
Year–07, Volume –07, Issue–02, June–2026

Reassessing the Topography of Assam: Landscape, Society and Indigenous Knowledge in John M’Cosh’s Narrative

– Dr. Imdad Ali Ahmed

Abstract:

The 19th-century writings of European travellers and colonial officials constitute an important body of historical sources for reconstructing Assam's past. Among these works, Topography of Assam by the Scottish army surgeon John M’Cosh provides one of the earliest detailed colonial descriptions of the region’s landscape, society, economy, and political history. This paper reassesses M’Cosh’s narrative with the objective of examining how colonial knowledge systems represented the geography and society of Assam and how such descriptions both informed and distorted historical understanding. The study adopts a qualitative historical methodology based on textual analysis of M’Cosh’s observations and their comparison with modern historiography on Assam. The findings reveal that while M’Cosh offered valuable descriptions of the Brahmaputra valley, agricultural resources, trade routes, and cultural practices, his interpretations were frequently shaped by colonial assumptions and incomplete information. Several inaccuracies appear in his account of the Ahom polity, the Paik system, and linguistic developments in Assam. Nevertheless, his work remains significant for documenting the environmental landscape, economic activities, and cross-border trade networks of the region during the early colonial period. By reassessing his narrative through contemporary scholarship, this paper highlights the importance of critically engaging with colonial sources while acknowledging their contribution to the historical geography of Assam.

Keywords: Assam history, colonial narratives, John M’Cosh, Brahmaputra valley, indigenous knowledge, historical geography.

Introduction

The historical geography of Assam has been documented through a variety of indigenous chronicles, travel accounts, and colonial administrative records. Among these sources, the writings of 19th-century European observers occupy an important position because they attempted to describe the landscape, society, and political history of the region for a wider audience. One such figure was John M’Cosh (1805–1885), a Scottish army surgeon who served in the Bengal Army of the East India Company and travelled in the northeastern frontier of India during the early nineteenth century. His work *Topography of Assam* provides an extensive account of the natural environment, economic resources, social customs, and political history of the region.

M’Cosh’s narrative reflects the colonial attempt to document newly annexed territories and to understand their administrative and economic potential. His descriptions of the Brahmaputra valley, the fertility of the soil, the trade routes connecting Assam with

Chief – Editorial Board: Prof. Ami Upadhyay, Hon'ble Vice Chancellor, BAOU, Ahmedabad.

Editor: Prof. Yogendra Parekh

Publisher: Registrar, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Open University, Ahmedabad.

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neighbouring regions, and the socio-cultural characteristics of its inhabitants provide valuable historical insights. At the same time, many of his interpretations reveal limitations typical of colonial knowledge production. Several inaccuracies appear in his explanations of the Ahom polity, language history, and socio-economic institutions.

This paper aims to reassess M'Cosh's work by examining the ways in which he represented the landscape and society of Assam and by comparing his observations with modern historical scholarship.

Literature Review:

Literature on colonial representations of Assam frequently highlights the importance of early British accounts in shaping historical and geographical understandings of the region. Among these works, *Topography of Assam* by John M'Cosh occupies a significant position. Written in 1837, the work provides one of the earliest systematic colonial descriptions of Assam's landscape, society, economy, and political history. Scholars note that M'Cosh's narrative combines observations of the natural environment—such as the fertile Brahmaputra valley, flood patterns, and climatic conditions—with discussions of trade networks linking Assam with Bhutan, Tibet, Myanmar, and Bengal. His account also documents agricultural production, local crafts, and the functioning of the Ahom administrative system, particularly the *paik* labour organisation.

However, historians have critically reassessed McCosh's work due to its methodological limitations. Much of his historical narrative was derived from earlier sources such as the writings of Francis Buchanan-Hamilton, David Scott, Francis Jenkins, and the chronicles of Haliram Dhekial Phukan, yet he rarely verified the authenticity of these materials. Consequently, several inaccuracies appear in his interpretation of Ahom history, including claims about the adoption of Bengali during the reign of Jayadhwaj Singha.

