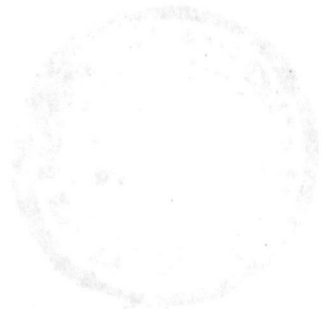


GEOGRAPHY OF ASSAM



**Abani K. Bhagabati
Ashok K. Bora • Bimal K. Kar**

GEOGRAPHY OF ASSAM



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Dedicated to
Professor S. P. Mandal
and
Late Professor S. D. Roy
of
Darrang College, Tezpur

Two different events in a very short span of time, one being really unbearable, prompted us to bring out this book with great haste. While the basic plan for the book was set to require a concrete shape Professor S. P. Mandal, a really geography teacher, retired from his long service as the head of the department of geography of Darrang College, Tezpur. Subsequently Professor S. D. Roy, a devoted teacher and social worker, who was heading the department, suddenly left this world for heavenly abode after a brief illness. Incidentally, both of the authors, class mates in the Patna University, became colleagues in Darrang College and immediate neighbour in an urban enclave called Rabber Canton at Tezpur for more than thirty years. The authors and the editors of this book, most of whom, are either their direct students or colleagues, thus considered it to be befitting to dedicate their works in memory of

Preface

The geography community of the north-east, more particularly of the state of Assam has been in urgent need of an exhaustive book on geography of the state since the late seventies of the last century when the highly acclaimed book by Professor H P Das, an eminent scholar in the field, went out of print. During the last quarter of the century, unlike many other parts of the country, Assam witnessed tremendous changes in all aspects of its geography including the most delicate ecological system. The evergrowing population resulting mainly from large-scale immigration; the highly disturbed water regime, 'threatened biodiversity, relative stagnation of the economy, growing unemployment and the volatile ethnic and political issues have made the contemporary geography of the state highly diverse and complicated. Serious kind of systematic studies incorporating all important aspects can only reflect the regional realities of such a spatio-socially diverse area like Assam. It is a task really very difficult for a single hand to tackle. We have, therefore, evolved a joint venture in which both young and matured minds could join hands and blend their ideas and expertise to finally arrive at the goal of publication of a new book on geography of the state.

Two different events of unavoidable concern to us, one being really unbearable, prompted us to bring out the book within a short time. While the basic plan for the book was yet to acquire a concrete shape Professor S P Mandal, a reputed geography teacher, retired from his long service as the head of the department of geography, Darrang College, Tezpur. Subsequently, Professor S D Roy, a devoted teacher and social worker, who was heading the department, suddenly left this world for heavenly abode after a brief illness. Incidentally, both of them were class mates in the Patna University, became colleagues in Darrang College and immediate neighbour in an urban enclave called Rubber Bagan at Tezpur for more than thirty years. The authors and the editors of this book, most of whom, are either their direct students or colleagues, then considered it to be befitting to dedicate their works in memory of

late Professor Roy and in honour of Professor Mandal. We all are really happy to have Professor Mandal among us still as a great source of inspiration to culture geography in this part of the country.

We have tried our best to make the book complete and do all possible justice to the proposed title. Even then, some of the important issues relating to occupational diversity, unemployment, trade and commerce, insurgency, diffusion of information technology, which have enough geographical relevance, could not be addressed directly. These issues need more interdisciplinary effort for their correct and comprehensive presentation. We are, however, very glad to announce here that most of our contributors are young geography teachers in the colleges of Assam and interestingly, for a few of them this would probably be the first attempt to express their views as responsible authors. We hope, the young authors in future will be more enthusiastically rise to the cause of geography education and research in this otherwise less-advanced part of the country.

The editors are greatly indebted to Professor M Taher of the department of geography, Gauhati University who agreed to take the pain of writing the introductory chapter of the book in spite of his old age. Incidentally, all the authors of the book are his direct and ardent students. Let us all take the opportunity to extend our deep sense of gratitude to Professor Taher. Dr. A U Choudhury, a well-known wildlife expert of the region and Dr. S K Phukan, a reputed police officer as well as a serious researcher, a rare combination indeed, deserve our hearty thanks for their valuable and highly relevant contribution. Thanks are also due to all other authors for their active participation in this venture. A special word of thanks goes to P Bhattacharya, cartographer, department of geography, Gauhati University, for his constant help and assistance.

M. L. Gupta, proprietor of Rajesh Publications, New Delhi willingly came forward to shoulder the responsibility of publishing this book. We are really thankful to him.

Lastly, with all humility and sincerity we invite constructive criticism, advice and suggestions from our learned readers so that necessary improvement may be made in the next edition of the book.

