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# Vernacular Historiography and North-East Literature: A Critical Reading of the *Kachari Buranji*

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## Abstract

This paper proposes to undertake an analysis of the *Kachari Buranji* (1936), a chronicle, collated from old Assamese manuscripts, documenting the Ahom–Kachari relations from the end of the fourteenth to the beginning of the eighteenth century. This *buranji* comes under the sub-genre called *kataki buranjis* (the others being *Jayantia Buranji* and *Tripura Buranji*), which have dealt with the political and other correspondences between the Ahoms and the adjoining kingdoms. Throughout the period of medieval history of Assam, the Ahom–Kachari relations went through the complex and alternating phases of friendship and animosity, which affected the territorial as well as demographic dynamics of precolonial “north-eastern” geography. Since the *buranji* was compiled in the early twentieth century by putting together relevant materials from a number of *Assam Buranjis*, the collated information throws light on the strategic importance of the Kacharis, both as a community and as a political entity, to the Ahom rulers and their expansionist ambitions. This study also endeavours to examine the *Kachari Buranji* as a vernacular historiographical enterprise undertaken by the Department of Historical & Antiquarian Studies, Government of Assam, during the 1930s, to compile a *buranji* specifically dedicated to a historically and culturally significant community of Assam.

**Keywords:** Assamese *buranji* literature, *Kachari Buranji*, Ahom, Kachari, vernacular historiography

## Introduction

The medieval period in the history of Assam, from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century, involved frequent and often drastic reconfigurations within the political geography of the region. From the thirteenth century onwards, Assam was ruled by the Ahoms who belonged to the Shan tribe of Upper Burma and came to Assam in 1228 and established an empire in the style of a “monarchical oligarchy” which ruled the state for about 600 years, and, subsequently, gave their name to the region. Around the same time, a new kingdom known as Kamata came into being with its capital at Kamatapur, at a distance of some eighteen miles from present-day Cooch Behar. While the Ahoms ruled over what is now the central and eastern parts of Assam, the western part of the state as well as certain areas on the northern part of present-day West Bengal comprised the Kamatapura kingdom. In this regard, noted colonial administrator and historian, Edward Gait (1906) notes:

[T]he western part of the Brahmaputra valley, ... in former times, ... was included in the ancient kingdom of Kamarupa, whose western boundary was the Karatoya. At the period with which we are now dealing [thirteenth to fifteenth centuries], the whole tract up to the

Karatoya seems still, as a rule, to have formed a single kingdom, but the name had been changed from Kamarupa to Kamata. (pp. 40–41)

However, apart from these two dominant political formations of medieval Assam, there were other significant “peripheral” social–political communities which exercised considerable impact upon the transformations brought about in the political geography in Assam during the medieval period.

The royal chronicles of the Ahom dynasty, called the *buranjis*, have been the major source of information on the changing social–political and cultural dynamics of medieval Assam, not only with respect to the dynasty in particular but also with regard to its encounter, since its inception, with the local communities, namely, the Chutiyas and the Kacharis. Both these communities belong to the Tibeto-Burman family of languages and were historically concentrated in and around Sadiya in the thirteenth century (Buragohain, 2016, p. 61; Bhattacharjee, 2016, p. 391; Shin, 2020, p. 51). It is possible that the Kacharis consolidated their identity as a community first at Sadiya, a place located in the easternmost part of Assam, the very place which is also associated with the rise of the Chutiya kingdom. The association of Sadiya with the Kacharis is also attested by the location of the shrine of the goddess *Kechai Khaiti* (also known as *Dikkaravasini* or *Tamreswari*), who is the tutelary deity of both the Kacharis and the Chutiyas. The origins of the Kacharis, as a community, could also be traced to Dimapur where they ruled from circa AD 1150 to 1536, before being overcome by the Ahoms (Bhattacharjee, 2016, p. 393–394; Guha, 2019, p. 51;). Within a few years’ time, the Kachari kingdom was re-founded with its capital at Maibong, and, despite a few years of servitude under the Koch kingdom, it soon recovered its position of strength and independence. The capital of the Kachari kingdom was shifted from Maibong to Khaspur in 1750 following its merger with the Khaspur state (Bhattacharjee, 2016, p. 397; Guha, 2019, p. 76). The Kachari kingdom was finally annexed by the British in 1832, thereby putting an end to its royal history which spanned close to 700 years, though often punctuated by periods of vassalage under the dominant Ahom and Koch kingdoms.

