

Assam



Land and People

R. Gopalkrishnan

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R. Gopalakrishnan



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R. Gopalakrishnan

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PREFACE

Even after five decades of Independence, the North-East in general and the state of Assam in particular continue to attract scant attention. This has encouraged the phenomenon of instability and revolts to dominate the regional transactions and relations. It has also encouraged mushrooming of political fora and militant organisations who reflected the revolutionary changes in the perception of the inhabitants of the region. The organising experiences of stagnating economy, inadequate and frequently ineffective relief mechanisms etc., have reinforced this. These have not only eroded the political stability but also undermined socio-cultural fabric of the society. So that, today, the region and the state in particular is at the crossroads of consolidation and growth and stagnation and disintegration. In fact, the phenomenon of revolt have encouraged some examination of instances. But despite the interest which has been aroused by this problem, the bulk of material which has appeared on the state and the region have been written by those with a professional interest on the subject of revolt and instability. These were meant for an professional audience. At the wider levels, the discussions which has taken places has frequently been conducted at low level both of competence and understanding.

This book, Assam - Land and People, represents reflections on basic attributes of the state and its society. It expresses personal views, interpretation and understanding. It puts forth a case to argue or possibly more cases. Above all, it is an attempt to place the contemporary instances in a geographical perspective as an alternative to the all too common approach to the problems of the state. The latter frequently ignores the background to current Developments.

I am grateful that (Late) Mr. T. S. Murty, Late Mr. T.K. Tocchawng, and (Late) Prof. Emeritus V.V.Rao of Guwahati University should have suggested to me that academic ought to write for a

wider audience than the World of scholarship. It is a challenge to try and make points stand on their own. This has materialised after more than two decades of study, travel and interaction with the people. I have special debt of gratitude to Prof. H.P.Das and Prof. M.. Taher of Gauhati University, and Prof. R.C. Sharma currently Visiting Professor, Nagaland University, for their constant encouragement. I also express my appreciation to Dr. Kamal K. Jhunjhunwallah, Editor, North-Eastern Panorama (Shillong) for providing significant insights and inferences during our frequent discussions.

I have a special debt of gratitude to Mr. T. Chandrasekhar of NEPA-Barapani, Shillong, who shared his experiences in J & K, Punjab, Karnataka, Assam, etc., with the author. These discussions suggested the importance of having source books that will provide the individuals professing varying expertise to understand the land and its people. I also express my sincere appreciation to Dr. P. Deka, Director HRD, Numaligarh Refineries, Guwahati and to the students of North-Eastern Hill University who stimulated and refined my thoughts on the subject and analysis of instances and issues in Assam and the North-East in the course of discussions seminars, etc. on the subject. These were strengthened by constant encouragement of Mr. Ramesh Kumar and Mr. Satish Kumar of Omson Publishers who were spontaneous in their offer of publishing the manuscript.

Besides, Dr. N.P. Goel, Dr. S. Sarma and Mr. D.K. Das of the Department of Geography, N.E.H.U., Shillong, unflinchingly extended their help and co-operation in planning the format and illustrations for the manuscript. To them, I express my sincere appreciation. I am grateful to the help extended by the staff of the Libraries of North-Eastern Hill University and the North-Eastern Police Academy for extending necessary material and help. I acknowledge the co-operation extended by the office staff of the Department of Geography and the Controller of Examinations, N.E.H.U., Shillong for effectively co-ordinating with the heavy schedule of the author. Last but not the least, the author acknowledges all those unnamed individuals and organisations, who helped him in his field studies. My efforts could not have succeeded but for understanding and encouragement given by my wife and children. Having expressed my thanks, however, I must emphasise that I alone bear the responsibility for the statements made and the views expressed in this book.

R. GOPALAKRISHNAN
SHILLONG

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INTRODUCTION

Assam is a miniature replica of the Indian Subcontinent. Its geography has the characteristics that enabled many of the trans-regional elements to adopt themselves to the meso-level ecological conditions of the Brahmaputra-Barak system or the Assam. So that, its history, is one of continuous reflections of large-scale population movements, where each cultural strain while maintaining its exclusiveness, coexisted with others. These migratory population streams used the plain and valley section of the North-East as a transit point-a staging point for empire formation or only to settle in the adjoining hill and mountain territories. Be that as it may, the state gradually witnessed transition from a primitive economy to a subsistence economy, with every population wave adding to the technology and change over a period of time, these development enabled the formation of an agrarian economy that was self-sustaining. These were forerunners of elements that were conducive for the formation of states and military-feudal structures in the landscape. And, in each historical period, there was constant struggle for space and confrontation over the control of subsistence between the original inhabitants, the Colonisers, the immigrants and the conquerors -rulers. These became the basis on which all subsequent historical transactions of exclusiveness of space by the concerned population groups and subgroups were based.

