

Caste, Tribes & Culture of India

Vol. I

ASSAM

K. P. Bahadur

CASTE, TRIBES & CULTURE OF INDIA ASSAM

Is an authentic in-depth document on the traditional but fast vanishing glamour, colourful customs and folklore of varied ethnic peoples inhabiting the picturesque region of Assam. It portrays both the well known and lesser celebrated tribal communities of the region. The panoramic canvass of the book imbibes a detailed study of such diverse tribal peoples as the Garo (s), the Kachari (s), Khasi (s), Mikir (s), the Meithei (s), Naga (s) and the Santhals. Accounts of the "vanished glory, the charming manners and customs, and the colourful tradition of these races" have been grouped and characterised particularly for the first time here in a scientific manner. These purport to the book's Chapter divisions viz 1. Origin and Habitat, 2. General Appearance, 3. Domestic Life, 4. Religion, 5. Superstition and Folk-Lore. The format is Demy octavo, and comprises matter that is indispensable and of permanent 'reference' shelf-value for all libraries, institutions or individuals connected with Anthropology, Ethenology, Geography, Human interest, Social Sciences, History and Tourism.

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K.P. Bahadur (1924—) took his master's degree in English Literature before entering the Indian Administrative Service. Presently he is Secretary cum Commissioner, 20 point programme, U.P. Government. He is author of a series of books on religion & Literature. His recent release Ramacharitmanasa of Goswami Tulsidasa has been a tremendous study.

CASTE, TRIBES & CULTURE OF INDIA :
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K. P. BAHADUR



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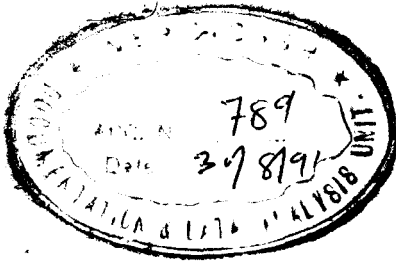
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Origin, Habitat & General Characteristics

The Nagas

The Nagas are a most singular race of people. They are of different classes, even though they have many characteristics in common. There are the Angami Nagas, the Ao Nagas, the Lhotas, the Regmas, Semas, the Nagas of the North-Eastern hills, and those of Cachar and Manipur, to mention only a few. The tribes are constantly forming new groups and associations, like the Chakhesangs, Zeliangs, Shamnyu-yungmangs and others. Thus the Nagas have quite a number of clans and affiliations.

The origin of the word 'Naga' is interpreted in all sorts of different ways. One belief is that it is derived from the Assamese word 'naga' (Sanskrit 'nagna') meaning 'naked', for the reason that the Nagas were comparatively ill-clad. It could also be from the vernacular 'nag' which means a mountain. Or it may be the corrupted form of 'log' meaning 'people'. In fact some Naga tribes use the word 'nok' for people, which closely resembles the Hindi word 'log'.

The Nagas are a kind of Indo-Mongoloids whose presence was noted as early as the 10th Century before Christ, at the period of the Vedas. They were known as 'Kirata' or non-Aryans, and were described in ancient Sanskrit literature as subsisting on the flesh of the animals they hunted, roots and fruits of the forest, a warlike race, dressed in skins, and wielding formidable weapons. They are described as 'golden

hued' in contrast to the dark complexioned people of the plains. It is also mentioned that they were rich, having exploited the plentiful minerals available in the hill regions and the forest produce of the mountain-sides. They were also expert weavers, a trait which exists amongst the race even now. It is mentioned in the *Mahabharata* that the great god Shiva took the form of a Kirata, with his consort Uma in the guise of a Kirata woman, and went in this form to meet the warrior Arjuna. Thus it is evident that the Nagas are not an alien race, but are a branch of the rich and varied tribes of India.

Nagaland is now split up into three districts viz, Kohima, Mokokchung and Tuensang. These are administered from Kohima. The southern base is Manipur, with Burma on the east, Nefa to the north, and the Assam valley on the west side. The Naga country is covered largely with hill ranges having many spurs and ridges, and occasional gentle slopes. The height varies from four thousand to about ten thousand feet above sea level. The population is concentrated on the higher hills. Rainfall varies from 70 to 100 inches in the year. Numerous rivers and streams flow through Nagaland, but there is a marked absence of lakes and tanks.