-Editors

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Assam : An Introduction

Assam, located in the tropical latitudes (24.3° N and 28° N) and eastern longitudes (89.5° E and 96.1° E), is the most populous state in North-East India. It is surrounded on three sides by hills and mountains. The rivers Brahmaputra and Barak, in the north and south respectively, carve out deep valleys, that represent the major part of the state. Between the two valleys there lies a strip of highland made up by hills and plateaus. The two plains form the easternmost parts of the north Indian plain, which are apparently shut to the south-East Asia by the Patkai Range and its southward extensions. In the north, the Brahmaputra plain rises steeply to the Himalayas, while to the east, the parallel hill ranges of Arunachal, Nagaland and Manipur attain height as one moves eastward, culminating at the Patkai- Manipur-Arakan Yoma hills. Although the hills and mountains mentioned above, appear to provide physical blockade, they are not inaccessible. There are a large number of mountain passes across both the Himalayas and the eastern hills. Situated as such, it is a transitional territory between South Asia and South- East Asia. The transition is reflected not only in the region's flora and fauna, but also in human types, languages and cultures.

Assam is surrounded by seven Indian states and two foreign countries. There are only a few Indian states which have such a strategic location. The state has an area of 78,438 km² representing 2.39 per cent of the Indian landmass and a population of 22,414,322 (1991) accounting for 2.64 per cent of the total population of the country.

Historical Evolution

Assam is an ancient land with a long history. The region is referred to as Pragjyotishpura in the earlier epic period. Its capital was also named Pragjyotishpura. The old Sanskrit literature seems to use both Pragjyotishpura and Kamrupa to refer to the same territory. The boundary of the ancient Kamrupa used to fluctuate in different periods. At one stage it extended from Dikkar River (that flowed in the Sadiya region) in the east to the Karatowa River (a river, consisting in the past, of now

abandoned channels of the Koshi, Mahananda and Tista).

Between the fourth and the twelfth centuries A.D., Kamrupa was ruled by the Barman, Salastambha and Pala dynasties. Kumar Bhaskar Barmana (594 A.D.- 650 A.D.), a contemporary of the north Indian emperor, Harsha Vardhana, was a famous king of Kamrupa. It was during his reign that the famous Chinese traveller, Huen Tsang, visited Kamrupa (643 A.D.) and wrote in praise of beauty and prosperity of the country. At the beginning of the thirteenth century, Muslim invasions started (1205 A.D. onward) from the west, and the Ahoms entered from the east under the leadership of Seu-ka- pha (1228 A.D). With the entry of these two forces into the political arena of the territory, there occurred a series of political changes. The western part of Kamrupa became an independent kingdom called Kamata, with its capital at Kamatapur (located 32 km south of the present Cooch Bihar Town), the middle part of the Brahmaputra Valley came under the sway of the Bhuyan feudal lords, and the Kacharis and Chutiyas carved out their Kingdoms in the southern and north-eastern parts of the Valley respectively. The Ahoms, meanwhile, established their kingdom over the area between the Burhi-Dihing and Disang and Dikhou rivers. While they continued their effort to consolidate and expand their rule, the Koches, in the fifteenth century, created a kingdom of their own (in 1485 A.D.) in the western part, based on the erstwhile Kamata territory. In course of time, the Koch Kingdom was divided (1584 A.D.) into two portions, the western portion becoming a protectorate of the Mughals and the eastern part becoming vassal of the Ahom king.

The origin of the name 'Axom' (Asom or Assam) is not fully clear. Baharistan - I - Ghaybi written by Mirza Nathan, depicting the geo-political conditions of eastern India during the period 1608-1624, referred to the Ahom territory as the 'Country of Asom'. It is mentioned here that Saiyid Abu Bakr was appointed to command the expeditionary force to conquest Asom, i.e. the territory ruled by the Ahoms (Nathan, 1992). Banikanta Kakati points out that Suryakhari Daivajna, who compiled the 'Darang Rajvanshawali, in the sixteenth century, referred to the Ahom community (and not the land they held) as Axom (Kakati, 1996). Sankardeva, in one of his verses, composed in the early sixteenth century, while referring to the castes and communities of the then Assam, used the term Axom to mean the Ahom (Dutta, 1969). Daityari Thakur, in his biography of Sankardeva, written in the seventeenth century also referred to the Ahom community as Axom (Kakati, 1996). Sihabuddin Talish,

who accompanied Mir Zumla as a scribe in the latter's invasion of the Ahom Kingdom in 1662-63, referred to the land east of Guwahati up to Sadiya as Asom (Talish, 1872). Incidentally, that exactly was the territory then held by the Ahom king.

These references show that the term 'Axom or Asom' was earlier used to mean the Shan community (the term by which the Ahoms initially introduced themselves), who established their Kingdom in eastern Assam. Subsequently, the term came to be used to mean also the territory they ruled. With the fall of the Koch power, when the western part of the Brahmaputra Valley also came occasionally under Ahom administration, the term 'Axom' or 'Asom' received a wider connotation to mean whole of the valley. Later, when the British annexed the territory in 1826 (Fig. 1.1) and constituted it into an administrative division under a Commissioner, they retained the name Assam. Further they added to it the southern hills, plateaus and plains, which they subsequently annexed. The