### **Objectives of Analysis**

On the basis of this historical background, the present essay attempts to analyse the *Kachari Buranji*, a chronicle, collated from old Assamese manuscripts, both as a window to the complex political and cultural encounters between the Kachari kingdom on the one hand, and the dominant Ahom and Koch kingdoms on the other, and as a text-in-itself collated and created amidst the nationalistic fervour of the early twentieth century under the institutional enterprise of the Department of Historical & Antiquarian Studies, Government of Assam. The *buranjis* epitomise the pivotal role played by the Ahom kingdom during the precolonial period of Assam’s history, and thereby provide a major source of historical documentation signifying the region’s unique identity and position of strength vis-à-vis the pan-Indian political formations like the Mughal kingdom, on the one hand, and the “border kingdoms” of the Kachari, Jayantia, and Tripura on the other hand. These chronicles were refashioned in the early twentieth century as part of concerted efforts directed towards the framing of a cohesive Assamese nationality by bringing together the major ethnic communities of the region within the larger conception of Indian

nationhood. Apart from briefly exploring these twin processes of regional and pan-Indian identity-formation, this essay will also cite and analyse specific responses emanating from the modern Kachari intelligentsia to counter the hegemonising impulses embedded within the nationality-formation process.

### **The “Vernacular” in Historiography: Setting the Framework for Analysis**

With reference to the pertinence of the “vernacular” within the study of “historiography,” Matthew Fisher (2019) notes that the “[v]ernacular texts play with the anticipated accessibility and familiarity implied by the choice of language. Additionally, the seeming intimacy of the vernaculars can make visible the strangeness of political, cultural, and ecclesiastical politics” (p. 340). Writing about “historiography,” Fisher, in the same chapter, states that, “like confession, [it] is a peculiarly mediated genre of an accessible experience: everyone lives in and through history. The scope of writing about this fundamental commonality extends from the familiar immediacy of the recent and the local, to the strangeness of distant lands and distant pasts” (2019, p. 344). The *Kachari Buranji* tells a story that has its origin, we shall see, in the mythical past thereby underscoring the “locatedness/rootedness” of the community within the spatial-temporal context of Assam-Kamarupa and its “unbroken” continuation through the annals of recorded history to a moment of relative “familiar immediacy” in the eighteenth century. Partha Chatterjee (2008) draws attention towards the position of vernacular histories as “vehicles for a range of critiques of modern academic history” (p. 21). He further remarks that, “[b]y indulging in the fabulous and the enchanted, they mock the scientific rationality that is the ideology of the academic historian” (Chatterjee, 2008, p. 21). However, as we shall see, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, in the capacity of an academic and official historian, did manage to combine the “rational” and “fictional” within the critical–interpretive apparatus he developed for the study of *buranjis* in early twentieth-century Assam. As a *kataki buranji*, the *Kachari Buranji*, along with *Jayantia Buranji* and *Tripura Buranji*, signifies a significant endeavour on the part of Bhuyan, as the editor-historian, to be mindful regarding the “interactive” and “dialectical” nature of its engagement with the connected histories of the Ahom and Kachari kingdoms during the precolonial period, and also the possible implications of such an engagement for the ethnic communities in their respective struggles for identity and self-determination in the twentieth century.

### **Analysis of the Text**

The *Kachari Buranji* (1936) bears a sub-title that goes as follows: “A Chronicle of the Kachari Rajas from the earliest times to the Eighteenth Century A.D. with Special Reference to Assam–Cachar Political Relations.” At the outset, it needs to be clarified that this is not a chronicle with a singular and consolidated identity, but a putting together of information gleaned from “original sources” comprising eight *Assam Buranjis*, belonging to the medieval period, under the editorship of Suryya Kumar Bhuyan. In this connection, J.N. Phukan (1981) makes note of the two types of Assamese *buranjis*: (i) original Assamese *buranjis*, and (ii) translated or compiled Assamese *buranjis* (p. 41). The *buranji* under discussion in the present study falls under the second category. Moreover, while suspecting that the title of the said *buranji* could have been coined by the editor