Much of the forest has been cut down to make way for cultivation, and most of the wild game has already been exploited. Thus there are few wild animals left, like elephants, tigers, leopards and so forth. The Indian hornbill bird is greatly prized by the Naga inhabitants. It is used for decoration, and magic is also associated with it. The Naga State has a population of 5.16 lakhs and an area of 16,527 square kilometres according to the 1971 census.

The traditional belief is that the Naga tribes migrated from the south, except in the case of the Kacha Nagas whose ancestors are said to have come from the mountains known as Japvo. There exists an isolating tendency amongst the race. One can almost categorise the type of Naga by a mere study of facial characteristics. In some villages the men are of tall

stature, while others are marked out by the beauty of their women. Some are even distinguished by peculiar traits of character. For example, the villages of Kidima and Nerharma abound in men who are fond of litigation, and Tofima has the distinction of possessing a large number of liars !

Various tales are told about the origin of the Nagas. The Angamis, Lhotas, and Semas are supposed to be descended from four brothers, and distinguished by the amount of clothing that they were authorised to wear. The eldest of these brothers was gentle and virtuous and so his parents gave him a picturesque dress to wear, The Angamis are his descendants. The second brother was troublesome and so he was given scantier clothing. He was the ancestor of the Aos. The third brother, from whom the Lhotas are said to have been descended, was much alike the second in conduct, and so he was clothed in much the same manner. The youngest brother, the ancestor of the Semas, was markedly wicked. When his parents sent him to scare away the birds from the field, he neglected his task and plucked off all the pumpkins. Fed up with his naughtiness, his parents tied a piece of cloth round his waist, and leaving him just like that, turned him out.

Another story is that the Naga tribes were all descended from one father, but he was the son of a second wife. The children of the first wife were given proper clothes, but the child of the second wife could get only a small piece of cloth which was sufficient only to wrap around the waist, and so his descendants still wear the kilt.

Yet another story of the origin of the Naga tribes is as follows : In the village of Kezakenoma there lived an old couple who had three sons. The sons used to take loads of paddy to spread out to dry on a huge stone. The heaps of paddy would multiply when laid on the stone due to the influence of a spirit living in it. One day the sons quarrelled among themselves about their precedence in spreading loads of paddy on the stone, and fearing that there would be bloodshed, their parents broke some eggs on the stone, laid firewood on it,

and set it afire. On being heated, the stone suddenly burst with a sound like thunder, and the spirit inhabiting it went up to heaven in a cloud of smoke. The three sons thereupon separated, and became the ancestors of the Angamis, Lhotas and Semas. It is said that the great stone, cracked when its spirit flew away, still exists opposite the house of the original founder of the village.

There are several legends concerning the origin of the Nagas of Manipur. According to the Tangkhul legend, one day a sow was tracked down a valley by the younger of two brothers. The sow littered by the banks of the Iril River, and the young man stayed behind to look after her. He found the country so fascinating that he decided to stay there. He would send the produce of the plain country, to his brother whom he had left behind in the hills, and get presents in turn from the latter. After some time the younger brother stopped sending gifts, which so enraged his elder brother, that he came down and forcefully obtained them. Subsequently, perhaps based on this legend, a curious custom came into existence according to which the Tangkhuls would swoop down on the day of the Naga sports and loot the women vendors, which made the Manipuris prohibit their women from frequenting the market.

Another legend concerns the Marring Nagas. It is said that they left the valley because of the heat and the mosquitoes, taking fire with them. The fire was extinguished when they reached a ridge between Hundung and Ukrul, but to make up for it the deity taught them to get fire from stone. The sacred stone, *maibung*, stands there till this day.

A legend concerning the Tangkhuls is given by themselves as follows : Some of the Tangkhuls were trapped in a cave, from which they emerged one by one. But a large tiger, who was watching them, devoured each of them as soon as they emerged. Thereupon they took recourse to a stratagem. They dressed up an effigy to make it appear as a live man, and left it outside to distract the tiger's attention. Having done so they rushed out together, and the tiger was so greatly baffled by

seeing the crowd, that he fled. To mark the occasion they set up a large stone on the hill-top, which is there to this day.

