

**S.L. Baruah**

***A  
Comprehensive  
History of  
Assam***

This work is the first analytical and comprehensive account of the civilization of Assam from earliest to the present times. Its object is to acquaint the readers with the forces and factors moulding the society and culture of Assam through the ages. It analyses the salient features of Assamese civilization giving proper weightage to the contributions made by different tribes or ethnic groups of both the hills and the plains as well as by the followers of different faiths towards its growth and development.

The work is divided into four parts. Part I gives a brief idea of the present state of Assam. It also discusses the source materials as well as the pre-history and the proto-history of the land. Part II deals with the ancient period beginning with the legendary kings till the dismemberment of the ancient kingdom of Pragjyotisha or Kamarupa in the close of the twelfth century AD. Part III treats the history of the medieval period from the rise of different tribal states on the ruins of the ancient kingdom till the fall of the Ahom monarchy in 1826. Part IV deals with the modern period covering the history of the British rule upto the attainment of the country's Independence in 1947. It also contains a chapter dealing briefly with the events after Independence. The authoress has made full use of all available sources, published and unpublished, preserved in different libraries within and outside the state. Attempt has been made to make the information up-to-date with proper notes and references and the treatment clear and precise. The work also contains a bibliography, glossary and index.

Swarna Lata Baruah is Professor in the Department of History, Dibrugarh University. She obtained her Ph. D. degree from Dibrugarh University for her dissertation 'Rajamantri Purnananda Burhagohain and His Times' in 1972.

Professor Baruah was a member of the Executive Committee of the Indian History Congress, Vice-President of the North-East India History Association and of the North-East India Council for Social Science Research. At present, she is actively associated with women's studies and writing profusely about women's problems. She has specialisation in the history and culture of North-East India and published numerous articles on the subject in scholarly journals. Her other book *Last Days of Ahom Monarchy: A History of Assam from 1769 to 1826* (1994) is also published by us.

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*In loving memory of  
my father  
Kumud Chandra Dutt  
(1907-82)*

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## Abbreviations

<i>ABHB</i>	Asam Buranji by Harakanta Sarma Barua Sadar Amin
<i>ABSM</i>	Asam Buranji obtained from the family of Sukumar Mahanta
<i>ABTP</i>	Asam Buranji by Kasinath Tamuli Phukan
<i>ACMSV</i>	Sri Sri Aniruddhadevar Charit aru Mayamara Satrar Gosain Sakalar Vamsavali
<i>AICC</i>	All India Congress Committee
<i>AISF</i>	All India Students' Federation
<i>AITUC</i>	All India Trade Union Congress
<i>ALAP</i>	Assam Legislative Assembly Proceedings
<i>ALCP</i>	Assam Legislative Council Proceedings
<i>AOC</i>	Assam Oil Company Limited
<i>APAI</i>	Assam Police Abstracts of Intelligence
<i>APC</i>	Assam Provincial Congress
<i>APCC</i>	Assam Provincial Congress Committee
<i>ARTC</i>	Assam Railways and Trading Company
<i>AS</i>	Assam Secretariat Files
<i>Baharistan</i>	Baharistan-i-Ghaibi
<i>BJP</i>	Bengal Judicial Proceedings
<i>BOC</i>	Burma Oil Company
<i>BPC</i>	Bengal Political Consultations
<i>BRC</i>	Bengal Revenue Consultations
<i>BSPC</i>	Bengal Secret and Political Consultations
<i>CD</i>	Despatches from the Court of Directors
<i>CPI</i>	Communist Party of India
<i>CWC</i>	Congress Working Committee
<i>DAB</i>	Deodhai Asam Buranji
<i>DC</i>	Deputy Commissioner
<i>DCC</i>	District Congress Committee

<i>DHAS</i>	Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Assam, Gauhati	283 301
<i>DIR</i>	Defence of India Rules	369
<i>EBAP</i>	East Bengal and Assam Council Proceedings	386
<i>HAG</i>	A History of Assam by Sir Edward Gait	414
<i>HFM</i>	History of Freedom Movement Records	
<i>Home Pol.</i>	Home Political Proceedings	
<i>HPA</i>	Home Political—A	
<i>HPB</i>	Home Political—B	
<i>HPP</i>	Home Political Proceedings	457
<i>IHQ</i>	Indian Historical Quarterly	465
<i>INA</i>	Indian National Army	472
<i>INC</i>	Indian National Congress	484
<i>INTUC</i>	Indian National Trade Union Congress	499
<i>IPC</i>	Indian Political Consultations	505
<i>JARS</i>	Journal of the Assam Research Society	
<i>JASB</i>	Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal	522
<i>JBORS</i>	Journal of the Bihar and Orissa Research Society	587
<i>JRAS</i>	Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, London	626
<i>JRASB</i>	Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal	646
<i>KAS</i>	Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti, Gauhati	
<i>MES</i>	Military Engineering Service	
<i>NEFA</i>	North East Frontier Agency	
<i>NNC</i>	Naga National Council	
<i>OEHFM</i>	Office of the Editor, History of Freedom Movement, Government of Assam	
<i>PAB</i>	Purani Asam Buranji	
<i>PASB</i>	Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal	
<i>PCC</i>	Provincial Congress Committee	
<i>PHA</i>	Political History of Assam	
<i>PP(HC)</i>	Parliamentary Papers (House of Commons)	
<i>PRSG</i>	Planter-Raj to Swaraj by Amalendu Guha	
<i>Relations</i>	Anglo-Assamese Relations by S.K. Bhuyan	
<i>SAB</i>	Satsari Asam Buranji	
<i>TB</i>	Tungkhungia Buranji	
<i>WCAIML</i>	Working Committee of the All India Muslim League	

College, Dibrugarh, who has helped me in countless ways and remained a constant source of inspiration. Last but not least I offer my sincere thanks to Sri Devendra Jain, Director of Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, for taking up the publication of the work and also to his staff members for printing it with care and patience.

## Preface

S. L. Baruah

Dibrugarh  
12 August 1982

This book covers the history of Assam from earliest times to date. Its object is to acquaint the readers with the forces and factors moulding the society and culture of the Brahmaputra valley in particular and the north-east India in general through the ages. There are certain themes which I could only touch upon but hope that they will not fail to draw the attention of future historians reconstructing the history of the land from a new angle. I have also tried to give an account of the contributions made by different ethnic groups of both hills and plains as well as by the followers of different faiths to the growth and development of civilization of this region. It had been my sincere endeavour to look at the things as objectively as possible and draw conclusions on the basis of historical facts. However, I claim neither completeness nor perfection. Use of diacritical marks have been avoided and popular forms of spellings of the non-English words have been used. However, I regret that uniformity of certain spellings could not be maintained throughout the book.

I acknowledge my indebtedness to all the authors, whose works I consulted. I am particularly grateful to Sri Atul Goswami, Lecturer in English, Dibrugarh University, for going through the manuscript and for helping me in dealing with certain intricate problems. I am also grateful to Dr. P.N. Chopra, Ex-Editor, Indian Gazetteers, New Delhi, for suggesting me to write this book, to Dr. K.M. Shrimali of Delhi University for his help in getting it published and to Sri L. Hazarika, Advocate, Dibrugarh, whose keen interest in the work was a source of encouragement to me. I am also thankful to various scholars and colleagues and to the staff members of the libraries and institutions, where I studied, for their help and co-operation. I am grateful, in particular, to my husband, Prof. K.P. Baruah, D.H.S.K.

