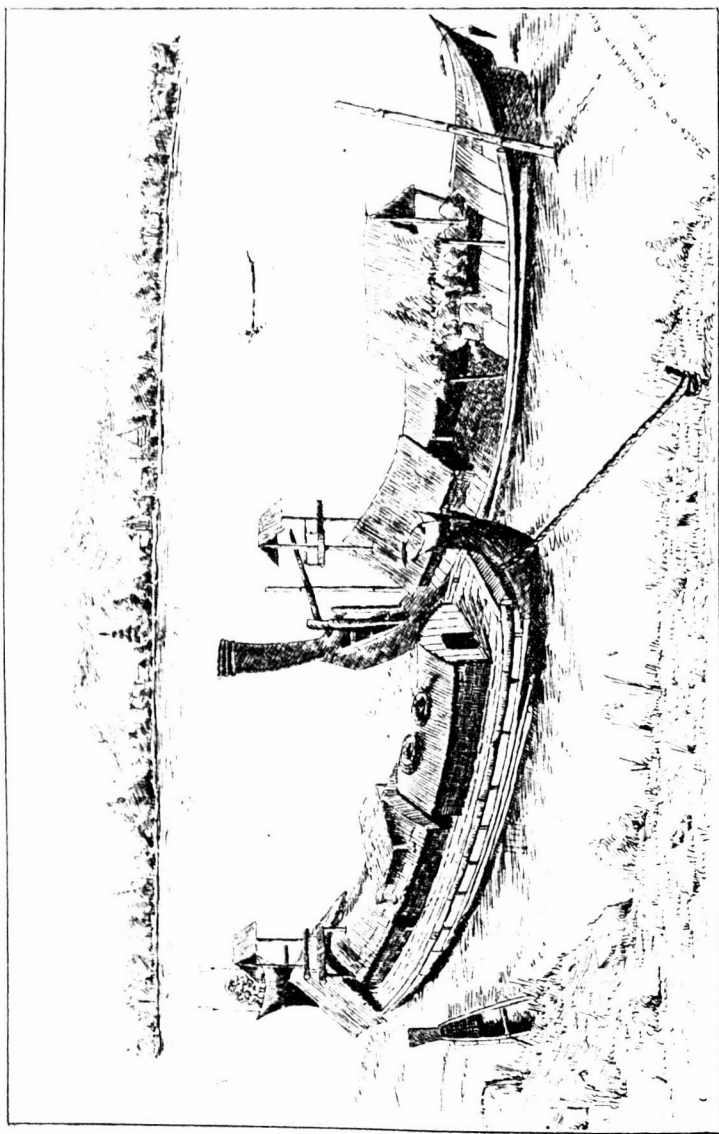


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HISTORY OF  
UPPER ASSAM, UPPER BURMAH  
AND  
NORTH-EASTERN FRONTIER



BOATS ON THE CHINDWYN RIVER, MONTYWA.

# HISTORY OF UPPER ASSAM, UPPER BURMAH AND NORTH-EASTERN FRONTIER



BY

L. W. SHAKESPEAR

*(Colonel, 2nd Goorkhas)*

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**Assam**

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•298-B Tagore Park Extn., Model Town-1, **DELHI -110009.**  
**Tel.**(011) 2724-1674.**email:**vinmedia@bol.net.in

First Published by Macmillan and Co., Ltd., London in 1914.  
First Indian Reprint, 2004.

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**ISBN 81-87502-86-X**

Distributors:

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**Fax/Tel.**(0361)2517059.**Cables:**unipub.**email:**unipub@sancharnet.in

•Akarshan Bhavan, 23 Ansari Main Road, **NEW DELHI-110002.**

**Tel.** (011)2324-1471 & 56022599. **email:**unitedpublishers@sify.com

Published by Krishan Kumar on behalf of Spectrum Publications and printed in India.

## TO THE ASSAM MILITARY POLICE FORCE

With which I had the honour of serving several happy interesting years—the Wardens of our long stretch of North-Eastern Marches; who, since we were brought into touch with this far-off corner of our Indian possessions have borne the heat, burden, and stress of every expedition (officially recognised or otherwise) with a cheerful willingness and zeal which has won the approbation of all who have worked with them, but whose labours too frequently pass unnoticed—I dedicate this humble work.

“Floreat custodes terminorum Imperii nostri.”

