

# Historical Threads: Persian Sources And The Narrative Of Medieval Assam

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## Abstract

This study examines the intricate historical fabric of medieval Assam and the crucial influence Persian sources had in influencing the history of medieval period. The article centers on how Persian documents offer distinctive perspectives on the political, cultural, and social aspects of Assam in the Middle Ages, as historical strands intertwine throughout history. Through meticulous analysis, this study aims to shed light on lesser-known facets of Assamese history, revealing the nuanced ways in which Persian influence intersected with and enriched indigenous developments in the region. By exploring Persian sources, the study uncovers how Persian literary, administrative, and historical texts offer unique insights that complement and enhance the indigenous records, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of the medieval Assam. By bringing these obscured aspects to light, the research not only enriches our understanding of Assam's past but also highlights the broader implications of cross-cultural exchanges in the shaping of historical narratives.

**Keywords:** Assam, Persian Documents, Medieval Period, Political Dynamics

## 1. Introduction

The emphasis on the importance in the title of this paper underscores the necessity of meticulously examining various Persian sources that provide information about the region during the period under review. This examination requires careful or repeated reading of the available sources and continual re-evaluation of previous assumptions. It is evident that genuine history cannot be conceived without periodizing the historical processes specific to a given region. In this context, the region in question is Assam, and the period is medieval. Both the region and the period need initial explanations for a better understanding of the former's situation and the latter's characteristics. Assam forms part of the vast land of India. However, serious history students often face the challenge of its varying boundaries over different periods. Present-day Assam is a reduced portion of the British Province of Assam, which was finally consolidated in 1874 by merging various territories, now forming all northeastern states except Manipur, Tripura, and Sikkim, as well as the Sylhet division of modern Bangladesh into a single province under British colonial administration. This consolidation process began in the early nineteenth century. Before this, the largest part of the Brahmaputra Valley, which constitutes most of

present Assam, was ruled by a Shan tribe that arrived in Assam in 1228 and governed the valley for six centuries. This ruling tribe gave the British Province its name, Ahom (Assam).

From 1200 A.D. to 1800 A.D., spanning the "High" and "Late Medieval Ages," the vast land later called Assam was divided into various kingdoms: the Ahom kingdom in the north, the Kachari and Tripura kingdoms in the east and south, the Jayantiya kingdom in the western hilly tract extending into a small portion of Sylhet, and a part of the southwest forming part of the Bengal Sultanate in the later period and the Bangla-Subahs of the Mughal empire. The ancient Kamrupa kingdom survived in the plains of the north bank of the Brahmaputra and parts of North Bengal for the first two centuries of the late medieval period, but ultimately succumbed to the rising powers of the Koches, the Mughals, and the Ahoms. With the British assumption of Dewani of Bengal in 1765, they took possession of the Mughal territories in Assam, gradually occupying all the small and large states of the region. The first phase of this colonial expansion was completed in 1838 when the British administration was established over the decaying Ahom kingdom by deposing its last king. This entire region was placed under the Dhaka division of the Bengal administration. However, in 1874, the region, including Sylhet (now the Sylhet division of Bangladesh and Karimganj district of Assam, India), was separated from Bengal and formed into a province under a Chief Commissioner, named Assam. Therefore, when referring to Assam in historical contexts related to the medieval or modern periods, the region encompasses present-day Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, and the Sylhet division of Bangladesh, as organized into the British Province of Assam in 1874 [1].

### **1.1 Importance of Persian sources in reconstructing medieval Assam's history.**

The insistence on the importance of Persian sources in reconstructing the history of medieval Assam forms a crucial aspect of studying the significance of sources for understanding the history of a particular region or the world at large. Historical sources are, in essence, monuments of the past, reflecting the conditions and circumstances of their creation. In other words, sources themselves are historical phenomena and warrant independent study. The foundation of the entire discipline of historical sciences is the study of these sources. According to E.H. Carr, not every event holds historical significance; rather, it is the interpretation that bestows significance. Carr argues that interpretation is the lifeblood of history. In his exploration of the question "What is history?" Carr asserts that history is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and their facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past [2]. This ongoing dialogue involves interpreting sources from the past using contemporary knowledge to draw conclusions about historical facts. However, accurate interpretation of sources requires consideration of the vital interests and ideas of their authors. This general principle of source study cannot be overlooked when examining Persian sources related to the history of Assam.