In fact, the historical patters were responsible for marginalisation of many peoples in the region. However, these processes induced plural structures and plural relationships to emerge and dominate the regional landscape. Regional variations, differences, disparities and inequalities, remained latent but had the potential to translate a peaceful landscape to a unstable political entity Interacting with the regional geopolitical compulsions, participation and representation became the most common theme on which competition over space,

confrontation over the control of means and conflicts over management were based. These became all the more imperative, when change and modernisation had horizontally and vertically divided the society. It is, in keeping with this perspective, that the present study on Land and people of Assam has been undertaken. It seeks to explain the nature of and distribution of the geographical phenomena elements-physical and human, in the state of Assam. It also seeks to provide a framework on which an understanding of the various distributional problems faced by the inhabitants of the state.

Location

The state of Assam is situated in the extreme North-Eastern part of the country. It lies, between 24°8'N latitude and 87°42'E and 96°E longitude. Assam forms the core of the North-Eastern region, (comprising the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura, besides Assam). It is bound by the states of Arunachal Pradesh in the north and northeast; by Nagaland and Manipur in the east; by the states of Mizoram and Tripura in the southeast; by Meghalaya in the south; and by West Bengal in the west. It has international boundaries with Bangladesh in the southeast and southwest and with Bhutan in the north and northeast. The state has Goalpara in the lower Brahmaputra valley and Cachar in the Barak valley; these are important gateways to the state and the northeast region itself. The significance of these gateways lay in their historical role in transforming relationships and transactions of the region. The entire region is connected with the rest of India by a slender corridor leading from Dhubri and Kokrajhar districts of Assam. It is frequently termed as the Siliguri NECK.

Assam has a geographical area of 78, 438 Sq.Km or 78.438, 000 Ha. This is 2.4% of the total geographical area of the country. The state comprises of two major river regimes of the Brahmaputra and the Barak of the Meghna systems. In other words, there are two distinct natural regions, viz., the plain area of the Brahmaputra and the Barak valleys comprising of twenty-one districts. The districts in the plains are Dhubri, Bongaigaon, Kokrajhar, Goalpara, Barpeta, Nalbari, Kamrup, Darrang, Sonitpur, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Nagoan, Morigaon, Karimganj Hailakandi and Cachar; and the hill areas consisting of two autonomous districts. The two hill districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills, cover an area of 15,200 Sq. Km and accounts for about a fifth of the land area of the state. The state has a population of 22,294,562 persons (1991 Census), Of this population, 6.24%

falls under the category of Scheduled Caste and 10.99% under the category of Scheduled Tribe ,population. with an average density of 284 persons per Square Kilometre. Highest density is found the district of Dhubri (467) and lowest in the district of North Cachar Hills (30). The State in the 1971-91 period averaged a growth rate of 52.44%. This growth is higher than the national average and has outstripped the rate of economic development.

Historical Outline

Major river basins of the state experienced separate historical development including the process of state formations. From the available literature on early state formation in the region, one can easily discern that the Brahmaputra valley with its insular characteristics displayed prominent southeast Asian influences while the Barak Valley, located in the southeastern extremity of the Indo-Ganga plains in the east, indicated profound deltaic influences. Accessibility, through the mountain passes located in the eastern adjoining territories and the continuous stretch of flat lands, permitted settlement and movement across the valley. Regional ecological conditions modified the requirements for adaptation. These were conducive for the development of individual elements. These established broad regional trends and alignments that laid the foundation of the valley societies. All these societies were characterised by several layers of identity of various cultural backgrounds. The coming together of these various peoples with their separate social and cultural attributes brought about significant fusion of sociocultural elements to provide a basis for a plural society. These affected the regional synthesis-with individual elements remaining exclusive but mutually dependent on the valley environments. It was on these geopolitical and ecological niche that the major spatial pattern in the state emerged to dominate the transactions and participation and representation. In conventional terms, the central location of the state in the regional and national context, has been of crucial importance. This location indicated a -

- Formidable, thickly forested Himalayan ranges in the north along with the Chars.-
- Densely clad North-Eastern Hills in the east;-
- Swampy and Marshy Char Lands and Duars;
- The NE-SW trending Barail System, separating the Brahmaputra valley from the Barak Plains;
- Karbi Anglong and the North Cachar Hills reinforcing the

separation of the Brahmaputra valley from the Barak Plains. It also forms a buffer between the Brahmaputra plains and the Bangladesh plains.

— The Cachar Plains enclosed by the hill ranges in the north, east and south, remains cutoff from the Valley Core while being closely linked to the Surma Plains further west in the Bangladesh plains.