A story which features the Nagas, the Kukis and the Manipuris, is about a jumping contest held between the representatives of the three tribes. The Kuki leapt from the top of one range to the crest of another. The Naga, too, jumped across, but his foot slipped and touched the water of the stream. The Manipuri tumbled right into the river. For this reason the Naga bathes only now and then, the Kuki scrupulously avoids it, and the Manipuri, because of his dropping headlong into the river, is rather fond of bathing.

A legend about the origin of the Marams is also interesting. A flood came and destroyed everyone except a couple of the name of Medungasi and Simoting. The couple wondered if they should get married, but since there was no one to advise them, they went out into the forest. Here a god appeared to the man and told him that they could marry but their descendants were forbidden to eat the flesh of the pig. Therefore to this day the Marams do not eat pork.

The origin of the Marring Nagas is also curious. It is said that fourteen of them, seven men and seven women, emerged from the earth. At that time the men and the women wore the same clothes (the dhoti). But in order to make a distinction, the men tied up their hair into a knot in front, and the women behind. The women lengthened their waist-cloth while the men shortened theirs. Not finding themselves comfortable in the plains they migrated into the hills, where they are living to this day. Another legend about the Marrings is that while they emerged from a cave, a horrible beast would devour them. The beast, however, was slain by a deity with two horns, and they could get out safely out of the cave.

A legend concerns the origin of the Vuites, another Naga clan. One day the head of the Thados clan of the name of Aisan Ningthon found two eggs in a basket. He ate one and found it bitter. The other he put aside, so that it may become

mature and nice to eat. From this egg, however, there emerged a lad who became chief of the Vuite clan.

Though constantly at war among themselves, the Nagas have a certain unity also. They intermarry only among their own clan, and not among tribes other than the Naga community. Though differing in build and complexion, they have common characteristics like a coarse and savage face, and a dull timid disposition. In the use of weapons, too, they have a similarity, for they all use only javelins and spears.

The Angami Naga is a particularly lithe and agile person. He is capable of a great deal of hard work and endurance, marches long distances and carries heavy loads. He has a curious way of bathing. The water from some stream is carried in a hollow bamboo, and the soap is made by pounding into pulp the fibrous stalk of a creeper which gives a lather like ordinary soap. A practice which has a smack of modernity is the wearing of wigs. The wigs were not worn by women, however, but by old men whose hair had greyed ! They were made of bear's hair, with human hair hanging at the back.

The Angamis were very fond of wearing something as an ear-ornament. This was not necessarily a silver or gold ear-ring, but anything which took their fancy, like plugs of black wool, pieces of red paper or cloth, and even the cog-wheel of a watch !

The men also wore cowries in rows of three or four. Originally these signified exploits in war, but gradually they became emblems of love, and the fourth line of cowries was worn by a man who had an intrigue with a married woman with two girls of the same name, with two daughters of one father, or with a mother and her daughter at one and the same time !

The Nagas eat mostly rice and meat, preferring beef and

pork. Though they have now started taking tea, and milk which was tabooed sometime ago, their favourite drink is rice beer of which they consume large quantities.

A word must be said about head-hunting. According to the Nagas themselves they got into this practice by seeing an ant and a lizard fight over a berry which a bird had dropped. The ant cut off the lizard's head! and thus provided the impetus to take heads. It is believed that the soul and its receptacle has its place in the head, so to bring home a head means capturing a great deal of spiritual power. Often it is the way to win the heart and hand of some lovely damsel in the tribe. Indeed at one time a Naga who had not won a head, could not get a decent girl in marriage. All these factors led to the Naga cult of head-hunting. So much was the desire for heads that they were taken most cruelly and treacherously. A man would hide near a tank, and suddenly pounce upon and kill any woman or child who came to draw water. Or a group of Nagas would swoop down upon a hapless village, particularly when the men were out in the field, and behead as many old persons, women, women and children as they could, and be off before the men of the village returned. Davis records that when some men of Mozema went to Kohima, they killed one man, five women, and twenty young children, for their heads, and one of the on-lookers told him 'that he never saw such a fine sport, for it was just like killing fowls'.* Fortunately all this is past history, and the last recorded case of head-hunting was in 1958.*

The Khasis

The Khasis are found in the Khasi and Jaintia Hill districts of Assam in an area of about 6,157 square miles. A sub-division of the Khasis are the Syntengs (also called Pnars). While the Khasis inhabit mostly the Khasi Hills, the Syntengs

* A.W. Davis, *Census of India*, 1891, Vol. I, pp. 237f.