This paper focuses on the late medieval period, from 1200 A.D. to 1800 A.D. During this time, significant developments in historical sources occurred, which were previously unthinkable in the ancient and early medieval periods. Following the decline and fall of the ancient Kamrupa kingdom, several small states emerged

in the region, making it vulnerable to invasions from both the east and the west. The first significant invasion came from the Turks in the early thirteenth century after their conquest of Bengal, followed by a series of invasions by the Turko-Afghans and Mughals. The second major invasion was by the Ahoms from the east in 1228 A.D. Both the Turks and Mughals from the west, and the Ahoms from the east, had a strong historical consciousness, and their authors left behind valuable historical sources. While the practice of writing chronicles and biographies was not entirely absent in ancient and early medieval India, the limited literary remains from those periods, though used as historical sources, do not demonstrate a developed sense of the art of history-writing in their approach and treatment [3].

## 1.2 Objectives

- To Evaluate the Importance of Persian Sources in Reconstructing Medieval Assam's History
- To Apply Historiographical Methods for Critical Analysis
- To Provide a Chronological Analysis of Persian Sources
- To Identify the Contributions and Limitations of Persian Sources

## 2. Persian Sources and their importance

The Turko-Afghan and Mughal monarchs employed chroniclers and court historians who meticulously recorded their activities in systematic and chronological order. Monarchs like Babur and Jahangir even left autobiographies, which are invaluable historical sources. Conversely, the Ahoms made history writing a distinctive practice in Assam, using both the Ahom language (a Thai Sino-Tibetan language brought by the Ahoms) and the Aryan Assamese. The Ahoms referred to history by their own word, "buranji."

The accounts of court historians, chroniclers, travelers, and scholars from the Sultanate and Mughal periods were primarily written in Arabic and Persian, with Arabic works being few and Persian works numerous. Notable Arabic works referencing Assam include Alberuni's "Tarikh-ul-Hind" and Ibn Batuta's "Rehala." Although a few works like "Tuzuki-i-Baburi" were composed in the Turki language, they fall outside the scope of this discussion, which focuses on Persian sources critical for reconstructing the history of medieval Assam.

### 2.1 Major Persian Works Referencing Assam

Following S.K. Bhuyan's approach in Appendix-A of "Annals of the Delhi Badshahate," an attempt is made to chronologically arrange Persian sources frequently referenced in the history of medieval Assam [4]:

1. Shahnama by Ferdousi, one of the most celebrated court poets of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni (reigned 997 A.D. to 1030 A.D.).
2. Tabaqat-i-Nasiri by Minhaj Uddin Abu Umar-i-Usman bin Sirajuddin al Jurzani, also known as Minlaj Us Siraj, a famous historical work written during the reign of Sultan Nasiruddin Mahmud (1246-1266).
3. Akbar Namah by Sheik Abul Fazal Allami, a celebrated historical work providing the main source of knowledge about Akbar and his time, completed in 1602.

4. Ain-i-Akbari, the third volume of "Akbar Namah," prepared simultaneously with the first two volumes and submitted in 1593.
5. Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri, the autobiography of Emperor Jahangir, covering his reign from 1605 to 1617 A.D. Continued up to the seventeenth year by Mutamad Khan due to Jahangir's ill health.
6. Tarikh-i-Ferishta by Mohammad Quaism Hindu Shah, known as Ferishta, completed in 1609 A.D.
7. Bahrstan-i-Gharyabi [5], a history of conflicts involving the Mughals with Assam, Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa during the reigns of Jahangir and Shah Jahan, composed by Mirza Nathan before 1641.
8. Padshahnamah, three different chronicles written by Muhammad Amin Qazwani, Abdul Hamid Lahuri, and Muhammad Waris during the reign of Shah Jahan.
9. Alamgir Namah by Mirza Muhammad Qazim, covering the first eleven years of Aurangzeb's reign from 1658 to 1669, discontinued by the emperor's order.
10. Fateha-i-Ibriya by Ibn Muhammad Wali Ahmad, surnamed Shihab Uddin Talish, documenting Mir Jumla's expedition to Assam in 1662-63.
11. Risalat-us-Shuhada by Pir Muhammad Shattari, based on testimonies from tomb keepers in Katanduar and Jala Maqam in Rangpur, written in 1663.
12. Ma'asir-i-Alamgiri, an official history of Aurangzeb's reign by Muhammad Saqin Mustaid Khan, completed in 1710 A.D.
13. Muntakhab-ul-Lubab or Tarikh-i-Khafi Khan by Muhammad Khan, alias Khafi, covering up to the reign of Muhammad Shah (1733).
14. Hadiqat-us-Safa by Yusuf Ali bin Ghulam Ali Khan, detailing Mir Jumla's invasion of Assam.
15. Maasirat-ul-Umara, containing biographies of Mughal bureaucrats from 1500 A.D. to 1780 by Shah Nawaz Khan.
16. Riyaz-us-Salain by Ghulam Hussayn Salim, compiled in 1787-88.

