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Indrani Chatterjee, *Forgotten Friends: Monks, marriages, and memories of Northeast India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013. XV+451 p. ISBN 978-0-19-808922-3

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Forgotten Friends belongs to the category of books that make a strong impression as soon as you browse through them. The quality of the publication, the enticing title, the refined language, the impressive volume of notes and references, are signs of a promising read.

The first chapter introduces a "monastic geographicity" in which pre-colonial North-East India's social space was structured around networks of monasteries. As explained in Chapters 2 and 3, this setup was undermined by the advent of the East India Company through the suppression of tax exemptions, which had benefited the monasteries, and of daughters and widows' legal rights to land revenue. Chapter 4 discloses a method of "translating" colonial archives by making their "hybridity explicit": the monastic elite was qualified as "feudal" and their followers deemed "savage". Chapter 5 highlights the "politics of fraternity practiced by monastic subjects" after the imposition of territorial segregations linked to the creation of tea plantations. In the excluded areas beyond the Inner Line, as a form of resistance to colonial militarization, women attempted to restore old monastic values through paradoxical conversion to Christianity, a process that consolidated social amnesia about the region's monastic past.

Surely the central thesis can be nothing but appealing: the dominant representation of North-East India's cultural, political and economic history has completely eclipsed the central role of monastic institutions. Up until the twentieth century ‘monastic teachers’ and their disciples were the ‘basic unit of political society’. These masters emanated from several different traditions but were not strictly confined to them; there were constant exchanges between spiritual lineages and their members always had a hybrid identity. The colonial version of Indian modern history, with a view to dismantling hybrid and women-friendly institutions, imposed the idea that Buddhism had disappeared from the subcontinent. In actual fact, North-East India's societies had been structured under the influence of ‘monastic governments’ within a ‘monastic geographicity’ formed by communities of followers based on ‘households where daughters and mothers were stable and brothers, husbands and fathers roved as monks, herdsmen and trader-soldiers’ (p. 157).

Anybody would love to believe such a coherent and innovative story. However, there remains the task of grounding it in solid material. We obviously knew about Chinese pilgrims wandering through the region, e.g. seventh-century Xuanzang—not mentioned in the book, and who reported that no Buddhists were found in Kamrupa (Xuanzang 1857, vol 2, 77). We also knew that a couple of Tibetan figures visited Buddhist sites in Assam in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Huber 2008, 138ff).[1] The author could have put these materials to good use. Nevertheless, we have so far had little information about the influence these travellers exerted in the Brahmaputra Valley; if they stayed there at all and if they converted a substantial number of locals. It is on this particular point that the author has painstakingly focused her attention, but it is precisely here that her undertaking is the least convincing. It seems that instead of leaving the material to speak for itself, her enthusiasm for a potentially critical thesis made her force the material onto the thesis. As illustrated below, she systematically resorts to biased, taken-for-granted wording, giving the reader the feeling that the case had been settled from the very start.

Attempting to show that everything is intricate and hybrid is very praiseworthy. Nonetheless, this does not mean

[1] The pilgrimages by Tibetans to Hajo and Singri in Assam could have been mentioned (cf Huber 2008, 155ff).

dispensing with rigour in dealing with the material. And what about this intricacy and hybridity if, in the end, one falls into greater essentialism whereby everything was 'monastic', 'Himalayan' and 'Central-Asian'? Even in contexts where no specific monastery is referred to, any raja is called 'monastic lord', armies are always 'monastic armies', traders 'monastic merchants' and common people 'monastic subjects'. It is not enough to create categories to transform them into realities. This is, however, what happens throughout the book where religious, geographical, and cultural categories, if not chronology itself, are systematically telescoped into broad blurred categories that encompass anything of use to the thesis. There are obviously numerous commonalities between Buddhism, Vaishnavism, Sufism and Tantrism, but does this suffice for them to be taken as a single form—the 'monastic'—to be invoked indiscriminately?

