



Glimpses of **Assam**



R.S. Arha
Latika Singh



Assam is dominated by the mighty Brahmaputra river which gives ample benefits to the people. Assam as a tourist destination corresponds to a world of contrasts and excitement with each place of the state having something amazing to offer. Some people call it a magic land while others call it a green paradise.

The state of Assam is one of the most beautiful regions of India. "Glimpses of Assam" is an attempt to bring before readers various facets of the people, language, culture, music, literature and festivals of Assam. In addition, the book also makes elaborate presentation on history, geography, districts, demography, IT and industrial policies, various sectors of state's economy, welfare measures and places of tourism destination.

Contents:

- Historical Overview
- Geographical Overview
- Districts Profile
- Population and Language
- Assam Tea
- Information Technology Policy of Assam
- Industrial Policy
- Culture, Festivals and Arts
- Economic Overview of the State
- Places of Tourism Interest

As such, the book is of utmost importance to students, teachers, tourists, guides and general public.

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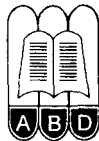


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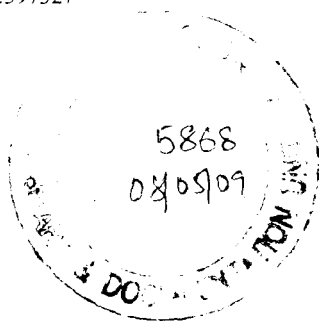


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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>v</i>
1. Historical Overview	1
2. Geographical Overview	14
3. Districts Profile	19
4. Population and Language	48
5. Assam Tea	65
6. Information Technology Policy of Assam	70
7. Industrial Policy	90
8. Culture, Festivals and Arts	133
9. Economic Overview of the State	149
10. Places of Tourism Interest	271
<i>Index</i>	<i>297</i>

1

Historical Overview

Introduction

The history of Assam is the history of a confluence of peoples from the east, west and the north; the confluence of the Indo-Aryan, Austro-Asiatic and Tibeto-Burman cultures. Politically, it has been invaded, but has never served as a vassal or a colony to an external power till the advent of the Burmese in 1821 and subsequently the British in 1826.

Paleolithic Cultures

The earliest inhabitants of the region are assigned to the Middle Pleistocene period (781,000 to 126,000 years ago) in the Rongram valley of Garo Hills. The Paleolithic sites, which used handaxe-cleaver tools, have affinities to the Abbevillio-Acheulean culture. Other Paleolithic sites include those in the Daphabum area of Lohit district in Arunachal Pradesh which used stone tools from metamorphic rocks. The cave-based Paleolithic sites at Khangkhui in Ukhrul, Manipur, is placed in the Late Pleistocene period.

There exists evidence of a microlithic culture in the Rongram Valley of Garo Hills that lie between the neolithic layers and virgin soil. The microliths here were made of dolerite, unlike those from the rest of India. Shreds of crude hand-made pottery indicate that the microlithic people were hunters and food-gatherers.

Neolithic Cultures

Early Neolithic cultures based on the unifacially flaked hand-axe in the Garo hills have developed in line with the Hoabinhian culture, and it is conjectured that this region was the contact point for the Indian and the Southeast Asian cultures.

The Late Neolithic cultures have affinities with the spread of the Mon Khmer speaking people from Malaysia and the Ayeyarwady valley and late neolithic developments in South China. Since these cultures have been dated to 4500 BC–4000 BC, the Assam sites are dated to approximate that period.

These Neolithic sites, though widely spread, are concentrated in the hills and high grounds, due possibly to the floods. These cultures performed shifting cultivation called *jhum*, which is still practiced by some communities in the region. Some typical sites are Daojali Hading in North Cachar hills, Sarutaru in Kamrup district and Selbagiri in the Garo Hills.

Metal Age

There exists no archaeological evidence of Copper-Bronze or Iron age culture in the region. This might seem as an impossibility given that corresponding cultures have been discovered in Bengal as well as Southeast Asia. It can only be conjectured that metal age sites in the region exist but have not yet been discovered.