This is not an exhaustive list. N.N. Acharyya [6] includes Ziauddin Barani's "Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi" as a Persian source for medieval Assam's history. Barani's work covers the Delhi Sultanate from 1259 to 1359 A.D. and offers an aristocratic view of history, becoming a historiographic standard. Barani continued where Minhaj us Siraj left off in "Tabaqat-i-Nasiri," but his passing reference to Kamatapur is neither a continuation of Minhaj nor indispensable for Assam's medieval history.

The local work titled "Suhl-i-Yamin" is a valuable addition to the list of Persian sources on the history of medieval Assam. It documents the historical event of the Turko-Afghan expansion into Sylhet, which may have been part of the ancient Kamrupa kingdom, now considered part of Assam for the purposes of this paper. This work includes the biography of the legendary saint Shah Jalal, who played a pivotal role in establishing Turko-Afghan rule in Sylhet in 1303 A.D. The "Suhl-i-Yamin," composed by Nasirud-din-Haidar in 1860, narrates a legend that was passed down orally for five centuries. Consequently, the possibility of exaggeration

cannot be dismissed. However, the historicity of the events and characters is supported by epigraphy and other literary sources.

### 3. Discussion and Analysis of Persian Sources

It is necessary to take into account the main goal of studying the Persian sources mentioned above before analyzing their significance. To put it simply, the primary goal of source analysis is to establish historical facts, which serve as the basis for historical science. The process by which our evaluations are created also becomes relevant. At the time of his death, Leopold Von Ranke (1795–1870), a German historian from the nineteenth century who was considered the first modern historian, proposed reading sources with rigorous linguistic critique and consideration for contemporaneity as a way to solve this issue. But Irfan Habib challenges Ranke's approach, saying, "Ranke's method would have led to utter aridities and the glorification of meaningless minutiae had even its founder followed it blindly." Therefore, it's critical to use Ranke's technique in conjunction with Habib's caution while examining the sources mentioned above [7]. Consider the Shahnama, which is at the top of the list. An Indian monarch called Sanghal or Shankal from Koch, east of the Karotoya, or Kamrupa, is mentioned in the Shahnama, a magnificent epic written by Ferdousi, the most renowned luminary of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni's court. Because the period, people, and events are unsupported by any other modern sources, this reference to Bahram Gaur's trip is legendary and cannot be regarded as historical information. The Shankal story in the Shahnama is significant solely in that it shows that in the tenth and eleventh centuries A.D., Ghazni was not a terra incognita for the Kamrupa dynasty. The Shankal legend from the Shahnama appears to be repeated in Muhammad Qasim Shah's Tarikh-i-Ferishta. As a source for Assam history, historians frequently refer to the previously mentioned title, "Riyaz-us-Salatin." Compiled in 1787 by Ghulam Hussayn Salim, a Munshi of Mr. George Udny, this Persian source covers the medieval history of Bengal, Bihar, and Assam. Arranged from various Persian materials that are accessible, it is a comparatively contemporary effort. Its factual assertions should not be trusted unless they are supported by reliable records, as it is neither an original nor a modern authority [8].

Of the remaining Persian sources, only one dates to the Turko-Afghan era; the others are Mughal in origin. The source for the Turko-Afghan period is Minhaj Uddin Abu Umar bin Siraj Uddin, also referred to as Minhaj-us-Siraj, whose well-known composition is "Tabaqat-i-Nasiri." This amazing history starts with older prophets and Muhammad's forefathers, which led to the rise of Islam, and concludes with Nasir Uddin Mahmud's rule up to 1260. Although there are several ambiguities and inconsistencies, "Tabaqat-i-Nasiri" is an excellent source for the early history of the Delhi Sultanate and provides comprehensive insights into medieval Kamrupa following the Pala era. The history of medieval Kamrupa after the rule of the Palas is as obscure as disconnected. For about sixty years after the copper plate inscription of Vaidya Deba who issued it in 1142 A.D [9]. Minhaj's portrayals of Assam meticulously adhere to his storytelling style, which frequently includes citations to his sources. "One night, in the year 642 A.D., the author was a guest at the dwelling of Muhammad ud Daulah, a trusted vassal of Muhammad-i-Bakhtyar, in the territory of Lakhnawati," he writes, "where his

host read and recounted the entire account" of Bakhtyar's trip to Tibet [10]. The king and kingdom of Kamrupa are referred to by Minhaj as "Rae" and "Kamrud. [11]" When Bakhtyar's army was returning from the unsuccessful mission to Tibet, it was tragically destroyed by the armies of Rae of Kamrud. Minhaj mentions the king as Barthu or Brithu [16] and recounts three Khalji assaults of Kamrupa: those of Bakhtyar Khilji [13], Ghiyas udin Iwaj-i-Hussain [14], and Malik Ikhtiyar Uddin Yuzbek Tughril Khan [15]. The Kanai Varasi stone inscription of North Guwahati confirms the historicity of Minhaj's first voyage.