* Verrier Elwin, *Nagaland*.

are found in the Jaintia Hills. Apart from these two main tribes, the L ynngams inhabit the western portion of the Khasi Hills, the Bhois the hills to the north and north-east of the Kamrup and Sylhet districts, and the Wars are found in the south. Some Handem clans (sometimes called Kuki) are found in the extreme eastern portion of the Jaintia Hills.

The Khasis are brown in their complexion, varying from dark to light brown. The people living in the hills have a lighter complexion than those of the plains, and those dwelling in the village of Cherrapunji are particularly fair, while the L ynngams are the darkest of the Hill Khasis. The males cut their hair short, and keep a single lock at the back side which they call the 'grandmother's lock'.

The Khasis are short of stature with muscular bodies and highly developed calves. With such a body they can carry very heavy weights which they do by means of a band worn across the forehead. The women, too, are hardy and buxom, with greatly developed calves, which they pride in. The people are of a cheerful nature, fond of music, good humoured, good tempered, loving outdoor life, and attached to their families. The Khasis are in general an industrious race, capable of hard labour. They are enamoured of betels and betel-nuts, hard drinkers, and inveterate gamblers. Mc Cosh describes them thus : 'They are a powerful, athletic race of men, rather below the middle size, with a manliness of gait and demeanour. They are fond of their mountains, and look down with contempt upon the degenerate race of the plains, jealous of their power, brave in action, and have an aversion to falsehood'.

The origin of the Khasis is very uncertain. According to one view they are connected with the Burmese, to whose [king they used, in the ancient days, to send an axe as an annual tribute to signify their submission. According to another tradition they came from the north and spread upto Sylhet; but from there they were driven back by a huge flood during which the Khasi lost his book while swimming (while the Bengali managed to retain his !) which accounts for their having no

written characters up to a long time. Yet another theory has it that they originally came into Assam from Burma via the Patkoi Range. It seems most probable however, that they moved into Assam from the east, and are possibly an off-shoot of the Mon-Anam family of eastern India.

The Khasis lay great stress on the potency of the egg. They use it for divination, for religious sacrifices, place it on the stomach of a man who has died and afterwards break it on the funeral pyre. This suggests an affinity to certain tribes of the Malay Archipelago whose medicine man, called *gaji-guru*, can see from the yolk of an egg which he breaks while counting from one to seven, the disease of a man who is ill. The Khasis also worship the serpent demon, and in this way appear to be akin to the people of Pagan who were originally 'nagas' or serpent worshippers. The Palaung women even now wear a dress which is like the skin of a snake. Another custom which is similar to the one which the Khasis observe at birth, is that of mixing placenta with ashes and placing it in a pot hung from a tree. This custom is observed as ancestor worship in Mandeling on the west coast of Sumatra. Thus there may be possible affinity between the Khasis and these Sumatra tribes.

The Khasis have now become modernised in respect of dress, and men wear knicker-bockers, [stockings and boots, coat, waist-coat, a collar without tie, and a cloth peaked cap. The women wear a chemise, a short coat of velvet, stockings, and shoes. But in the ancient days the dresses were quite different, and much more colourful and picturesque. The male attire consisted of a sleeveless coat which left the arms bare, with a fringe at the bottom, and a row of tassels across the chest. The head wear consisted of a cap with ear-flaps, or a white turban. The women wore a number of garments, which made them look somewhat overdressed. Next to the skin was a piece of cloth called *ka jympien*, fastened to the loins by a cloth belt. Over this a long piece of cloth hanging loosely from the shoulders down to a little above the ankles, called *ka jainsem*. Over the *jainsem* there was a sort of cloak of a gay colour called *ka jain kup*. A wrapper, either white or of some

bright hue, was cast around the head and shoulders. This was known as the *ka-tap-moh-khlieh*.

