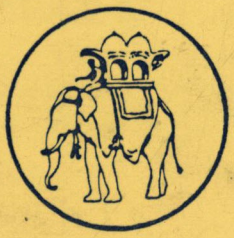
LONDON STUDIES ON SOUTH ASIA NO. 3

THE ASSAMESE



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Anthropologically speaking, almost nothing is known of Assam, and for many centuries it occupied a peripheral position, both geographically and politically, in relation to the rest of India. The many tribes living in the hill tracts of Assam early engaged the attention of anthropologists but no significant studies have been made of the people living in the Assam valley who call themselves Assamese, the distinctive features of whose culture are inseparably connected with their religious institutions. The purpose of this book is to give an account of the way of life which the Assamese people are seeking to preserve, and its chief claim to attention is that it is the very first field-study of the village foundations of social life in Assam, containing a plenitude of detailed information on local aggregates, caste divisions, modes of livelihood, devotional practices, marriage patterns and much else.

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AUDREY CANTLIE

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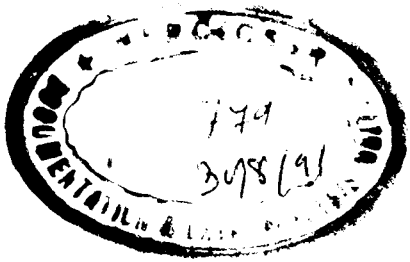

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INTRODUCTION

Anthropologically speaking, almost nothing is known of Assam. For many centuries it occupied a peripheral position, both geographically and politically, in relation to the rest of India. The term Assam, Asam or Aham was originally applied to the country ruled by the Ahoms, a Shan people who migrated from upper Burma at the beginning of the thirteenth century and gradually extended their rule throughout the Brahmaputra valley. According to Ahom tradition, the name meant 'unequalled' or 'peerless' *(asama)* and was applied to them in admiration by the local tribes (Gait 1906:241). The Ahoms were later to turn back the tide of Mughal conquest in the face of repeated incursions by the governors of Bengal so that the country never became part of the Mughal empire but pursued an independent political existence outside. The British first intervened in the area in 1824, when they became embroiled with the Burmese invaders who had overrun the Ahom kingdom. Under British administration the term Assam was originally used to designate the six districts of the Brahmaputra valley under the control of the Commissioner of Assam, but when in 1872 a Chief Commissionership of Assam was created, it was extended to designate the entire territory of the Chief Commissionership, including two districts in the Surma valley, six hill areas and two frontier tracts. Leaving aside the short-lived amalgamation of Assam with East Bengal between 1905 and 1912, this remained the position until Independence.

The many tribes living in the hill tracts of Assam early engaged the attention of anthropologists but no significant studies have been made of the people living in the Assam valley who call themselves Assamese. Most of the hill districts have since been separated to form autonomous states, and Assam consists today of the six districts of the Brahmaputra or Assam valley, which are chiefly Assamese-speaking, the single district of Cachar in the Surma valley, which is Bengali-speaking, and the two hill districts of the Mikir Hills and the North Cachar Hills (see Map 1). The population of the Brahmaputra valley was 12.5 million in 1971. But not all those who return themselves as Assamese-speaking are considered to be Assamese. The term 'Assamese' is sometimes

used to refer to those who are citizens of Assam: in this sense it includes tea-garden labour and Mymensinghi settlers. More generally, however, it is used to denote the indigenous or long-settled inhabitants who are recognized as Assamese, not only in language, but also in culture and way of life. Today the Assamese feel that this way of life is increasingly threatened.