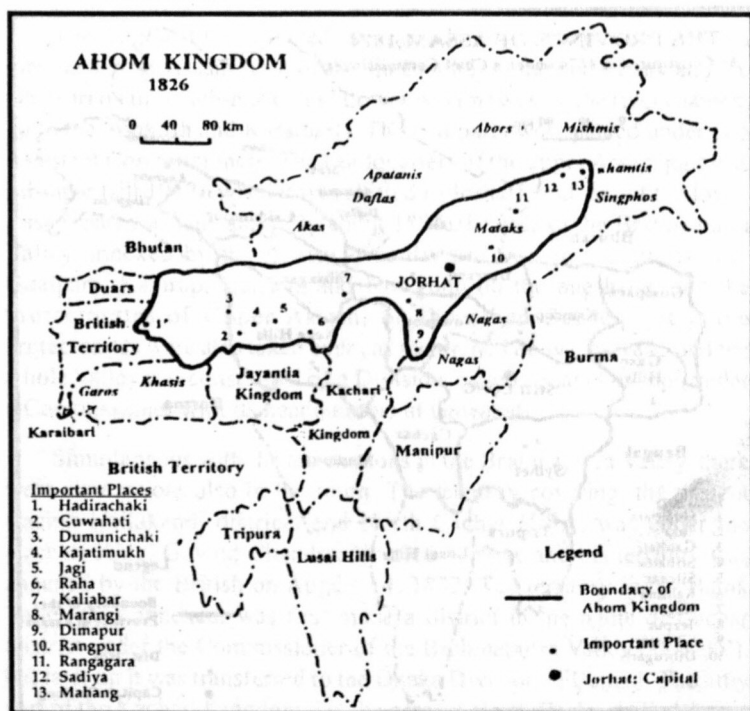


Fig. 1.1

whole territory was constituted a Province on February 6, 1874, as the Province of Assam (Fig. 1.2) under a Chief Commissioner.

The formation of Assam as an administrative province under British India is a story of annexation of small native kingdoms and principalities in North-East India and their merger into one unit. The undivided Goalpara district (comprising the present districts of Dhubri, Bongaigaon, Goalpara and the southern part of Kokrajhar) and (Karaibari, western part of Garo Hills) came to be controlled by the East India Company following the transfer of 'Dewani' from the Mughal emperor to the former on August 12, 1765. In fact, a district named Goalpara was constituted by the British, comprising the above mentioned areas, under the Commissioner of Cooch Bihar in 1821. The Brahmaputra Valley between the Manas River in the west and Kumatia River (on the north bank) and the Burhi Dihing River (on the south bank) in the east was annexed by the company following the Treaty of Yandaboo with the invading Burmese army on February 24,

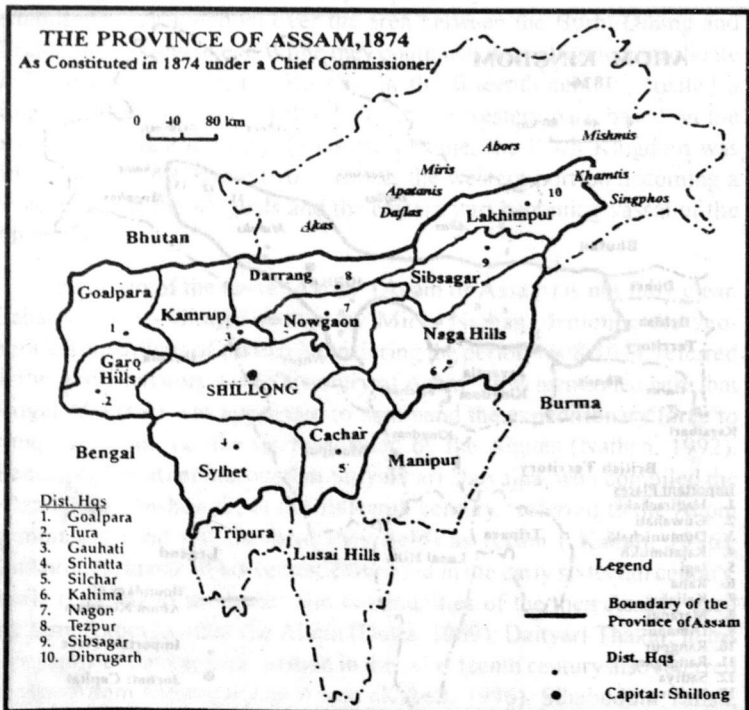


Fig. 1.2

1826. Between 1828 and 1838, the area covering the present districts of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Jorhat and Golaghat was allowed to be administered by the Ahom King Purandar Singh. It was finally merged with the British territory in November 1838, on the plea of incompetent but ruthless administration of the king. The area to the east of the Ahom territory, i.e. the portion comprising present Dhemaji, Dibrugarh and Tinsukia districts (except Sadiya Sub-Division) was taken over from the Matak prince by the British in November, 1839, on the plea of the former's inability to pay the annual tribute. The area to the farther east (east of the Matak territory), now covered by Sadiya Sub-Division and foothills of the Lohit district was annexed by the British in 1836 from the Khamti prince due to alleged rebellion of the latter. Subsequently, the area in the southern part of the present Lohit district was also taken over by the British in 1843 from the Singphos on the plea of alleged insubordination of the latter, thus completing the annexation of whole of the Brahmaputra Plain and its immediate foothills in the east.