Megalithic Cultures

Though the metal age seems to be missing in Assam, the Iron Age Megalithic culture of South India finds an echo in the rich megalithic culture in the region, which begins to appear in the first millennium BCE, and which continues till today among the Khasi and the Naga people. The affinity is with Southeast Asia. The Megalithic culture was the precursor of the fertility cult and the saktism and the Vajrayana Buddhism that followed.

Mythological Assam

Protohistoric Assam is reconstructed from epics and literature from early times (*Mahabharata, Kalika Purana, Yogini Tantra*, etc.). The earliest political entity seems to have been led by a non-Aryan Danava dynasty with Mahiranga mentioned as the first king. This dynasty was removed by Narakasura. Naraka appears to be a generic name for many kings belonging to the Naraka dynasty. According to legend, the last of the Naraka kings was killed by Krishna and his son Bhagadatta took the throne. Bhagadatta is said to have participated in the Mahabharata war with an army of "chinas, kiratas and dwellers of the eastern sea", thereby indicating that his kingdom, Pragjyotisha, included part of Bangladesh. The last in the Naraka dynasty is a ruler named Suparua.

Ancient Period

The historical account of Assam begins with the establishment of Pushya Varman's Varman dynasty in the 4th century in the Kamarupa kingdom, which marks the beginning of Ancient Assam. This dynasty was most likely of aboriginal origin, but drew its lineage from Narakasura. The kingdom reached its zenith under Bhaskarvarman in the 7th century. Xuanzang visited his court and left behind a significant account. Bhaskar

Varman died without leaving behind an issue and the control of the country passed to Salasthamba, who established the Mlechchha dynasty. After the fall of the Mlechchha dynasty in the late 9th century, a new ruler, Brahmapala was elected, who established the Pala dynasty. The last Pala king was removed by the Gaur king, Ramapala, in 1110AD. But the two subsequent kings, Timgyadeva and Vaidyadeva, though established by the Gaur kings, ruled mostly as independents and issued grants under the old Kamarupa seals. The fall of subsequent kings and the rise of individual kingdoms in the 12th century in place of the Kamarupa kingdom marked the end of the Kamarupa kingdom and the period of Ancient Assam.

Medieval Period

The beginning of Medieval Assam is marked by the rise of the Khen dynasty of the Kamata kingdom, established by Prithu in the western part of the old Kamarupa Kingdom, and the beginning of attacks by the Turks of Bengal. The Kamata kingdom, named after the capital at Kamatapur, was frequently attacked by the rulers of Bengal, and Alauddin Hussein Shah finally removed the last Khen king in 1498. But Hussein Shah and subsequent rulers could not consolidate their rule in the Kamata kingdom, and in the 16th century Viswa Singha of the Koch tribe established the Koch dynasty in the Kamata kingdom.

In the eastern part of the old Kamarupa kingdom, the Kachari and the Chutiya kingdoms arose, with portions controlled by the Bhuyan chieftains. In the tract between the Kachari and the Chutiya kingdoms, a Shan group established the Ahom kingdom. The Ahom kingdom in the course of time expanded into the Chutiya kingdom to its north and pushed the Kachari kingdom to its south further south. After

the death of Nara Narayan of the Koch dynasty in the late 16th century, the Kamata kingdom broke into Kooch Bihar in the west and Koch Hajo in the east. Most of the 17th century saw the Ahom-Mughal conflicts for the control over Koch Hajo, which ended in 1682 with the defeat of the Mughals at Itakhuli.

After the Ahom kingdom reached its zenith, problems within the kingdom arose in the 18th century, when it lost power briefly to rebels of the Moamoria rebellion. Though the Ahoms recaptured power, it was beset with problems, leading to the Burmese invasion of Assam in the early 19th century. With the defeat of the Burmese in the First Anglo-Burmese War and the subsequent Treaty of Yandaboo, control of Assam passed into the hands the British, which marks the end of the Medieval period.