L. W. SHAKESPEAR  
(Colonel, 2nd Goorkhas).

DEHRA DOON, 1912-13.

## PREFACE

As I have found no book dealing completely and succinctly with Assam, its border land now so much in the public eye, and the many wild and interesting peoples dwelling along that border, which obliges the student to search through many books before arriving at the points of interest desired (if even then they are obtained), I have endeavoured to collect materials from all—to me—possible sources, and weaving them into narrative form, to produce something useful and readable at least for those who care about that little-known but very interesting corner of India. The success of my article which the *Army Review* printed in October, 1912, on this subject, has led me to attempt something more complete in detail; and with all its shortcomings I trust it may be appreciated by those interested in the past and future of this fertile and lovely land. If any criticisms may seem too trenchant, I trust the hope that there are those who will in the future benefit by statements of facts may be recognised as a sufficient excuse for having ventured into such, possibly to some, undesirable spheres. In this connection a remark of Commander Bellairs, R.N., in his interesting article on "Secrecy and Discussion," which ran to the effect that, if there is no criticism, which naturally goes with discussion, the teachings of history are apt to be perverted—may still further strengthen my excuse. Without certain of the books

mentioned in the Bibliography this could not have been attempted, and I desire to record my high appreciation of, and indebtedness to, the particular labours of their authors; and my gratitude to the Librarian of the Imperial Library, Calcutta, for his personal assistance so courteously given. My thanks are also due to certain friends who have helped with photographs, namely, those of the Ābors, Mishmis, and some of the photos dealing with Marām monoliths and Nagas where I was unable to go personally; the rest of the photos and sketches are my own.

I may add that this book has been *viséd* by Army Headquarters, whose suggested alterations, omissions, have been duly attended to.

L. W. SHAKESPEAR  
(Colonel, 2nd Goorkhas).

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HISTORY OF  
UPPER ASSAM, UPPER BURMAH  
AND  
NORTH-EASTERN FRONTIER

CHAPTER I

IN spite of the interest Assam has furnished to ethnologists in the past, due to the numerous and curious peoples living in and round it, as well as from the more recent military expeditions and the awakening of China with her ambition to monopolise the country lying to the north and east of its practically unknown borders; there is hardly any part of India which is less known to the general public. It has indeed probably only been heard of by the public as a tea-producing district, and one which has, since Lord Curzon's famous "Partition," become connected with the sedition of Eastern Bengal which lies immediately south of Assam proper. It is not thought of as ever having possessed a stirring history or an old civilisation; though this latter is attested by the numerous ancient forts, temples, and certain old high roads such as the Kāmāli Alli running 350 miles

from Cooch Behar to Narainpur, still in use in parts, which are to be found scattered up and down the length and breadth of the land. These probably only reveal a small portion of what may still remain for the archæologist when the jungle and forest which still cover so great a portion of Assam may be removed, as settlers and their cultivation gradually extend. That it was a densely populated country in the far-off past is shown by the extensive ruins of Kamātāpur near Cooch Behar in the west, stated by Buchanan Hamilton to be upwards of nineteen miles round and flourishing up to the end of the fifteenth century, when it fell a prey to the Moghuls—by the extensive ruins of old fortifications in the neighbourhood of Baliapāra not far from the foot of the Aka Hills—by the famous temples of Kāmakhya near Gauhati, and those at Charaideo, near which latter are also the remains of the old capital of Garhgaon. In the extreme eastern corner of Assam, viz., in the angle formed by the rivers Dibong and Dikrang within fifteen miles of our present frontier post of Sadiya and no great distance from the point whence General Bower's recent Abor expedition made its start, lie the extensive ruins of Bishmaknagar (Kundina) and a large fort of hewn stone together with four or five excavated tanks.

This showing that what is now almost a “terra incōgnita” to us, covered with more or less impenetrable jungle, was once the centre of a thriving community.

Mr. Kinney, who knew the Dibrugarh district well, alludes to the former high state of cultivation and energy of a people now sunk in apathy and opium eating, as evinced by ruins of magnificent buildings

and raised roadways found all over the country. The fine old Tengrai Raj Alli connecting Rangpur with Nāmrup for instance, is frequently met with in the heart of the forest, and parts of it in the more open spaces are in use still. Mr. T. T. Cooper also writing in 1873 of eastern Assam again testifies to the energy and civilisation formerly characteristic of this people and forming a striking contrast to the lethargic existence of the present-day scanty population. He says : “ The contemplation of these ruins surrounded by almost impenetrable jungle which has overgrown the once fertile and well cultivated fields of a people that has almost passed away, is calculated to strike one with an intense desire to learn more of the history of those terrible events which robbed a fertile land of a vast and industrious population, converting it into a wilderness of swamps and forests.”

