

ASSAM THROUGH THE AGES

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O. H. K. Spate, in his book, 'India and Pakistan' (1954), opens the geographical account of Assam with the following lines : "The state of Assam possesses a very marked individuality. It is in a sense transitional towards High Asia and Indo-China and even to China itself." Some writers often describe it as a miniature Indian-epitome of the sub-continent. The anthropologists consider it as a paradise for their research, an anthropological museum. The lovers of nature describe it as the Switzerland of the East. The botanists and zoologists find in the State all the pleasure of rare discoveries among the varied fauna and flora of the land. Sir J.D. Hooker, who was probably the first among the botanists to undertake a botanical survey of some parts of the State in the middle of the last century, tells us that the vegetation of Assam is the richest in India and probably in all Asia. About one fourth of the total area of the state is thickly forested. Among the rare animals of world-wide fame are the one-horned rhinoceros, lemurs, and gibbons. The elephant, tiger, deer, antelope, goyal, buffalo and a large variety of birds adorn the mighty forests. For the philologists and ethnologists, Assam offers a fertile field for research, a melting pot of two diverse traditions-the East and the West, the Mongoloids and Caucasoids. Col. L.A. Waddell, who was the first to attempt a systematic study of the ethnic composition of the people of Assam observes that "few of the wilder parts of the world, still left, preserved such a vast variety of primitive tribes of such great ethnological interest as the mountain Valleys of the mighty Brahmaputra..... Zoologically this tract stands at the junction of the Indo-Chinese, Indo-Malayan and Indian sub-regions of the Oriental regions of naturalists." Into this tri-junction of India, China and Indo-China poured throughout the ages of her history different branches of the great Sino-Tibetan speaking people who had their original home in the region of eastern Tibet and western China, the Austriacs from Indo-China, the Dravidians and the Indo-Aryans from the mainland of India and finally the Siamese-Chinese section of the Mogoloids in their Thai tribes of the Ahoms from the Shan plateau of northern Burma. It was in this State primarily that these diverse elements, in the formation of the Indian nation, became largely Indianised, particularly in the Brahmaputra Valley. In the words of Prof. S.K.

Chatterji, one of the foremost orientalist of our time, "this can be looked upon as Assam's great contribution to the synthesis of culture and fusion of races" in the formation of the present Indian nation. We also know that in forest wealth, mineral oil, tea industry and in silk rearing, the State occupies the foremost position in the Indian Union.

The geologists say that the present configuration of this part of India is not more than 30 million years old which is comparatively a recent time in consideration to the total age of the earth (4600 million years). For the greater part of the history of this planet, this region was submerged under the floor of the great ocean. The geologically oldest part of Assam is represented by the Assam plateau comprising the Garo and the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, which, along with its easternmost outcrop in the Mikir and Rengma Hills, is believed to be of Archaean in origin (300 million years). The basal archaean series is, however, superimposed mainly in the southern sector by sedimentary rocks and lava, the last one testifying to intense volcanic activities in the Middle Jurassic epoch (170 million years). At that time, the Assam plateau was partly submerged by sea and the rest was low land and swamps where coal beds were formed. The present configuration of the Assam plateau owes its origin to the great geostatic movement connected with the upliftment of Himalayas from the floor of the ancient Mediterranean Sea, (Sea,) the Sea of Tethys. The major parts of Assam, Nagaland and Manipur were formed between 38 to 25 million years. The Valley of the Brahmaputra is the most recent in origin. The alluvial tract of the valley is believed to have been built up in the foredeep of the Himalayas by the silt brought down by the rivers since a million years, and it is still being built up by the millions of tons of silt brought down every year by the Brahmaputra and its tributaries.

Hemmed in between the Eastern Himalayas, Tibet, China, Burma and East Pakistan, the hills and the valleys of the Brahmaputra occupy a somewhat secluded and isolated part of Asia. Yet, in spite of the geographical isolation, the province throughout her history remained in close contact with Southeast Asia as with India through the river valleys and mountain passes. The name, 'Assam' is, according to some scholars, derived from the Sanskrit 'asam', which means 'peerless' or 'unequaled'. It has also been suggested that this title was applied to the Shan invaders, the Ahoms who transferred their tribal name to the country they conquered (Ahom-Asam—Assam).