The Plain was then divided into two administrative parts and named them as Upper Assam (east of the Jia Bharali on the north bank and the Dhansiri on the south-bank) and Lower Assam (west of the rivers named, up to the Sonkosh and Karaibari). The two parts were placed under two Assistant Commissioners. The headquarters of the upper Assam part was Sibsagar (till 1912, when it was shifted to Jorhat), and that of the lower Assam part was Guwahati. By about 1834, the area of the Brahmaputra Valley annexed by the British, was divided into four districts, viz. Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong on the one hand, and the protectorates of Upper Assam, on the other. Subsequently, the protectorates were also taken over, as mentioned above, by 1843 and the whole Valley was constituted by a Division, called Assam Division under a Commissioner with its headquarters at Guwahati.

Simultaneous with the annexations in the Brahmaputra Valley, there were annexations also in the south. The territory covering the present Cachar-Hailakandi districts and North Cachar Hills, was under the Kachari King, Govind Chandra. He died heirless and his territory was annexed by the British on August 14, 1832. The territory in the Barak Valley thus annexed, was first made a district in the name of Cachar District under the Commissioner of the Brahmaputra Valley ('Assam'), but later on it was transferred to the Dhaka Division of Bengal. The hilly part of the Kachari Kingdom, i.e. the present North Cachar Hills District and a large part of the present Diphu Sub-division, was then under Tularam

Senapati, a rebel Kachari leader, again as a Company's protectorate. This portion (surrounded by the Jamuna river in the north, the Dhansiri in the east, Barail Range in the south and the Diyung and Kapili rivers in the west) was annexed by the British in 1834 on the plea of Tularam's depredation on the former's territory. Tularam was, however, allowed to remain as its feudal lord. After his death in 1844 the land was divided between his two sons. They could not properly administer their respective parts. The East India Company finally took over the region. The northern part inhabited mainly by the Karbi people was joined with Nowgong district, while the present North Cachar Hills was constituted an administrative sub-division and attached to Cachar District.

It is noticed that by about 1828, the East India Company virtually became the master of both the Brahmaputra and the Barak Valleys. They wanted to construct a road linking the two Valleys across the Khasi Hills. The road began to be constructed from Sylhet northward and ultimately reached Nongkhlaw (in West Khasi Hills District), where they wanted to construct a sanatorium also. This step was not kindly taken by the Siem of the area, Tirot Singh, who started a resistance against the British on May 5, 1829. The resistance continued for long six years. Tirot Singh was finally defeated and Khasi Hills was annexed by the British on February 11, 1835.

The Jaintia territory was still a separate kingdom under Ram Singh III, alias Rajendra Singh, albeit as a Company's protectorate. The king abdicated his throne on March 15, 1835 and the territory was annexed by the Company. The Khasi and Jaintia territories were merged into one unit and was constituted a district under the Assam administrative Division in the name 'United Khasi and Jaintia Hills District'.

There was little geo-political change in this part during the period 1843-1865. Then in 1866, the northern part of the present Kokrajhar district (comprising Bijni Duar, Sidli Duar, Chirang Duar, Rifu Duar and Guma Duar areas), which was earlier under the dual control of the Bhutanese King and Koch feudal lords, was annexed by the British and constituted a district, called Eastern Duars under Kuch Bihar Division. The district was, however, dissolved in 1867 and made a part of the then Goalpara district.

In 1866, the present Wokha District of Nagaland was attached to the British territory on the plea of depredation of the Angami Nagas on the British areas. Like other Naga foothill areas, this tract was firstly made a

part of Sibsagar district. But later on, all the areas of the Naga hills, annexed by the British, were constituted into a district called Naga hills District.

While the foothill part of Garo hills bordering the Bengal plain and the Brahmaputra Valley was already under the British, comprising an estate called Karaibari, the interior higher hills, bordering the Khasi Hills in the east, still remained under the tribal chiefs. This interior part was taken over by the British and a new district named Garo Hills District was constituted in 1869. This district also included the western Karaibari area and was placed under the Commission of Kuch Bihar.

While political consolidation continued in the Brahmaputra Valley, the local people kept insisting on introduction of Assamese, their mother-tongue, as the medium of instruction and administration since the late eighteen-thirties in the districts of the Valley. This was agreed to by the British administration in 1871 and Assamese became the medium of instruction in the primary schools, courts and offices of the region. The identity of Axom or Asom or Assam may have received a boost from this politico- social decision also.

On February 6, 1874 the British government constituted a Province under a Chief Commissioner in North-East India and named it Assam, which included their Assam administrative Division (the Brahmaputra Valley) and the hills and plains to the south of it, annexed by the British between 1826 and 1866. The Province initially included ten districts, viz. Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, Naga Hills, United Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Garo Hills and Cachar (which included a part of the Barak plain and the present North Cachar Hills District). However, seven months later, on September 12, 1874, the Sylhet District of the then Bengal was added to it, raising the number of districts in Assam to eleven.