Again the extensive region of the dense Nambhor Forest lying between Lumding Junction (on the Assam and Bengal Railway) and Golaghat and bordered by the Mikir and Naga Hills is known to cover ground at one time owned by the strong Kachāri clans in a high state of civilisation with their capital at Dimāpur on the Dhansiri river almost in the centre of the forest. When the engineers, Messrs. Thornhill, Buckle, and Venters in 1896-97 were arranging the earthwork of the Assam and Bengal Railway north from Lumding, they came on causeways, canals, and sites of buildings, notably in the vicinity of Rangapahar and Dimāpur now covered with jungle ; which jungle, however, forest experts speak of as being of no greater age than 200 years. As we shall see later on, history shows us the Kachāris were overwhelmed by the Ahoms and

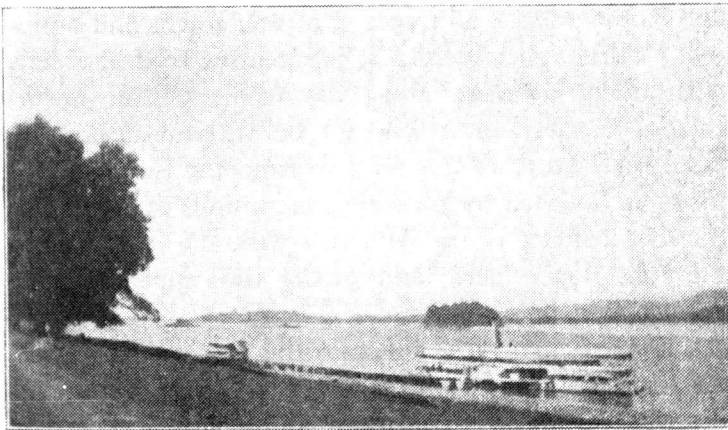
had their capital sacked in the middle of the sixteenth century, which was then deserted together with the entire region, and this was never re-occupied by either nation

Just these few facts go to prove that Assam, spoken of in old Moghul writings as "a land of mystery and witchcraft," does possess an interest which will repay those who care to peruse the illuminating works on this country by Messrs. Blochmann, Gait, Prinsep, and others. When these are read and one realises to what an extent civilisation had reached, the large armies that operated up and down the Brahmaputra valley, the depth of its religions, the engineering and architectural work left behind, one is inclined to wonder what has become of it all and of the peoples; and what caused the decay of power which permitted its once thriving valleys to be now choked and buried in densest forests? For the people now met with in Assam are a peaceful, almost effeminate race, in no great numbers, addicted in a large measure to opium eating, and not disposed to diligent labour; whence the necessity for importing the great numbers of coolies from India required to work on the tea gardens.

It is generally assumed that climatic conditions tended very largely to bring about this state of decay, at all events where the people were concerned; for the climate is a distinctly enervating one, and each race that has settled there has, in course of time, lost its vigour and been supplanted by hardier folk, who in their turn have, in spite of material progress as to civilisation, succumbed to the love of ease and luxury born of an enervating climate in a highly fertile land.

As to vanished cities, forts and other landmarks of

the past, their disappearance is attributable to the soft alluvial soils of the valleys, which permit the easy task for rivers of cutting for themselves fresh channels, and so frequently destroying and carrying away the towns and buildings which history tells us did exist along their banks. Examples of this are to be found in comparing a map of 1790 with one of about 1860 when the Brahmaputra's course below Gauhati will be seen to have shifted close on fifty miles within this



BRAHMAPUTRA AND RIVER STEAMER AT GAUHATI.