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## Chapter 1

### A Thumb-nail Sketch of Assam

Assam, is situated in "one of the greatest routes of migration of mankind".<sup>1</sup> Down the ages she received people of different strains, particularly the Indo-Chinese Mongoloids, pouring into India, who added new elements to the country's population and culture-complex. Across her geographical boundaries there came men, ideas and means of production to mingle together with the aboriginals and shape a new mode of living and a rich culture. The contacts so achieved, with both inside and outside India, were both lasting and ever-increasing. Her contacts with China, Tibet and Burma are also well-known. In the medieval period, Assam could successfully resist the eastward expansion of the Turko-Afghan and the Mughal rulers of India towards Burma and beyond.<sup>2</sup> She maintained her independent status till 1826, when finally she passed on to the hands of the British. Since the revolt of 1857, Assam has completely identified herself with the main stream of Indian culture. In the national struggle for freedom as well she played a part no less significant than other states of India. Ever since Independence, she has been sharing the weal and woe of the nation and contributing towards the country's progress.

#### Physiography

Assam is situated in the extreme north-east frontier of India, in between 28° and 24° North latitudes and 89° 86' and 96° East longitudes, and borders on the hill States of Bhutan, Arunachal,

<sup>1</sup>J.H. Mills, *Assam Review*, March, 1928, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup>S.K Chatterjee, *The Place of Assam in the History and Civilization of India*, Gauhati University, 1970, pp. 45f.

Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and Meghalaya in the vicinity of China and Tibet on the north, of Burma on the east and the south and of Bangladesh on the west. Her extraordinary fertile soil, rich natural and mineral resources and a population of mixed character, offer interesting subjects of research and study to natural and social scientists. Except on the west, she is bounded on all sides by mountain ranges inhabited by different hill-tribes, mostly of Mongoloid stock. On the north, she is guarded by the eastern section of the great Himalayan range, where live the frontier tribes like the Bhutiyas, the Akas, the Nishis (the Daflas), the Mishings (the Miris), the Adis (the Abors) and the Mishnis. On the east lie the mountains inhabited by the Khantis and the Singphos. This region, as a whole, except the part inhabited by the Bhutiyas, now forms the State of Arunachal. The Patkai range on the south-east, which forms the natural boundary between Assam and Burma, is inhabited by the Nagas and merges itself into the mountains of Burma. On the south of the Brahmaputra valley, beginning from the extreme south-west, the mountain chains take the name of the Garo hills, the Khasi and the Jaintiya hills, the North Cachar and the Mikir hills and the Naga hills. This mountain system is collectively known as the 'Assam Range', which with the exception of the North Cachar and the Mikir hills and the Naga hills, forms the State of Meghalaya. The Naga hills, together with the eastern portion of the Patkai range, creates the State of Nagaland. The North Cachar and the Mikir hills forming two districts of the North Cachar hills and the Karbi Anglong (the Mikir hills) remain within the present State of Assam. To the south of the Assam Range lies the Barak valley or Surma valley, which includes the present district of Cachar. To the south of Cachar and Nagaland lie the States of Mizoram (earlier Lushai hills) and Manipur. To the south-west of Cachar is the State of Tripura and to the west of Cachar is Bangladesh. Assam's relation with the neighbouring hill States of Arunachal, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Meghalaya and also with Tripura is very close since time immemorial. During the British rule, most of neighbouring hills were tagged together to the State of Assam. Though these hill areas have attained their separate autonomous existence after Independence, Assam's cultural and political relation with them is so close that the history of Assam cannot be separated from the history of the neighbouring hill areas. Indeed present-day Assamese culture has grown out of an assimilation of elements of tribal and Hindu cultures.

The Assam Range broadly divides Assam into two valleys—the Brahmaputra valley or Assam valley and the Surma valley or Barak valley. The Brahmaputra (son of the Brahma) is one of the largest rivers of the world. It flows majestically through the heart of the Assam valley. Another river, the Surma, with its tributary, the Barak, flows through the Surma valley. The Brahmaputra valley is an alluvial plain, about 720 km. in length with an average breadth of 96 km. The valley spreading flat and wide from east to west in the lower portion, tends to project northward in its upper portion where it tapers off. There are seven districts in the Brahmaputra valley—Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh and Lakhimpur. The major part of the Surma valley falls within the present Bangladesh; only a small triangular part of it, known as the Barak plains forming the district of Cachar, falls within the present State of Assam.

The Brahmaputra is also known as Lohit or Luit (deriving from *Lauhitya* in Sanskrit, meaning 'the red river'). It is so called, perhaps, because the river takes this colour during the rainy season, when it flows through the red soil and embankments.<sup>1</sup> There is also a mythological story tracing the origin of this name to Parasuram who, after committing matricide, washed off his bloody stains in this river and regained his sainthood, which made the water of the river red. According to the Hindu Scriptures, the Brahmaputra originated in the sacred pool known as the Brahmakunda, a place of pilgrimage, now within the State of Arunachal. But the actual source of this river is the Chemayung Dong glacier situated to the south-east of the Manas-Sarovar. The Brahmaputra is identical with the Tsangpo in Tibet, which, while entering Arunachal takes the name of Siang. This river flows to the further south as Dihong and while reaching the plains of Assam joins with the Dibang and the Lohit rivers, both flowing from the north-east, near Sadiya. It is the combined water of these rivers that flows as Louhitya, Luhit, Luit or Brahmaputra through Assam. The total length of the Brahmaputra is about 2,897 km. and its drainage area measures about 9,35,504 sq. km. It flows for about 724 km. down the Assam valley. It is navigable throughout the year. During the monsoons, the river grows majestic in its vastness and intensity and is like a sea with the interplay of tremendous waves. After

<sup>1</sup>H. Barua, *The Red River and the Blue Hill*, Gauhati, 1962, p.7. Bishnu Rabha has suggested that the word Brahmaputra is a Sanskritization of a Bodo expression *Bhullumbutter*, meaning 'making a gurgling noise'.

passing Assam, the river turns south, flowing through Bangladesh and joining with the Padma, after which, it flows as Meghna and falls into the Bay of Bengal. It was on the bank of the Brahmaputra that the civilization of Assam grew, so that the history of Assam is, in a sense, the history of the civilization of the Brahmaputra valley.

The Brahmaputra divides its valley into three geographical areas called Uttarkol or North Bank, Dakhinkol or South Bank and the Majuli or the largest riverine island in the middle formed by the fork of the Lohit and the Dihing. Both the North Bank and the South Bank are fertile plains washed by a number of tributaries of the Brahmaputra. The main tributaries on the north are the Suvansiri, the Burai, the Dikarai, the Bharali, the Dhansiri, the Barnadi, the Manas, the Gadadhar and the Sonkosh and those on the south are the Dihing, the Dichang, the Dikhou, the Dhansiri, the Kapili, the Digaru, the Kulsi etc. This network of rivers gives Assam a tremendous water-power potential. Some of these rivers specially the Suvansiri and the Dhansiri (of the south bank) were at one time noted for their gold dusts and in the prime of Ahom power in the middle of the 18th century, about sixteen thousand Sonowals or gold-washers were engaged by the Ahom government in washing for ten thousand *rolas* of gold annually.

The utilisation flow of the Brahmaputra is estimated to be 12,308 MCM.<sup>1</sup> The specific yield of the Braahmaputra is 3.50 CFS per sq. mile, which is believed by experts to be the highest in the world. According to one estimate, the total hydel potential of the Brahmaputra is 12,900 MW. At present, only 1 per cent of this has been developed and another 2 per cent is in the process of exploitation.