British History

Annexation by British

After the Burmese occupied Assam, the British began their campaign against the Burmese. In 1824, lower Assam (originally Koch Hajo) was formally annexed. The following year the British defeated the Burmese in upper Assam leading to the Treaty of Yandaboo. In this war against the Burmese the Ahoms did not help the British. In March 1828, lower Assam was formally annexed. In the same year, the Kachari kingdom was annexed under the Doctrine of Lapse after the king Govinda Chandra was killed. In 1832, the Khasi king surrendered and the British increased their influence over the Jaintia ruler. In 1833, upper Assam was handed over to an erstwhile ruler of the Ahom kingdom, Purandhar Singha, as a protectorate of the British, but in 1838 the region was formally annexed into the British empire. With the annexation

of the Maran/Matak territory in the east in 1839, the annexation of Assam was complete.

British Rule

Bengal Presidency (1826-73)

Assam was included as a part of the Bengal Presidency. The annexation of upper Assam is attributed to the successful manufacture of tea in 1837, and the beginning of the Assam Company in 1839. Under the Wasteland Rules of 1838, it became nearly impossible for natives to start plantations. After the liberalisation of the rules in 1854, there was a land rush. The Chinese staff that was imported earlier for the cultivation of tea left Assam in 1843, when tea plantations came to be tended by local labour solely, mainly by those belonging to the Kachari group. From 1859 central Indian labour was imported for the tea plantations. This labor, based on an unbreakable contract, led to a virtual slavery of this labor group. The conditions in which they were transported to Assam were so horrific that about 10 per cent never survived the journey. The colonial government already had monopoly over the opium trade.

There were immediate protests and revolts against the British occupation. In 1828, two years after the Treaty of Yandaboo, Gomdhar Konwar rose in revolt against the British, but he was easily suppressed. In 1830 Dhananjay Burhagohain, Piyali Phukan and Jiuram rose in revolt, and they were sentenced to death. In the Indian Rebellion of 1857, the people of Assam offered resistance in the form of non-cooperation, and Maniram Dewan and Piyali Baruah were executed for their roles. In 1861 peasants of Nagaon gathered at Phulaguri for a *raiz mel* (peoples' assembly) to protest against taxes on betel-nut and *paan*. Lt. Singer, a British officer

got into a fracas with the peasants and was killed, after which the protests were violently suppressed.

Chief Commissioner's Province (1874-1905)

In 1874, the Assam region was separated from the Bengal Presidency, Sylhet was added to it and its status was upgraded to a Chief Commissioner's Province. The capital was at Shillong. The people of Sylhet protested the inclusion in Assam. Assamese, which was replaced by Bengali as the official language in 1837, was reinstated alongside Bengali. In 1889, oil was discovered at Digboi giving rise to an oil industry. In this period Nagaon witnessed starvation deaths, and there was a decrease in the indigenous population, which was more than adequately compensated by the immigrant labor. Colonialism was well entrenched, and the tea, oil and coal-mining industries were putting increasing pressure on the agricultural sector which was lagging behind.

The peasants, burdened under the opium monopoly and the usury by money lenders, rose again in revolt. Numerous *raiz mels* decided against paying the taxes. The protests culminated in a bayonet charge against the protesters at Patharughat in 1894. At least 15 were left dead and in the violent repression that followed villagers were tortured and their properties were destroyed or looted. In 1903, Assam Association was formed with Manik Chandra Baruah as the first secretary.

Eastern Bengal and Assam under Lt. Governor (1906-12)

Bengal was partitioned and East Bengal was added to the Chief Commissioner's Province. The new region, now ruled by a Lt. Governor, had its capital at Dhaka. This province had a 15-member legislative council in which Assam had two seats. The members for these seats were recommended (not elected) by rotating groups of public bodies.

The Partition of Bengal was strongly protested in Bengal, and the people of Assam were not happy either. The partition was finally annulled by a royal decree in 1911. The Swadeshi Movement (1905-08) from this period, went largely unfelt in Assam, though it stirred some, most notably Ambikagiri Raychoudhury.

