



## DOCUMENTING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS AND ETHNOGRAPHY IN EARLY COLONIAL ASSAM: INSIGHTS FROM A DESCRIPTIVE ACCOUNT OF ASSAM OF WILLIAM ROBINSON

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### RESEARCH ARTICLE



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#### Abstract

The early colonial period witnessed the emergence of a body of descriptive literature that attempted to document the social, cultural, and environmental landscape of Assam. Among these works, *A Descriptive Account of Assam* (1841) by William Robinson occupies a significant place as one of the earliest systematic attempts by a colonial observer to record the region's society and culture. This study examines Robinson's work as an important source for understanding indigenous knowledge systems, ethnographic observations, and socio-cultural practices of Assam during the late medieval and early colonial transition. Using a historical-analytical methodology, the paper analyzes Robinson's descriptions of population composition, social organization, religious practices, festivals, dietary habits, and material culture. The study also evaluates the colonial lens through which Robinson interpreted Assamese society and compares his observations with later historical works on Assam. The findings reveal that despite certain biases and inaccuracies typical of early colonial narratives, Robinson's account provides valuable ethnographic details about various communities, including the Ahoms, Koches, Kalitas, and other tribal groups. It also documents important aspects of everyday life such as agriculture, food habits, domestic architecture, and social customs. The paper argues that Robinson's work represents an early attempt at colonial ethnography in Assam and contributed to the development of British historiography in the region, later influencing scholars such as Edward Gait.

**Keywords:** *Colonial ethnography, Indigenous knowledge systems, Assam history, William Robinson, Social and cultural history, Colonial historiography*

#### Introduction

The colonial encounter in northeastern India produced a substantial body of descriptive and administrative writings that sought to document the geography, society, and culture of newly annexed territories. In the case of Assam, one of the earliest and most significant works was *A Descriptive Account of Assam* written by William Robinson in the early nineteenth century. Robinson, who served as Headmaster of the Gauhati English Seminary and later as Inspector of Schools in Assam under the patronage of Commissioner Francis Jenkins, compiled this work using both administrative records and personal observations (Baruah, 1985). Robinson's account appeared during a period when Assam was undergoing major transformations following the decline of the Ahom kingdom, the Burmese invasions, and the consolidation of British rule after the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826 (Gait, 1906). In this transitional context, colonial administrators attempted to understand local society for administrative and political purposes. Consequently, their writings often combined geographical surveys with ethnographic descriptions of indigenous communities, religious practices, and socio-economic life.

Although primarily intended as an administrative report, Robinson's work provides valuable insights into the indigenous knowledge systems and cultural life of Assam. His descriptions of population groups, caste structures, religious institutions, agricultural practices, and festivals constitute one of the earliest ethnographic records of the region. This paper examines Robinson's account as a historical source, highlighting its contribution to documenting the society and culture of Assam while also evaluating its limitations within the framework of colonial knowledge production.

#### Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative historical methodology based on textual analysis of William Robinson's *A Descriptive Account of Assam*. The work is examined as a primary source reflecting early colonial ethnographic observations. The analysis focuses

particularly on the chapter “Civil and Social State,” which contains detailed descriptions of Assamese society, religion, customs, and everyday life. Robinson’s observations are contextualized with secondary scholarly literature on Assam’s history and colonial historiography, including works by Edward Gait, S. L. Baruah, and Amalendu Guha. Through comparative interpretation, the paper evaluates both the ethnographic value and the colonial biases embedded in Robinson’s narrative.

## **Discussion**

### **Colonial Knowledge Production and the Context of Robinson’s Work**

The production of colonial knowledge about Assam began soon after the establishment of British administration in the region following the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826. During the early decades of colonial rule, British officials sought to collect detailed information about the geography, economy, and social structure of the region in order to facilitate governance and revenue administration. In this context, descriptive works such as Robinson’s *A Descriptive Account of Assam* emerged as important documents for understanding the region from a colonial perspective.

William Robinson was closely associated with the administrative establishment in Assam through his connection with Commissioner Francis Jenkins. Jenkins encouraged Robinson to prepare a comprehensive account of the province, and Robinson had access to official archives and administrative records while compiling his work. As a result, the book combined both official data and personal observations, making it one of the earliest systematic descriptions of Assam under British rule.