himself, Bhattacharjee (1986) goes a step further to question its very dependability as a historical source (pp. 37–39). While recognising and appreciating the concern and misgivings of Bhattacharjee vis-à-vis the position of the *Kachari Buranji* within the historical scholarship of Assam, it is well worth noting his own admission that the “original sources” are no longer available for further scrutiny and verification in this regard (Bhattacharjee, 1986, p. 38). In the preface to the fifth bulletin of the Department of Historical & Antiquarian Studies, published in December 1951, it is mentioned that “[t]he three chronicles *Kachari Buranji*, *Jayantia Buranji*, and *Tripura Buranji* are practically the only extant contemporary accounts of these three border kingdoms” (Bhuyan, 1951, p. 2). Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, the editor/compiler of the *Kachari Buranji*, does note in the preface to the first edition that, “[t]he main bulk of the present publication has been reproduced from an old Assamese manuscript chronicle recovered from the family of the late Srijut Hemchandra Goswami” (Bhuyan, 2010, p. g). However, the editor also mentions the fact that the said manuscript is an incomplete one, and, therefore, the lost/omitted/missing portions have been recovered from other chronicles on Ahom–Kachari relations collected from the Ahom Juvak Sanmilani, the American Baptist Mission Office at Guwahati, the India Office Library of London, and also from personal collections (Bhuyan, 2010, p. g). Considering the position of the Ahom/Assam chronicles as a major and trustworthy source of information regarding the Kachari community (Shin, 2020, p. 62) and the relative paucity of other written accounts regarding its history (Saikia, 2019), the importance of the *Kachari Buranji* as a precolonial written source documenting an important phase in the political and cultural evolution of the community, cannot be denied or underestimated.

Recognising the twin historical locations of the Kacharis, the first two chapters of the *buranji* are respectively entitled “Sadiyal Kachari’r Adikatha” (Origin-myth of the Sadiya Kacharis) and “Herambiyal Kachari’r Adikatha” (Origin-myth of the Heramba Kacharis). The Sadiya Kacharis have a brief history, for the reason that they were soon expelled from the place. As conjectured by Bhattacharjee (2016), they possibly came into conflict with Arimatta and his son, Jongal Balahu, and with also the Bhuyan chiefs, who combined forces to oust them from Sadiya (p. 393). On the other hand, the Heramba Kacharis came to be so called because of their settlement in Dimapur and on the North Cachar Hills. They also came to be known as the Dimasa Kacharis, where the word “Dimasa” meant “sons of the great river.” There are differing opinions as to the provenance of the word “Kachari”, though a possible meaning could be a reference to an inhabitant from “the deep bank of a river or a tract of land between a river and a hill” (Bhattacharjee, 2016, p. 392). Chapter 1 of the *buranji* makes reference to the settlement of twelve Kachari families in and around the Sadiya hills, without however mentioning their place of origin (*Kachari Buranji*, 2010, p. 1). On the other hand, the Heramba Kacharis are shown to have descended from the mythical figure of Ghatotkach, son of Bhima and demoness Hirimba/Heramba (*Kachari Buranji*, 2010, p. 3), and, hence, the Kachari kings came to be referred to as “Herambeswar.” With respect to tracing the founder of a royal line of kings to a mythical persona, Chattopadhyaya (2019) provides an interesting observation that:

The emergence of a royal lineage is usually marked by distancing it from the region and community over which it comes to rule by locating the ancestral origins geographically away from it in some purer land, ..., and by associating the lineage with an exalted origin: either the solar or the lunar lineage, or a divinity, or a holy person. (pp. 125–126)

Within the local lore, the *buranji* recounts the stories of two kings, both of whom are variously regarded as the first king of the Heramba Kacharis, namely, Sasempha and Birahas. In the second story, it is narrated that, within the kingdom of Birahas, there lived a Kachari Deodhani (a woman possessed or endowed with the power of divination) with whom Shiva or Mahadeva had an amorous relationship in the guise of her husband, as a result of which, a son was born to her (*Kachari Buranji*, 2010, p. 7–8). The child was brought up by Birahas who named him Bicharpati and subsequently installed him on his throne (*Kachari Buranji*, 2010, p. 9). The identification with Shiva as the progenitor of a royal lineage could also be found in the genealogical treatise of the Koch kings, the *Darrang Rajvamshavali*, where it is recorded that Vishu or Vishwasingha, the founder-king of the Koch kingdom, was born out of a union between Shiva, who had assumed the form of Haria Mandala (a Mech/Koch), and Heera (wife of the real Mandala).<sup>i</sup> Therefore, in the Kachari and the Koch contexts alike, the identification with Shiva, while attesting to the affiliation of the god with the communities outside the caste-Hindu paradigm, also serves to provide them a divinely ordained sanction towards kingship. In a similar vein, the Ahom kings traced their origins to Indra, the king of the *devās* in heaven, and the Chutiya kings to Kubera, the lord of treasure (Shin, 2020, p. 59–60).<sup>ii</sup>