Beginning 1905 peasants from East Bengal began settling down in the riverine tracts (char) of the Brahmaputra valley encouraged by the colonial government to increase agricultural production. Between 1905 and 1921, the immigrant population from East Bengal increased four-folds. The immigration continued in post colonial times, giving rise to the Assam Agitation of 1979.

Assam Legislative Council (1912-20)

The administrative unit was reverted to a Chief Commissioner's Province (Assam plus Sylhet), with a Legislative Council added. The Council had 25 members, of which the Chief Commissioner and 13 nominated members formed the bulk. The other members were elected by local public bodies like municipalities, local boards, landholders, tea planters and Muslims. As Assam got sucked into the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Assam Association slowly transformed itself into the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (with 5 seats in AICC) in 1920-21.

Dyarchy (1921-37)

Under the Government of India Act, 1919 the Assam Legislative Council membership was increased to 53, of which 33 were elected by special constituencies. The powers of the council were increased too; but in effect, the official group, consisting of the Europeans, the nominated members etc. had the most influence.

Assam Legislative Assembly (1937-47)

Under the Government of India Act, 1935 the council was expanded into an Assembly of 108 members, with even more powers. The period saw the sudden rise of Gopinath Bordoloi and Muhammed Saadulah and their tussle for power and influence.

Assam during Post-colonial Period

In 1979, Assam flared into Assam Agitation (or Assam Movement) a popular movement against illegal immigration. The movement, led by AASU and AAGSP, set an agitational programme to compel the government to identify and expel illegal immigrants and prevent new immigration. The agitational programmes were largely non-violent, but there were incidents of acute violence, like the Nellie Massacre. It ended in 1985 following the Assam Accord that was signed by the agitation leaders and the Government of India. The agitation leaders formed a political party, Asom Gana Parishad, which came to power in the state of Assam in the Assembly elections of 1985.

Crisis Over State's Name

The etymology of Assam is an issue that often comes up for debate in the Indian state of Assam. In the latest instance, the Government of Assam under the Indian National Congress has sought to change the name of the state from Assam to Asom. This move has been opposed by a wide range of people, triggering once again a public debate. The academic consensus is that the name is associated with the Ahom kingdom, established by the Shan prince Sukaphaa, that existed from the 13th to the 19th century for nearly 600 years, according to historian Satyendra Nath Sarma.

While the Shan invaders called themselves Tai, they came

to be referred to as Âsâm, Âsam and sometimes as Acam by the indigenous people of the country. The modern Assamese word Âhom by which the Tai people are known is derived from Âsâm or Âsam. The epithet applied to the Shan conquerors was subsequently transferred to the country over which they ruled and thus the name Kâmarûpa was replaced by Assam, which ultimately took the Sanskritised form Asama, meaning 'unequalled, peerless or uneven'.

The land referred as Pragjyotisha in the *Mahabharata* is now accepted to be present-day Assam. In the *Bhismaparvan*, the Pragjyotisha king Bhagadatta is said to have joined the Kurukshetra war with an army of kirata and cinas. Since the name China is derived from the Qin Dynasty (221 BC - 206 BC), the reference cannot be dated to earlier than the 3rd century BC. In the *Ramayana* Pragjyotisha is situated on the Varaha mountain and not in present-day Assam, and it seemed that "the author of these stanzas, whosoever he was, had no idea at all of its location and was just eager to refer to it as it had already become a celebrated town".

The earliest epigraphic mention of the Assam region comes from the Samudragupta's Allahabad stone pillar from 4th century AD, where it is called Kamarupa. Later epigraphic sources from Assam calls the kingdom Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa. In the early 12th century epigraphic sources from the Pala dynasty mention Kamarupa as a mandala (an administrative division) of the kingdom they ruled. The invasion of western Assam by Allauddin Hussein of Gaur up to Barnadi river in 1498 is recorded in coins (from the early 16th century), which declares Hussein as the conqueror of 'Kamru' (and not 'Assam').

The earliest mention of Assam is found in the *Bhagavat* of Sankardeva, composed in the 15th and 16th centuries. In a map of 'Kingdom of Bengale', drawn by Joh. van Leenen

around 1661 and published around 1662, Assam was clearly named and correctly identified. One of the first unambiguous references comes from Thomas Bowrey in 1663 about Mir Jumla's death: 'They lost the best of Nabobs, the Kingdome of Achan, and, by consequence, many large privileges'.