The soil of Assam is exceedingly fertile and well-adapted to almost all kinds of agricultural purposes. To quote Robinson: "The rapidity with which wastes composed entirely of sand, newly washed forward by the river current during floods become converted into rich pasture is astonishing".<sup>2</sup> Considering the geological structure and chemical composition, Assam soil can be divided into three types : red loam soil, laterite soil and alluvial soil. The hilly regions of Cachar, North Cachar hills and Karbi Anglong as well as the southern part of Sibsagar district belong to the first category. This soil is suitable for the cultivation of orange, pineapple, grape, mango,

<sup>1</sup>The Irrigation Commission Report 1972.

<sup>2</sup>William Robinson, *A Descriptive Account of Assam*, Delhi, 1975, p. 7.

vegetables etc. The soil in the districts of Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur, Darrang, Kamrup, Goalpara, some part of Cachar and the northern part of Sibsagar district have alluvial type. Rice, wheat, sugar-cane, banana, tobacco, mustard, jute etc. grow abundantly in this type of soil. Some parts in the districts of Cachar, Sibsagar and Nowgong are favoured with laterite soil, which is highly suitable for the cultivation of rice and potato.

#### Flora and Fauna

Nature has lavishly bestowed all her beauties on Assam. The hills and the forests, besides enhancing beauty to the land, contain valuable *flora* and *fauna*, some of which are rare in the world. About one-third of the total area has been considered as forest region in Assam and in the period 1976-77, area under reserved forests was estimated at 16,514 sq. km.<sup>1</sup> This forest region contains valuable timber like Sal (*Shorea*), Khoir (*Acacia*), Sisso (*Dalbergia*), Gamari (*Gmelina*), Sonaru (*Cassia*), Cham (*Artocarpus*), Bonsom (*Phoebe*), Nahar (*Mesua*), Amari (*Amoora*), Khokan (*Duabanga*), Koroi and Maz (*Albizzia*), Simalu (*Bombax*), Ajar (*Lagerstroemia*), Champa (*Michelia*), Hallang (*Dipterocarpus*), Hollok (*Terminalia*), Kadam (*Anthocephalus*), Bola (*Morus*) etc. and various kinds of bamboos, canes, grasses and reeds. In addition to providing timber for various construction purposes, certain trees provide good tanning and dyeing materials as well as household fuel. Vegetable plants and essential oil producing plants are also not uncommon. Lac and *Agaru* (a much valued perfume) are two important forest products of the State. The abundance of Chom (*Machilus*), Nooni (*Morus*), Era (*Ricinus*), Keseru (*Heteropanax*), Suanlu (*Tetranthera*), Champa (*Michelia*), Mezankari or Adakuri (*Tetranthera*), etc. helps in the rearing of silk-worms, which nourishes the famous silk-industry of Assam. Sealing wax, gum and rubber are also produced. Medicinal herbs and many varieties of beautiful orchids, generally classed as *Kapauphul* and *Bhatauphul*, are exported from Assam, which are sold at high price in foreign countries. In the financial year 1976-77, Assam government earned an income of 25 crores from industrial origin forestry.<sup>2</sup> Assam is very rich in different kinds of citrus fruits like orange, lemon, ou-tenga (*Dillenia*) and thekera (*Garchinia*). Betel-nut and betel

<sup>1</sup>Statistical Hand Book, Assam, 1978, p. iv.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 246, Table no. 22, 2.

vine are so abundantly grown that they not only form the most common items in the daily menu of an Assamese but constitute an integral part of Assamese culture. Among other common fruits, mention may be made of jack-fruit, mango, banana, guava, pineapple, leteku (*Baccaurea*), ponial (*Flacourtia*), jamu (*Syzygium*), etc. Assam exports an average of one thousand quintals of dried fruit annually.<sup>1</sup> She is well-known for her oranges and pineapples.

Besides these rich floras, the forest regions in Assam abound with many kinds of animals like one-horned rhinoceros, elephant, wild buffalo, tiger, leopard, bison, Himalayan bear, black panther, sloth bear, various kinds of deers and monkeys, pigmy hog—the smallest pig in the world, the yellow primula (*Floribunda*) which is found only in this region and the painted bat with its red wings which is the only coloured bat in the world. The Kaziranga wild life sanctuary is one of the best of its kind and is a point of attraction to tourists from all over the globe for its one-horned rhinoceros. This sanctuary has an area of about 410 sq. km. and a population of 250-300 rhinoceroses, 500 wild buffaloes—a magnificent species getting rarer in the rest of India, and 300 elephants, besides other animals and birds. The other game reserves are Manas (about 260 sq. km.), Sonai, Rupai and Pabha. The total area of game sanctuary in Assam at present is about 1188 sq.km.<sup>2</sup> Besides the common species, some rare types of birds are found in the forests of Assam, which include pelican, blue coot, green pigeon, imperial pigeon, different varieties of parrot, partridge, quail, florican, different kinds of pheasants, scarlet, yellow mi, horn-bill, *maina*, egret etc. and some water birds like whistling teal, snipe, adjutant, cormorants, white and black-billed storks, and a varieties of seasonal migratory ducks. Among the reptiles found in the State, mention may be made of crocodile, king cobra, lizard, monitor lizard and python.

### Mineral Resources

Amongst the mineral resources of Assam, the most important are oil fields of Digboi, Duliajan, Naharkatia, Moran, Rudrasagar, Hugrijan, Lakua, Barhola, Tengakhat, Jurajan, Geleki etc. and the coal fields of Ledo, Bargolai-Numdang, Tipong Jaipur, Silbhetta etc. The Oil and Natural Gas Commission undertook exploration in

<sup>1</sup>Statistical Hand Book, Assam, 1978, p. 229, Table no. 19.1.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 230, Table no, 19.1.

Assam and in the neighbouring areas, for oil and natural gas, early in 1957, when a seismic survey was initiated and this has been continuing till today. Gravity Magnetic surveys were carried out in 1962. At present, seismic field parties have been working in this region for location of favourable structures for oil accumulation. It has been estimated that the oil field at Geleki in the district of Sibsagar is the largest of its kinds in India and it can yield a minimum of 22,000 metric tons of crude oil annually. In the year 1976 Assam produced 42,96,000 tonnes of crude oil which amounts to 58 per cent of the total production in India, 12,74,000 tonnes of petroleum products and, natural gas (utilised) of 848 million cubic metres.<sup>1</sup> There are in the State, at present, two refineries—one at Digboi and the other at Noonmati (Gauhati)—one petro-chemical complex at Namrup and a refinery-cum-petro-chemical complex at Bongaigaon. Assam also supplies crude oil to the refinery at Barauni (Bihar) through a pipeline 1157 km. long. But compared to the huge amount of oil deposits in the State, these establishments are not sufficient. According to an official statistics, Assam has an estimated coal reserve of 850 million metric tonnes, of which 250 million tonnes are proved.<sup>2</sup> But the high content of sulphur makes the Assam coal unsuitable for metallurgical purposes. According to authoritative sources, however, Assam coal could be more profitably used as gaseous fuel or liquid gas, which is yet to be developed. Limestone and iron ores are also found in some places of Assam.

### Climate

Annual revolutions of seasons in Assam are not accompanied by sharp contrast of temperature and rainfall. Due to its constant high humidity, Assam has a moderate climate. Rise of temperature in Assam is checked by frequent showers and thunder-storms which bring heavy rainfall during the spring and summer. Assam is freely open to the moisture-laden winds from the Bay of Bengal. She lies beyond the influence of the dry air-current which flows down the Gangetic plain during the hot weather. The climate is, therefore, very damp. There is wide variation of temperature between summer and winter months, but neither the summer is extremely hot nor the winter extremely cold.