As a result, the Brahmaputra valley, remained susceptible to frequent waves of migration and invasions. Goalpara and Cachar formed the western and eastern gateways, through which the deltaic influences permeated into the region. While the accessible mountain passes in the east along the North Eastern Hills permitted trans-frontier elements to intrude into the regional space. This called for frequent territorial adjustments between the various groups who were already in occupation of the valley space but also with the new waves of migrants who forced the earlier settlers to either disperse and fragment or move into the interior hills or both. Continuation of these processes brought about distinctly marked areas of attraction and areas of isolation. So that, there developed symptoms of differences and disparities within the existing state's territories. Natural endowments and geographical attributes reinforced this. Latter provided each territory and its populace with specific geonomic considerations that set it apart from the adjacent ones. In a way these encouraged early balkanisation and reflected heterogeneity under more or less similar conditions in the state's landscape. These encouraged distinctions in the valley society, territory and participation to emerge. These proved tenacious and accentuated micro-differences; so that with the extension of administration, there emerged contradictions in space arrangements that did not relate to either the historical or geographical distinctions. However, such distinctions, proved to be meaningful only in the sociocultural and politico-economic contexts, if one refuses to accept the existing arrangements.

Geopolitical factors played a crucial role in the development of the state's political and socio-economic conditions. The social and political balkanisation of the state, that had taken place since Independence were largely due to slow rate of economic development. It, then, becomes imperative to understand the basis of these attributes which are largely historical in nature. Although numerous references related to ancient Assam could be found, yet one doubts its authenticity, mainly on the ground that such information

cannot be treated scientifically. A fact which is evident throughout these references, is the ever changing administrative boundaries of Assam. This constituted one of the basic political-geographical feature of the pre-colonial, colonial, as well as post-colonial state.

The extent of ancient Assam can be obtained from the Hindu epics and in the Pauranic and Tantric literature; Assam or Pragjyotisha as it was then known, stretched southwards as far as the Bay of Bengal. Its western boundary was the Karatoya. On the other hand, the Puranaic literature suggested that Kamrup or Assam embraced almost the entire eastern Bengal, Assam and Bhutan. In the Jogini Tantra, Kamrupa is said to have extended from the Karatoya river on the west to Dikhu on the east and from the mountains of Kanjagiri on the north, to the confluence of the Brahmaputra and the Lakhya river on the south. In other words, it included roughly the present day Brahmaputra valley, Bhutan, Rangpur, Cooch Bihar, the north east of Mymensingh and, possibly the Garo Hills. Further, this country was divided into four portions, viz. Kampith from the Karatoya to the Sankosh, Ratnapith from the Sankosh to the Rupohi, Suvarnapith from the Rupohi to the Barali and Saumarpith from the Bharali to the Dikrang.

During the Ahom rule, the extent of Assam varied with the change in the leadership. According to Huen Tsang who visited India in the first half of the seventh century A.D., that Kamrupa had a circumference of almost 1,700 miles. Probably, it would have included the whole of Assam, and Bhutan. North Bengal is as far as Karatoya river and the part of Mymensingh which lies to the east of the old course of the Brahmaputra. Its eastern boundary was line of hills adjacent to the tribes of the Chinese frontier, i.e. it extended as far to the east as did the composite Assam. Buranjis of the Ahoms, provide adequate references to the size and extent of the state between 12th and 18th centuries. Reference about the extent of the boundary of Assam during the Ahom rule is contained in Mir Jumlah's account, who accompanied Shihabb Uddin, on his invasion of Assam in 1662.

Thus all these references suggests that Assam lay northeast of the province of Bengal. The river Brahmaputra divided the valley into two unequal halves by flowing west to east. Guwahati to Sadiya is about 200 Km ; its breath, north to south, from the hills of the Garos, Miris, Mishmis, Daflas and Landahs to those Naga tribes is given eight days journey. Its southern mountains touch lengthwise the hilly region of Khasia, Kachar and Gonasher and breadth-wise

the hills inhabited by the Naga tribes. The land on the north bank of the Brahmaputra is called Uttarkol, and on the southern bank Dakhinkol; Uttarkol stretches from Guwahati to the home of the Miri and Mishmi tribes, and Dakhinkol from the kingdom of the Nak-Kati Rani to the village of Sadiya. Hamilton (1820) stated that Assam adjoined the province of Bengal at the northeastern corner, about 91°E longitude, from where it stretches in an easterly direction to an undefined extent; but it is probable that about the 96° east longitude, it meets the northern territory of Ava, and is separated by an intervening space of about 180 miles from the province of Yunan in China.