There was a period of geopolitical lull after the formation of the province of Assam. However, The British administration used to make excursions to the northern mountainous territory allegedly to contain the depredations of the hill and plain tribes like the Mishmi, Khamti, Singpho, Adi, Apatani, Nishi, Hrusso, Aka, etc. In fact, the British government, based in Assam, started marking out Inner Line and Frontier Tracts, from September 30, 1875, partly to regulate the activities of the said tribes and partly to consolidate their administration in Assam.

In 1895 almost whole of Lusai Hills (now Mizoram) was annexed by the British government and in 1898 the region was tagged to Assam as its twelfth district.

With the turn of the century, direct and indirect efforts, aimed ultimately at attaining independence of India, began to emerge among the educated Indians and the British government started taking counter-measures covertly and overtly to check the tide. As a part of such a design, they divided the then Bengal in 1905 and its eastern part, comprising 16 districts, was joined with the 12 districts of Assam to form a new Province named 'Eastern Bengal and Assam' under a Lieutenant Governor. This was done partly perhaps to break down the strength of the united Bengali nationality and partly to divide it on the basis of religion (for eastern part of Bengal had Muslim majority, while the western part had Hindu majority population). However, this arrangement of administration had to be abandoned in 1912, under tremendous public opposition when the province of Eastern Bengal and Assam was dissolved. Assam once again became a separate province under a Chief Commissioner. Meanwhile minor administrative adjustments were made within Assam. For example, in 1913-14, the Dimapur area, which was in Sibsagar district, was transferred to Naga Hills district. In 1921, under the Montague-Chelmsford Reform suggested in 1919, Assam was made a full-fledged province under a Governor. There was no geopolitical change thereafter till 1937, when the four plain areas of the then North-East Frontier Tracts, adjoining the Brahmaputra Valley, namely the Balipara area, Jonai area, some portions of Sadiya area and Margherita area were merged with Assam and the area of the province remained so till 1947 (Fig. 1.3).

In 1947 when India was partitioned, Sylhet district was separated and tagged to the then East Pakistan, except the Thana areas of Karimganj, Badarpur, Ratabari and Patharkandi, which were merged with the undivided Cachar district.

After independence, there was a long period of administrative reorganisation of the areas of North-East India. On November 17, 1951 the district of United North Cachar and Mikir Hills was created by merging 4421.12 km² of hill area from Nowgong district, 1539.65 km² of hill area from Golaghat Sub-Division of the then Sibsagar district and 4371.23 km² of hill area from Jaintia Sub-Division of United Khasi and Jaintia Hills district. In the following year, an Autonomous District 'Hills district Council' was set up for the district as per Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. In 1963, Naga Hills district was separated from Assam for

creating a state out of it. On January 2, 1970, United North Cachar and Mikir Hills was divided into two Autonomous district, viz. North Cachar Hills and Mikir Hills (which was renamed Karbi Anglong in 1976). In 1970 Garo Hills and United Khasi and Jaintia Hills were seceded from Assam to form an Autonomous state, which was accorded full-fledged statehood as per North Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act 1971 of the Union Government. This Act also took away Lusai Hills from Assam, which was constituted as Union Territory under the name Mizoram. By then, the number of administrative districts in Assam came down to only nine.

However, the exigencies of socio-economic development, under the regime of planning, necessitated the creation of smaller districts. On October 2, 1971, old Lakhimpur district was divided into Dibrugarh and Lakhimpur districts. While the part lying to the south-east of the Brahmaputra was made Dibrugarh district, the socio-economically