<sup>1</sup>*Statistica Hand Book, Assam*, pp. v-vi.

<sup>2</sup>*The Brahmaputra Beckons*, ed. D. Kakati, Madras, 1982, p. 259,

Shihabuddin Talish, the historian of Mir Jumla, who invaded Assam in the middle of the 17th century, made a correct assessment of the climate of Assam, when he observed that "it rains for eight months in the year and even the four months of winter are not free from rains."<sup>1</sup> In short "perpetual humidity, frequent and heavy rainfall and moderate temperature changes of a warm summer and cool winter especially distinguish the valley of Assam."<sup>2</sup>

Floods are the most common and regular natural calamities in Assam. It is generally in early May that the first flood of the year is experienced. But it is of short duration and does little harm to the land or to the early cultivation. By early June, the south-west monsoon reaches the Assam valley and the continuous heavy rains raise the river levels rapidly and the Brahmaputra remains in spate, registering a series of high flood levels until October. The plight of the people during this period beggars description. Villages situated on the river banks are submerged, paddy fields, standing crops and cattle are washed away and thousands of inhabitants living in these areas are rendered homeless. All important lines of communication are snapped, so that Assam becomes largely cut off from the rest of India. When floods subside, often pestilence creates havoc among men and animals. The flood of 1954 was one of the highest ever recorded.

### Area

In the estimate of 1975-76, Assam has an area of 73,520 sq. km. of which 63,300 sq. km. belong to the plains division and 15,220 sq. km. belong to the hills division. Out of this, 8,560 sq. km. are put for non-agricultural purposes, 15,580 sq. km. are barren and uncultivable, 19,960 sq. km. are forest and 31,760 sq. km. from total cropped area.<sup>3</sup>

### Population

The Census Report of 1971 estimates the population of Assam at 1,46,25,000 souls—77,14,000 males and 69,11,000 females. Of the total population 1,41,70,000 live in the plains districts and 4,55,000 in the hills districts.<sup>4</sup> The total population in the urban areas is 12,89,222 and that of the rural areas is 1,33,35,890. The same source gives the

<sup>1</sup>Fathiya-i-Ibriyah, tr. Sir J.N. Sarkar, *JBORS*, vol. I, part II, December, 1915.

<sup>2</sup>A. Das et al., *Flora of Assam*, vol. I, part I, Shillong, 1934, Intro., p. xxix.

<sup>3</sup>*Statistical Hand Book, Assam*, pp. 84f, Table no. 3. 4 (a).

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid*, p. 1, Table no. 1.1.

density of population as at 186 per sq. km. and sex ratio as 896 female per 1,000 males.

### Religion

Hinduism is the dominant religion in Assam. Next to it is Islam. Other faiths like Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism etc. have also their followers. The tribal people are largely animists and most of their animistic beliefs have got infused with non-tribal religious rites and superstitions. The 1971 Census gives the number of Hindus in Assam as 1,06,04,618, Muslims 35,92,124, Christians 3,81,000, Sikhs 11,920, Buddhists 22,565 and Jains 12,914.<sup>1</sup> The three popular forms of Hinduism namely, Saivism, Saktism and Vaisnavism are prevalent here. Neo-Vaisnavite movement gained wonderful momentum in Assam in the 16th century<sup>2</sup> under the leadership of Sankaradeva and his disciple Madhavadeva. This new religion which drew its teaching from the *Bhagawata Gita* is called *Bhagawati* or *Mahapurusha dharma*. *Satras* or Vaisnava monasteries were established and a new orientation of Assamese socio-cultural-cum-intellectual life was set in. Following the examples of the preceptors, other disciples in their turn established *Satras* in different parts of the country and the new religion became the religion of the people. At present about 75 per cent of the Assamese Hindu population are followers of this cult. In spite of all this, popularity of Siva, the prime deity of ancient Assam did not decline much. Saktism was also very popular in ancient days. The temple of Kamakhya on the Nilachala hill at Gauhati, the principal centre of Sakti worship in India, still attracts votaries from all parts of the country. Worship of the mother-goddess in various forms like Durga, Kali, Lakshmi and Saraswati are seen particularly in the urban areas.

Assamese people are very liberal in their religious outlook and a sharp distinction amongst the followers of these cults is not discernible. Vaisnavas offering homage to Siva and Sakti, and Saivites or Saktas holding and taking part in the *Nama-prasangas* (recital of prayer songs by the Vaisnavas) are a common feature in Assam.

The followers of Islam in the State according to the 1971 census Report constitute 24.56 per cent of the total population.<sup>3</sup> In spite of the repeated invasions of Assam by the Turko-Afghans and the

<sup>1</sup>Ibid, pp. 28f., Table no. 1.6.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 28, Table no. 1.6.

Mughals beginning with the first decade of the 13th century till the close of the 17th century, the Muslims formed a distinct minority in the population of the State. It is with the inauguration of the British rule that regular immigration of the Muslims to Assam took place. Before the district of Sylhet was separated from Assam to constitute East Pakistan in August 1947, the Muslim population in Assam was 33.7 per cent of the total, the Muslim percentage being 60.71 alone in the district of Sylhet. Though a sharp decline in their strength should have been expected after this separation, streams of Muslim immigrants from erstwhile East Pakistan and present-day Bangladesh have helped to swell their number to a considerable extent in the present Assam. As a result the problem of detection and deportation of foreign nationals had often been discussed in several quarters and though the Assam Immigrant Act was passed in 1950, the problem still awaits final and fruitful solution.

The Muslims in Assam are generally called *Gariyas*, a term originating from the name of the kingdom of Ghor, to which Muhammad, the founder of the Muslim empire in India belonged, or from Gauda (Bengal) from which they came to Assam. There is another section of Assamese Muslims called *Mariyas*, the descendants of the war-prisoners of Turbak's army,<sup>1</sup>

Leaving aside the *Mariyas*, amongst other Assamese Muslim families of Syeds, Mughals and Pathans are also found.<sup>2</sup> *The Kamrup District Gazetteer* mentions of the Khalifas also and holds that they were the descendants of Muslim religious preceptors, who entered Assam "some centuries ago". The early Muslim settlers have got themselves completely assimilated with the Assamese people speaking their language, adopting their mode of living, sharing their social rites and superstitions and fighting for the cause of this land.

Christianity appeared in Assam with the advent of the British rule in 1826. Of all the Christian missionaries, who came to spread the gospel in Assam, those of the American Baptist Mission, who first set their feet on this land in 1836 were most popular. Against all the difficulties placed before this Mission by men and nature, its members had succeeded in gaining a large number of converts in the hill areas, though they could not do the same in the plains. These American missionaries did a great service to the cause of the

<sup>1</sup>E. Gait, *History of Assam*, Calcutta, 1967, p. 96.

<sup>2</sup>E. Gait, *Report on the Census of Assam, 1891*, Shillong, 1882, p. 86.

Assamese language. It is worth mentioning here that they, along with certain Assamese intellectuals, fought successfully to make the British ruler accept Assamese as the official language of the State. *Orunodoi*, the first Assamese periodical was published by them in 1846 in the printing press they set up in Sibsagar. Besides the American Baptist Mission, there were such other missionary organisations as the Norwegian, Welsh, Spanish and Italian, that were engaged in similar work. Despite the fact that the missionaries brought the tribal people to the pale of 'civilization' by giving them religion and education, competent authorities on tribal customs and behaviour like Hutton, Mills, Haimendorf and Verrier Elwin have pointed out how the policy pursued by the missions, of 'strenuously imposing an alien western culture on their converts' had led to pernicious effects.