Assam has one of the highest in-to-out migration rates among Indian states. Those who are born in the fertile valley of the Brahmaputra are generally content to remain there, while outsiders come to settle in the State for a variety of reasons. The tea plant grows wild in the valley and in the latter half of the nineteenth century many gardens were opened for the cultivation and processing of tea. As the Assamese villager preferred the cultivation of his own fields to wage-labour on a tea garden, it became necessary to import labourers, mainly from Bihar and Orissa, whose descendants often settled as cultivators on waste land. By 1921 migrants to tea gardens and their descendants probably numbered one-sixth of the total population of the province. Today this cause of movement has ceased, but migrants still come from these areas to work on the roads and in construction industries, which again is work that the Assamese do not do. At the beginning of the century the density of population in the valley was 140 per square mile (Goswami 1963:32), and its rich, virgin soil attracted a flow of settlers form East Bengal, mainly Muslims from Mymensinghi district, who rapidly took possession of waste land and encroached on to the grazing reserves. The total number of Muslims entering Assam from East Bengal can only be estimated as settlement was in some cases illegal, but by 1951 they probably constituted between one-tenth and one-sixth of the population (Goswami 1963:26). Bengali Hindus came to the province in the early days of British administration as clerks and rapidly secured a dominant position in government service and the professions. From 1837 to 1871 Bengali was used as the official language of the courts and of schools, Assamese being considered a provincial dialect rather than a separate language. The Assamese have bitter memories of this period and still feel themselves at a disadvantage in the competition for jobs compared with the middle-class Bengali. Today over one million people living in the Brahmaputra valley are first-generation Bengali immigrants, the Muslims living mainly as cultivators and the Hindus concentrated in towns. In the absence

of an indigenous entrepreneurial class, Marwaris and Punjabis have settled in the State where they occupy a key position as moneylenders, merchants and industrialists. Nepalese immigrants, numbering some 200,000, control the milk trade. The population of Assam has increased from 3.3 million in 1901 to nearly 15 million in 1971. If natural increase is taken at the all-India rate of 130 per cent for the period, this means that about half of the present population is to be accounted for by immigration. As a result the Assamese find themselves in the position of becoming a minority, although the largest minority, in their own State. Outbreaks of xenophobia among the Assamese (the anti-Marwari disturbances of the 1960s, the anti-Bengali riots of 1972, the massive uprising of 1979 to 1980) reflect the response of a once peaceable people to this fundamental change.

The purpose of this book is to give an account of the way of life which the Assamese people are seeking to preserve. To the Assamese the distinctive features of their culture are inseparably connected with their religious institutions. The majority of Assamese Hindus follow the path of devotion based on the teachings of the Bhagavata Purana which is associated in the State with the name of a fifteenth century preacher called Shankaradeva. Today Shankaradeva is venerated among Assamese Vaishnavas not only as the founder of their faith and an incarnation of Vishnu but as the originator of all that is peculiarly Assamese in their social organization and culture and hence, in a sense, as the father of the Assamese nation. Bishnuram Medhi, formerly Chief Minister of Assam, wrote in 1963:

> ... any one who cares to know Assam and her people soon discovers that everything we call Assamese is rooted in the soil that was prepared more than five centuries ago by this Great Saint and Savant Sreemanta Shankar Deva (Neog 1963:iv).

The first part of this introductory account of the State is a village study in which the major social institutions of the people —caste, kinship and affinity—are analysed within the context of local devotional organization. The second part examines the distinctive features of the caste process in Assam in historical perspective and discusses both the traditional institutions and beliefs of Assamese Vaishnavism and the impact upon these