Although the internal conditions of the country east of the Karatoya (Bagmati) River are not extensively described in the accounts of these expeditions, the clear historical narrative, the description of the terrain, and the king's power and wealth underscore the unique significance of 'Tabaqat-i-Nasiri.' Although comprehensive information about Kamrupa is sparse, 'Tabaqat-i-Nasiri', the puthis, and Kampupor Buranji can be used to recreate the history of medieval Assam from the collapse of the Palas to the rise of the Ahoms. Because Minhaj provides a chronological narrative with dates, other modern indigenous sources do not provide this information. The "Akbar Namah" and "Ain-i-Akbari," written by Abdul Fazl Allami, a man of literature, poet, essayist, critic, historian, diplomat, and Akbar's prime minister, are the next important Persian texts. The primary source of information regarding Akbar's reign is "Akbar Namah," which was ordered by the emperor but was not officially endorsed by him. It is an accurate and comprehensive account of Akbar's reign. The most well-known source of knowledge regarding Mughal administration is "Ain-i-Akbari," which provides a statistical and descriptive analysis of the Mughal Empire as well as insights into its administrative structure and public policies. It also sheds light on the affairs of nearby states. Abul Fazl brought intellectual components into historiography in "Akbar Namah" and "Ain-i-Akbari." He had a secular stance and demonstrated how struggles between nationalism and regionalism, secularism and fanaticism, and stability and disintegration occurred throughout India's history. Though there isn't much explicit information regarding Assam's internal situation in these works, 'Ain-i-Akbari' observes that the Ahom kingdom in the Brahmaputra valley was growing in strength and territory while the ancient Kamrupa kingdom's strength and territory were declining. According to Persian records, the Brahmaputra valley was known as Assam under the reign of 'Ain-i-Akbari.'

"There is a country named Kuch to the north (of the Subah of Bengal). The leader of the group is in charge of 100,000 foot and 1,000 horses. He rules over Kamrup, also referred to as Kamata. The Rajah of Assam's dominions, whose spectacular pomp and circumstance are widely publicized, border this nation." Additionally, the 'Ain-i-Akbari' offers thorough descriptions of the later Assam kingdoms of Jayantiya and Sylhet [17].

The primary Persian sources for Bengal contemporaneous with the reign of Mughal Emperor Jahangir were 'Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri,' with sporadic allusions also found in 'Padshahnamah' and 'Ma'asiratul Umana,' until Sir Jadunath Sarkar discovered 'Baharistan-i-Ghaybi' in the early 1920s. The political and social climate of Assam at the time is only partially covered by these sources [18]. Nonetheless, the episodes concerning the Dargah of Ghiyasuddin at Hajo are mentioned in "Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri" and "Padshahnamah," which place the event in 1614 [19]. The sole reliable Persian narrative for the years 1608 to 1624 is found in 'Baharistan-i-Ghaybi,'

written by Alaud-Din Isfashani, a contemporary Mughal general also known as Mirza Nathan. Other sources from Jahangir's tenure are incomplete. Its significance is emphasized by S.K. Bhuyan, who writes, "Readers of Assamese chronicles are as familiar with the names Islam Khan and Mirza Nathan, Lakshminarayan and Parikshit, Ababakar and Satrajit as they are with 'Baharistan-i-Ghaybi.'" However, 'Baharistan-i-Ghaybi' completes a lot of gaps, and the Persian chronicler's extra touches help us visualize historical individuals better [20]." This work is important because it describes the strange customs of the Ahoms in addition to telling the story of battles and conflicts [21].

The 'Padshahnamah' of Abdul Hamid Lahuri is one of the three chronicles with the same title written by various authors and mentions Assam. This source adds to the story of "Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri," but it also sheds light on historical occurrences like the expeditions led by Allah Yar Khan in 1639 and Sheikh Muhiuddin in 1630 [22]. It also offers intriguing insights into the nature and customs of the Ahom monarchs, portraying them as compulsive hobbyists—elephant hunting (Khedda) being one of their most well-known activities [23].

'Alamgirnamah,' while adding to 'Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri' and 'Padshahnamah,' alludes to a previous historical event, thereby exposing the way that modern India views Assam. According to the account, in 1332–1333, Mahmud Shah, the son of Tughluq Shah, the monarch of Delhi, led an army of 100,000 horsemen on an expedition against Assam, "but the whole army perished in that land of witchcraft, and not a trace was left [24]."

