

the
background of
**ASSAMESE
CULTURE**
rajmohan nath



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THE
BACK-GROUND
OF
ASSAMESE CULTURE

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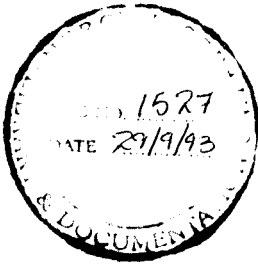


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Chapter I

THE AUSTRICS

The first race of people with a more or less organised form of society, in the sense in which the term is understood now, to inhabit the province now known as Assam, were the Austro-Asiatics or the Austrics, as the Anthropologist calls them.

Austro-Asiatic is only a generic term. The race of people who came to Assam belonged to the same stock that inhabited the vast country comprising the present Indonesian Islands and Australia. Linguistically and culturally, they also belonged to the same stock.

According to the French scholar Przyluski, the Austrics were yellowish brown in colour and poetic, imaginative and lustful in habit. They used to live in batches under the leadership of a headman, and they knew the art of cultivating paddy, arum roots, turmeric, betel-nuts and betel-leaves by picking up high land. They used red pigments.

The original home of the Austrics is roughly taken by some scholars to be somewhere near about northern Indo-China, others locate it in Siberia and prefer to call them Finno-Augrians.

These people were divided into several tribes—Khoso, Synteng, Kol, Ho, Gond, Moria, Munda etc. and each tribe designated itself by a term which meant 'man'—Hor, Hora, Mi, Mei etc.

According to the author of the "Periplus of the Erythraean Sea"—a Greek navigator of about the first century—A. D.—a race of people, called the Besatis, lived in the country in the interior part of the mainland to the north of Sumatra and the country was called the land of THIS. The people were of mild temperament and with flat nose and round face.

The land called This has been identified by scholars to be the "great western state of China—Ts'in, city called Thinae (Hien-yang later known as Sig-nan-fu on the Wei-river not far above its confluence with the Hoang-Ho) in the present province of Shen-si."

China was known in old days by a general term 'Chao-Thieus'—

meaning God's Heaven-land, and even to this day, the people of northern Burma designate China by the general term 'Thieus'.
Zuh-This. Chao-Thieus was later on shortened to Chuh-This, and was also pronounced as Zuh-This. Chao, Chuh or Zuh later on meant only high hill or high land. Cultivation carried on by picking up a high hill or high land was known as Zuh-moh or Zuhm cultivation. The people living in hills were known by the general term Mei-Zuh or Mi-Zuh ; others were known as Mei-this.

Taing, Tien or Ti means state, dominion or kingdom, and the people were also known after the name of the state. Besa-tien or Besati was the name of a state in China or Chu-This, and the people of that state were called the Besatis. In a much later period, the people from the Kham-ti (Kham-Gold) were known as the Khamtis. Similarly the people of the Ts'in-taing were known as the Ts'in-taing, Synteng, or Syntien. Syntien was later on pronounced as Chyntien and then as Zyntien, and now they are known, as the Jaintias.

'Kha' means water course in a river or a lake or a spring, and Chai (Bodo) means persons or children. Chai (chinese) also means blood, and chai-kha or Kha-chai means bloody water. The people living by the side of the spring from which reddish water oozed out were the Kha-chais, and they were later on known as the Khasias or the Khasis.

The Moria sect of the Austriacs who were originally known as the Mei-Morias settled in the north eastern part of the country which was later on known as the head or the Mahtak or Matak country. Later on, they mixed up with the Bodos and other tribes and were known as the Morans, while their tribe name was transformed from Mei-Moria to Maya-Moria or Moa-Moria. They were completely Hinduised in later times and they played an important role in overthrowing the powerful Ahom Empire. Some scholars have endeavoured to interpret Maya or Moa with reference to black-art.

A batch of the Zuh-This people from their original home-land in the land of This migrated south-west-wards along the course of the river that rising from the hill on the south-western border of China joined the Tsangpo river at the north-eastern corner of Assam. As they proceeded, they found the water course in the river very wide, and they called it Lao-tu (wide-
Lohit River.

water), and this name later on under-went transformation into Lohit. The main river flowing through Assam was known all along as the Lohit and the country was known as Lauhitya in all old Indian records. This migration very probably took place in about 2750 B.C.