The Kachari king Bicharpati was followed by Bikramaditya-pha (-pha being the customary suffix to the initial line of the Kachari kings), Mahamani-pha, Mani-pha, Larh-pha, Khora-pha, and Dersong-pha. The third chapter of the *Kachari Buranji* moves into the recorded historical time, and describes the initial encounters between the Ahom and the Kachari kings between AD 1493–1603, during which Supimpha, the Ahom king, first conquered Namchang and Mahang, which were Kachari territories under Khora-pha (*Kachari Buranji*, 2010, p. 11). Another battle ensued during the reign of Suhungmung Dihingia Raja, when his commander Kancheng Barpatra Gohain engaged with the Kachari and Chutiya kingdoms, and extended the boundary of the Ahom kingdom till the Dikhow river (*Kachari Buranji*, 2010, p. 11). Dersong-pha made an attempt to conciliate the Ahom king; however, the mission failed and the hostilities continued between the warring kingdoms. With Phrasengmung Bargohain as the commander of the Ahom army and Dersong-pha himself leading the Kachari side, a protracted battle was waged between them leading finally to the defeat and death of the Kachari king (*Kachari Buranji*, 2010, p. 15). The subdued Kacharis requested the victorious Ahom king to install Madan Konwar, the boy-prince, as the next king of the dependent Kachari kingdom. In response to this entreaty, the Ahom king appointed Madan Konwar as the “thapita-sanchita” (established and preserved) king of the Kachari kingdom, with the new name Nirbhayanarayan, and under the obligation to pay annual tributes to the former (*Kachari Buranji*, 2010, pp. 19–20).

It must be remembered that the *Kachari Buranji* is part of the sub-genre called *kataki buranji*s (the others being *Jayantia Buranji* and *Tripura Buranji*), which have dealt with the political and other relations and correspondences between the Ahoms and the adjoining kingdoms. At times, the scramble for power and territory between the Ahoms on the one hand and either one of the remaining local powers on the other hand also ended up involving a third power. Added to that, the frequent incursions of the Mughal army from the west, particularly during the seventeenth century, added another participant in the bloody theatre of events unfolding along the Brahmaputra valley. During the initial years of the seventeenth century, the Kachari king Jasanarayan invaded the Jayantia kingdom, and forced the defeated king Dhan Manik to pay

tribute and also part with his nephew Jasa Manik as hostage to the former. After the death of Dhan Manik, the Kachari king delegated the young Jasa Manik as the king of Jayantapura. As noted by Kalita (2021), the Kacharis had become a “powerful nation in the seventeenth century by conquering a greater part of the Nowgong district and the North Kachar Hills and [extending] their reign into the plains of Kachar” (p. 27). Unable to assert his independence from the Kachari stranglehold, Jasa Manik of Jayantapura conceived an ingenious plan to thwart the expansionist ambitions of the Kachari king. He sent messengers to the court of Pratap Singha, the then Ahom king, proposing to form a strategic alliance with his kingdom by offering his daughter in marriage to him. However, he laid one condition that the Jayantia princess would travel through the Kachari kingdom en route to the Ahom kingdom (*Kachari Buranji*, 2010, p. 22). Naturally, such an arrangement did not please the Kachari king, who refused to facilitate the journey of the Jayantia princess across his kingdom, thereby embittering his relationship with the Ahom king. This led again to a series of battles between the Ahoms and Kacharis after a sustained period of peace and mutual settlement.

The Ahom army, led by Sundar Gohain, made deep incursions into the Kachari territory and conquered several villages up to Demera located in the upper Kopili valley. The Kachari king Jasanarayan made efforts to strike a peace deal with the Ahoms. However, the resistance on the part of the Kacharis continued under the command of a valiant leader called Bhimbal Konwar, and it was by means of a pre-planned night attack that Sundar Gohain is killed thereby signalling the victory of the Kacharis over the Ahoms (*Kachari Buranji*, 2010, pp. 24–25). This event was a significant milestone in the history of the Kachari kingdom — Jasanarayan celebrated this victory by adopting the name Pratapnarayan and renaming his capital Maibang as Kirtipur. He also stopped paying tribute to the Ahom king and fashioned himself as an independent king. This is corroborated by J.B. Bhattacharjee (1986) when he notes that, “a portion of the Barak Valley had [also] passed under the rulers of Maibong during the reign of Pratapnarayan (1583–1613) who claimed himself as *Srihattavijayina* in one of his coins” (p. 35). There follows a period of about 80 years till about the end of the seventeenth century when both the Ahom and Kachari kingdoms make attempts to reconcile and make peace with each other. Also, the fact that, during this period, there were frequent incursions of the Mughal army into the Ahom territory necessitated the maintenance of cordial relations, especially on the part of the Ahoms, with the neighbouring kingdoms.