The Fatiha-i-Ibriya is among the most significant Persian sources on Assam history. It is among the rarest Persian-language historical writings on local issues. It is comparable to the Baharistan-i-Ghayabi in this regard. Tarikh-i-Asham, as the Ahom kingdom was called to the rest of India, is another name for this book written by Shihab Uddin Talish. As mentioned previously, even during the reign of Akbar, the Brahmaputra valley was known by the name Asham. Mir Jamula's expedition to the Ahom kingdom in 1662–1663 is documented in Fateha-i-Ibriya. Shihabuddin Talish traveled with Mir Juma on his expedition, providing him with the chance to see firsthand every facet of the nation's social, economic, political, and physical characteristics. Thus, he addresses even the most minute details regarding Assam's social, political, economic, geographical, and topographical conditions. He also discussed the people's cultural circumstances, including their culinary habits, attire, jobs, and religious convictions. "This contemporaneous account by a foreign observer, albeit a somewhat critical one, is of special interest, as it mentions many matters on which the indigenous records are silent," says Edward Gait, addressing the significance of such a historical work [25]. The "Aftab-i-Almatas" press released the text of this work in Kolkata on May 24, 1849, 1st Rajab 1256 A.H. However, these editions are hard to get. Blochmann published an abstract of this in the JASB in 1872. A synopsis of the work was published in the JASB in 1906–07 by Sir Jadunath Sarkar [26].

Tarikh-i-Khafi Khan and Ma'asir-i-Alamgiri reiterate the Mughals-Ahom relationships mentioned in previous sources. The Mughals' 1679 invasion of Gauhati is mentioned in Ma'asir-i-Alamgiri, but no specifics are provided." A historical incident is mentioned in Risalat-us-Shuhada, published in the JASB 1874 by GH.

Damant. It is said to have occurred in Assam in 1474, during the reign of Rukuddin Barbak Shah in Bengal (1459–74)." Ma'asirul Umara and Haditay-us-Safa can be utilized as additional sources for other Persian narratives.

#### 4. Contributions and Limitations

The Persian sources on medieval Assam offer invaluable insights into the region's history, providing glimpses into its political and social dynamics from the 10th to 13th centuries. Notable works like Ferdausi's , Shahnama and Minhaj Us Siraj's Tabaqut-i-Nasiri highlight interactions and conflicts, though they sometimes blend historical facts with legendary tales. Comprehensive accounts by Abul Fazl in the Akbar Namah and Ain-i-Akbari illuminate Mughal administrative practices and their relations with Assam, while Shihab Uddin Talish's Fateha-i-Ibriya offers detailed firsthand observations during Mir Jumla's expedition, enriching our understanding of Assamese society, politics, and geography.

However, these sources also have limitations. Works such as the Shahnama and Tarikh-i-Ferishta contain legendary elements that need careful evaluation. Sources like Riyaz-us-Salain and Baharistan-i-Ghaybi often require corroboration from other contemporary records to ensure accuracy. The biases of court historians and the retrospective nature of some compositions necessitate a cautious approach in interpreting these sources. Therefore, while these Persian texts are indispensable for reconstructing medieval Assam's history, they must be supplemented with indigenous records and archaeological evidence for a more balanced and comprehensive narrative.

The importance of these sources can be better understood through rigorous source critique. This involves evaluating their social orientation and the reliability of the information they contain. Most Persian sources on Assam were motivated by a genuine urge to document history rather than external pressures, reflecting objectivity. Many authors came from an aristocratic class of nobles and bureaucrats, driven by a vision of expanding paramount power. Situated on the periphery of the Indian subcontinent, Assam's resistance was often misconstrued by these authors as conflicts between paramountcy and regionalism, or between forces of religion, rather than between expansionism and regional solidarity. Despite these biases, the reliability of the Persian sources is affirmed by their origins and the ability to cross-check them with contemporary records, making them valuable for historical analysis.

#### 5. Conclusion

The paper reveals the intricate interplay between local and foreign influences that shaped the historical narrative of Assam. Persian sources provide a valuable external perspective, complementing indigenous records and oral traditions. These sources highlight the cultural and political exchanges between Assam and Persianate societies, underscoring the region's connectivity within broader medieval networks. By examining Persian texts alongside local narratives, historians can gain a more nuanced understanding of Assam's medieval

past, appreciating the diversity and complexity of its historical development. This synthesis of perspectives enriches the historiography of Assam, offering a more comprehensive and interconnected view of its history.

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