There are evidences, both archaeological and literary, to prove that Buddhism existed in ancient Assam. There are also traditions in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and Assam, according to which, the *mahaparinirvana* of the Buddha took place in western Assam in Sualkuchi or somewhere near Hayagriva-Madhava temple at Hajo.<sup>1</sup> According to other traditions, the older shrine at Hajo was a great Chaitya, created over the cremated relics of the Buddha's body.<sup>2</sup> The Tibetan Lamas identify the temple deity as Mahamuni, another name of the Buddha. The temple is still a centre of pilgrimage for the Buddhists. Every winter the Bhutanese in great numbers come to visit the temple; and side by side, they also carry on small trade with the people of Assam.

Taranath describes how Dhitika, who succeeded Upagupta to teachership became responsible for the spread of Buddhism in Kamarupa.<sup>3</sup> He also states that Asvabhava preached the Mahayana cult in the land.<sup>4</sup> Innumerable icons of the Buddha found in different places of Assam prove further the antiquity of the religion in the land which contradict the statement gaining much ground that there was no prevalence of Buddhism in ancient Assam before the visit of Yuan Chwang to this land.

The Khamtis, Phakials, Aitonias, Turungs, Khamjangs and Shyams

<sup>1</sup>Waddell, *Buddhism of Tibet*, London, 1895, pp. 307f; K. L. Barua, *Studies in the Early History of Assam*, ed. M. Neog, Jorhat-Gauhati, 1973, pp. 37ff; P.C. Choudhury, *The History of Civilization of the People of Assam to the Twelfth Century A.D.*, Gauhati, 1966, p. 401.

<sup>2</sup>Choudhury, *op. cit.*, p. 401.

<sup>3</sup>*Indian Historical Quarterly*, vol. V, p. 720.

<sup>4</sup>Taranath, *History of Buddhism*, p. 199.

(or Naras) of Arunachal and eastern Assam are all Buddhists. It is believed by some that once the Kalitas of Assam were the followers of this religion and there are others who opine that the Baniyas and the Kaivartas, two scheduled caste people of present Assam, were also originally Buddhists.<sup>1</sup> In many places of Assam, Buddhist monasteries are also seen. But against the proselytising influence of Hinduism, Buddhism has not succeeded in gaining strong foothold in Assam.

Jainism seems to have entered Assam in the modern period. A few of the Jainists might have been there in ancient Assam, but their number was very negligible to find mention in the records. With the coming of the British, Marwari traders had made their entry into this region and within a short span of time they established their shops in almost all urban areas. Assam has become till now a very fertile field of successful business enterprises to the enthusiastic Marwaris and they are playing an important role in its social and political life. A section of the Marwaris who are Jainists set up their temples in the places of their establishment and almost in every town of Assam there is such a one.

There is a belief amongst the Sikhs that Guru Nanak visited Assam. The ninth Sikh Guru Teg Bahadur also came to Assam along with Raja Ram Singh, the general of Emperor Aurangzeb in the latter's expedition to this land in 1669. It is narrated in the Sikh chronicles that Teg Bahadur left a number of his disciples in Assam. The *thanah* of Damdama in the district of Goalpara is ascribed to the Sikhs. *Gurudwaras* are seen in many towns of Assam.

### *Castes and Tribes*

Assam has been the melting pot of all branches of human race and of cultures of both hills and plains. Waves of people belonging to different ethnic groups poured into this region from time immemorial. In the process of assimilation of these diverse elements, a composite culture grew up and that culture is the Assamese culture. "The functional classification of the tribes which is supposed to be the root of the caste-system gradually gave way to a more fluid type of social set-up and the rigidity of caste distinction markedly receded with the passage of time, particularly during the last few decades."<sup>2</sup> In the context of changed social pattern, a rigid account of castes and

<sup>1</sup>H. Barua, op cit., p. 7.

<sup>2</sup>Assam District Gazetteers, Lakhimpur, Gauhati, 1976, p. 227.

## A THUMB NAIL SKETCH OF ASSAM

tribes is difficult to make. However, salient features of some castes and tribes inhabiting Assam are given below:

**Brahmins:** The earliest reference in historical documents to the settlement of Brahmins in ancient Assam dates from the early 6th century AD. But there are reasons to believe that migration of Brahmins to Assam began long before that date. Traditional accounts indicate that Parasuram settled Brahmins near the present Parasuram Kunda. The Assamese Brahmins originally came from Mithila, Orissa, Benaras and Kanauj. There are also a few Bengali Brahmins, who in social questions usually keep themselves distinct from their Assamese confreres.<sup>1</sup>

Apart from observing the sacramental rites prescribed by Halayudha or Pasupati, the Brahmins also practise *Sandhya* and *Yapa*. The *Upnayana* or the ceremony of the investiture of the holy thread is strictly observed by them. "In spite of their pride in social superiority" the Brahmins are "liberal in their outlook regarding occupations and in their observance of other social laws. In fact the Brahmanas of Assam have always followed a rather flexible system, not as strictly rigid as in other parts of India; even in respect of food".<sup>2</sup> Usually a Brahmin maintains a family deity. The Brahmins do not plough the land themselves but work with the spade and they constitute the priestly section of the Hindu society. The Brahmins in Assam are called by the Assamese appellation *Bamun*.

**Kayasthas:** The Kayasthas are believed to be Kshatriyas. They are said to have come to Assam from places like Mithila, Kanauj and Bengal. The Kayasthas observe some of the sacramental rites such as *Annaprāsana* and *Sudakarana*. They do not plough the lands themselves. Many of the *Satradhikars* are Kayasthas. Sankaradeva himself was a Kayastha Bhuyan.

**Kalitas:** It is generally held that the Kalitas came to Assam from places of upper India during the reign of Dharmapal (c. 1095-1120). The traditional account of their origin—that they were Kshatriyas who concealed their caste for fear of Parasuram—has been rejected by some scholars of Assam.<sup>3</sup> Some scholars ascribe them Alpine origin, whereas, some others conjecture that they are of Aryan stock.

<sup>1</sup> *Assam District Gazetteers, Sibsagar, Shillong, 1967, p. 90.*

<sup>2</sup> Choudhury, *op. cit.*, p. 313.

<sup>3</sup> *Assam District Gazetteers, Lakhimpur, p. 129; K. Medhi, 'The Kalitas', JARS, vol. III, no. 3, p. 75.*



According to B.K. Kakati, the Kalitas were originally a class or *phaid* and not a profession caste.

*Keots*: The Keots are included among the caste-Hindus. In the district of Kamrup, they are generally called 'Kamars' or blacksmiths. Besides this occupation, they have taken to agriculture and other trades. The observance of sacramental rites is confined to very few of them.

*Bariyas*: The Bariyas are a caste peculiar to Assam. The term *Bariya* is said to have been derived from *Bari* meaning a widow. It is said that they originated from an offspring of a Brahmin widow by a Sudra husband. The children of Brahmin girls married to Sudras were also called Bariyas, but this is not so in present days. They are generally agriculturists.

*Suts*: The term *Sut* is said to have been derived from *Sut*, the expounder of the *Puranas*, who was himself the son of a Brahmin widow. But some people of *Bariya* sub-caste also call themselves *Sut*. The *Suts* are generally Vaisnavas.