These immigrants coming from Zhu-This land were known in this country as the Zuh-This people. They lived for several centuries in the **Zuhm-Cultivation**. land now known as the Brahmaputra Valley, where the country inundated by the water of the big river was found very fertile for paddy. The Tsang-po river originating from the Manas lake and flowing east-wards joined the Lohit river and the combined water course coming down to the plains, in later times, was given the name Brahma-putra.

Coming from China, the first homeland of paddy, the Zuh-This people introduced the cultivation of paddy for the first time in this eastern part of India. They however, continued the practice of cultivating arum-roots, turmeric etc. by picking up the high land with a pointed iron implement like a hoe called the 'Moh-khew', and this kind of cultivation was known as the Zuh-Moh or the Zuhm cultivation. The rice beer which these people used as an invigorating drink was also known as the 'Zuh' meaning the heavenly drink.

Though these people took to cultivation, they still considered the vocation to be of secondary importance for the maintenance of their lives, and the work was left to the womenfolk of the family, while the males ran after wild animals for gathering flesh for food. From this practice, either by choice or by compulsion, the belief gained ground that the womenfolk were the best suited for cultivation. Women produced children out of their wombs, vegetation also grew out of the earth. The fecundity of women was same as that of the earth. When cultivation assumed an important part in family, life, the womenfolk for their supposed relationship with the earth were considered important persons for the society and they were held in high esteem. The matriarchal rules, in the matter of inheritance and other affairs, thus grew up in the society.

Earth was likened to a woman, she was the Mother Earth, and the country was also a woman--the Mother. Now, Assam as her physical geography stood in those days, and as it stands even now, extended from the high hills on the north-east frontier towards the south-west with the mighty Brahmaputra river as her back-bone, She being a woman, the north

eastern portion from Sadiya upto the Bharali river in the present Darrang district was her crown— (or *Sumeru*). This portion was known in later times as Saumar. The Dibrugarh and Sadiya area together were known in later times as the Mastak or Mahtak (meaning the head) country.

The area between the Bharali river and the Rupashi river, in the present Nowgong district, formed the neck and the **Ratna-pitha.** breast of the country, and this was known as the Ratna-pitha, or the ornamented area.

The Gauhati area up to the Monas river formed the waist or the portion of the genital organ (*Kama*), and was known as the Kama-pitha. From a natural spring flowing out of a rocky hill on the bank of the Brahmaputra river oozed out reddish water due probably to the fact that the rock contained red-haematite. The people living near about this area were known by the general term Kha-chais or the Khasias or the Khasis.

The water of this spring assumed a reddish tinge only during the rainy season when the flow increased naturally, and in other parts of the year the colour was natural. At the point at which the water oozed out from the rock at its foot, there was a natural fissure conical in shape about nine inches in length and fifteen inches in width and reddish pink in colour—looking very much like the genital organ of a woman. This further strengthened the belief that Mother Earth menstruated through this fissure at the pick time of cultivation. The place was therefore, called the Ka-Mei-Kha (mother-water course). Later on, the Hindus named the place Kamakhya and worshipped it as the genital organ of the Supreme Mother. (Kha as verb means to give birth to).

The lower portion of the country represented the feet of the Mother, and was later on named the Bhadra-Pitha or the **Bhadra-Pitha.** Venerated region.

The Zuh-This people, as they flourished and increased in number, migrated west-wards along the belt at the foot of the Himalayas and reached as far as Afganistan and probably to the further west. They were centralised in three important centres—in the east in Assam, in the centre in the present Bareilly district, and in the north in Afganistan. These three centres were later on named as the Prag-Zuhthis, the Madhya Zuhthis and the Uttar-Zuhthis. The word Zuh-this was transformed later on int

the Sanskritic form Jyotish, which word literally means astronomy, and has been responsible for a lot of speculations amongst scholars as to the adeptness of the people of that ancient period in that particular branch of science.

The cultivation season in Assam started in those days, as it does even now—just when the monsoon broke usually in the middle of May. So, as soon as the spring was over, the thought of the people turned to cultivation. It was necessary therefore to do something to rouse the propensity for fertilisation in Mother Earth, so that she might be capable of conceiving and producing abundantly. **Cultivation.** This was done logically in a simple way by rousing the feeling of excitement in the womenfolk,—for, they possessed the same physio-logical properties as mother Earth.

In the month of April (Bohag or Baisakh of the Assamese) males and females, married and unmarried—mostly the latter—dressed in their best, congregated in a festive mood in the open field, **Bohag-Bihu Songs.** and indulged in amorous songs and sex-appealing dances. The dress of the girls consisted of cloth with red border and red florets, and the palms and the feet were anointed with the red pigment made out of myrtle leaves.