Anciently, this landmass was known as Pragjyotisha and Kamarupa. The kingdom of Kamarupa probably included the greater

part of modern Assam and of Bengal, east of the Karatoya river. From the descriptions in the Puranas and the Tantras, it is evident that Pragjyotisha and Kamarupa formed an integral part of India (Aryavarta) since early times. We find mention of Assam as Pragjyotisha in Sabha parva and Udyoga parva of the Mahabharata. Here it is mentioned that Pragjyotisha was a kingdom of 'Mlecchas' ruled over by Bhagadatta, who participated in the battle of Kurukshetra as an ally of the 'Kauravas'. In Assam's relation with rest of India, Bhagadatta forms a significant symbol, even though he might be purely legendary. It is stated in the Puranas that the ruling family of Pragjyotisha and Kamarupa descended from Vishnu. The son of Vishnu and the Earth-goddess was Naraka who was adopted by Janaka, the king of Videha, modern north Bihar. Bhagadatta was Naraka's son. The historic significance of these legends is that the Aryan priests and warriors undoubtedly founded their way to the Brahmaputra Valley from the Gangetic India probably between 800 and 500 B. C., or may be even earlier.

But the land possesses the history of a much longer period about which there is no written records. This comes in the realm of pre-history, which, we may say, constitutes the fossilised records of man's activities in the dim remote past, now lying buried under the earth's crust. The history of this period needs to be dug out by applying the art of the pick and shovel, and to be pieced together to form a coherent story by using archaeological methods.

About ninety nine percent of human history falls in the realm of prehistory. The humanity had to pass through a long period of savagery and barbarism covering about one million years from the time of origin of man upon this planet, before ushering into the historic period about five thousand years ago only in three great river valleys of the world-the Euphrates and Tigris, the Nile and the Indus followed by Greece, Rome, Aryavarta and the Huangho Valley of China. The recorded history of India is reckoned from the time of Buddha (500 B.C.) and of Assam only from 4th Century A.D.

The reconstruction of the history of Assam during the unrecorded period is still incomplete. We do not know the history of this region during the Early Stone Age (Palaeolithic) when humanity was in the savage stage living merely by hunting and food collection. The earliest record of the Stone Age period of Assam, in the present state of research, could be traced not earlier than 5000 B.C. This period is known as Mesolithic in general and Hoabinhian in Southeast Asia. During this period, man had no knowledge of agriculture. Their implements and weapons were fabricated out of stone. The

succeeding stage, starting from approximately 4000 years ago, witnessed some revolutionary changes. Methods of food production i. e., agriculture and domestication of animals were introduced in human society for the first time in this period. Assam abounds in evidence of this period of her prehistory, called Neolithic Age. The inhabitants, who occupied mainly the hills and the higher part of the valley, knew the art of making improved types of stone implements and of converting clay into vessels, the manufacture of pottery. They grew crops probably rice and millet on the hill-slopes by method called shifting or 'Jhum' cultivation, where tilling of the soil is not necessary. The seeds are sown over the ashes that accumulate due to burning of the forest; the agriculture implement used for this purpose is a wooden stick pointed at one end, called dibbler. This method of cultivation is still in vogue among the hill-tribes of Assam. The flood plains of the Brahmaputra Valley seem to have been ecologically unsuitable for the neolithic people who had no knowledge of plough cultivation on flat land. The latest prehistoric immigrants to Assam were the Indo-Aryans, who, after peopling the Ganges Valley, advanced further east into the Brahmaputra Valley probably in the early part of the first millennium B. C. These people were far advanced in knowledge and technology than the neolithic hilldwellers. They for the first time introduced into the valley the knowledge of metallurgy, art and architecture including plough cultivation and wheel-cart. In other words, they brought the first germ of civilisation into the valley. The history of this period, as stated earlier, is locked up in the legends and in the epics and the Puranas.

Although there is no reference to Kamarupa in epigraphy or other historic records in India during the Pre-Christian era, it is recorded in Chinese chronicle that there were well established trade routes between China and India and thence to the West through Kamarupa. Historians also say that in the beginning of the Christian era, the Romans, who had already established several trading posts in India, tried to establish trade contact with China through Assam. Future archaeological researches may prove the truth in it. On the whole, there cannot be any doubt that Assam lies on the path of two great and ancient civilizations of the world—the Chinese and Indian civilizations.