The Assam valley has been repository of Dravidian, Mongoloid, Austeric and Aryan groups of people. These groups entered the valley at different periods. Initial settlements were temporary. Frequent movements within the valley space coincided with the search for sustainable lands for cultivation with the then available technology and man power. It formed part of the ancient kingdom of KAMRUPA. It consisted of numerous tribal kingdoms who were in constant state of dynamic equilibrium with each other. By the thirteenth Century A.D., the valley was dominated by-

- The Kamata Kingdom, covering the area occupied by the present day districts of Goalpara, Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Barpeta, Nalbari, Kamrup, and parts of Morigaon. It lasted upto 1385 A.D.
- The Bara-Bhuyan kingdom, covering the area occupied by the present day districts of Darrang, Sonitpur, parts of Lakhimpur, Nagaon, Jorhat and Sibsagar. It lasted upto 1504 A.D.
- The Kachari Kingdom, covering the area occupied by the present day districts of Nagaon, Jorhat, and Sibsagar. It lasted upto 1536 A.D.
- The Chutiya Kingdom of the Bodo-Shan group, covering the area occupied by the present day districts of Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Lakhimpur and Sibsagar-east of Subansiri and Dihing Rivers.
- During this period, elements from the Ganga delta and the Tai elements from further east of the region began their periodic forays into the region.
- The Ahoms, comprising essentially of the Tai elements, began their incursions into the valley towards the latter half of the thirteenth century. They were able to bring the upper Brahmaputra valley under their sway. In this initial phase (13th

to 16th Century A.D.), they shared the valley with other prominent powers.. However, towards the latter half of the Sixteenth century, power relationship within the valley were transformed. It coincided with the emergence of the Koch kingdom covering parts of the present day districts of Goalpara, Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Kamrup, Darrang, Sonitpur, and Morigaon. It lasted upto 1587 when it was absorbed by the expanding Ahom kingdom; and,

— The Ahom Kingdom enclosed the present day districts of Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur, Tinsukia, and Sibsagar by early fourteenth century. It's westward expansion coincided with the decline and fragmentation of the Kacheri Koch kingdoms. This empire survived for a long period, i.e., from 1226 to 1826 A.D.. By 1587, the Ahoms confronted the Mughals in the west round the Lower Brahmaputra valley, the Burmese along the Patkai ranges in the east and Manipur in the south and south east; while Manipur was also under permanent threat from their neighbour in the east.

— Initially, the Ahoms were successful in subjugating the territories occupied by the Morans, The Borahis, the Naga groups and other inhabitants of the valley. With the decline of the Ahoms, the Singhpos along Patkai range wrested control of the area east of the river Burhi-Dihang in 1794. Following them, the Khamptis established themselves along the river Tengapani and extended their territorial control upto Sadiya. However, this period also saw the rise of three significant regional powers of the Ahoms, Burma (Kingdom of Ava) and Manipur. These powers between them, controlled the transactions in the region-from the northern and eastern extremity of the Ganga delta through the eastern Hills and plateaux upto the Upper Burma and lower Burma regions. This period also saw inroads made by the Mughals in the west through the Goalpara gateway and through the southeastern gateway of Cachar from the eastern Ganga delta., The Ahom empire was geopolitically dominated by powerful neighbours whose interests lay in their attempt to fragment the Ahom empire. The Ahoms built strong military-feudal structures adequately reinforced by fort cities, extensive river navigation, strong agrarian economy and a strong feudal bureaucratic military structures. It was largely successful in assimilating many of the elements; thus strengthening plural characteristics. Despite the innovative measures in the structure

of control and economy, the Ahom empire succumbed to internal contradictions.

Thus, the Ahom empire in the valley extended on both sides of the river Brahmaputra. It was divided into three provinces, Kamroop on the west, Assam proper in the centre, and Sadiya at the eastern extremity. The western province Kamroop, with several subordinate or intermixed petty jurisdictions, extends from the British boundary to near middle Kamakhya ($26^{\circ}36'N$ and $92^{\circ}56'E$), about 130 miles in length. From the boundary opposite to Goalpara to Nogarbera, a distance of 21 miles, Assam extends for 109 miles. Its width average about 30 miles. About 104 miles above Guwahati ($91^{\circ}48'E$), the Brahmaputra separates into two branches and encloses an island five days journey in length and about one in width.

Assam proper, the middle province of the Kingdom is of greater extent than the western. The portion, north of the Brahmaputra was designated as Charidwar, probably exceeds 200 miles in length and 20 in average breadth; but the length on the south side of that river is less considerable. It commences near the middle Kamakhya about 130 miles East, from Goalpara, and reaches to the upper Kamakhya, which is said to be 10 miles below Tikliya Potor Mukh. Within these limits, it comprises of the upper half of the western island formed by Brahmaputra, and includes the island of Majuli, the Brahmaputra and its tributary, the Dihing. Of the third and most remote province nothing is known, except that it is a small side of the Dibrong river, about $95^{\circ}10'E$. The boundary changes that had taken place were mainly restricted to the peripheral region. Ahoms pursued a policy of benevolent neglect as far as the adjacent hilly periphery was concerned. These adjacent hill territories had a weak economic base, and were characterised by difficult and rugged terrain. These along with dense forest cover, acted as a deterrent to accessibility and movement. Physical barrier prevented the core from having any meaningful interaction with its periphery. This enabled these territories to maintain the physical isolation, and reflect multiplicity of ethnic, cultural and regional identities. The Ahom rulers conferred upon these regions, the status of dependencies. They strengthened the economic base of the Brahmaputra valley, which was essentially a rice-based economy.