A crucial phase in Ahom–Kachari relations ensued during the reign of the Ahom king, Rudra Singha (1696–1714), when he decided once and for all to subjugate the Kacharis in order to immortalise his military prowess and legacy. He commanded his generals with the said prospect through these words, as noted in the tenth chapter of the *Kachari Buranji*:

Kachari rajkhani mari joxosya lobo khujo, tohote ki bola? (I wish to earn eternal renown by conquering the Kachari kingdom; what do you all say? [my translation]) (p. 68)

It can possibly be argued that, by this time, the Kachari kingdom had acquired much power and relevance vis-a-vis the geo-political dynamics of the larger precolonial “north-eastern” region. This is attested by the fact that the “Cachar expedition”, as it came to be known, of Rudra Singha finds mention not only in the *Kachari Buranji*, but also in the *Jayantia Buranji* (2012, p. 80) and the *Tungkhungia Buranji* (1990, p. 35). As Surya Kumar Bhuyan (2010) notes in the Introduction to

the *Kachari Buranji*; "In 1706 Rudra Singha ... despatched two divisions to Cachar, one under Kamal Lochan Dihingia Barbarua through the Dhansiri route, and another under the Paniphukan, grandson of the general Phul Barua of Saraighat fame, through the Kapili route. The Barbarua's forces captured one fort after another, and succeeded in ultimately occupying Maibong the Kachari capital" (p. xii). Tamradhawaj, the Kachari king, fled from the capital and took refuge at Khaspur. The rampaging Ahom army charged towards Khaspur in hot pursuit of the absconding king and camped at a place called Shyampani on the way, and sent a warning message to Tamradhawaj thereby exhorting him to honour the principle of "thapita-sanchita," as his forefathers had done under the orders of the Ahom king (*Kachari Buranji*, 2010, pp. 80–81). However, the Ahom army had to retreat following the outbreak of a severe epidemic within the camp. In the meantime, the Jayantia king hatched a treacherous plan, under the guise of friendship, to imprison the fugitive Kachari king and succeeded in capturing the latter along with his wife. The Kachari queen, though in captivity, still managed to convey the news of their imprisonment to the Ahom king. Hearing this, Rudra Singha launched another expedition under the command of Surath Singha Barbarua, this time against the Jayantia king. The commander devised a stratagem of enticing the Jayantia king to visit the Ahom camp under the pretext of marriage with an Ahom princess, and, in the process, captured him along with the Kachari king. Both the kings were presented before the Ahom king, and made to take the oath of allegiance to him (*Kachari Buranji*, 2010, pp. 86–87). With respect to the Cachar expedition of Rudra Singha and his subsequent foray into the Jayantia kingdom, Bhuyan notices a wider plan on the Ahom king's part to extend his domination into the Mughal territories towards the west (*Kachari Buranji*, 2010, p. xv). However, as fate would have it, he passed away in July 1714 before he could actually launch the expedition in person.

The death of Rudra Singha also marks the end of *Kachari Buranji* proper; the subsequent portion of the edited text presents snippets from other *buranjis* collected from various sources. Interestingly, a significant part of the *Kachari Buranji* has as its source certain "retranslated" extracts from Dr. J.P. Wade's *An Account of Assam*. Furthermore, the episode concerning the capture of the Ram Singha Jayantia Raja and Tamradhawaj Kachari Raja by Rudra Singha was also recorded in a note compiled by Col. Adam White in 1834, and the same has been appended to the *Kachari Buranji* (2010, pp. 144–149). A significant number of sources, both precolonial and colonial, have been utilised in the "making" of the *Kachari Buranji* and its publication under the auspices of the Department of Historical & Antiquarian Studies, Assam, in 1936. In addition to it, two *buranjis*, namely, the *Jayantia Buranji* and the *Tripura Buranji* were published respectively in 1937 and 1938. It may, however, be noted that like *Kachari Buranji*, the *Jayantia Buranji* also has been compiled with reference to materials gleaned from various chronicles belonging to the Ahom period. Only the *Tripura Buranji* had existed in the form of a singular manuscript—preserved in the British Museum—bearing the title *Tripura Desor Kathar Lekha* and chronicling "the friendly missions sent by Maharaja Rudra Singha to Ratna Manikya, Raja of Tripura" (*Tripura Buranji*, 1990, p. III). Therefore, the special efforts invested in the compilation of the other two *buranjis* point towards an engagement with the mutually conflicting processes of Assamese nationality formation, on the one hand, and the articulation of indigenous ethnic identities in Assam, on the other hand, during the 1930s.