The Khasis also wear considerable jewellery. The women are fond of gold and coral bead necklaces, the beads being a hollow sphere filled with lac. A peculiar ornament is the silver or gold crown with tassels of the same metal hanging down the back, which is worn by young women at dances. Both men and women wear ear-rings and silver chains. The men wear the chains round their waist like a belt and the women hang them round their necks—dangling almost to their waists ! The Lyingam men also wear cornelian bead necklaces called '*pieng blei* or 'necklaces of the gods'.

A peculiar ornament is the *rupa-tylli* or silver collar—a broad, flat, silver collar, hanging down from the neck, and secured by a fastening behind. Gold and silver bracelets are also worn. The Lyingam and Garo women wear so many brass ear-rings that their ear lobes are greatly distended. Their necklaces have a large number of blue beads of glass. After a Lyingam man has given a big feast he is entitled to wear silver armlets above the elbows and on his wrist.

The Khasis use swords, spears, bows and arrows as weapons, and carry shields for defence. They also knew about gunpowder and used the cannon. The swords they use are very heavy and cumbersome because they are forged, handle and blade, from wrought iron or occasionally, steel. The spear is about six and a half feet long with a wooden or bamboo handle. The bow (*ka ryntieh*) is the Khasi's favourite weapon. Two kinds of arrows are discharged from it—the one with a barbed head (*ki-pling*), used for hunting, and the other with a plain head (*sop*), used for archery, which is the Khasi's national game. The shield is circular, and is made of hide. It is studded with brass or silver. The Mikirs or Bhois use the spear and the bill-hook merely for cutting down jungle. They are the peaceful type of Khasis, quiet and hard working, and devoted to their work. Of them, Butler says : 'Unlike any other hill tribes of whom we have knowledge, the Mikirs seem devoid

of anything approaching to a martial spirit. They are a quiet industrious race of cultivators, and the only weapons used by them are the spear and the *da* hand-bill for cutting down jungle. It is said, after an attempt to revolt from the Assamese rule, they were made to forswear the use of arms, which is the cause of the present generation having no predilection for war'.

The Garos :

The Garos are inhabitants of the hills known by that name, (about 3,140 square miles), which are bounded on the north and west by the district of Goalpara, on the south by Mymensingh, and on the east by the Khasi Hills. But they have also spread to the surrounding districts.

The Garos are darker than their neighbours, the Khasis, and have Mongolian features. They generally have wavy or curly hair, though sometimes they also wear it straight. Colonel Dalton's description of the Garos in his *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* is significant : 'Their faces are round and short. The forehead is not receding, but projects very little beyond the eye, which is small, on a level with the face, very dark and obliquely set. The want of prominence in the nose is remarkable. The whole face has the appearance of being flattened, the mouth sharing in the compressed appearance and not at all prognathous'.

The Garos are short in stature, and though hardy, they do not show the development of the lower limbs which is a marked characteristic of their neighbours, the Khasis. Those living on the higher ranges are somewhat healthier. Some keep beards, but their moustaches usually have only a few hair because they pull out the rest. The hair styles are the same for both men and women. They keep the hair tied up in a knot behind, or wear a pugree. The women are buxom and healthy when young, though they lose their beauty quickly with age. Their ears have to bear the weight of enormous ear-rings which quite often breaks their ear-lobes into two—and this is a great disfigurement.

The Garos are friendly and pleasant by nature, and straightforward, honest and tactful. They are very much taken up by litigation. They have few vices, and apart from their passion for drinking, they are an abstemious race, for they do not take any hemp or opium, abstain from gambling, and are not indebted. As regards personal cleanliness, the Garos leave much to be desired, for they seldom bathe. On the whole they are a peaceful, law abiding race, cheerful and light hearted, industrious and conscientious.

The principal garment worn by the Garos is the *gando*, which is a strip of blue cotton cloth with stripes of red. It passes between the legs and is then wound round the waist, and tucked in at the back. Sometimes the end of the flaphas rows of white conch-shell beads. On his head the Garo wears a turban of dark blue or white cotton cloth, but for especial occasions he dons one of red silk with an ornamented fringe. The turban is wound in many folds round and round, but leaves the top of the head bare. There is a strange belief to account for this. It is said that the huluk ape, when it sees the tangled hair on top of the head, calls out 'huh! huh!' in derision as if to say 'what a miserable head of hair' and runs off into the branches of a tree. Thus, keeping the head bare drives off the ape! When it is cold the Garo puts a cotton cloth or a blanket over his shoulders, otherwise the *gando* is all that he wears. At a dance the Garo man might wear a garment called *pandra*—a black cloth reaching to the waist, wound around the body and laced across with white cotton bands.