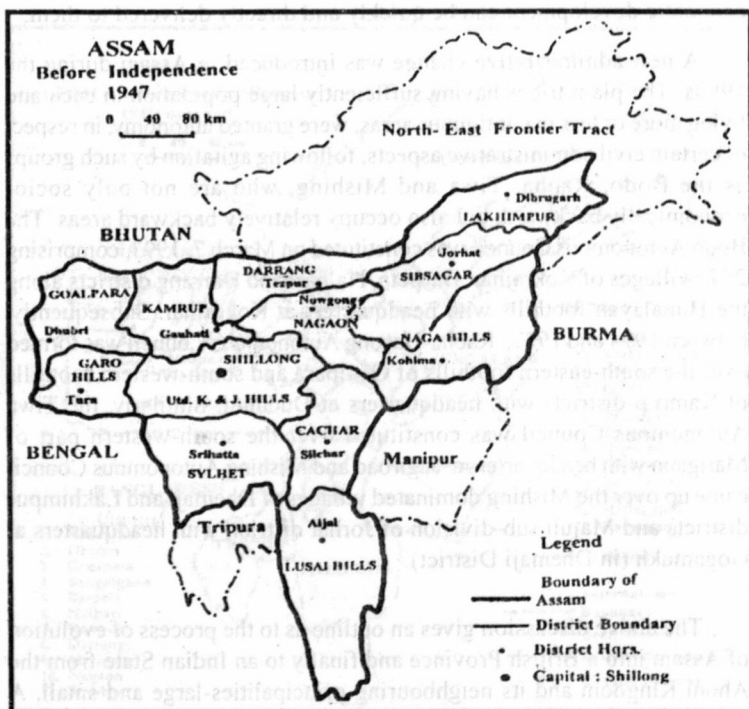


Fig. 1.3

backward north-western part comprising Dhemaji sub-division and Lakhimpur sub-division, was made the district of Lakhimpur. Assam, thus, came to have ten districts from late 1971. Following the above principle, the number of districts was raised to 17 between 1981 and 1987. The districts of Dhubri and Kokrajhar were carved out of the old Goalpara district. Similarly, Barpeta and Nalbari were carved out of the old Kamrup district. Besides, the old Darrang district was divided into Darrang and Sonitpur districts, old Sibsagar into Sibsagar and Jorhat districts and old Cachar into Cachar and Karimganj districts. Thus, during the early nineteen eighties, the number of districts in Assam rose to 17. Again between 1988-89, Golaghat was carved out of Jorhat, Dhemaji out of Lakhimpur, Marigaon out of Nagaon, Tinsukia out of Dibrugarh, Bongaigaon out of Kokrajhar and Goalpara and Hailakandi out of Cachar. Thus by 1989, the number of administrative districts rose to 23 (Fig. 1.4). The aim of creation of smaller districts, as mentioned above, was to bring administration nearer to the people, so that the benefit of socio-economic development can be quickly and directly delivered to them.

A new administrative change was introduced in Assam during the 1990s. The plain tribes having sufficiently large population in each and living more or less in contiguous areas, were granted autonomy, in respect of certain civil administrative aspects, following agitation by such groups as the Bodo, Rabha, Tiwa and Mishing, who are not only socio-economically backward, but also occupy relatively backward areas. The Bodo Autonomous Council was constituted on March 7, 1993, comprising 2570 villages of Kokrajhar, Barpeta, Nalbari and Darrang districts along the Himalayan foothills with headquarters at Kokrajhar. Subsequently, between 1994 and 1997, Rabha-Hasong Autonomous Council was formed over the south-eastern foothills of Goalpara and south-western foothills of Kamrup districts with headquarters at Dudhnoi. Similarly, the Tiwa Autonomous Council was constituted over the south-western part of Marigaon with headquarters at Jagiroad and Mishing Autonomous Council came up over the Mishing dominated villages of Dhemaji and Lakhimpur districts and Majuli sub-division of Jorhat district, with headquarters at Gogamukh (in Dhemaji District).

The above discussion gives an outline as to the process of evolution of Assam into a British Province and finally to an Indian State from the Ahom Kingdom and its neighbouring principalities-large and small. A close look at the geopolitical events reveals that the period of evolution spread over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, can be divided into

two periods : Firstly, the period of geopolitical consolidation, from 1826 to 1947 and secondly, the period of geopolitical reorganisation from 1947 onward.

Process of Peopling

Because of its transitional location between South and South-East Asia, Assam has been receiving migrants from the north, east, south and west, across the high Himalayas, over the tangled mass of ridges and valleys of the Patkai Range, Manipur Hills, Lusai Hills and Arakan Yoma and over the plains of the Ganga-Brahmaputra Doab since time immemorial. The state had a population of more than 22 million as per the census of 1991. The natural environment of Assam with fertile river valleys, abundant rainfall, luxuriant vegetation and a rich collection of fauna, had been such that it could attract groups of people to settle. There had been, therefore, streams of migrations into it even during the

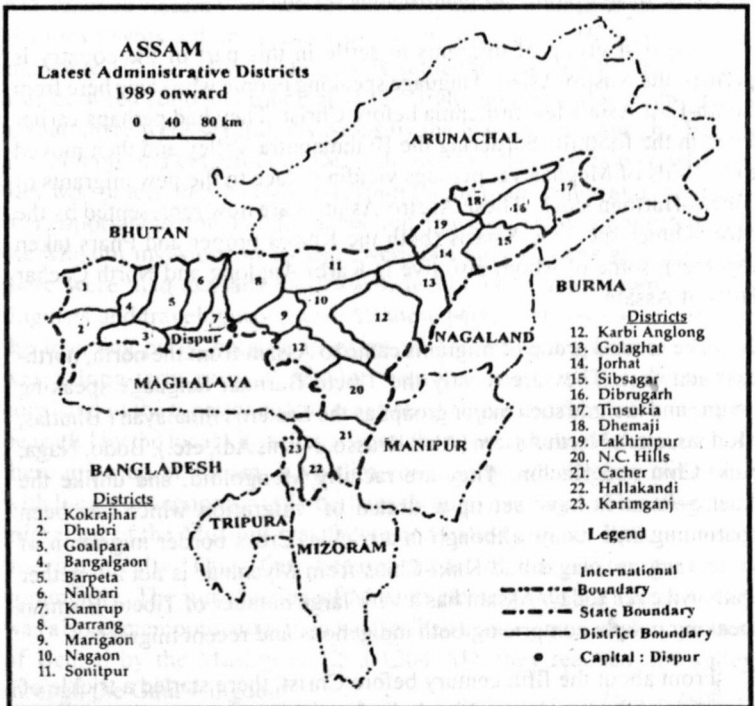


Fig. 1.4

palaeolithic period. An analysis of the sequence of peopling of Assam is difficult to make, firstly because, no systematic and tangible evidence has so far been found as to the human occupation of the land during the prehistoric and protohistoric periods; and secondly, there has been such an intermixture of both blood and cultures of different groups of people in this transitional part, that little can be traced to establish a succession of peopling.