### **Publishing *Kachari Buranji* in the Twentieth Century: An Institutional and Identitarian Enterprise towards Reimagining and Reconstructing Precolonial History**

By the 1920s, a number of associations emerged in order to articulate the voices and aspirations of the Bodo-Kachari community, notable among them being the Bodo Chatra Sanmilan (Bodo Students' Association), Kachari Chatra Sanmilan (Kachari Students' Association), and Bodo Maha Sanmilan (Greater Bodo Association) (Sharma, 2012, p. 212). These associations aimed to carve a distinct identity for the community, and a crucial component of this process was the reclamation of their past glory, as evidenced by the assertion of Rupnath Brahma, an influential Bodo politician of the time, that the ancestors of the Kachari community were "the most influential people in the whole of the Brahmaputra valley" and, throughout history, the community "never allowed their tribal peculiarities to be merged into the Hindu society" ("Note by Rupnath Brahma," *Census of India*, 1921, vol. 3, Assam, part I; quoted in Sharma, 2012, pp. 211–212). At the same time, however, there were also attempts to reintegrate these communities into the larger fabric of the Assamese society, particularly under the auspices of the then newly instituted pan-Assam associations like the Asom Sahitya Sabha. Around 1930, in an article entitled "Kachari Bhratrixakal aru Cachar Zila" (Kachari Brethren and the Cachar District), published in the Assamese periodical *Awahon*, the writer Hiteswar Borborua recounts the pre-Ahom history of the Kachari community, its mythical–historical origins and subsequent interface with the Koch community, and, more importantly, the twentieth-century manifestation of its racial and cultural identity vis-à-vis the caste-based dynamics of the ongoing larger Assamese nationality-formation process. He exhorts the Kachari brethren to adopt the behavioural codes and practices of the Hindu religion and thereby rectify the so-called corrupt ways that have crept into their social–cultural life (Borborua, 1930–31, p. 1345).<sup>iii</sup> These assertions on the part of Borborua echo the predominant sentiment of the contemporary Assamese intelligentsia with regards to social–cultural fashioning of a modern Assamese identity. As Kar (2008) notes:

From the end of the 1930s, a campaign for 'Greater Assam' (*bahal asam*) ... began to gain force in the middle-class circuit of the Brahmaputra Valley" (p. 71). In the seventeenth convention of the Asom Sahitya Sabha held at Guwahati in 1937, Krishna Kanta Handiqui stated that, "[i]t should be considered a major responsibility of Assam Sahitya Sabha to preach the Assamese language among [the] tribes. (Quoted in Kar, 2008, p. 71)

Considering these statements from either side, it could be argued that the process of compiling and publishing the three *kataki buranjis* in the twentieth century was a means to grapple with the question of defining and consolidating the Assamese nationality by reemphasising the centrality of the Ahom kingdom in the precolonial period vis-à-vis the "border kingdoms" like that of the Kachari, Jayantia, and Tripura. However, in response to the larger process of political–cultural appropriation, Jadunath Khakhlari sought to infuse pride in the usage of the word "Kachari" to define the community, and, went to the extent of claiming in his book *Kacharir Kotha*, published in 1927, that, "the Kachari language [was the one] from whose roots sprang the present Asomiya language, whose king was the first patron of the religion and its books" (quoted in Sharma, 2012, p. 213), referring most likely to the patronage extended by the Kachari king Mahamanikya to Madhav Kandali for the composition of the *Saptakanda Ramayana* (Ramayana in Seven Cantos) during the first half of the fourteenth century. The possible reference to the Kandali Ramayana is