The present reviewer can only give his opinion on the parts of the book that concern areas with which he is familiar. However, one does not need to be a specialist of the region to recognize serious problems of 'geographicity'. The Assamese sovereign is described as 'Himalayan bureaucracy' (p. 60) or 'Himalayan *svargadeva*' (p. 132). It seems that, for the author, every area north of Kolkata is 'Himalayan' and that consequently its precise location is not a matter of concern. Manipur and Arakan, among others, would be 'Himalayan foothills' (pp. 62-63). Similarly, one finds 'the city of Gurkha in the valley of Kathmandu' (p. 87) [in actual fact, 100 km away, as the crow flies]; on the other hand, Bhatgaon [in the Kathmandu Valley] shifts to 'eastern Nepal' (p. 3); Dhaulagiri [these days in central Nepal] is situated in 'eastern Nepal and western Bhutan' (p. 356); 'the hills of northeast of Jytner [Jaintia hills, in Meghalaya] in the direction of the foothills of Bhutanese Assam' (95); or the capital of the Ahom, Garhgaon [30 km south of the Brahmaputra], which is located 'on the north bank of the Brahmaputra' here (p. 135). Carrying on from this, the places where people live are also of little importance. The Kachari [now termed Bodo/Dimasa] would live in 'lower Tibet-Bhutan' (p. 155)—wherever that is.

The same conflations and inaccuracies characterise the treatment of linguistic affiliations, e.g. 'The Tibetan-Burman-Bengali speaking worlds of eastern Bengal and Assam' (p. 67). According to the author, obtuse British travellers were unable to properly describe what they saw due to their linguistic incompetence in these unknown languages: 'Buchanan, like most Englishmen of his time, did not know the hybrid languages being spoken—least of all the Tibetan-inflected Bengali and Maithili' (p. 107). To re-establish a more accurate linguistic image of the region, the author reveals previously undocumented idioms, such as 'hybrid Tibetan-Nepali languages' (p. 57), supposedly spoken by the Kachari [Bodo] (p. 236), among others. And she extensively resorts to supposedly Tibetan terms which often do not sound Tibetan at all and are impossible to trace as no transcription convention is specified and, generally speaking, no source is given.[2] The Assamese place name 'Dimarua' would come from a mysterious 'Tibetan' *dim bsekh,* 'prisoner of war' (p. 60). A simple search in an Assamese dictionary would have offered an alternative; *ḍimarū* simply means 'fig-tree'.[3] And *bunjuu* would mean 'troops', *kungur* a term for self-reference, *naga* a yoke… The Khasi will be happy to learn that their designation comes from a Tibetan word meaning a 'group made up of priests and laity' (p. 95). Mi-ri, as the Mishing were called in colonial times, would be a Tibetan term of reference for 'a generic hillman's collective' (p. 189) [if this had at all existed, it would in fact have been *ri-mi*='hill-men']. Abor [now Adi living in Arunachal], the Assamese for 'disobedient' according to dictionaries (*ā-bar*) becomes 'traders from Northern Tibet' on the basis of a supposedly Tibetan *a.bo.hor*; *hor* actually means Mongol but *a bo hor* does not correspond to a possible Tibetan form] (p. 189).

As the book is supposed to deal with monks, the reader might have expected a more rigorous introduction to the main

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[2] My comments on the supposedly Tibetan terms rely on the advice of Fernand Meyer and Rémi Chaix from the Centre for Himalayan Studies, CNRS.