The women's main garment is the *riking*, which consists of a cloth just big enough to encircle the waist, like a petticoat. It is fastened on the top with two strings, and leaves the thighs bare. The women leave their bosom uncovered, except when it is cold, when they cover themselves with a shawl, generally of a blue and white cloth. On festive occasions the women wear a dress of coloured silk much of the kind worn by Khasi women, called a *marang-jasku*. The women sometimes go bare-headed, and at other times wear a turban like those of the

men, or a folded turban called the *odoreka* or *salchak*, which is almost in the form of a cap.

As in other tribes, both men and women among the Garos wear ornaments. The men wear two kinds of brass rings in their ears. Those worn in the lobe are called *nadogbi* or *otonga*, and as many as thirty or forty are worn in each ear ! In the upper part of the ear they wear a very small brass ring called *nadirong*, which is sometimes ornamented with four small brass discs attached to the outer and lower edge. Occasionally a semi-circular piece of brass, silver, or crystal, to which a string of beads is attached, is added to it.

Men and women both wear necklaces with barrel-shaped red beads. On festive occasions the *kadisil* is worn. This is a round circular ornament with brass studs, worn round the head. Another strange kind of ornament which only the village headman is entitled to wear is the *jacksil*. This is a particularly heavy ring, usually of iron, but sometimes of brass or silver, worn just above the elbow.

The women, like the men, also wear many varieties of ornaments. They too wear brass rings, called *shishas*, in their ears, but of a much larger size, and heavier. Often more than fifty rings are worn in each ear, and the inevitable consequence is that the ear lobes can't bear the weight and get torn. Despite this the rings are not done away with. Instead, they are tied together by a strong string, and supported from the head ! The women of the Akawes and Chisak tribes wear an enormous necklace of many many rows of blue and white or red beads, which hangs very low over their bosoms.

When a man dies, his widow must take off her ear-rings. An adulterous woman was in the old days punished by tearing off her ear-rings. But afterwards she was required only to take them off and not wear them till she was absolved of the charge of infidelity.

The women wear a kind of waist-band called *senki*,

which has in it several rows of cylindrical shaped beads. Brass and bronze bracelets, too, are worn. A peculiar and spectacular head ornament, which is worn by women who take part in a dance, is the *pilni* or *salchak-maldong*. This is a bamboo comb which the woman sticks into the knot of her hair at the back. A strip of cloth, ornamented with cylindrical beads, is attached to the comb, and this hangs down the back of the head.

The weapons used by the Garos are the sword, spear, and occasionally the bow. They have, of course, the shield for defence. The swords are very ill-designed and cumbersome to use. The grip is curved and very thin, and ends in a sharp edge, so that the sword can be stuck on the ground by his side when a Garo halts. In fact the sword is more of use in clearing brushwood and jungle growth, than as a weapon. It is made from hilt to the point, of one piece of iron. The Garo spear is much better and more effective. Its blade is exceedingly sharp, and it is attached firmly to the bamboo shaft. Bears, and even tigers, can be killed by the spear, and it is used for slaughtering pigs for food. Unlike the Khasis, the Garos seldom use the bow.

The shields are of two kinds. The *sepi* is of wood. It consists of flat pieces of wood bound by thin cane strips. The other kind is the *dani*, made of bear-skin or cow-hide stretched on a wooden frame.

The Mikirs

The Mikirs are mostly found in the hills which bear their name. The origin of the name 'Mikir' is not known. They call themselves 'Arlengs', which means 'man'. Their complexion is a light yellow brown, and they are tall and muscular. Like the Khasis, they can carry heavy burdens upon their back. They wear a thin moustache, and their hair is gathered into a knot which hangs behind the head. The girls are often fair complexioned.

The Mikir dresses almost like the Khasi. He wears a

dhoti of cotton, or if wealthy, of silk. His coat is a sleeveless striped jacket with a long fringe behind. A thick wrapper called *bor-kapor* is worn in the cold weather. On the head there is a cap of black and red cloth, or a turban.