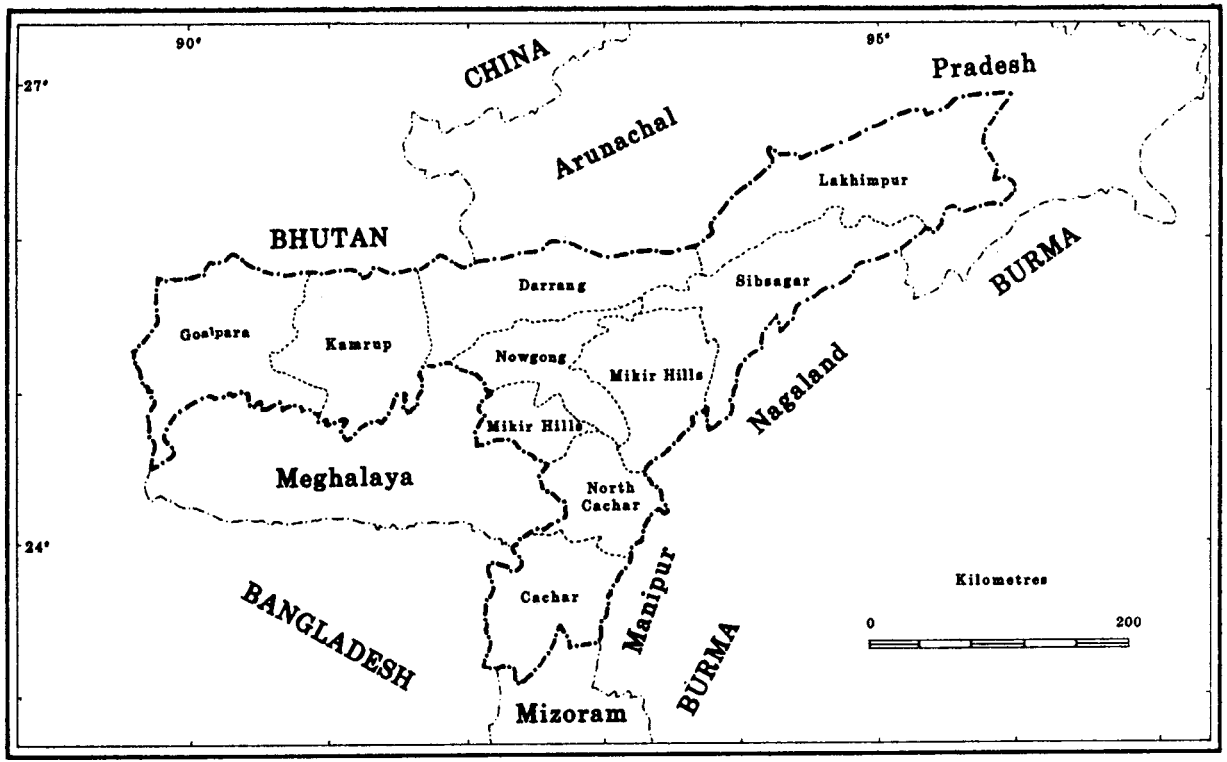
institutions of the new reform movements which arose in the 1930s.

Data for the work were collected during two visits to the field, the first of four months in 1969 and the second of two and a half months in 1971. The first visit was spent almost entirely in the study of one village, here called Panbari, and the second visit was spent partly in Panbari and partly in areas where the Vaishnava reform sects originated and were most active. Both these periods of research were made possible by grants from the School of Oriental and African Studies, to whom I acknowledge my indebtedness. I also collected much general information on Assamese customs in the period from 1940 to 1950 when I was living in Assam.

I am happy to put on record the warmth and friendliness with which I was everywhere received in Assam and to express my gratitude to the many Assamese friends who unstintingly gave up their time to respond to my queries. Professor Prabhas Chandra Goswami gave me invaluable assistance in the selection of the village and in the organization of the research. I would have accomplished little without his advice and support. Dr. Padma Dhar Saikia, himself an anthropologist, opened his house to me most generously at almost all hours and provided me with much valuable information. My Assamese teachers, Mitradeva Mahanta and Mohan Chandra Mahanta, provided a living demonstration of the practical truths of Assamese Vaishnavism as manifested in their persons. I wish to record my deep appreciation of their great patience and kindness towards me over the years. I am also indebted to Sosi Barbarooah, Professor Bhaba Misra and Dr. Kehab Chandra Goswami for their friendship and help, and to Purna Kanta Dutta for his assistance in the village.

This book is based on a thesis approved for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the University of London. I acknowledge my debt to my supervisor, Professor Adrian Mayer, for his patience and encouragement, and to Dr. Richard Burghart for his helpful comments on a draft of the thesis.

A version of Chapter 8 appeared as a paper, 'The moral significance of food among Assamese Hindus', in *Culture and morality*, edited by Adrian Mayer and published by the Oxford University Press. I am grateful for permission to re-publish the material here.



Map 1. *Assam (adapted from Census of India, Vol. III, Assam)*