crucial vis-à-vis its significance as one of the earliest poetic works in the Assamese language, and, also for the fact that the text addressed an interface between maintaining the “propriety” of a pan-Indian Sanskrit epic and localising the same in the vernacular for the benefit of the “uninitiated” masses.<sup>iv</sup> The active interest shown by the Kachari royal lineage in the promotion of Assamese language and literature is also emphasised by Suryya Kumar Bhuyan in his introduction to the *Kachari Buranji*.<sup>v</sup> It may be noted in this regard that various dynasties like the Kachari, the Kamata, the Koch, and, for that matter, also the Ahoms, which had traditionally existed outside the “*varna/jati*” order and which ruled over different parts of Assam-Kamarupa since the fourteenth century, actively contributed to the development of Assamese as a well-developed literary language by the sixteenth century. The patronage accorded to poets like Hem Saraswati, Harivara Vipra, Kaviratna Saraswati, and Rudra Kandali by king Durlabhnarayana of Kamata and his immediate successors around the fourteenth–fifteenth centuries clearly imply the development of a “scripto-centric culture” (term borrowed from Professor T.S. Satyanath) within the Assamese language at that time. The increasing use of Assamese as a literary as well as an administrative language is also associated with the gradual adoption of Hinduism (or rather one of its sectarian orders) by the royal households of the Ahoms and the Kacharis. As noted by Jose Kuruvachira SDB (2013), “[t]he more recent of the *buranjis* are written in Assamese which was gradually adopted by the Ahoms after their conversion to Hinduism.” With Jayadhvaj Singha (1648–1665) becoming the first Ahom king to formally adopt Hinduism, the “hinduisation” of the Ahoms became a significant factor in the increasingly mediatory role played by the kings in the monastic–missionary enterprise of neo-Vaishnavism known as the Sattrā institution. On the other hand, in 1642 *saka* (AD 1720), Suradarpa, the Kachari king and son of Tamradhawaj, commissioned Bhubaneswar Bachaspati to undertake the translation of *Shri Naradiya Kathamrita* in the vernacular *payara* metre (Bhattacharjee, 1986, p. 36; Guha, 2019, p. 67).

Therefore, the compilation of the *kataki buranjis*, apart from emphasising the centrality of the Ahom kingdom during the medieval period, also enabled the reimagining of Kachari, Jayantia, or Tripuri community-histories within the emergent ideas of regional and pan-Indian identities in the early twentieth century. The presentation of these histories, according to Bhuyan (2010), went beyond mere chronicling of political events and presented, according to him:

[A] drama of human passions, of accomplished hopes and frustrated ambitions, of triumphs and failures, of defiance and humility ... couched in [a] language racy, appropriate, unsophisticated and dignified, in perfect harmony between the spirit of the age and the character of the events described. (p. ii)

A representative format of this nature was part of the native-vernacular historiographical model developed by historians like Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, which attempted to “reconstruct the Assamese past by fusing the Western spirit of rationalism with pre-colonial Assamese resources of history” (Purkayastha, 2008, p. 182). While stressing upon the importance of a rationalist-positivist methodology of history-writing, he was equally mindful of at times retaining the fictional narratives which formed part of a community’s oral-literate and performative history. And this explains his espousal of the *Kachari Buranji* as not only documenting the Ahom–Kachari political relations from the end of the fourteenth to the beginning of the eighteenth century, but also reflecting upon the individual heroic characters or the collective social consciousness of the communities in question within the text. In his introduction to the text, Bhuyan (2010) claims that,

"[t]here arose in Cachar a great leader in the person of prince Bhimbal Konwar" (p. x). The heroism and valour of the Kachari prince Bhimbal Konwar in his guerrilla warfare tactics against Sundar Gohain's Ahom army was a major instance in history of the kingdom's military success against its more powerful neighbour.

### Conclusion and Implications for Further Study

The study of a text like the *Kachari Buranji* is significant from the fact that it often provides alternative perspectives on events and personages usually seen and analysed from the point of view of the centrist/dominant narratives. Even though gleaned from the Ahom chronicles and colonial documents, the structure of text is so contrived to enable a continuous political history of the Kachari community, encompassing the mythical–legendary, documented, and geographical accounts of its existence from the beginning till the eighteenth century. Together with the two other *kataki buranjis*, it also facilitates and enhances our knowledge on politics, society, and the culture of north-east India in the precolonial period, and, more importantly, before the region actually became the "north-east" of India and, by extension, a frontier region of the larger colonial, and later postcolonial Indian state machinery. The story of the Kachari community, as we have seen, had begun from their settlement upon the Sadiya hills, which subsequently became the easternmost frontier outpost of the British kingdom. However, in the precolonial period, apart from being the homeland of the Sadiyal Kacharis, Sadiya was also the political seat of the Chutiya kingdom till the year 1523, when it was overrun by the invading Ahom army under Suhungmung (1497–1539). As community identities get crystallised over a period of time, thereby emphasising more and more upon the differential aspects of one community-identity in the relation to the other, it is crucial to recognise the double-edged nature of essentially precolonial texts like the *Kachari Buranji* which engages, on the one hand, with the objective of consolidating the history of an ethnic community based on extant information regarding its racial origins and demographic patterns, and, on the other hand, also draws attention towards the contingent nature of this very engagement with community-identity formation.