*Yogis*: The Yogis are also known as Naths, Nath-Yogis and as *Katanis*, a sub-caste of the Yogis. They claim that they are descendants of Gorokshanatha, who is said to be an incarnation of Siva. "In the *Ballalacharitam*, a Sanskrit book supposed to be written in the 12th century AD, we find mention of a sect of people, who lived on the banks of the Brahmaputra and were known as 'Jungis'. They were drum-beaters, whose descendants are still found in some parts of Assam and are known as *Kendra-Jogis* (Yogis). Their original profession was drum-beating, palanquin-bearing, quackery, snake-charming etc. They have now taken to agriculture."<sup>1</sup> In the Ahom rule, they were mainly associated with the rearing of *pat* silk worms and spinning of silk thread. "Judging from literary records and legends, still prevalent among the Yogis of the Nath order, it appears that the Nath cult has grown with general air of Saivism".<sup>2</sup> The Yogis wear the holy thread but unlike the Brahmanas, they take to ploughing themselves. They perform their social and religious rites by their own priests. People of this sect living in Cachar follow the practice of burial of the dead but those of the Brahmaputra valley follow cremation.

<sup>1</sup> *Assam District Gazetteers, Lakhimpur*, p. 130: *Assam District Gazetteers, Nowgong, Gauhati*, 1978, p. 115.

<sup>2</sup> S.B. Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults*, Calcutta, 1946, p. 228.

Nadiyals, Jaluas or Kaivartas: Fishing is their main occupation. Some of them have now taken to agriculture and other trades. They follow in general many essential tenets of Hinduism. Most of them are followers of Vaisnavism propounded by Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva. In the present constitution of India, they have been included among the scheduled castes.

There are, besides, many sub-castes and classes among the Assamese Hindus, such as, Mali (gardener), Kumar (potter), Sonari (goldsmith), Hira (Potter), Napit (barber) and Dhoba (washermen), which are more or less functional. Of these castes Dhoba, Napit and Kumar are included among other Backward Classes, whereas the rest comes under scheduled castes.

The Koches, the Chutiyas, the Bodo-Kacharis, the Marans, the Barahis and the Ahoms were the ruling dynasties of Assam at some periods of history. They are all Mongoloids or Indo-Mongoloids. Such is the irony of fate that all of them including the Ahoms who ruled Assam for six centuries, are now included among the other backward classes.

The Khamtis, the Phakials, the Aitonias, the Turungs, the Shyams (or Naras) and the Khamjangs are all Tai-Shans like the Ahoms, who have emigrated to Assam at different times and settled mainly in eastern Assam. They are Buddhists and bear some traits of Burmese culture in their mode of living.

The Miris, also known as Mishings, were originally a hill tribe living in the hills between the Nishi and the Adi territories. They came to the plains during the Ahom rule. They settled on the banks of the Brahmaputra and the Suvansiri rivers and their tributaries with agriculture as their main occupation. Their dialect is allied to the Adis. They are of Mongoloid stock. They are divided into two main endogamous groups *Bare Gam* (twelve *gams*) and *Dah Gam* (ten *gams*), which are subdivided into a large number of minor groups.

Amongst the population of Assam, some Manipuris, Singphos, Adis, Karbis (Mikirs), Garos and Nagas are also found. The Manipuris are all Vaisnavas, the Singphos Buddhists, the Adis largely Animists, the Karbis and the Garos are either Christians or Hindus, whereas the Nagas in the Tirap transferred area in the Dibrugarh district are all Christians and in the Sibsagar district are all Vaisnavas and disciples of the Mayamara *Satra*. These Nagas can speak Assamese well. In the districts of Darrang, Kamrup and Goalpara there are some Bhutiya villages, whose inhabitants are of Vaisnava tenant taught by Sankara-

deva and Madhavadeva. In western and central Assam some other classes of tribal people called Lalungs and Hojais are found. They are one of the autochthonous people of Assam. Their main habitat at present is the district of Nowgong.<sup>1</sup> Agriculture is their principal occupation.

Settlement of the Sikh population in Assam dates back to the middle of the 17th century. It is said that the early Assamese Sikhs are descendants of the disciples of Guru Teg Bahadur, who came to Assam in 1669 AD. These Sikhs got assimilated with the Assamese people through inter-marriage and they adopted Assamese language and culture. The second batch of Sikhs came to Assam towards the close of the Ahom rule. In the standing militia created by Purnananda Burhagohain, the Premier of the Ahom kingdom (1783-1817), there were a number of Sikhs. Indeed some Assamese Sikhs claim that they are direct descendants of Chaitana Singh, the army commander of the Ahom king Chandrakanta Singha (1811-17). Their religious and social rites are performed in accordance with the mandates of the *Adi Granth*. In other matters there is no difference between them and the Assamese. Their main occupation is agriculture.

Since the inauguration of the British rule, Marwari and Punjabi traders and bankers, Bengali clerks, doctors, lawyers and businessmen and, in course of time, their counterparts from several parts of India began to pour into Assam and had permanently settled here. Tea garden labourers were recruited from all parts of the country, who now constitute an important element of the Assamese population.

The Nepalis began to come to Assam since the early part of the 19th century and they have monopolised the dairy industry of the land.

### *Languages and Dialects*

Assam is a bilingual state with Assamese as the court language in the Brahmaputra valley and Bengali in the two districts of the Surma valley. Assamese, like Bengali, Bihari and Oriya originated from the eastern variety of the Magadhan *prakrit*. B.K. Kakati has shown that both Assamese and Bengali "started on parallel lines with peculiar dialectical predispositions and often developed sharply contradictory idiosyncracies."<sup>2</sup> He has further illustrated how the Austric, Kolerian,

<sup>1</sup>For details see, *Assam District Gazetteers, Nowgong*, pp. 118ff.

<sup>2</sup>B.K. Kakati, *Assamese: Its Formation and Development*, DHAS., Gauhati, 1941, p. 73.

Malayan, Bodo and other elements have enriched Assamese vocabulary. Indeed the evolution of Assamese literature on independent lines took place from the middle of the 10th century.<sup>1</sup>

“The present Assamese script is not an outcome of natural evolution but is the product of certain historical factors”.<sup>2</sup> The earliest specimen of Assamese script is found in the copper plates and various inscriptions of Assam. The present Assamese script differs widely from its earlier specimen.

Of the Assam-Burmese branch of Tibeto-Burman linguistic group, the most important is the Bodo language.<sup>3</sup> The Bodo language is said to have no inherited script at present. Bodo people of Assam are scattered in the area from Dhubri in the west to Sadiya in the east. In Arunachal, Tripura and Nagaland also, there is a small number of Bodo-Kachari people. The Kacharis, Koches, Rabhas, Hojais, Lalungs, Garos, Marans and Chutiyas originally belonged to the same speech community. Since 1963, Bodo language has been introduced as the medium of instruction at the primary level in the Bodo predominant areas like Kokrajhar in the district of Goalpara.

Another important language of the Assam-Burmese branch of the Tibeto-Burman group is Tai-Ahom. It is spoken by the Khamtis, Aitonias, Shyams (Naras), Phakials, Khamjangs etc. In the early part of the Ahom rule, this was used as the court language but gradually it was substituted by Assamese. Numerous historical works were written in this language till the end of the Ahom rule. Very few among the Ahoms are at present conversant with this language. It has its own script.

Among the important dialects of Assam, majority of them come under Tibeto-Burman. S.K. Chatterjee in his work *Kirata-jana-krita* gives the distribution of the Tibeto-Burman speech in Assam and elsewhere as follows.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Tibeto-Burman*

- (a) Tibetan and its dialects;
- (b-c) the Himalayan group of dialects;
- (d) the North-Assam group—Aka, Miri, Abor, Daffa and Mishmi;

<sup>1</sup>S.N. Sarma, *Asamiya Sahityar Itibrita*, Gauhati, 1961, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup>Assam District Gazetteers, Nowgong, p. 101.