The women wear a petticoat of white cloth with red stripes, secured round the waist by an ornamental girdle. The upper garment is a wrapper drawn under the arms and tightly lacing the breasts. Normally they are bare-headed, but use a black scarf in funeral dances. Their hair is drawn back and tied into a knot. When a girl attains puberty it is usual for her to tattoo a vertical line with indigo down the middle of her forehead, her nose, upper lip and chin.

The ornaments are the usual ones. The ear ornament is a large silver tube inserted into the lobes of the ear. Ordinarily ear-rings of gold or silver are also worn. Necklaces of gold, silver, or coral beads are worn, and on festive occasions, feathers in the turban.

The weapons, too, are the usual ones—a long knife, a spear, and bows and arrows. The bow is made of bamboo with a string of strong bamboo fibre.

The Kacharis

The Kacharis are widely spread in Assam, but they are to be found outside also, in the north-east of Bengal, in Koch-Berar, and in the Tippera Hills. The branch of this race which became powerful was in the kingdom of Kamarupa (Koch). The earliest mention of the Eastern branch of the Kacharis is under the name of the Churiyas. The Ahoms, with whom they had a long struggle, were ultimately victorious, and drove the Kacharis to the foot of the Naga Hills. But the Ahoms pressed on their victory, and the Kachari Raja moved to Maibong, and then to Khaspur in Kachar. Here the Kacharis came under Hindu influence, and their kings, Krishna Chandra and his brother Govinda Chandra, professed Brahminism. It is said that they were placed inside a huge copper replica of a

cow, and on emerging were declared Kshatriyas, descendants of Bhima of the *Mahabharata*. Consequently the Darrang Kacharis consider themselves to be children of Bhima (*bhima-ni-fsa*).

King Govinda Chandra's reign was short. The Burmese constantly oppressed him, and finally drove him to Sylhet. He was reinstated in power with the help of the East India Company, but later he was murdered and his kingdom became part of the British dominion.

The Kacharis are distinctly separated into the Northern and Southern races. There is no intermarriage between the two, and the dialects also greatly differ. A story is related about the reason for this cleavage which has to do with the war of the tribe with the Ahoms. It is said that the Ahoms were pursuing the Kacharis, and their king, Dimasa, had to retreat when hard pressed. But the retreat was stopped by a deep river. Thus King Dimasa was in a fix, with the enemy on one side and the river on the other. In the night when he slept, he had a dream in which a god appeared and said that the king and his army should enter the river at a spot where they saw a heron standing in the water, but no one should look back. Next morning the king saw a heron, as the god had said, and led his men to the spot. They found that the river had turned mysteriously shallow there, and began to get across. But while some had managed to get across, others were in the middle of the river, and yet others still this side of it, a man, wondering if his son was following or not, looked back. Immediately the waters deepened, and everyone had to cope with this unexpected turn of events. Some saved themselves by clutching rushes (*khagris*) and are consequently known as Khagrabarias. Others caught hold of reeds (*nals*) and are called Narbarias. The Dimasas were those who could get across safely.

The Meitheis.

The Meitheis are residents of Manipur State. The country given the name of *Methoi Leipak* is their abode, On the

west there lies the district of Cachar, the frontier touches Upper Burma, and towards the south there are the Chin and the Lushai Hills.

About their origin there is a legend according to which at the beginning of the Kaliyuga age was born one Pakhangba, who would assume the form of a god in the day and a man at night. It is said he could change shape at will and turn himself into a snake, but unfortunately his life was cut short by an unhappy accident in which his son, seeing him in the house and mistaking him for someone else, killed him with a spear. According to another story, the ancestry of the first ruling King of Manipur, Pakhangba, is traced to Brahma himself. According to Colonel McCulloch several tribes occupied Manipur, viz, the Koomuls, the Looangs Moirangs and the Meithei, and by degrees the last named subdued them all. It seems most likely that the Meitheis are descended from the surrounding hill tribes, and have close connection with the Nagas. The inhabitants of Manipur account for the name from the word '*mani*' or jewel, which the Rajas of old possessed.

In appearance the Meitheis approach the Aryan type. Their girls are fair, sometimes with brownish-black hair, brown eyes, and rosy cheeks. The unmarried girls wear the hair behind their heads, combed back and tied into a knot, and left loose. The hair is combed forward in the front and cut, so as to reach a little above the eyebrow. Married women grow their hair long, comb it back from the forehead, and tie it into a knot behind.