The songs were composed extempore, referring to natural environments and day-to-day life and appealing to the softer feelings. These were mostly simple love appeals—often times verging on what may be considered as obscene by modern people.

The dances were nothing but imitations of the effects of nature in the environment in the preceding and the following **Bohag-Bihu Dances.** months.

Swaying of the upper part of the body backward and forward with a sudden jerk, keeping the lower part stiff, was an imitation of the effect of the storm on trees. The bending of the upper part of the body backward and forward was the effect of the high wind on bamboos and paddy plants. Sitting down suddenly represented the breaking of trees. Shrieks represented the rustling sound of the storm. The movement of the hip with a sudden jerk represented the waving of the palms, cocoanuts or betel-nuts on the trees by the wind, and the gentle fluttering of the stretched-out hands represented the ripples caused in the water of the great river.

After Mother Earth had been excited to full youth, the flowers of

the Asoka-plant which was tonic for the uterus were applied to her by floating them in her spinal chord—the Lohit river.

Asokasthami. This ceremony has been adopted by the Hindus as Asoka-asthami, but this is performed in the same old fashion only in Brahmaputra river.

Then the cultivation began, and in the month of June when the time of sowing the seed came, it was considered necessary that Mother Earth should menstruate—to develop the symptom of her capability for conception. The ceremony was observed on the Kamakhya hill at the out-let of the natural spring. The mother was in her course and it was absolutely necessary to leave her undisturbed for four days. Ploughing or picking the earth was strictly forbidden during these four days. The womenfolk who were incapacitated for conception due to widowhood or otherwise, were prescribed food that would keep their feelings suppressed.

Virgins dressed in their best performed a dance at a very slow pace. It was unnatural that there should be any sharp movements on the fifth day of the course. The virgins put on a red pigment on their fore-heads—as a symbol of having had attained puberty—and the joy was expressed by the slow pace dance. The ceremony is preserved in the Nongkrem dance of the Khasis. The modern artist ridicules the dance as an art-less and-killing perambulation, but the fundamental idea at the root of the ceremony could not prescribe otherwise.

The seed had been sown, Mother Earth had conceived, and it was considered in the fourth or the fifth month of her pregnancy when the ears were full of corn to do something to keep her in the best of her health and spirits and avert any calamity to the foetus. A small plantain tree was dressed in the simple cloth veiled like a bashful woman, and in the middle part representing her belly were tied paddy plants, black arum, giant arum, turmeric plants, the chief products of cultivation, which were growing in the womb of Mother Earth. As medicinal doses were tied Bael fruits as an antidote to constipation, leaves of Asoka as an antidote to uterine troubles, Aparajita creeper as an antidote to phlegm, Barela and Jayanti plants as antidotes to troubles in the pelvis. Then festivities with songs, dances and eating and drinking continued for four to seven days. On the last day of the ceremony filthy and obscene language was freely used

amongst the partakers in the ceremony with a view to frightening away the calamity that might harm the foetus.

The ceremony in a modified form is now observed by the Nagas as their great festival for seven days. Singing, dancing and feasting form the main features. The Hindus have now adopted the ceremony in a different manner in the great festival—the Durga Puja. The *Kola-Bou*, the technically chief deity of the festival is made even now-a-days in the old form of the Austrics, and Durga the main deity of the show is only an emblem of killing the calamitous demons with ten weapons. The use of obscene language is avoided now-a-days.

• The Assamese people observe the ceremony on the last day of the month of Asvin by illuminating their houses.

The mother conceived, the child grew, and when the harvesting was over—she was delivered of the child. The people of the house bathed in the early morning. The mother had to be kept warm, and for this purpose, Mejis or Bhelaghars built with heaps of stubbles in different parts of the field were set fire to. Cakes and drinks made out of the fruits of cultivation were exchanged and eaten together in a great festivity. This ceremony is now observed on the last day of the month of Pous and is also called the Pous-Parvan or the Pitha (Cake) parvan.

All these cultivation ceremonies of the Austrics are observed even now all over the Assam Valley—in the plains as well as in the hills. The Hindus in the plains observe these festivals on the last day of the month—previous to the month after which the festival is named, but the hill-people observe the festivals on any date or dates fixed by the head-man of a particular locality during the season.