The Eighteenth century saw the gradual decay of the Ahom power, particularly the Ahom control over the region received its first blow from the Moamoria Civil War that took place in 1770, and since then under the impact of the repeated Burmese invasion, which

culminated in their occupation of the valley (1817-1824), left the plain a reign of total chaos, lawlessness and oppression. Thus the last of the Ahom ruler had no option but to seek the help of the British, whose rule then extended till the adjoining Bengal plain. It is under such conflicting conditions in Assam, that the British made their appearance. They forced the Burmese in the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 to surrender their claim over the region. Thus, according to the Article 2 to the treaty the Burmese renounced all claims upon and future interference with the principality of Assam and its dependencies, and also with the contiguous petty states of Cachar and Jaintia.

This marked the beginning of the new era in the history of Assam and put an end to a glorious rule of the Ahoms and the uninterrupted freedom that the people of Assam enjoyed so far; at the same time the British incorporated the province for the first time within dominion.

In short, it can be stated that, there is a definite link between political activities and the geographical space. A change in administration or territorial boundary includes a corresponding change in the policy and priorities of development; consequently landscape changes followed. During the Ahom rule, the core of their power, i.e., the Brahmaputra valley, were surrounded practically on all sides by hills, accessible only through the numerous but difficult passes and river routes. The Ahom rulers policy towards the hilly periphery was essentially that of non-interference, motivated may be by the fact that: possession of extensive unintegrated or economically neglected areas may result in a drain on state resources from the cost of administration and communication construction. Since, their territorial jurisdiction was confined to the long alluvial valley of the Brahmaputra, homogeneous in terms of physiography, economy which was described as a rice economy, and culture, it enabled the Ahoms to administer the region efficiently and effectively in all spheres. Thus the rice economy of the state made considerable progress under their rule. The British interest, on the other hand, was more of economic exploitation, particularly since the discovery of tea and jute in the region. Due to the sporadic raids by the hill tribes, on the valley, it, necessitated to exert some measure of control over them, primarily to safeguard their interest and also for reasons of security due to their location in sensitive areas, bordering China and Burma. They, therefore, gradually amalgamated the various political units of the surrounding hill areas. Despite this, their policy was in essence similar to that of their predecessors, i.e., they adopted the policy of conciliation in their dealing with the hill tribes. This

policy helped to keep the hill people at bay and at the same time brought about an atmosphere, conducive for their pursuit in the commercial sector of the agricultural economy.

Burmese expansion began in 1750. After consolidation of the immediate environs-Upper Burma proper, they expanded westwards to annex the Arakan coasts. Burma expanded westwards into Manipur and then to the Brahmaputra valley. There were corresponding movements towards the coastal Gangetic delta. These developments found parallels in the Sub-Continent, where the British East India Company was able to seize the political initiative and territorial control to establish an empire. Burmese expansion posed a threat. Though Burma had made frequent armed incursions in Manipur in the past, it was only during the first quarter of the Nineteenth century that the decisive phase of Burmese territorial expansion was reached and its implications were abundantly clear. Burma brought Manipur under its sphere of influence and latter was able to effectively dominate the eastern half of the Brahmaputra valley by 1823. Simultaneously, Burma occupied the island of Shahpuri-off the delta coast in the East Bengal, now Bangladesh. It's brief occupation of these areas coincided with decimation of the people of the valley and destruction of the valley economy.

In the meanwhile, the British In India were able to persuade the Jaintia and the Cachar kings for defensive arrangements to meet the increasing Burmese threat in 1824. Subsequently , in 1825, Burmese converged on Cachar. This resulted in the First Anglo-Burmese War. Burma was forced to withdraw from Raha and Kaliabor in the Nagaon sub-region of the valley. This was the western limit of the Burmese expansion in the valley. They were compelled to withdraw from Cachar and Manipur. They capitulated at Rangpur (now in Bangla Desh). By the Treaty of Yandaboo, 1826, Burma surrendered all its claim over Assam, Manipur, Jaintia, Cachar and Gangetic delta. The British in India subsequently entered into treaty agreements with these powers, but the entire region now lay open to British East India Company's domination and control. As for Assam, particularly the Brahmaputra valley, areas west of Biswanath were incorporated with the Bengal Province, while areas east of it remained under the nominal control of the Ahoms. These events were followed by the pacification of the Singhpos and Khamptis. It remained the company's responsibility to guarantee internal security.