Although Robinson’s work primarily discusses climate, geology, botany, zoology, and economic resources, it also contains an extensive discussion of the social and cultural life of the Assamese people. The chapter titled “Civil and Social State” provides valuable ethnographic insights into the population, social organization, religion, festivals, food habits, and domestic life of Assam.

### **Population Composition and Ethnic Diversity**

One of the notable features of Robinson’s account is his attempt to describe the demographic composition of Assam. According to him, the population of the region was approximately eight lakh during his time. He observed that about one-sixth of the population consisted of Muslims, while the majority belonged to different sects of Hinduism. In addition, Robinson noted the presence of numerous tribal communities such as the Kacharis, Rabhas, Chutiyas, Mikirs, and Lalungs.

These observations highlight the ethnically diverse nature of Assamese society. Modern historians have also emphasized that Assam historically developed as a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural region shaped by the interaction of Indo-Aryan, Tibeto-Burman, and Tai cultural elements (Baruah, 1985). Robinson’s documentation of these communities therefore provides valuable information about the ethnic composition of the region during the early nineteenth century.

However, Robinson’s classification of communities often reflected the colonial tendency to categorize societies into rigid racial or ethnic groups. While his observations capture the diversity of Assam, they sometimes oversimplify the complex processes of cultural assimilation and social mobility that characterized Assamese society.

### **The Ahoms and Cultural Transformation**

Robinson devoted special attention to the Ahoms, the ruling dynasty that governed Assam for nearly six centuries. He observed that although the Ahoms experienced several political upheavals during their rule, they maintained many of their traditional customs and institutions. At the same time, he noted that they gradually adopted Hindu practices, and the consumption of beef became taboo among them.

Robinson also remarked that the Ahom language was no longer widely spoken and was preserved mainly by priestly groups known as Deodhais. According to him, Assamese had become the common language of the region, and he believed that the Assamese language was largely derived from Sanskrit (Robinson, 2014).

Modern linguistic studies, however, indicate that Assamese evolved from the eastern branch of Indo-Aryan languages and developed through a long historical process that predates Ahom rule (Gait, 1906). Robinson’s assumption that the language originated primarily from Sanskrit therefore reflects a limited understanding of linguistic history. Nevertheless, his observations about the decline of the Ahom language and the increasing influence of Hindu culture correspond with the broader process of cultural assimilation that occurred during the later Ahom period.

### **Social Structure and Caste System**

Robinson’s work provides detailed descriptions of the caste system in Assam. He noted that Brahmins occupied the highest position in the social hierarchy and that many Brahmins had migrated from Bengal. According to him, the Rarhi Brahmins from Bengal played an important role in the spiritual life of the Assamese kings.

He also mentioned the Baidik Brahmins, who were believed to have been introduced into Assam during the reign of the Koch king Biswa Singha. Robinson described them as learned scholars of Hindu scriptures and noted that they often avoided matrimonial alliances with Brahmin families from Bengal.

Apart from Brahmins, Robinson described several other caste groups such as Kalitas, Kayasthas, Keots, Doms, and various artisan communities. He observed that professional specialization was less rigid in Assam compared to other parts of India and that members of different castes often engaged in multiple occupations. This observation suggests that Assamese society displayed a relatively flexible social structure.

Modern scholars have similarly argued that the caste system in Assam historically remained less rigid than in many other parts of India due to the region's diverse ethnic composition and frontier conditions (Guha, 1983).

### **Tribal Communities and Cultural Practices**

Robinson also documented the customs and practices of several tribal groups in Assam. Among them, he described the Koches as a significant community and noted that the Rajbongshis formed an important section within this group. According to Robinson, the Koches practiced ritual sacrifices to their deities Rishi and Jago at the end of the rainy season.

He further noted that before the arrival of Brahmins, the Kalitas played an important role as spiritual guides of the Koches. Robinson also mentioned the Meches, who were once numerous in the region. He explained that many Mech people later adopted the title of Rajbongshi following the rise of the Koch dynasty under Biswa Singha.

These observations indicate the dynamic nature of social identities in Assam, where communities often transformed their status and cultural practices over time. Robinson's descriptions therefore provide valuable clues about processes of social mobility and cultural assimilation in the region.

### **Religion and Sacred Geography**

Religion occupied an important place in Robinson's description of Assamese society. He attempted to trace the early forms of worship in Assam and the influence of Hinduism on local religious practices.