<sup>3</sup>Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*, vol. I, Delhi, 1968, pp. 62f.

<sup>4</sup>Cited in H. Barua, *op. cit.*, pp. 97f.

(e) the Assam-Burmese group;

1. the Bodo speeches—Bodo, Mech, Rabha, Garo, Kachari, Tipra.
2. the Naga dialects—Ao, Angami, Sema, Tengkhul etc.
3. The Kuki-chin speeches of Manipur (Meithei or Manipuri), Tripura, Lushai Hills as well as Burma.
4. the Kachin (Singpho)—Lo group.
5. Burmese and its dialects.

Almost all the hill tribes, with the exception of the Khasi-Synteng language group, are believed to have belonged to the Tibeto-Burman family of the languages. All these different dialects have contributed together to the growth and formation of the Assamese language.

Nagamese and some other variety of standard Assamese is the lingua franca of Nagaland and part of Arunachal, respectively.

Next to Assamese, the other important language of Assam is Bengali, spoken by 19.7 per cent of the total population. Leaving aside the Hindi-speakers, most people in the urban areas can speak broken Hindi. There are speakers of other languages too, like Gujrati, Marathi, Punjabi, Sindhi, Oriya, Tamil, Malayalam, etc. Below is the distribution of speakers of various languages specified in Schedule VIII to the Constitution of India, as it appeared in the Census Report of 1971:

Language	Total No. of speakers
1. Assamese	89, 04, 917
2. Bengali	28, 82, 039
3. Gujrati	649
4. Hindi	7, 92, 481
5. Kannada	204
6. Kashmiri	26
7. Malayalam	4, 138
8. Marathi	1, 292
9. Oriya	1, 50, 196
10. Punjabi	12, 704
11. Sindhi	278
12. Tamil	2, 547
13. Telegu	20, 083
14. Urdu	6, 254

### Urban and Rural Life

Assam is a peasants' land par excellence so that 91 per cent of her population live in the village, with agriculture as their main occupa-

tion. Not only her economy but also her social and cultural patterns are determined by this mode of living. Rice, wheat, pulses, mustard and other oily seeds, sugar-cane, jute and different kinds of fruits and vegetables are the main crops of cultivation. But tea is her main agriculture-based industry. There are at present 756 tea gardens in Assam covering an area of 1,89,338 hectares with a total annual production of 2,76,308 tons, which constitutes 55 per cent of the total production of tea in India (as assessed in 1976). Number of bonafide dependent workers on roll as on 31st Dec. 1974 comes up to 6,00,855. Only one ninth of the total production is sold at Gauhati auction centre, whereas the remaining are sold at the auction centres at Calcutta and London. Over 62 per cent of India's foreign exchange earnings from tea is contributed by Assam.

Besides oil and tea, another important industry of Assam is that of plywood, which now comprises 40 mills in different parts of the State. But 80 per cent of the total production of the plywood mills is transferred to depots in other States and head-offices of 14 such mills are located outside the State. This deprives the State of its legitimate share of the revenue-yield, employment and other benefits.

During the past few years, some medium-scale industries have been started. Mention may be made of two sugar mills, one jute mill, one paper mill, one cycle factory, couple of steel re-rolling mills, a cement factory, a number of forest-based industries and a couple of textile units. The total number of factories registered in Assam till 1976 is 1,603. But these are much negligible in relation to the State's huge natural resources, power potential and population strength. Assam is still lagging far behind other Indian states in matters of industrialisation. Most of the towns in Assam are merely administrative headquarters having government offices, a thanah or a court, some educational institutions and cinema halls. Assam commands about one fourth of the power potential of the country, yet the per capita consumption in the State is the lowest in India (25 Kwh against the all India average of 110 Kwh). The Umtru-Umiam Project of Meghalaya and the Thermal Project of Chandrapur supply electricity to lower and central Assam; whereas upper Assam is fed from the Namrup Thermal Plant. In the district of Nowgong, work on the Kapili Hydro-electric project have now been started. Till 1977, only 1,797 villages in Assam have been electrified.

There are in Assam 21,995 villages and 72 towns. The life in the town is only a continuation of the life in the village, the connect-

ing link between the two being maintained through Government offices, cinema halls and the market places in the towns and the rice bowls in the villages. The villages are mostly self-sufficient in their economy and "simplicity in the social system and patterns of life is their key-note." The peasant ploughs the land and produces his own food, he builds his house with thatches and bamboos collected from the jungles. The womenfolk actively help cultivation in every stage except ploughing. She maintains a kitchen garden, rears silk worms and weaves cloth for the members of her family. She wears a *mekhela*, a long skirt down to the ankle; a *riha*, which she ties round her waist and breast; a *chadar*, which she wraps round her body and a blouse, usually of coloured fibre. The menfolk wears a *dhoti*, a shirt or a *fatahu chola* (sleeveless shirt), ties a *gamocha* on his head or hangs it from his shoulders and in winter wraps an *endi* shawl over his body, all items with usual exception to the second one being woven by the womenfolk. Till recently even cloth for making shirt was woven by women, and this practice has not been totally given up. In this context the observation made by Gandhiji is worth quoting: "Every woman of Assam is a born weaver..... And she weaves fairy tales in cloth.....I fell in love with the women of Assam as soon as I learnt that they are accomplished weavers. Being weavers they have used economy in their dress without impairing its beauty or its efficiency as cover. And to me it is a sign of very high culture to see the Assamese women and girls wearing little or no jewellery".<sup>1</sup> Weaving constitutes the most essential part of a girl's education and the lack of it does her discredit; earlier a disqualification for her marriage. This classic picture of a traditional Assamese village, however, is being spoiled by the inroads of foreign capital into Assam as well as by the expansion of the Indian home market for industrial goods. The native handicraft industries of the erstwhile 'self-sufficient' village are being rapidly eliminated in competition with large-scale industries outside Assam. Decay of feudalism has resulted in the loss of traditional habits and customs. Assamese culture, for example, is being replaced by the western and consequently, the dear, old, traditional Assamese village is facing a great crisis, both economic and cultural.

Assam does not have a separate weaver's class. Here all people weave irrespective of caste or creed or social position and almost every

<sup>1</sup>Cited in *ibid*, p. 88.

house contains a loom. In fact sericulture and handloom weaving are the most important cottage industries in Assam.

Assam, like China, has a wide reputation in the manufacture of varieties of silk cloth, an art which was known to her as early as the days of the Epics and even earlier. There are three main varieties of Assam silk worms: Eri or Endi (*Attacus ricini*), Muga (*Antheroea*) and Pat (*Patta*). Eri worms are mainly fed on castor plants (*Ricinus sps.*); Muga worms are fed on plants like Adakuri (*Tetranthera quadrifolia*), Suanlu (*T. macrophylla*), Dighalati (*T. Dighlati*), Chom (*Machilus rdoroatissima*), and Champa (*Michelia pulnyensis*) and pat worms on mulberry plants (*Morus indica*).

Cane, bamboo and palm leaf works constitute indigenous cottage industries of the rural areas. Cane industry has been carried to the towns and beautiful and durable furniture much esteemed by all are made of it. A kind of hat called *japi* made of palm-leaf is used by every peasant whether he is working in the rice or tea field. The *japis* are often ornamented and embroidered with different designs.