However, a close look at the ethnolinguistic composition of the people of the state reveals that there are people speaking Austro-Asiatic, Tibeto-Chinese and Indo-European languages. An analysis of peopling of Assam on the above ethnolinguistic basis, coupled with whatever scanty palaeolithic, neolithic and historical evidences are available, shows that there are as many as eleven 'waves' and 'streams' of migration into Assam (The term 'wave' is used to mean a migration that occurred once at a particular point of time and the term 'stream' is used to depict a migration of a group of people that continues for long time). The 'waves' and 'streams' of migration are identified as follows:

1. The first group of migrants to settle in this part of the country is perhaps the Austro-Asiatic language speaking people who came here from South-East Asia a few millennia before Christ. They had perhaps earlier lived in the foothills bordering the Brahmaputra Valley and then moved to the hills of Meghalaya, perhaps yielding place to the new migrants of Tibeto-Burman stock. These Austro-Asiatics are now represented by the Mon-Khmer speaking Khasis (both the Khasis proper and Pnars taken together), some of whom also live in Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills of Assam.

2. The second group of migrants came to Assam from the north, north-east and east. They are mostly the Tibeto-Burman language speaking people and include such major groups as the Eastern Himalayan (Bhutias, Monpas, etc.), North Assam (Aka, Hrusso, Nishi, Adi, etc.), Bodo, Naga, Kuki-Chin and Kachin. They are racially Mongoloid, and unlike the Austro-Asiatics have set up a stream of migration which has been continuing still today, although in a trickle. Cross border migration of some Tangsas, Nagas and Kuki-Chins from Myanmar is not altogether unknown even today. Assam has a very large number of Tibeto-Burman speaking people comprising both indigenous and recent migrants.

3. From about the fifth century before Christ, there started a trickle of migration of the people speaking Indo-Aryan language from the Gangetic

plain. Their migration has continued ever since. In the past, Indo-Aryan migration was even occasionally sponsored by the local kings and Chieftains of Assam, although in most cases, there were voluntary streams with migrants moving in search of economic opportunity in the Brahmaputra and Barak plains. They are originally of Caucasoid racial descent, who mixed with the subsequent migrants of the same stock and the locals of other stocks and have now formed the majority of the Hindu population of the state. They are also the ones, who spread and built-up the Vedic socio-cultural basis of the state. The spread of the Indo-Aryans into the Barak valley was contemporaneous to that in the Brahmaputra Valley, their settlements being an extension of that in the Gangetic Delta of Bengal.

4. While the migration of the old Indo-Aryan socio-cultural group was still continuing, there started another stream of disguised migration of another group of Indo-Aryans belonging to Islamic faith. Mohammad Bin Bakhtiar Khilji, a Muslim General of Kutubuddin, in about 1205 AD, reached Assam with his force of army in his attempt to go to Tibet. His movements within Assam enraged the local king. He was defeated and some of his captive soldiers were settled in Assam, especially in the area between Hajo and Sipajhar in the Brahmaputra Valley. Subsequent to that, there were several invasions by the Nawabs of Gaur and Dhaka and Sultans and emperors of Delhi. In most of their invasions, whether they won or lost, they had to leave behind some of their men and materials. It is important to note in this connection, that the persons connected with the Muslim invasions of Assam were not only soldiers and generals, there were also artisans, craftsmen, technicians, apart from scribes, linguists and travelogue writers. All these personnel were necessary for the invading party, because invasion of Assam, then a terra incognita, was a long-term project. Muslim captives and left-outs, therefore, consisted of the types of people mentioned above and they were found to be useful by the local kings. They were, therefore, allowed to settle. Thus, there grew up in Assam, a Muslim community, which grew over time with local conversions mostly perhaps through marriages. This disguised migration of the Muslims was feeble and halted and the settlers mostly married locally. Thus, they became a part of the greater Assamese community. The introduction of Muslim element into the Barak Valley was also contemporaneous to that described above, for after the conquest of Bengal by the Muslim in 1203-1204 AD, they reached this valley through the Gaur Kingdom.

5. About twenty-three years after the first invasion by the Muslims, there came in another group of migrants from Shan State of northern Myanmar. Under the leadership of an able and mighty general, Seu-kapha, in 1228 AD, there came in a group of Tai or Shan people belonging to the Siamese-Chinese linguistic sub-family, who were locally known as Ahom in Asom. They established a kingdom in eastern Assam between the rivers Burhi-Dihing and Disang, which grew into a large one, occasionally covering whole of the Brahmaputra Valley. The Ahoms married locally, learnt the local language (Assamese) in course of time and adopted Hindu religion and culture. The kingdom they built lasted for long six hundred years from 1228 to 1826. They made positive contributions to consolidate Assam's regional socio-cultural identity.