All these festivals except the menstruation festival are now known as the Bihu festivals. Bohag Bihu is observed on the last day of the previous month, Chaitra ; Kati Bihu on the last day of Asvin, and Magh Bihu on the last day of Pous. The term Bihu is derived from the Sanskrit word “Dvishu” meaning dividing into two, which referred to the date of the solar equinox, when, the day and the night were of equal duration. The Aryan year commenced from the ‘Dvishu’ day, and the last day of the previous month being the new year’s eve was a day of rejoicing and festivity.

Different schools of thought counted the month with regard either to the movement of the sun or of the moon, and the year commenced

on the date either on the vernal or the autumnal equinox. With the precession of the equinox, the first month of the year also changed from time to time, but the tradition of the observance of the festival of new year's eve in any particular month continued even when that month ceased to be the last month of the year.

According to astronomical calculations, Agrahayan (Nov.-Dec.) was the first month of the year in about 4000 B.C., Kartik in about 2200 B.C. and Asvin in about 1400 B.C. The last days of all the corresponding previous months were at one time or other the days of the new year's eve.

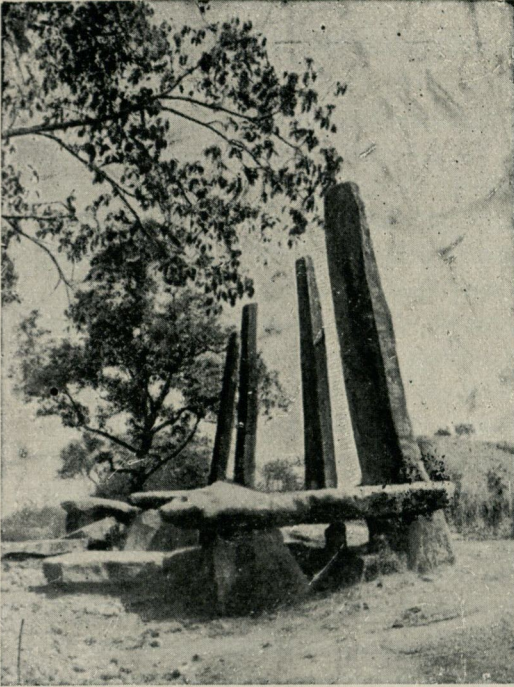
When the Aryan civilisation spread into Assam, the Dvishu ceremonies were found to coincide more or less with the cultivation festivals of the indigenous people, and with fusion of culture the festivals were merged. The tradition of the observance of the last day of Asvin by the Assamese people as a Dvishu day (Kati-Bihu) entitles them to the tradition of the Aryan culture of about 2200 B.C., when perhaps the first wave of Aryan culture spread into Assam.

The Austrics believed in the immortality of the soul or the spirit. When a person died, his or her spirit was believed to take shelter in a rock or a tree, and the relatives of the deceased erected a piece of stone at a convenient place to provide an easy resort for his or her spirit. Food and drink were offered on another flat piece placed in front of the vertical one.

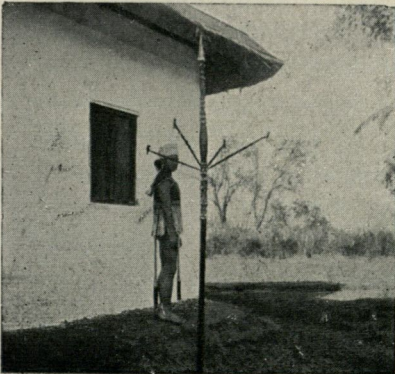
Religion.

The Khasis and the Jaintas erect numbers of such stone megaliths—even now-a-days in memory of their deceased. The Khasis call them Maw-Bynna (Maw—stone ; Bynna—to let people know, to commemorate). These megaliths consist of a vertical piece of stone fixed into the ground with a flat squared piece placed on four stone pegs in front of the vertical one. At the time of the erection ceremony, the vertical piece is decorated with the dress of the deceased according to his or her sex, and the food and the drink meant for the spirit of the deceased are heaped on the flat piece. The Garos erect only a vertical piece made usually with timber, and this piece is oftentimes carved with the face and dressed with the clothings of the deceased.