period ; while some twenty miles from the right bank of the same river between Nalbāri and Hājo are to be seen the arches of an ancient bridge once spanning an old course of the river, and known as the " Sil Sako." It stands now in the centre of a lake surrounded by miles of forest, and had several of its arches destroyed by the great earthquake of 1897. In the far eastern corner of the province beyond and not far from Sadiya are signs that the Brahmaputra and Lohit rivers flowed

in the far-off past much closer to the foot of the Ābor and Mishmi hills, and Hannay states his opinion that it was the gradual changing of the river's course further and further south which led to the abandonment of the cities of Kundina (Bishmaknagar) and Prithiminagar. Added to this force of Nature come those of earthquakes by which Assam has suffered seriously, and the marvellously rapid growth of vegetation; which when unchecked in a few years spreads, chokes up valleys, and obliterates, as in the case of the Dhansiri and Kopili valleys, all traces of former towns and buildings. Although this volume is intended to deal chiefly with tribes dwelling along the whole of our north-eastern borderland it will not be without interest to trace the history of the country from the most ancient times as revealed by rock-cut inscriptions and legends, the first contact of the Moghuls with the Ahoms then the ruling race here, and finally the appearance of the English on the scene.

The particular part of Assam this history deals with, viz., upper Assam from Goalpāra to Sadiya, comprises the whole valley of the Brahmaputra with a length of nearly 450 miles and a varying breadth of sixty to eighty miles, covering an area of over 30,000 square miles. To the north and east high mountains shut it off from Thibet and Bhutān, on the west it joins Bengal, while south and east another mountainous region—that of the Patkoi and Barail ranges—separates it from Burma and south-western China. It is thus almost completely surrounded by mountains which are inhabited by more or less savage tribes. The early history of Assam being purely legendary it is practically impossible to lift the veil lying over it, though here

and there a little light comes in from ancient inscriptions in India, such, for instance, as that on the famous Allahabad pillar erected in Chandragupta's time, 316-292 B.C., whereon we learn that Kāmarupa (as Assam was called in early days) was known of then as a State lying away east of Nepal to which King Chandragupta's fame had penetrated; and it had then, probably under its Hindoo Khettri Kings (the very earliest rulers in Assam), attained to a degree of civilisation almost equal to that of the Hindu dynasties in India of those days.

A copper-plate inscription records an invasion by Vikramaditya, King of Ujjain, about 57 B.C., and as he was a Buddhist it is probable he fostered that religion in the land where, as we shall see, it never took a serious hold. Major Hannay of the old Assam Light Infantry, who made considerable research into the ancient history of Assam, is of opinion that Kāmarupa was one of the earliest conquests of the Hindu Khettri Kings about 400 B.C., and was the seat of that primitive form of Hinduism which existed previous to Buddhism, and which again was followed in the middle of the fifteenth century by Brahminical Hinduism introduced by certain Brahmins from the city of Gaur, in Bengal.

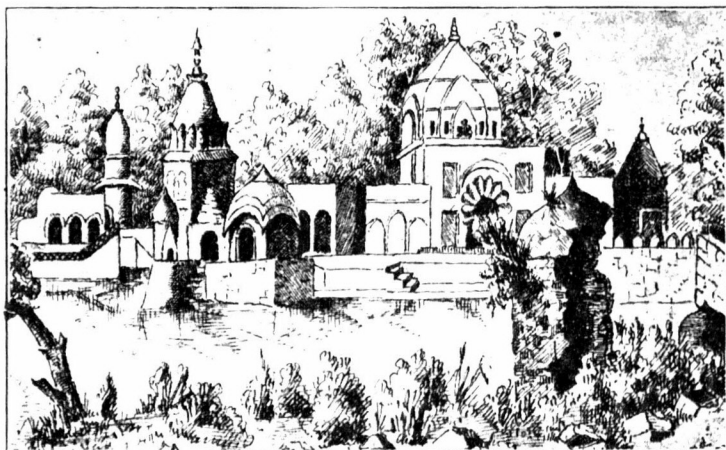
Another inscription shows a Gupta King, by name Samūdra, at the end of the fourth century A.D. exacting tribute from Kāmarupa, and from the following century this country came under the Gupta dynasty, lasting up to the first half of the ninth century. A Rajput, called Itari, rising to power, started the Pal dynasty, taking the name of Dharm Pal. Twelve kings of this dynasty are said to have reigned between

830 and 1140 A.D., and these in their turn gave way to that of the Senas, who however, being of Bengal, ruled only the western part of Kāmarupa.