A portion of Upper Assam, (excluding Muttock and Sadiya) was constituted into a separate principality and was conferred upon the last Ahom King. In 1834, the British of the Brahmaputra valley was divided into four districts, Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang including Bishwanath and Nowgong. In 1838, due to the incompetence on the last Ahom King, the province under his jurisdiction was annexed and formed the districts of Silpur or Sibsagar, which included the tract South of the old course of Brahmaputra, and Lakhimpur. Again in 1842, Muttock and Sadiya were incorporated into the British territory, and was incorporated to the Lakhimpur district the headquarters of which was transferred to Dibrugarh in the Muttock district. The British authority, now extended to the districts of Goalpara, Guwahati, Tezpur, Nagaon, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur.

Once the Colonial administration found their footing in the region, it became inevitable for them to be on constant lookout for newer and newer tracts that could be added to their Empire. By 1858, the territorial extent of Assam was bounded on the northwest and north by Burma and the Naga tribes; on the south by Cachar, Manipur, Jaintia and the Khasi hills; and on the west by the British district (Zillah) of Goalpara. It extended from latitude 25° N and from longitude 90°40' to 97°1' E, with an area of 21,805 Sq. Miles, and a population at 710,000. Much of the territories that surrounded Assam, i.e., Jaintia, Cachar along with their dependencies, the independent tribal states of the Khasi Hills as well as the other principalities were gradually annexed, on the face of stiff resistance. These were completed within a decade and a half after the Treaty of Yandaboo. The first to be incorporated within the administrative setup was Cachar in 1832, though North Cachar Hills were organised into a separate administrative unit in 1854, after their complete subjection; the Khasi state in 1833, while Jaintia Hills in 1835, and Garo Hills was made into a separate district in 1869, the process to bring them under full control continued till 1873. The Lushais were brought under control during the period 1871-89, and the Lushai Hills was formed into a district in the year 1898. The annexations of Bhutan Duars, the Sadiya, Balipara frontier tracts, the Naga hills etc. were a long process. Only a part of Naga hills was annexed in 1866, but the control over the Lotha Nagas was possible only in 1878-80 and the Ao Naga as late as 1889. Thus, it was a fact that the boundaries of the British power in North-East India were in fact always moving always in a flux, right up to its last days in India. However, Muttock uprising in 1839 compelled the Colonial power to incorporate the entire Upper Brahmaputra valley in 1839. Correspondingly, Cachar

Subsequently based on the ... were 2 in the then districts of

sub-region was annexed between 1832 and 1835. Sadiya Tracts were brought under control in 1842. So that all the territories of the Ahom empire were effectively brought under the purview of the British colonial power.

Initially, the Ahom system of administration was adhered to. This was followed by a revenue survey of the valley. This enabled the Colonial administration to assess the resource potentials of the valley and encouraged them to formulate policies that favoured furtherance of their interests in commercial plantations. This was followed by an assessment of land relations. By mid 1830's, the administration promulgated new land policies that were at par with the policies adopted in the rest of the Subcontinent, and ultimately led to the lop sided development of the area (whose impact continued well after Independence). The resultant change had radically transformed the relationships and equations in the valley. It transformed the existing patterns of interactions between various population groups, particularly in their social, cultural and political transactions. Initially, these policies provided little incentive to the inhabitants to participate in the political relations. It, however, kept them aloof from the economic changes that were gradually introduced in the valley. Spurt in the Colonial economic activities and work of various non-governmental agencies along with alphabetisation of the languages and dialects introduced processes that were alien; so that, the state began to exhibit the co-existence of tradition and modernism at the same time. These changes coincided with the large-scale movement of population from the Ganga delta and the Chota Nagpur sub-regions of the Sub-Continent, who moved into the region as a response to demand for manpower required by administration and commercial activities. These introduced complexity in a difficult scenario.

Be that as it may, administratively the state was initially included in the province of Bengal-the Bengal Presidency under Non-Regulated System. In 1874, it was at this time that it was declared as Scheduled District. It was separated from the Bengal Province to form a Chief Commissioner's province. It consisted of the districts of Goalpara, Garo Hills, Kamrup, Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills, Darrang, Nagaon, Lakhimpur and Sibsagar (1875). In 1905, as a result of Curzon's plan for the Partition of Bengal, it was included in the province of East Bengal and Assam. However, with the annulment of the Partition Plan in 1911-12, it was re-designated as the Chief Commissioner's Province. In 1921, it was elevated to a Governors' Province. It, then, consisted of the districts of-

- Goalpara (originally part of the Bengal province), Kamrup, Darrang, Lakhimpur and Nagaon in the Brahmaputra valley;
- The Barak-Surma Valley comprising the areas of Sylhet (now in Bangla desh) and Cachar; and
- The hill areas of Garo, Khasi, Jaintia, Naga and Lushai areas along with the areas of Mikir and Barail ranges; administratively, areas of the North eastern Frontier Tracts (now Arunachal Pradesh) were brought under the purview of State's Governor.