Despite such inconsistencies, scholars acknowledge that M'Cosh's observations on geography, trade routes, and everyday life provide valuable insights into early colonial perceptions of Assam. Reassessing his narrative alongside indigenous sources and modern scholarship enables a more balanced understanding of Assam's landscape, society, and knowledge traditions.

Methodology:

This research adopts a qualitative historical methodology to reassess the narrative of John M'Cosh regarding the landscape and society of Assam. The study primarily relies on textual analysis of historical writings and comparative evaluation of colonial and modern interpretations of the region's geography and socio-economic conditions.

The main source examined in this research is M'Cosh's *Topography of Assam*, which contains descriptions of the Brahmaputra valley, natural resources, trade networks, demography, and political institutions. These descriptions are analysed in relation to other historical works, including colonial administrative records and modern academic studies on Assam's history.

A comparative analytical approach is employed to identify both the strengths and limitations of M'Cosh's narrative. Particular attention is given to instances where his interpretations diverge from contemporary historical knowledge. For example, his explanations of linguistic developments, the Paik system, and the social structure of Assamese society are evaluated in the light of recent scholarship.

The methodology also involves examining how colonial perspectives influenced the way M'Cosh interpreted the landscape and people of Assam. By situating his work within the broader context of colonial knowledge production, the study seeks to understand how

environmental descriptions, ethnographic observations, and political commentary were intertwined in early colonial narratives.

Through this approach, the research aims to provide a balanced reassessment of M'Cosh's contribution to the historical geography of Assam.

Discussion:

The narrative of John M'Cosh offers one of the earliest colonial attempts to describe the geography, society, and economy of Assam in a systematic manner. His observations cover a wide range of themes including the physical landscape of the Brahmaputra valley, agricultural production, social life, political history, trade networks, and meteorological conditions. While these descriptions provide valuable insights into the region during the early nineteenth century, they must be examined critically in order to understand the limitations and biases inherent in colonial narratives.

Landscape and Environmental Perceptions -

M'Cosh's description of the landscape of Assam reflects both admiration and curiosity. He portrays the Brahmaputra valley as a vast and fertile plain interspersed with small hills rising abruptly from the flat terrain. His comparison of these hills with hay-cocks in a meadow suggests that he viewed the landscape through familiar European imagery. Such analogies were common in colonial travel writing, where unfamiliar environments were interpreted through references to landscapes known to European readers.

His observation that the region remained swampy during much of the year but became highly productive in the dry season highlights the unique ecological characteristics of the Brahmaputra valley (M'Cosh 5). Modern environmental studies confirm that the floodplains of the Brahmaputra possess fertile alluvial soil that supports intensive agricultural cultivation. However, M'Cosh's account also reflects a limited understanding of the ecological knowledge developed by local communities who had long adapted their agricultural practices to the seasonal flooding of the river.

The river itself occupies a central place in his narrative. McCosh describes the Brahmaputra as the principal drainage system of Assam and as the most important means of communication with Bengal (M'Cosh 6). This observation corresponds with historical evidence indicating that river transport played a crucial role in the economic life of the region before the development of modern infrastructure. The river not only facilitated trade but also connected Assam with neighbouring regions such as Bengal, Tibet, and Myanmar.

Trade Routes and Regional Connectivity -

One of the most valuable aspects of M'Cosh's work is his documentation of trade routes linking Assam with surrounding territories. He identifies several overland routes connecting the region with Bhutan, Tibet, Myanmar, and China (M'Cosh 10-12). Although these routes were often difficult to traverse, they played a vital role in facilitating cross-border trade.

M'Cosh also describes the exchange of goods between Assam and Bhutan, noting that Bhutanese traders brought items such as gold dust, rock salt, musk, ponies, and woollens in exchange for rice and dried fish. Such descriptions reveal the long-standing economic relationships between the Himalayan regions and the Brahmaputra valley. Historical research indicates that these trade networks had existed for centuries and were sustained through a combination of riverine and mountain routes.

Similarly, his reference to traders arriving from Lhasa to exchange silver and rock salt for Assamese products highlights the region's participation in broader trans-Himalayan trade networks. These observations demonstrate that Assam was not an isolated frontier but part of a complex web of economic interactions linking South Asia with Central and Southeast Asia.