Jean-Baptiste Tavernier's *Travels in India*, published in 1676 uses the spelling 'Assen' for Assam in the French original. The official chronicler of Mir Jumla too calls the place 'Assam'. In various documents of British East India Company, in their relationships with the last few Ahom kings, the name of country was mentioned as Assam. After the fall of the Ahom kingdom and the conquest by the British in 1826, in the Treaty of Yandabo, 'Assam' was used to denote the area under the erstwhile Ahoms, and its protectorates (Darrang Koch, Jaintias, Kacharis and some hill areas in the present Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland).

After the British took control of the region, the name 'Assam' was extended to the province which was then much larger than the erstwhile Ahom kingdom. It then included, Garo Hills and Lushai Hills (Mizoram). The boundaries of Assam have been redrawn many times after that, but the name Assam remained. Today, the political boundary of Assam contains roughly the historical Ahom Kingdom and its protectorates, the Kachari kingdom, Koch Hajo and a part of the Jaintia Kingdom.

Historical Chronology

- 350 Pushya Varman establishes the Varman dynasty in Kamarupa.
- 636 Xuanzang visits the court of Bhaskar Varman in Kamarupa.
- 650 Bhaskar Varman dies. End of Varman dynasty
- 655 Salasthamba establishes Mlechchha dynasty in Kamarupa

- 900 Brahmapala establishes Pala dynasty in Kamarupa
- 1100 Jayapala, the last Pala king removed by Ramapala of Gaur.
- 1185 Prithu establishes the Khen dynasty and the Kamata kingdom.
- 1187 Birpal establishes Chutiya kingdom.
- 1228 Sukaphaa enters Assam.
- 1253 Sukaphaa establishes capital at Charaideo.
- 1449 Srimanta Sankardev is born.
- 1490 First Ahom-Kachari battle.
- 1498 Hussein Shah of Gaur removes the last Khen ruler of Kamata kingdom.
Vasco da Gama lands at Calicut.
- 1515 Vishwa Singha establishes Koch dynasty.
- 1522 Chutiya kingdom annexed to Ahom Kingdom under Suhungmung.
- 1527 The first Muslim invasion of the Ahom kingdom ends in failure.
- 1532 Turbak attacks Ahom Kingdom, the first commander to enjoy some success.
- 1533 Turbak defeated and killed. Ahoms pursue Gaur army to Karatoya river.
- 1536 Ahoms destroy Dimapur, the capital of the Kachari kingdom.
- 1568 Srimanta Sankardev dies.
- 1584 Naranarayana of Koch dynasty dies. Koch Kingdom breaks into Koch Bihar and Koch Hajo.
- 1602 The Nawab of Dhaka attacks Lakshmi Narayana of Koch Hajo, the beginning of Mughal interest.
- 1609 Momai Tamuli Borbarua restructures Paik system in Ahom kingdom.
- 1662 Mir Jumla occupies Garhgaon, the Ahom capital.
- 1663 After Treaty of Ghilajharighat Mir Jumla returns to Dhaka, dies on the way.

- 1671 Ahoms wins Battle of Saraighat.
- 1679 Laluk-sola Borphukan deserts Guwahati.
- 1681 Gadadhar Singha becomes Ahom swargadeo.
- 1682 Ahoms win battle at Itakhuli.
Mughals do not try to retake Koch Hajo again.
- 1769 First phase of Moamoria rebellion, Ahom capital falls but recaptured in few months.
- 1783 Ahom capital Rangpur fell the second time to Moamoria rebellion. Rebel leaders strike coins in their names.
- 1794 Captain Thomas Welsh restores Rangpur to Ahom king from Moamora rebels.
- 1817 The first Burmese invasion of Assam.
- 1826 Treaty of Yandaboo signed.
- 1979 Assam Agitation begins.
- 1985 Assam Accord signed. End of Assam Agitation.