[3] My reference for Assamese terms is Baruwa 2007.

monastic traditions in the region (pp. 36-42), and a description of the monks or adepts whom the author asserts had such an important role to play. Instead, we are provided with a few brief mentions of figures whose religious nature and cultural affiliation are asserted in a peremptory manner but seldom demonstrated in a consistent way. For instance, to show that the Assamese sovereign was of monastic origin, the author underlines (p. 39) that, according to a chronicle, he and the Deb Raja of Bhutan belonged to the same lineage; and that consequently the Ahom chief 'hailed from a clan of monastics or disciple-patrons of a Tantric Buddhist monastic lineage'. Claims to brotherhood are indeed common in Assamese (and other) chronicles and must often be taken as claims to friendship, or claims over the territory of the 'brother'. Furthermore, we know that in Bhutan's dual government in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, *deb raja* (or *druk desi*) was indeed the secular head, while *je khenpo* or *dharma raj* was the chief abbot. Deb raja's office could be occupied either by a monk or a layperson, and thus referring to him in this way does not make Deb Raja a 'Himalayan Buddhist monk' (pp. 37, 88). The fact that political power included a divine component in this region (and elsewhere), and that titles may reflect this, does not suffice to reduce holders of political power to religious figures. Contrary to other parts of India, in Assam *gosāĩ* does not only designate ascetics and deities but also non-ascetic gurus and lay dignitaries of the Ahom sovereign's lineage. The Bar gosain, which the author enthusiastically labels 'Sakta Tantric sannyasi' (p. 140) was in fact a minister at the Ahom courts, and a king in Jaintia. That ascetics, or more possibly gurus, became ministers or kings so that their successors came to be called Bar gosain is not a logically impossible thesis; it simply needs to be documented.

Religion is ubiquitous, and multifaceted: for the author, worship here and there of water, soil and mountains reveals a 'shared cosmography of Eastern India and Inner Asia' (p. 44)—why not further away?; and a six-branch star found near a fort suggests that 'fort holders along the Surma-Barak were followers of a conjoined Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Tantric Buddhism' (pp. 48-49).

Kinship is another realm where the author uses concepts in a high-handed manner without actually mastering them. We read 'matrilateral lineages' (p. 59): we already knew about matrilineal descent, about matrilineages, about matrilateral kin but what could a matrilateral lineage be? 'Exogamous marriage' (p. 61) is apparently used for a polyandrous marriage. Regarding princely marriages that are supposed to have taken place between half-brothers and sisters in Ava (p. 128): 'such matches were expressed as patrilateral cross-cousin marriages'. The example given features marriage between two parallel, patrilineal cousins: thus neither cross- nor half-siblings. And 'patrilateral cross-cousin' with no mention of the person of reference is nonsensical because the relationship between cross-cousins is patrilateral from one cousin's point of view and matrilateral from the other's. Is it a trick to impress the readers or does anthropological rigour fall within the evil 'ethnologizing' (p. 61) which the East India Company was guilty of?

I am not claiming that all the proposals put forward by the author are of no value but that they are either not at all supported or shoddily supported. For instance, the fact that 'monastic dormitories served as epicentres for a network of lay and ordained people' (p. 42) is true for Assam but is, surprisingly, not described in detail. And no fact or reference is provided to sustain the fascinating idea that monastic centres were linked by 'mobile monks and militia'. Although there might have been sound illustrations of 'monastic governance', the *satra* (monastery, abode of a guru), the major nexus of Assamese social stucture, and the Moamaria, a Vaisnava sect which overthrew the Ahom State in the eighteenth century, are barely mentioned; nor does the word Ekasaraṇa (Assamese vaisnavism) appear or the name of Shankardeva, the major figure at the origin of this tremendous religious, social and political reform movement in Assam. In the same way, the idea that many current ethnic groups originated from groups of followers of a religious figure (p. 46) deserves to be investigated thoroughly. Instead, the author defines it *a priori* as a general rule, applicable to all tribes. As the tribes are supposed, according to the author, to be a creation of the colonial agenda, then logically all present tribes were groups of adepts (pp. 358-359). Finally, the book ends up replacing an old essentialism (colonial and

post-colonial) with a new essentialism, in which people's specificities and the region's cultural complexity disappear, buried under grand narratives.

But let me leave the author to conclude: ‘Professional postcolonial scholars had learned not to read the Mahabharata to make sense of Himalayan-plains histories. Yet, the storyline of that epic—with its focus on friendships dishonoured, marriages betrayed, battles fought—is suggested by no less than colonial archives itself’ (p. 368).

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