Demographic Observations and Social Life -

M'Cosh's narrative also includes observations about the demographic composition of the Brahmaputra valley. He notes the presence of Hindus, Muslims, and various tribal communities and emphasises the relatively tolerant relations among them. According to him, intermarriage between different groups was common, making it difficult to distinguish between communities based solely on physical appearance (M'Cosh 21; Sarma 39).

This observation aligns with modern historical research, which highlights the cultural diversity of Assam and the long history of interaction among different ethnic groups. The region has traditionally been home to numerous communities including Indo-Aryan, Tibeto-Burman, and Austroasiatic populations. Over time, cultural exchange and intermarriage contributed to the formation of a distinctive Assamese identity.

However, some of M'Cosh's remarks also reflect the ethnocentric attitudes typical of colonial observers. His comments regarding the beauty of Assamese women and their resemblance to Europeans reveal a tendency to evaluate local populations according to European aesthetic standards. Such observations provide insight into colonial perceptions but should be interpreted cautiously as they often reflect subjective judgments rather than objective analysis.

Education and Gender Relations -

M'Cosh's discussion of education in medieval Assam suggests that literacy was limited and largely restricted to men. He notes that learning among women was discouraged and that educated women were considered unsuitable for marriage (M'Cosh 26). While it is true that formal education was limited during this period, his account does not fully capture the broader cultural context.

In traditional Assamese society, knowledge was often transmitted through oral traditions, religious institutions, and community practices rather than formal schools. Satras and other religious institutions played an important role in preserving literary and cultural traditions. Therefore, M'Cosh's portrayal of education as almost absent may reflect a misunderstanding of indigenous knowledge systems.

Agriculture and Economic Activities -

The agricultural richness of Assam is a recurring theme in M'Cosh's narrative. He emphasises the fertility of the Brahmaputra valley and the variety of crops cultivated in the region. Rice was the principal crop, but he also mentions the production of sugarcane, mustard, cotton, silk, lac, and opium (M'Cosh 13).

These observations correspond with historical records indicating that agriculture formed the backbone of the regional economy. The cultivation of rice in the floodplains of the Brahmaputra provided the foundation for food security, while other crops supported local industries and trade. Silk production in particular became an important economic activity, with Assam gaining recognition for its unique varieties such as *muga* silk.

M'Cosh also describes the self-sufficient nature of rural households. According to him, most families constructed their own houses, produced their own textiles, and manufactured everyday tools (M'Cosh 63). Although he characterises these activities as rudimentary, they actually reflect a system of decentralised production typical of many pre-industrial societies.

The Paik System and Political Organisation -

One of the most significant aspects of M'Cosh's narrative concerns his description of the paik system, which formed the administrative and military foundation of the Ahom kingdom. According to him, the population was organised into units of paiks who were

required to perform service for the state. Several paiks formed a unit known as a *got*, and each unit was responsible for contributing labour or military service when required (M'Cosh 120).

While this description broadly corresponds with historical understanding of the Paik system, M'Cosh's interpretation contains several inaccuracies. For instance, he describes the paiks as serfs and suggests that they paid money when not performing labour. Modern historians have shown that the system was more complex. Paiks were not simply serfs but members of a structured administrative system that combined agricultural production with state service.

Each paik was typically granted land for cultivation in return for periodic labour obligations. This system allowed the Ahom state to mobilise manpower for public works, military campaigns, and agricultural development without relying on monetary taxation. Although the system placed considerable demands on the population, it also provided a framework for organising society and maintaining political stability for several centuries.

Political History and Historical Inaccuracies -

M'Cosh's account of the political history of Assam begins with the arrival of the Ahoms in the thirteenth century and continues until the early stages of British colonial rule. However, his discussion of historical events is relatively brief and contains several inaccuracies.

One notable example is his claim that during the reign of Jayadhwaj Singha, the Ahoms adopted the Bengali language and abandoned their own language. Modern scholarship indicates that this assertion is incorrect. The introduction of Bengali as an administrative language occurred later during the colonial period rather than during the Ahom era (Saikia 29).

Such inaccuracies illustrate the limitations of M'Cosh's sources. Although he relied on manuscripts and reports prepared by earlier officials and scholars, he did not always verify the authenticity of the information he obtained. Consequently, some of his conclusions were based on incomplete or misunderstood evidence.

