

Moreover, Welsh's limited understanding of local languages and cultural practices may have affected the accuracy of his observations. His reliance on informants and intermediaries further complicates the reliability of the report.

Scholars like H.K. Barpujari caution against taking such colonial accounts at face value. Instead, they advocate a critical reading that considers both the strengths and limitations of these sources.

- **Historiographical Significance**

Despite its limitations, Welsh's report remains an important source for the study of Assam's history. It provides a snapshot of the Ahom state during a period of transition and offers valuable data on its administration, economy, and society.

The report has been used extensively by historians, including S.K. Bhuyan, to reconstruct aspects of Ahom governance. However, its interpretation requires careful contextualisation within the broader framework of colonial knowledge production.

In recent years, scholars have emphasised the need to integrate indigenous sources and perspectives to balance colonial narratives. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of Assam's past, highlighting the agency of local actors and the complexity of pre-colonial institutions.

Conclusion:

Captain Thomas Welsh's 1794 report is a significant colonial document that offers detailed insights into the political, administrative, and economic structures of the Ahom kingdom. While it serves as a valuable primary source, its interpretation must be approached critically, considering the imperial context in which it was produced. The report reflects the priorities of the East India Company, particularly its interest in governance and resource extraction. By engaging with modern historiography, this paper highlights both the contributions and limitations of Welsh's account. Ultimately, a balanced

understanding of Assam's history requires the integration of colonial records with indigenous sources, ensuring a more comprehensive and nuanced reconstruction of the past.

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