Independence had brought about a tremendous change in the existing politico-administrative landscape. Partition resulted in the loss of territory whereby the state lost most of its jute producing areas to Pakistan (Bangladesh). Influx of a sizeable number of refugees and dislocation created due to snapping off, of railways, road and water communication with the rest of the country made the situation of the state quite difficult. In addition, the state extended administration to the hill areas. This in a way , encouraged the growing feeling of alienation amongst the hill people. Consequently, they began to demand autonomy for their respective territories. This eventually led to administrative re-organisation.

The state of Assam in the post-1947 phase was territorially defined as being located in the northeast border of India and is surrounded on all sides by the other independent states like Bhutan and Tibet(China) in the northwest and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) on the west. It was surrounded by mountainous ranges at least on three sides, on the north is the Himalaya shutting off the tablelands of Bhutan and Tibet; on the northeast is the Patkai range along with a series of other hills which merge with those forming the limits of the independent republic of Burma and part 'C' state of Tripura. It is only on the west where it adjoins West Bengal and Eastern Pakistan that there are no hills. It comprises the whole of the valley of Brahmaputra down to the point where the river emerging on the Bengal delta takes a sudden southwards curve and a portion of the valley of Surma together with the intervening range of hills which forms the watershed between them (see Map No.1).

At the time of Partition and Independence in 1947, the Province of Assam minus the district of Sylhet (a referendum was held in Sylhet to decide whether the area was to go to India or Pakistan; it went in favour of Pakistan), an amendment was made to the Assam Land Revenue Regulation in 1947. This amendment redefined 33 tribal blocks and belts (10 tribal belts and 23 tribal blocks). Subsequently based on this, there were 2 in the then districts of

Goalpara, 8 each in Kamrup and Darrang, 3 in North Lakhimpur and 12 in Nagaon district. In 1954, Tuensang Frontier Division of the North Eastern Frontier Tract (renamed as the North Eastern Frontier Area) was transferred to Assam and became a combined district of the Naga Hills and Tuensang area. (see Map No.2)

The post Independence period witnessed a significant change in the relationship between the hills and the Assam valley. Independence led the government to totally abandon the policy of non-interference in the hill regions, due to their strategic location along the borders with China, East Pakistan (now Bangladesh and Burma. Thus, there was concerted efforts on the part of the state to bring these regions within the mainstream of the country. This resulted in bringing about a growing feeling of alienation among the hill units of Assam. In this context it is fair to state that dissidence normally occurred amongst sections of the population who regarded themselves as being distinctive in language, religion, and origin.

The distinct ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity of the hill areas fostered the desire to separate from the composite state of Assam, to form an autonomous state of their own. Due to their location in a sensitive and strategic region, it was not possible for the state to ignore the aspirations of the population. This ultimately resulted in reorganisation that left Assam a shadow of her former self. In the process, the first to breakaway from the threshold of Assam were the inhabitants of the Naga Hills and Tuensang Frontier division which was separated from Assam to form the state of Nagaland in December, 1963. (It consisted of the entire district of the former Naga hills of Assam and a part of Tuensang, part of NEFA). This served as a catalyst for the other hill tribal areas of Assam to seek their own state. Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh were separated from Assam almost around the same time. Initially, Meghalaya was conferred the status of Autonomous state within the state of Assam on 2nd April, 1970, it became a full-fledged state on January 21st, 1972, comprising of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo hills with an area of 22,500 sq. km. Since then there had been no changes in the external boundaries of the state. Mizoram as a Union Territory was separated from Assam on 21st January 1972, covering the erstwhile Mizo hills district of Assam with an area of 21,087 sq. Km. The other area to separate was, North-East Frontier Agency. In 1972, under the provisions of the North-East Frontier Areas (Reorganisation) Act (1971), NEFA was declared a Union Territory and came to be known as Arunachal Pradesh. It became a state in 1987.