That Assam and the Hukong Valley to the Irrawadi river and beyond, formed as it were a natural highway for old-time Indian kings with a desire for conquests far afield is known, and Forlong, in his researches, states an Indian King named Samudra (not the one previously mentioned) was ruling in upper Burma about 105 A.D., and that they were Hindus from that locality who led the Shans far down the Mekhong river into Siam ; while earlier still Chinese chronicles state an Indian prince from Cambōd in north-west India was reigning in Cambōdia, giving the name of his original homeland to his new territory. These chronicles also say adventurers from India founded kingdoms in Java and Malaya as far back as 166 A.D., and also that merchants from Alexandria or some other Roman port visited China a little later, travelling viâ Chiampa, the old name for Siam. All these Indians with their armies must have got there via Assam and the low passes of the Patkoi Range into the Hukong Valley and so further east. The difficult mountainous regions stretching from the Patkoi away down south to Arrakan precluded the possibility of passing masses of men through them, while long sea voyages were unknown to the Indian peoples of those days. Though certain historians are of opinion that Hindus from the ancient sea coast kingdom of Kalinga (Madras side) did make voyages to Java and that the Hindu ruined cities and temples found there are their handiwork.

Other copper plate inscriptions found in Assam show various lands having been made over to Brahmin

priests by certain rulers of the Pal dynasty between 990 and 1142 A.D., whose names are thus arrived at ; otherwise the first authentic information we have of Kāmarupa, viz., the country lying between the Karatoya river (flowing past Julpigori into the Brahmaputra near Goalundo) and Sadiya, is by the hand of the great Chinese traveller, Huien Tsiang, who came



ANCIENT TEMPLES IN UPPER ASSAM.

to this country in 630 A.D., visiting Gauhati and other places of sanctity.

Of the three strong tribes who long held dominion in different parts of upper Assam, the earliest to arrive in the country is surmised to have been the Kachāris, whose original habitat is believed to have been along the foot of the Darjiling hills and the Morang tract, which was known to the Nepalese as the "Kaccha country." These then travelled east and crossed the Brahmaputra, settling in what is now the Nowgong district between Jorhat and Gauhati.

Spreading from there, they populated the Dhansiri and Kopili valleys and all eastern Assam, eventually crossing the southern hills and occupying the present district of Cachar, to which they gave the name of their ancient home, after they had ousted the Tippera people.

The Chutiyas, an offshoot of the Kachāri tribe, alone used a written character, but made no use of it in recording events.

The second tribe to rise into prominence were the Kocches, allies to the Kachāris, whose home lay just east of the Karatoya river where the little State of Cooch Behar is now. Their kingdom when consolidated comprised the whole of Kāmarupa, which then lay chiefly on the north bank of the Brahmaputra, with Gauhati and the country towards Goalpāra on the south bank.

As these two tribes had kept no records, our information regarding them up to the arrival on the scene of the Ahoms, comes from Mahomedan historians who recorded the different Moghul invasions, and from local legends, here and there substantiated by rock-cut and copper plate inscriptions which have come to light at Tezpur, Gauhati and elsewhere.

The third and the most important tribe are the Ahoms, because they possessed a literature of a sort and certainly kept written historical records—"buranjis" as they are called, meaning "stores of instruction for the ignorant," whereby we have a definite history of events in upper Assam since their arrival there about 1220 A.D. They were non-Buddhist Shans of the great Tai race who inhabited the old kingdom of Pông (the Mogoung of the present day) which stretched from the upper Chindwyn to the upper

Irrawadi rivers ; and these people held sway in the Brahmaputra valley until the troubles with the Burmese in 1825 led to the appearance on the scene of the last dominant Power—the English. Besides these three large tribes, other smaller ones ruled in outlying portions of the country, as, for instance, the Chutiyas, owning the country between the Subansiri and Disang rivers, and the Morans who dwelt opposite the Chutiyas on the south bank of the Brahmaputra, east of the present Sibsagor. Both are of the same stock as the Kachāris, but the former is of very ancient origin, the Deori Chutiyas claiming proudly to belong to the descendants of the Hindu Khettri line, which Hannay says seems to be corroborated by the fact that the Chutiya language, now only known to the Deoris or temple priests, contains a large proportion of Sanscrit and Hindu words plus a certain amount of Burmese from the Shan conquerors, whose “buranjis” state the Chutiyas were the only possessors of a written language they met with at the time of their advent into Assam. Whether the Chutiyas were the original builders of the cities of Bishmaknagar (Kundina) and Prithiminagar beyond Sadiya, and now covered by forests, is not known, but Hannay is of opinion that they were occupied in the time of the Khettri Kings over 2,000 years ago.