The genre of *kataki buranjis* as such had acquired considerable importance during the 1930s and 1940s, and efforts were in full swing to bring to light more of such texts and preserve them for posterity. In the preface to the first edition of the *Kachari Buranji*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan records the existence of one *Bardhamanor Buranji*, which chronicled the testimonials of the messengers sent by the Ahom king Rudra Singha to the Burdwan court. The manuscript was in possession of Hemchandra Goswami, and, unfortunately, got misplaced when it was sent for exhibition to a literary conference. Despite the loss, Bhuyan remained hopeful, as evident from his futuristic vision in this regard, which incidentally also emphasises upon the significance of the *kataki buranjis* vis-à-vis the history of precolonial Assam and the larger "north-east" of India. He writes:

With the progress of investigation more *Kataki Buranjis* will, we are sure, be discovered in Assam; and we shall not be surprised if *Kataki Buranjis* dealing with Amber in Rujputana, Delhi, Bihar, Nadiya, Barnagar, Rungpoor, Pangia, Morung and Bana-vishnupur, which were visited by King Rudra Singha's agents and emissaries, be discovered in the near future

proving to the world that the interests of the Assamese of yore transcended the limits of their own territories. (Bhuyan, 2010, p. i)

Writing in the year 1936 during the heydays of the freedom movement and also negotiating with the twin coordinates of regional and national identities, Bhuyan's attitude towards the past exhibits a progressive orientation towards locating/positioning the Ahom kingdom (and by extension, Assam) as an active polity participating in political, diplomatic and cultural exchange within the wider network of precolonial Indian kingdoms and principalities. However, the mission of discovering and publishing more *kataki buranjis*, as envisioned by him, could not make any further progress, and the publication record of the Department of Historical & Antiquarian Studies, as collected from their website (<https://dhas.assam.gov.in/portlets/publication-0>), mentions only the three *kataki buranjis* which have been discovered so far, along with other *buranjis* published by the department, including those in Assamese and in English translation. The *Kachari Buranji* has gone through four editions (1936, 1951, 1984, and 2010); the *Jayantia Buranji* through four (1937, 1964, and 2012), and *Tripura Buranji* through three (1938, 1962, and 1990).

While carrying on the study of these *buranjis* through the methodology of comparative historiography, it is also necessary to relaunch the search for more *kataki buranjis* and related narratives, if at all they were composed as imagined by Bhuyan, and thereby critically examine the dynamics of vernacular historical documentation as a process involving a series of sustained activities undertaken during the precolonial and early colonial periods of Assamese and Indian history. The importance and relevance of the *kataki buranjis* (or rather the *buranjis* in general) even at the present time could be realised from the fact that as recently as February 2022, the English translations of *Kachari Buranji*, *Jayantia Buranji*, *Deodhai Asam Buranji*, and Harakanta Barua Sadar Amin's *Assam Buranji* were published under the auspices of Dr. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan Memorial Trust based in Guwahati, Assam. A renewed focus on the critical study of the *buranjis* and their place within vernacular historiography in Assam is, as all would agree, the need of the hour, and the translations of the aforementioned works could possibly be the right step in that direction.

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<sup>i</sup> Sadashive bole moyee tora rup dhori/...

Chala kori tora bharjya korilo romon/... 66

(Sadashiva says, "I assumed your form ... and, with guile, dallied with your wife", *Darrang Rajvamshavali*, 2013, pp. 11–12)

<sup>ii</sup>Interestingly, among the Chutiyas too, there is a prevalent narrative, according to which, Kubera took the form of a Chutiya chief called Birpal and engaged in the sexual act with the chief's wife Rupavati (Shin, 2020, p. 59).

<sup>iii</sup>Borborua (1930–31) was also reacting against the then prevalent tendency on the part of the newly educated Bodo-Kacharis to adopt an increasingly Hinduised identity signified by the use of the surname "Brahma" (p. 1344). As Sharma (2012) also notes, "[b]y 1921 the census reported that many Kacharis had abandoned tribal names and were describing themselves as Bara by caste and language, and Brahma by religion" (p. 211). Kalicharan Brahma was the prime founding force behind the Brahma movement amongst the Kacharis.

<sup>iv</sup>With respect to *Saptakanda Ramayana*, Manjeet Baruah (2012) remarks that, the "[t]wo notable features about Kandali's text are that it was aimed at/for royal clientele, i.e., the 'tribal' monarchy, and that the text has a social base which is 'tribal-peasant' in nature. Both were as much linked to the geographical location of the [Brahmaputra] Valley" (p. 68).

<sup>v</sup>Bhuyan (2010) notes that, "One king of Cachar was the patron of Madhab Kandali, who flourished before the age of Sankar Deva and who translated the Ramayana into Assamese" (p. vii).

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