Apart from the legendary sources, the first, epigraphic reference to Kamarupa is found in the Allahabad pillar inscription of Samudragupta (C. 350 A.D.). Here with Samatata, Dabaka, Nepala and other states, Kamarupa is mentioned as a 'pratyanta' or frontier state outside the Gupta Empire, but in friendly and subordinate relation with it.

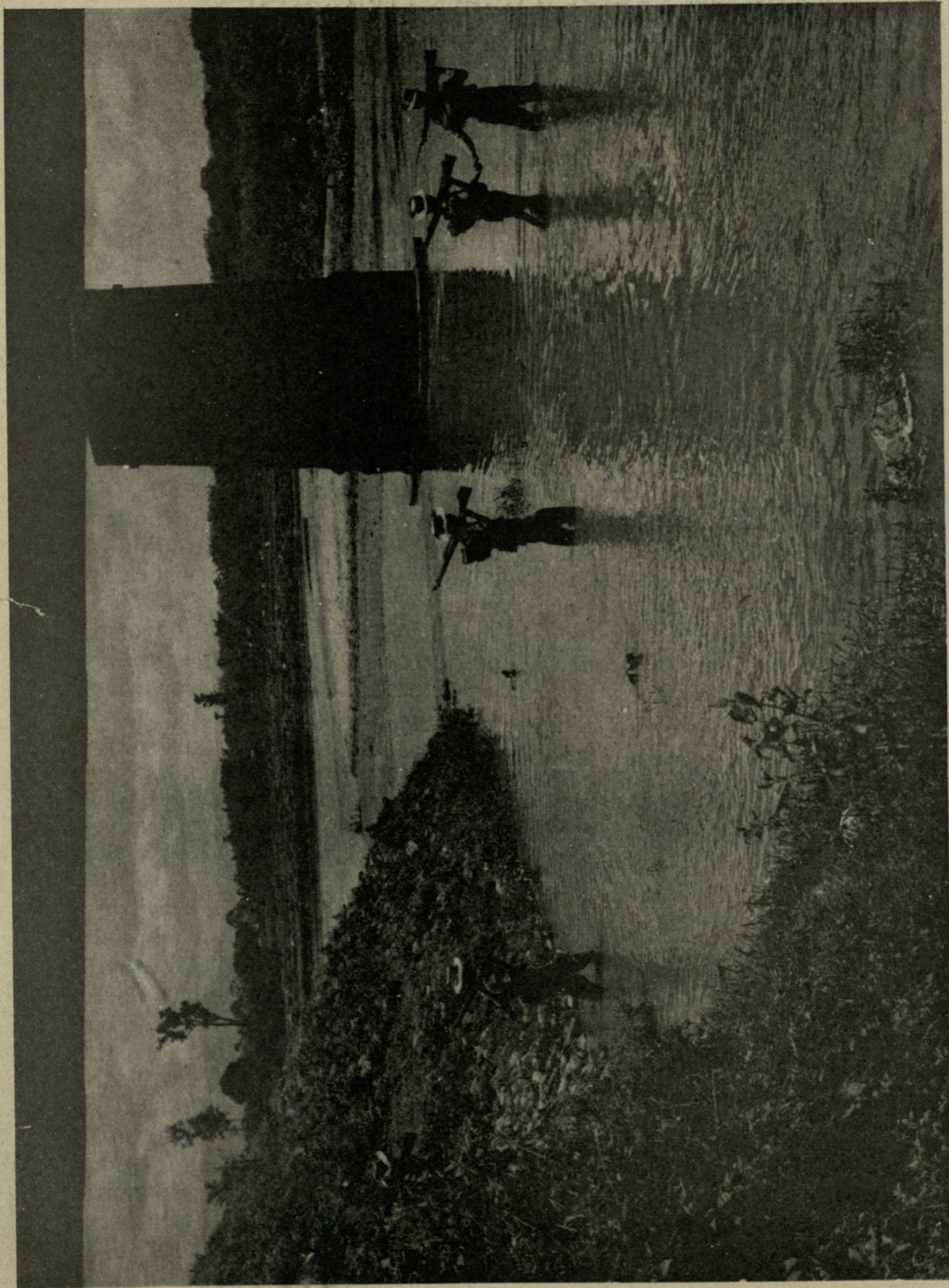
The Seventh century after the Christ was a glorious period for both India and Assam. When Harsha Vardhana, one of the most powerful and enlightened rulers of India, was emperor in North India, in Kamarupa Kumar Bhaskar Varman was on the throne. He was the most powerful king of northeastern India at that time and a great ally of Harsha. The most significant event of his reign was a visit to his court by the Chinese scholar, Hiuen T'sang, on the invitation of the king, when the scholar was staying and studying at Nalanda. The description left by the Chinese scholar of the place and the people is the oldest record, we have of Assam from any write-Indian or foreign, baring references in the Mahabharata. It is therefore clear that from the early christianera the influence of Indo-Gangetic civilization, and the gradual Aryanisation of the Bodo and Austic people continued. It was perhaps most vigorous at the time of the Gupta Emperors as suggested by iconographic evidence. By about 1200 A.D., the Brahmaputra Valley appears to have become definitely a part of Aryan speaking India. The Magadhi Pakrit of Bihar slowly extended to northeastern India and made its way to the Brahmaputra Valley.