Robinson identified the temple of Kamakhya as one of the most important religious centers in Assam. According to him, the shrine attracted pilgrims from different parts of India and was widely celebrated for its religious significance. However, his descriptions of the rituals associated with the temple often reflected the moral judgments typical of colonial observers.

Another important religious site mentioned by Robinson was the temple at Hajo, which he described as a place visited by both Hindus and Buddhists. He noted that pilgrims from various regions gathered there annually and offered valuable donations.

Robinson also referred to Brahmakunda, which he believed to be the mythical source of the Brahmaputra River. His discussion of these sacred sites highlights the importance of pilgrimage and religious geography in shaping Assamese cultural life.

### **Festivals and Cultural Life**

Robinson's account provides one of the earliest colonial descriptions of Assamese festivals, particularly the celebration of Bihu. He identified two major Bihu festivals: Bohag Bihu, celebrated at the beginning of the Assamese year, and Magh Bihu, associated with the winter harvest.

Bohag Bihu, according to Robinson, marked the start of the agricultural cycle and involved various festive activities during the first three days of the Assamese month of Baisakh. Magh Bihu, on the other hand, was characterized by feasting and communal celebrations following the harvest.

These observations highlight the close relationship between agriculture and cultural practices in Assamese society. Bihu festivals continue to play a central role in the cultural identity of Assam even today.

### **Food Habits and Indigenous Knowledge**

Robinson also documented various aspects of indigenous food practices in Assam. He noted that green vegetables, particularly leafy varieties known as "hak," formed an important part of the Assamese diet. Many people collected wild plants and tender leaves from cultivated crops such as mustard.

Fish constituted another major component of the diet. Robinson described how small fishes were caught during the rainy season and preserved by drying them in the sun. Such practices reflect traditional methods of food preservation and resource management.

He also observed the widespread consumption of betel nut and betel leaf, noting that many people chewed them regularly. Tobacco was also widely used.

These observations reveal important aspects of indigenous ecological knowledge and food culture in Assam.

### **Domestic Architecture and Material Culture**

Robinson provided detailed descriptions of Assamese houses and domestic life. He noted that most houses were constructed from bamboo and cane and were thatched with grass. The floors were coated with cow dung, which helped keep insects away. Furniture was minimal, and most people sat or slept on mats. Cooking utensils were usually made of earthenware.

Robinson remarked that the simplicity of Assamese houses, clothing, and furniture corresponded with the simplicity of their diet and lifestyle. Although his description may reflect certain colonial stereotypes about rural simplicity, it nevertheless provides useful information about the material culture of the region.

### **Limitations and Colonial Bias**

Despite its ethnographic value, Robinson's account contains several limitations. His observations were shaped by colonial attitudes and sometimes reflected cultural misunderstandings. For example, he described the Assamese as physically inferior to people from western India, although he considered them superior to Bengalis.

Such statements reveal the racial and cultural biases that often characterized colonial writings. Moreover, Robinson faced significant challenges in collecting reliable data because Assam was undergoing a period of political and social transition after the Moamoria rebellion, Burmese invasions, and the establishment of British rule.

Nevertheless, Robinson's work remains an important early attempt to document the society and culture of Assam. Later historians such as Edward Gait built upon these early colonial accounts to produce more systematic histories of the region.

### Conclusion

William Robinson's *A Descriptive Account of Assam* represents one of the earliest colonial attempts to document the social and cultural life of the region. Written during a period of major political and social transformation, the work provides valuable insights into the demographic composition, social organization, religious practices, festivals, and everyday life of the Assamese people.

Despite certain inaccuracies and colonial biases, Robinson's observations offer important ethnographic information about various communities in Assam, including the Ahoms, Koches, Kalitas, and several tribal groups. His descriptions of agricultural practices, food habits, domestic architecture, and cultural traditions highlight aspects of indigenous knowledge systems that formed the foundation of Assamese society.

The study demonstrates that Robinson's work played a significant role in the early development of colonial historiography in Assam. It also contributed to the broader process of knowledge production through which colonial administrators sought to understand and govern the region.

For modern scholars, Robinson's account remains an important historical source that must be interpreted critically. When read alongside later scholarly works, it helps illuminate the complex social and cultural landscape of Assam during the transition from the late medieval period to the early colonial era.

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