6. After the consolidation of administration by the Ahoms in upper Assam and by the Koches in lower Assam, there prevailed a period of peace and prosperity in the Brahmaputra Valley and the stream of Indo-Aryan migration from Bengal and other parts of the Gangetic Valley received a fillip under the sponsorship of these kings, for religious and economic reasons. Similarly, the invasion of the Nawabs and Sultans also continued to leave behind some Muslim settlers. Apart from these, there was a migration of some Tai people from upper Myanmar, which added a new element to the population mosaic of Assam. These 'Later-day' Tai people, entering Assam during the period from seventeenth century to early nineteenth century, are the Khamtis, Khamyangs, Aitons, Phakes and Turungs. Each of these groups came at different time from different areas across the Patkai. They are Buddhist by religion and speak Tai language and unlike the Ahoms, have still retained their religion and culture. They are to be found in small groups in upper Assam today.

7. It was the above six groups of people who inhabited Assam until it was taken over by the British. The British annexation of Assam brought about not only political change, but also profoundly changed the population structure of the region. The British introduced new administrative and economic order. They needed English educated personnel to help them in administration. They also needed trademen with the introduction of full-scale monetised economy in Assam. Further, they needed policemen, security personnel, technicians, professionals and artisans for safety and security and for public works and various other services. Thus started a new stream of migration with the coming in of Bengali government service-holders and professionals, Rajasthani tradesmen and north-Indian labourers and artisans, Nepali security men,



etc. The trend of immigration, thus gaining momentum, continued unabated till recently, giving a new dimension to the population base of Assam.

8. Some British explorers and prospectors, who had known of the presence of natural tea bushes in Assam, started tea plantation in the region once it was annexed by the East India Company. As the local people were found to be unwilling to work in the tea gardens as labourers, the planters recruited indentured labourers from the tribes of Chotanagpur of Central India. These tribals are ethnolinguistically Austro- Asiatic speaking Mundari group of languages. Most of these belong to such tribes as Munda, Ho, Santal, Savara, Oraon, Gond, etc. Thus a new wave of Austro - Asiatic migration started in about 1848 and continued till 1940. Assam today has about two million people of the origin of this group of immigrants.

9. After the annexation of the Brahmaputra Valley by the British in 1826, they consolidated their rule over almost whole of North-East India, including the hills. But, inter-tribal feud, political conflict and social unrest still prevailed in upper Myanmar, across the border of British India. As such, a large number of Kachin, Naga and Kuki-Chin people migrated to the contiguous areas of North-East India across the border. Some of them, especially the migrants of the Kuki-Chin stock, migrated to Assam beyond the hills of Mizoram and Manipur. Some of the Singphos, living in the Changlang border of Tinsukia district and the various Kuki tribes, who live in North Cachar Hills and Karbi Anglong, are of the origin of these migrants of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

10. Still another stream of immigration started in the last two decades of nineteenth century with the coming in of the landless Muslim peasants from the then eastern Bengal (now Bangladesh), firstly, at the instance of the landlords of the undivided Goalpara district in connivance of the British administrators. The stream became large during the period between 1901 and 1947, the immigrants occupying the active flood-plains of the Brahmaputra, where they took to jute, vegetable and Aus and lowland rice growing. This stream has brought in one of the largest volumes of immigrants which have affected even the demographic scenario of Assam. It is further noticed that the stream of this immigration continued even after the partition of India. The people of the origin of this group of immigrants now number about 4 million in Assam. They are racially perhaps Aryo-Dravidian and speak

a dialect of Indo-Aryan Bengali. Their descendents are fast adopting Assamese language and culture.

11. The partition of India, at the time of independence, provoked unofficial transference of population and millions of Hindu refugees from the then East Pakistan entered India. Assam being contiguous to it, received a large volume of Hindu refugees, from 1947 over a few decades, numbering about a million. Unlike the Muslim immigrants from East Bengal, who generally went to the flood-plains and took to agriculture, the Hindu refugees of East Pakistan generally settled around the towns, service centres and railway junctions and stations and took mostly to tertiary activities.

The eleven waves and streams of immigration, recorded above, are the ones that stand out in temporal perspective. Besides these, there were other minor streams and waves also, as evidenced by the people coming in from all over India and beyond in search of job, trade opportunity and for other economic activities. They normally settle in the town and industrial locations, and being small groups get themselves merged with the local population in course of time. Be that as it may, the present population of Assam, who are permanent residents, whether of indigenous or immigrant origin, are largely the descendents of the eleven main streams and waves of migrants. Their intermixture, over the years, has contributed to the rich socio-cultural heritage of the region.

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Geography of Assam

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Assam, a state in the north-eastern region of India, is a unique geographical entity presenting a rich physical and cultural diversity. The natural landscape of the state is, however, changing fast with the growth of industrialization and urbanization, and especially the ever-increasing inflow of people from within and outside the country. The state thus has assumed immense geographical significance needing careful study and research. This book covering almost all aspects of nature and culture is really a commendable contribution towards understanding the regional personality of Assam. Definitely this book will cater to the long-standing needs of not only the students and teachers of geography, but also those interested in environment, society and economy of the state.

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