The thirteenth century signalled a major turning point in the history of Assam. In the year 1228, a group of Shans or Ahoms from northern Burma under the leadership of Sukapha crossed over the Patkai hills and occupied a territory at the foot of the Patkai range. Gradually they grew in power and by the middle of the fifteenth century, they established themselves as the ruler of the Brahmaputra Valley. The most notable event of the Ahom period is the invasion of the Mughals from Bengal for seventeen times successively, but without any tangible success. The most significant contribution of the Ahom period to the history and culture of India is the final triumph of Hinduism over the tribal religion of the Ahoms. The Ahoms although established themselves as the master of the land, had to yield to the process of Hinduisation and Indianisation that was in operation in the Brahmaputra Valley since the coming of the Indo-Aryans to the valley. This was indeed advantageous to both the conqueror and the conquered, but more to the conqueror who seemed to have a religion and culture alien and ulterior to the main stream of civilization in the valley. The Burmese army who invaded the valley in aid of a warring aspirant for the throne, treated the innocent inhabitants of the valley with such extreme barbarity that the woes of those sad days of Assam history still echo in the heart of the people of the valley. These are sung as ballads at the time of distress. The Burmese atrocity fell upon the valley for three times in succession within nine years beginning from 1816, each time with increasing barbarity, as a result of which the valley was largely depopulated, the civilization was ruined. On the whole the vital-

ity of the people and their culture and civilization sank to the lowest ebb. From the beginning of this period, the western border of the valley was almost closed for fear of invasion by the Mughals, thus isolating the area from the main current of the Gangetic civilization and reducing it into a cultural cul-de-sac.

Finally, another foreign power, this time an European power with a culture and religion, completely alien to the land, took the possession of the territory in 1826 after freeing the country from the Burmese occupation. Under the British rule, Assam, comprising all the plains and hill districts, became for the first time in her history an integral part of India. Once again, since the time of Kumar Bhaskar Barman, the valley was brought closer to the main stream of the Indian civilization. Further, the British period saw the discovery of Assam to the scientific words. Foreign scholars and scientists came to the state to assess and record its natural wealth. Detailed geographical, geological, ethnological and statistical accounts were prepared and published. The innovations of the modern industrial period were brought in. Tea, oil and mining industries were established. Modern and scientific education in the European model was introduced. The commerce, industry and the main economy of the state, however, remained in the hands of the foreign power. This speaks well for the relative backwardness of the area, although in natural wealth, the richness of the area is well-known.

The post-independence period, since 1947, brought in rapid development of the state, mainly in the field of education and communication. In the sphere of economy, industry and agriculture, the progress is rather slow. An event of far-reaching consequence, in the British and post-independence period, is the large-scale migration of people from the over populated Bengal and the Ganges Valley into this area, thus threatening the state with the most serious consequences of over population. Being a border state facing two hostile neighbours, China and Pakistan, Assam has innumerable problems to face. The situation is further aggravated by internal troubles, sometimes breaking into rebellion. Looking at the present political situation in the state, it appears that the foundation of unity and intergration forged in this area throughout the Ages, is now beginning to weaken, certainly a matter of deep concern for all of us.



Assam Police Patrol Crossing a River