The men are strong, well built and muscular. Their stature varies, some being tall and others short. They have wide chests and well developed limbs. The men wear their hair long, combed back from the forehead and gathered into a coil behind. Beards and moustaches are uncommon.

As regards dress, there used to be many restrictions imposed by the old rulers. For example, certain articles of dress could be worn only if permitted by the Raja, particularly in his

presence. Thus a silk dhoti with purple patterns, or an orange coloured one, could be worn only by the princes and the sons-in-law of the Raja, and not by persons of inferior rank. A red or pink dhoti could be worn in the presence of the ruler only by privileged persons. Turbans with silk borders could not be worn in the royal presence. In the same way, women could not wear gold embroidered *chadars* in the presence of the Raja. The carrying of pieces of cloth of different colours, which the Meitheis used as rugs, also had a formal usage. Persons of high rank could carry a red wollen cloth, those of a lesser rank a green wollen one, and those of a rank lower, a cotton cloth.

In general, the men adopted the usual Indian dress, viz, the dhoti and *kurta*, and occasionally a *chadar*. In winter a padded coat with long sleeves and big collars is worn by those who can afford it. A short pugree forms the head gear.

The women wear a piece of cloth called a *fanek*, covering the lower body. This is hitched up to the knee and tucked in at the waist., It is of cotton or silk, with horizontal stripes. The bottom is stitched together, and has a colourful border. A thin white chadar is worn over the *fanek*, called the *in-na-phi*. In winters a short tight fitting jacket of satin, black, blue, or green velvet may be worn. Girls below the age of puberty have the upper part of the body bare, wearing only a *fanek* round the waist.

There are festive dresses for occasions like sports (boating and wrestling), and at dances or religious festivals women wear a very gay costume consisting of a small black velvet cap trimmed with pearls, a close fitting jacket of black cloth or velvet with gold trimming on the sleeves, a white cloth wound lightly round the waist and upto breasts, and a green or red petticoat with a band of sequin ornamentation at the bottom of it. The costume, complete with decoration and ornaments, is very gay, and due to its prohibitive cost it is often obtained on hire.

Ornaments consist mainly of bracelets, necklaces, and earrings. Ankle and toe ornaments are not worn. The women wear a small gold pin in each nostril. As in dress, there were restrictions on the use of ornaments, and permission to wear ones of gold had to be obtained from the Raja, so far as ordinary classes were concerned. Men as well as women wore earrings, generally a thin plating of gold over lac. Women of the upper classes wore necklaces, quite often of pure unalloyed gold.

The weapons used by the Meitheis were the *dao*, the dart (*aramba*), and a catapult, which replaced the bow, firing pellets of hardened clay. Shields made of buffalo hide and studded by brass knobs, were carried mainly on ceremonial occasions. The *dao* was a blade from one to two feet in length, firmly fixed in a wooden or metal handle. The dart (*arama*) consisted of a heavy pointed piece of iron, attached to a bamboo rod and twelve long quills of peacock feathers. The handle was used to fling the iron piece with unerring accuracy. Gunpowder was known to the Meitheis, and they could make rough matchlocks and breechloading guns.

The Santhals

The Santhals were originally residents of the Santhal parganas of Bihar. They later migrated to Assam and settled in the northern part of the Goalpara district at the foot of the Bhutan Hills.

The Santhals are a dark complexioned race, strong and healthy. They are simple in their habits, and peace loving. They dress scantily. The men wear a dhoti, and wrap their heads with a towel in the form of a pugree. Often the lower limbs are covered by a variety of loin cloth only.

The women wear a saree almost in the same manner as Bengali women, and a blouse. The ornaments are few, and are usually of silver.

The Santhals are very good archers, and are always equipped with a bow. With them, the bow has almost a sacramental significance. When a child is born, his umbilical cord is cut by a steel arrow, which is then laid by the side of the infant for five days. The initiation of the grown up child into the use of the bow is an important and significant occasion. In marriage the women give a display with the bow, and when a man dies all his bows and arrows are burnt in the funeral pyre. So is the case with a woman, except that in her case only one of her bows and one arrow are burnt with her body.