Every Hindu village has a *Namghar*, where congregational prayers and *bhawanas* or theatrical performances on religious themes are held. It is also the court building of the village where minor civil and criminal cases are disposed of.

### Festivals

The special Assamese festivals are the three *Bihus*. The *Bihu* is the national festival of Assamese people without any sectarian tinge in it. It thus promotes unity among different castes and creeds. The three *Bihus* are *Bahag* or *Rangali* (merriment), *Magh* or *Bhogali* (festivities) and *Kati* or *Kangali* (unceremonious). The origin of the *Bihus* is traced to a remote past and they are associated with cycles of cultivation. The *Kati Bihu* is celebrated on the last day of *Ahina* or *Aswin* (middle of October) most unceremoniously. *Chakis* (lamps) one in each, are lighted under a *tulsi* plant (sacred basil-*ocimum sanctum*), cattle-shed and rice fields, and hymns are sung outdoors praying a good harvest. The *Magh Bihu* begins on the last day of *Poh* or *Paus* (middle of January), after the harvest is collected. Bonfire, feasts and social gatherings are its special marks. It can be called the 'Harvest Home'. The *Bahag Bihu* is celebrated with the advent of the Assamese New Year and begins on the last day of *Chait* or *Chaitra* (middle of April). It is a spring festival where dance and music are preponderant. The *Chaitra Sankranti* day is

celebrated as *Garu* (cow) *Bihu*, when the cows are smeared with oil mixed with pasted black gram and tumeric and then bathed. In the evening, villagers go from house to house singing *Huchari* songs and exchanging greetings. *Huchari* is accompanied by *Bihu* dances. Offering of *gamocha* (a kind of hand-woven towel) as a token of love and respect is a most usual feature of this *Bihu*. *Huchari*, merriment and games and sports usually continue for seven days. Social gatherings, merriment and preparation of different varieties of *pitha* (rice-cakes) by the womenfolk characterise both the *Bahag* and *Magh Bihus*.

The *Bihu* dances are performed with indigenous musical instruments called *dhol* (drum), *taka* (bamboo clapper), *mahar singor pepa* (flute made of buffalo horns), *gagana* (a small wind-instrument made of bamboo), *chifung* (a special kind of flute) etc. The *Bihu* dances are accompanied by *Bihu* songs, which are full of youthful vibrations and romantic appeal.

The death anniversary of Sankaradeva is celebrated in August/September and that of Madhavadeva three days before the *Janmastami*. All work is laid aside on these two days and people devote their time to the singing of hymns and eating *prasad*. The *tithi* of Damodardeva, another disciple of Sankaradeva is similarly observed by the *Bamuniya* sect of the Vaisnavas. *Janmastami*, *Rashlila* and *Doljatra* are specially celebrated in the *Satras* and *Namghars*. Another popular festival is *Sivaratri*. *Durga puja*, once confined to the Saktas, are now celebrated by most Hindus in the urban areas. Worship of Saraswati, Lakshmi, Viswa-karma and Kali are also performed annually.

Muslims, Christians and followers of different sects observe their religious festivals with co-operation from their fellow brothers of different sects. Birth-day anniversary of all the different founders of religion are held with public meetings and functions, where people of different castes and creeds participate. Local beliefs and superstitions have influenced both the Assamese Muslims and Christians. A class of Muslim prayer songs called *Zikirs*, in imitation of those composed by Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva and, ascribed to one Ajan Fakir, are very popular in Assam.

#### *Marriage Customs and Rituals*

The Assamese Hindus perform their marriage ceremonies according to Vedic rites. Alongside the religious rites, they also follow some special rites and procedures which usually last two to three days. The sacrificial part of the ceremony takes place in the bride's place. Per-

formance of wedding songs suitable to different stages of the ceremony forms a special feature of an Assamese Hindu marriage.

The Ahoms perform their marriage ceremony according to their own rites called *Chaklang*, which forms the religious part of the ceremony, other rites being exactly similar with those followed in case of an Assamese Hindu marriage.

Other religious sects perform their marriage according to their respective rites, but in most of them, local influences so far as the social rites of the ceremony are concerned, are clearly visible.

Assamese family is patriarchal. The joint-family system was common in the past. There are cases even now of several brothers living jointly and having a common kitchen. But under new socio-economic influences, joint family system is losing its hold.

### *Education*

There are three universities in the state located at Gauhati (1948), Dibrugarh (1965) and Jorhat (1968) respectively and the last of them being an Agricultural one, The total number of educational institutions in the State as in 1976-77 is 26,468; of this 132 are colleges for imparting general education and 18 for imparting professional education. There are 7 technical schools in the State and a deaf and dumb school located at Gauhati. Annually an average of 1,000 post-graduates and 8,000 graduates are produced by the universities of the State. In recent years, many institutions devoted to the cultivation and promotion of fine arts like music, dancing etc. have grown up in every town and in some villages adjacent to the towns. Percentage of literacy in the State according to the 1971 census is 28.1.

### *Transport and Communication*

Transport and communication in Assam is not well developed and this is the major reason for the State's backwardness. In the rural areas, gravelled roads are few and as such, transport is extremely difficult in the summer season. Even the National Highway and the PWD roads are of deplorable conditions in most parts. This is mainly due to climatic conditions and damages by floods. The N.F. Railway line stretches upto Murkkongsellek in the Lakhimpur district. The broad-gauge reaches only upto New Bongaigaon, as such, railway journey upwards New Bongaigaon is very tiresome and time-consuming. The total length of railway route in the State as in 1977 is 2,194 km. There are in all 6 air-ports in the State but flights in winter due

to fog and mist are often uncertain.

The length of navigable waterways for different categories of boats and vessels in 1976-77 is 4,098 km.

### *Conclusion*

Assam has a rich cultural heritage that goes back to the days of the Epics. She is lavishly endowed with the beauties of nature and possesses important mineral products like petroleum and coal. She is known to the outside world including the rest of India, mainly for one thing—tea. Despite the fact that she has a glorious past and played an important role in the history and civilization of India, till late she was known to many as a land of earthquakes and floods and of mountains and jungles, where wild elephants, roaring tigers and poisonous snakes peep and peer with virulent eyes and claws. Not a few still believe Assam as a land of magic and sorcery and the orthodox Saktas look to it as the abode of the sacred temple of Kamakhya only. But Assam is not merely a land of natural calamities, wild animals and miracles, but of a struggling people, conquering nature and making history.

With her strategic position touching or having close proximity with three foreign countries in three different directions; Bangladesh on the west, China on the north and Burma on the south-east, Assam now becomes a vital frontier with a political importance similar or even greater than that held for centuries by the northwestern part of India. In the political history of the world, Assam first sprang into prominence as the area where the Japanese in course of the Second World War advancing into India from Burma were first held and then repulsed. In 1962 NEFA (North East Frontier Agency, present Arunachal) along with Ladakh had been the scene of the Sino-Indian border war and after the fall of Bomdi-La on November 19 of that year, Assam's destiny lay at the mercy of the Chinese. It was the second time when the attention of the whole of India, nay, the world was drawn for a moment to Assam.

Is Assam, then, merely a strategic outpost? No, it is also the abode of the millions, who are to decide their own destiny. With their active involvement in developing an economy, in which the growth of agriculture and the growth of industry are balanced, a bright future for Assam is ensured. Through the proper utilisation of natural resources, particularly her power potential and through the modernisation of agriculture, the people of Assam can change the face of their land and

build up an effective resistance against the capitalist exploitation, both Indian and foreign. This alone would remove her isolation from the outside world and place her amongst the vanguards of progress.

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