The repercussions of all these activities had left a marked impression on the agricultural economy of the state. This may partly account for the slow progress made by the economy particularly agriculture in spite of decades of planned development. From the development administrative point of view, the state has undergone series of changes, from nearly 6 districts in the late 1940's to 10 in the 1970's to 23 in mid-1990's. Today, in 1996, the state of Assam has 23 districts, 45 sub-divisions, 134 Revenue Circles and 131 Community development Blocks, besides having scores of Panchayats and Anchalik Samities (See Map No.3). Following table -1 gives the necessary details-

Table - 1
Administrative Divisions- Assam - 1995


S.No.	District	Area in Sq.Km	Sub-Division	Revenue Circles	C.D. Blocks
1.	--Dhubri	2,838.0	3	8	7
2.	--Kokrajhar	3,498.0	2	5	5
3.	--Bongaigaon	2,159.0	3	4	5
4.	--Goalpara	1,910.8	1	5	4
5.	--Barpeta	3,245.0	2	8	8
6.	--Nalbari	2,257.0	1	9	7
7.	--Kamrup	4,345.0	3	14	11
8.	--Darrang	4,810.0	2	9	6
9.	--Sonitpur	5,324.0	2	7	7
10.	*Lakhimpur	2,277.0	2	6	6
11.	*Dhemaji	3,237.0	2	4	3
12.	--Morigaon	1,559.2	1	5	4
13.	--Nagaon	3,973.3	3	9	10
14.	*Golaghat	3,502.0	2	5	6
15.	*Jorhat	2,851.0	2	5	6
16.	*Sibsagar	2,668.0	2	6	6
17.	*Dibrugarh	3,381.0	1	7	6
18.	*Tinsukia	3,790.0	3	4	4
19.	Karbi Anglong	10,434.0	3	-	10
20.	N.C.Hills	4,888.0	2	-	4
21.	Karimganj	1,829.0	1	5	5
22.	Hailakandi	1,327.0	1	4	3
23.	Cachar	3,786.0	1	5	7
ASSAM		78,438.0	45	134	131



On the basis of the above table, one can infer that-

- That 18 plain districts of the state, located largely in the Brahmaputra valley, enclose 71.62% or 56,174 Sq. Km of the state.
- That the districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills, occupying 19.53% or 15,322 Sq.Km, form the Hill and Plateau section of the state; and,
- That the districts of Karimganj, Hailakandi and Cachar occupying 6922 Sq.Km or 8.8% of the state area, form the Barak valley sub-division of the state.

Within this truncated state itself, there re-organisation of districts-from 5 in 1950's to 10 in 1970's and to 23 in 1990's. Further, because of uneven and lop sided development, inadequate infrastructure facilities and others, several population subgroups are presently pressing for separate autonomous administrative status. This has brought the spectre of possible re-organisation.



1	Assam	78,438.0
2	Barak Valley	6,922.0
3	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
4	Plain	56,174.0
5	Barak Valley	6,922.0
6	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
7	Plain	56,174.0
8	Barak Valley	6,922.0
9	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
10	Plain	56,174.0
11	Barak Valley	6,922.0
12	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
13	Plain	56,174.0
14	Barak Valley	6,922.0
15	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
16	Plain	56,174.0
17	Barak Valley	6,922.0
18	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
19	Plain	56,174.0
20	Barak Valley	6,922.0
21	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
22	Plain	56,174.0
23	Barak Valley	6,922.0
24	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
25	Plain	56,174.0
26	Barak Valley	6,922.0
27	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
28	Plain	56,174.0
29	Barak Valley	6,922.0
30	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
31	Plain	56,174.0
32	Barak Valley	6,922.0
33	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
34	Plain	56,174.0
35	Barak Valley	6,922.0
36	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
37	Plain	56,174.0
38	Barak Valley	6,922.0
39	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
40	Plain	56,174.0
41	Barak Valley	6,922.0
42	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
43	Plain	56,174.0
44	Barak Valley	6,922.0
45	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
46	Plain	56,174.0
47	Barak Valley	6,922.0
48	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
49	Plain	56,174.0
50	Barak Valley	6,922.0
51	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
52	Plain	56,174.0
53	Barak Valley	6,922.0
54	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
55	Plain	56,174.0
56	Barak Valley	6,922.0
57	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
58	Plain	56,174.0
59	Barak Valley	6,922.0
60	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
61	Plain	56,174.0
62	Barak Valley	6,922.0
63	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
64	Plain	56,174.0
65	Barak Valley	6,922.0
66	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
67	Plain	56,174.0
68	Barak Valley	6,922.0
69	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
70	Plain	56,174.0
71	Barak Valley	6,922.0
72	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
73	Plain	56,174.0
74	Barak Valley	6,922.0
75	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
76	Plain	56,174.0
77	Barak Valley	6,922.0
78	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
79	Plain	56,174.0
80	Barak Valley	6,922.0
81	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
82	Plain	56,174.0
83	Barak Valley	6,922.0
84	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
85	Plain	56,174.0
86	Barak Valley	6,922.0
87	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
88	Plain	56,174.0
89	Barak Valley	6,922.0
90	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
91	Plain	56,174.0
92	Barak Valley	6,922.0
93	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
94	Plain	56,174.0
95	Barak Valley	6,922.0
96	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
97	Plain	56,174.0
98	Barak Valley	6,922.0
99	Hill and Plateau	15,322.0
100	Plain	56,174.0

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