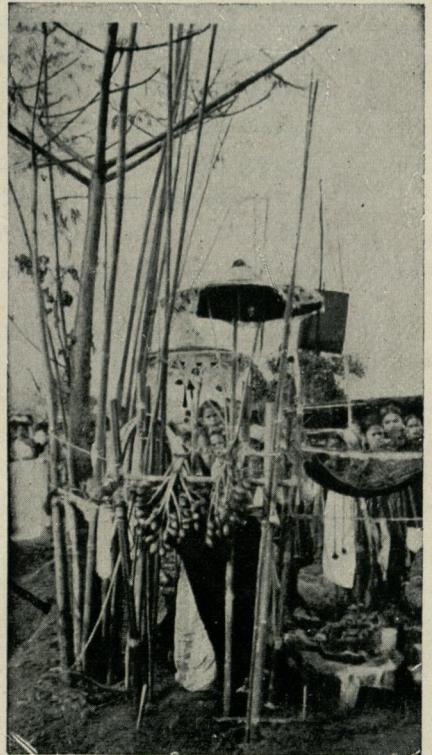
Dr. Hutton considered these megaliths as representations of phallic worship—the vertical piece representing the male, and the flat piece representing the female. But the actual ceremony of erection does not support this interpretation. Vertical ones are erected to represent either a male or a female, and the flat piece is only a plate for the food-stuffs.



The Austric Megalith raised in honour of the
Dead Jaintapur.



Naksabari



Installation ceremony of the Megalith as
observed by the Mikirs in the Mikir Hills.

Pedestrians revere the vertical piece but do not hesitate to squat on the flat piece.

The Mikirs who were influenced by the Khasi culture perform the death ceremony of their deceased by performing the Chuman-Kang Dance—(Ka-iang=Dance) literally meaning the dance of the heavenly people—the Khasis. Unmarried boys and girls of marriageable age go round in a circle at a slow pace, each one holding the waist of the other. The girls are veiled. Most obscene songs appealing to sex and sex intercourse are sung by dancers and the audience—while beating of drums continues in a corner of the gathering. Wailings go on near the megaliths erected in memory of the deceased in honour of whom the ceremony is performed on one side, and the sex appealing songs and the dance by virgins and unmarried youths go on simultaneously on the other side.

This ceremony is evidently purely Austric, and the dance and the songs are only devices to rouse the propensity for making good the loss sustained by the community by the death which is mourned on the other side.

The belief that women were specially related to Earth further strengthened the belief that they were special favourites of God. In religious ceremonies women took the active part in officiating as a go-between between men and God. At the time of drought, the dancing of a naked woman, and at the time of pestilence in crops, the tour of a naked woman round the area were considered enough to please the angry God, and bring relief. The spirit of God found abode in women to foretell events. This Austric belief has been assimilated in various Hindu customs. Deo-dhani or Deva-dhani literally meaning God's woman is still common in Assam to officiate as God's vehicle to foretell events. The Deva-dasi system of dedicating women to the god of a temple appears to be a direct influence of the Austric culture.

In the matter of administration and inheritance, the women got preference. The man went to the family of the women he married, and the youngest daughter of the family inherited the property.

The Austrics like the Polynesians made drums by scooping out hollow the trunk of a tree and covering its sides with skins of animals. The *dhol* scooped out of a tree trunk is yet the important musical instrument in Assam, specially in Bihu festivals.

Canoes were also made out of a long tree by scooping out its heart wood. These boats are still a speciality in Assam.

Houses were built with bamboos and thatch or leaves on a raised pedestal made with trees. The buildings had two sloped roofs, and the end formed the frontage. All the members of the family lived in the same room. Little boys and girls, when they were grown up a bit, were compelled to sleep in separate dormitories built separately for each sex in every village. This system is still in vogue amongst hill tribes in Assam.

China having had developed hunting, fishing, animal husbandry, growth of clans, and the marriage system in about 2800 B.C., and the use of the plough, and medicinal plants in about 2700 B.C., the Zhu-This people who came to Assam introduced the Moh-Khiew or the pointed hoe for Zuhm cultivation and also introduced the cultivation of paddy in Assam. Apart from the few iron implements, they also used stone implements of the neolithic period and such implements are found in the hills of Assam. The use of a few medicinal plants was also known to these people.

These people did not know the use of cows or buffaloes either for cultivation or for milk, and as a matter of fact, no hill tribe in Assam

Animals. use them even now for these purposes. Bison and the Methon were hunted and goats and pigs were tamed for flesh. The elephant appears to have been unknown to these people, for there is no word for elephant in the Khasi language ; the word '*Hati*' has been adopted later on.