Antiquities and Architectural Heritage -

M'Cosh also provides descriptions of historical monuments and architectural remains in Assam. He discusses the famous temple of Kamakhya and describes it as an important pilgrimage centre visited by people from various parts of India. His account highlights the scale and significance of the temple complex as well as the impressive stone structures surrounding it.

In addition to religious monuments, he refers to ancient roads, bridges, and embankments constructed during medieval times. One example is the Gohain Kamal Ali, a historic road built during the reign of the Koch king Naranarayan. Such infrastructure demonstrates the advanced engineering capabilities of pre-colonial societies in the region (M'Cosh 69).

His observations on brick architecture are also noteworthy. He remarks that bricks used in Assam were often larger and differently shaped compared to those found in other parts of India. These details contribute valuable information to the study of historical architecture in the region.

Climate, Floods, and Natural Disasters -

Another important aspect of M'Cosh's work is his discussion of the climatic conditions of Assam. He describes the region as having a relatively moderate hot season, heavy rainfall, and dense fog during winter months. He also notes the occurrence of strong storms and frequent flooding caused by the rising waters of the Brahmaputra.

His observation that the river could rise by as much as thirty feet during the monsoon season underscores the dramatic environmental changes experienced in the floodplain. These

floods, while destructive, also contribute to the fertility of the soil by depositing nutrient-rich sediments.

M'Cosh also records instances of earthquakes, describing a dramatic event in which a small hill collapsed and formed a deep pool of water. Such descriptions provide early documentation of seismic activity in the region, which is now recognized as one of the most earthquake-prone areas of the Indian subcontinent (M'Cosh 74).

Diseases and Public Health -

In discussing public health conditions, M'Cosh attributes many diseases to miasma arising from marshes, stagnant water, and jungles (M'Cosh 100-7). Although this explanation reflects the prevailing medical theories of the nineteenth century, it predates the discovery of the malaria parasite by Ronald Ross in 1897.

His identification of environmental factors such as waterlogging and poor sanitation as sources of illness nonetheless highlights the difficult living conditions faced by many inhabitants of the region. Diseases such as fever, dysentery, cholera, and skin infections were widespread and posed serious challenges for public health (M'Cosh 108-15).

Colonial Knowledge and Indigenous Reality:

A critical reassessment of M'Cosh's work reveals the dual nature of colonial knowledge production. On one hand, his observations provide valuable documentation of the environment, economy, and society of Assam during the early nineteenth century. On the other hand, his interpretations were shaped by the intellectual frameworks and administrative priorities of colonial rule.

By comparing his narrative with modern scholarship, it becomes clear that many of his conclusions require careful reconsideration. Indigenous sources such as the Buranjis and later historical studies provide a more nuanced understanding of the region's political and cultural history.

Conclusion:

The reassessment of John M'Cosh's *Topography of Assam* demonstrates the importance of critically engaging with colonial narratives in the study of regional history. M'Cosh's work represents one of the earliest attempts by a European observer to describe the geography, society, and economy of the Brahmaputra valley. His vivid accounts of the landscape, agricultural resources, trade routes, and climatic conditions provide valuable historical information about Assam during the early nineteenth century.

At the same time, his narrative contains several inaccuracies and reflects the limitations of colonial knowledge systems. Misinterpretations regarding the Ahom polity, linguistic developments, and social institutions illustrate how incomplete information and cultural biases influenced colonial descriptions of the region. Modern scholarship based on indigenous sources and interdisciplinary research has helped correct many of these misunderstandings.

Despite these limitations, M'Cosh's work remains an important historical document. It not only records environmental and social conditions but also reveals how colonial observers perceived and interpreted the landscapes and societies they encountered. By reassessing such texts through contemporary historiography, historians can gain a deeper understanding of both the historical realities of Assam and the processes through which colonial knowledge about the region was constructed.

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Dr. Imdad Ali Ahmed, Associate Professor, Department of History,
Pub Kamrup College, P.O. Baihata Chariali, Dist. Kamrup, Assam, India.

E-mail: imdadghy@gmail.com

ORCID: 0009-0002-6024-5328