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The Tribes of ASSAM

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The Tribes of ASSAM

Assam is the cradle ground for many civilizations, a glimpse of which is also explore here in the book. This book accounts most of the tribes in the state. The important tribal group consists of Bodo, one of the largest ethnic and linguistic groups of the Brahmaputra valley. The Dimasa is one of the important Kachari tribes.

Kacharis seem to constitute one of the early autochthonous ethnic stratum of north eastern India. The Karbis are the principal tribal community in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam. And many other tribes of the state and their cultures, dances and festivals are all discuss in this book.

Editors:



Dr. M.C. Arunkumar is not only known of his critical observation of the North East Societies but also of his creative works expressing his ideas of the people of this region. During his long career of anthropologist in Manipur University, he carried out many projects ranging from tribal studies to social problems relating with political culture and HIV/AIDS. His political plays are staged at state and national festivals by different theater groups. His doctoral work on Women's Crime in Manipur opens a new insight to the women's studies in the region. He is teaching Social Anthropology at present. To his credit, there are a number of academic papers as well as popular articles, number of books.



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VOLUME II
THE TRIBES OF ASSAM



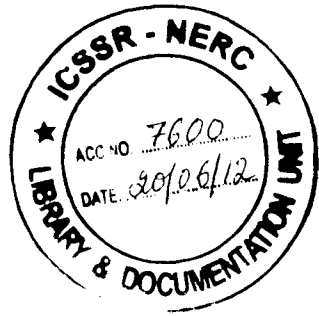
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The Tribes of Assam

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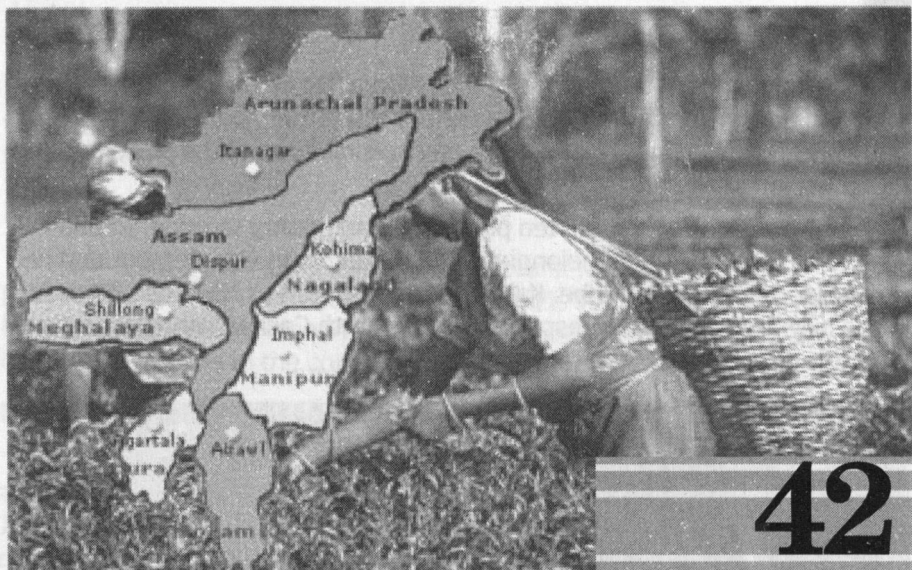
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INTRODUCTION

Assam is a northeastern state of India with its capital at Dispur in the city of Guwahati. Located south of the eastern Himalayas, Assam comprises the Brahmaputra and the Barak river valleys along with the Karbi Anglong and the North Cachar Hills with an area of 30,285 square miles (78,438 km²). Assam is surrounded by six of the other *Seven Sister States*: Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and Meghalaya.

These states are connected to the rest of India via a narrow strip in West Bengal called the Siliguri Corridor or "Chicken's Neck". Assam also shares international borders with Bhutan and Bangladesh; and cultures, peoples and climate with South-East Asia – important elements in India's Look East policy.

Assam is known as the settling ground for many civilizations. Numerous tribal groups have travelled to Assam through different routes as the land was connected to several states and countries. Negritos, Dravidians, Alpines, Tibeto Burmese and Aryans had been the major races that came and dwelled in ancient Assam. They were considered as the aborigines of Assam and even today they are an integral part of the Assamese Diaspora.

The largest population in Assam is that of the Tibeto Burmese descent known as the Bodo tribe and Mishing tribe. Major tribes of Assam make out their livelihood through agriculture and by selling their handicrafts. Different types of tribes living in Assam are famous nationwide for their wide variety of handicrafts, handloom and pottery works.

The languages of the Assamese tribes too differ according to their places of origin. Bodo Tribes are one of the earliest tribes that had settled in Assam. They are, however, not restricted to any specific area of the state and are found in almost all parts of Assam.

They practice cultivation, tea plantation and poultry farming. Rabha is a scheduled tribe of Assam, belonging to the Indo Mongoloid descent and has resemblance to the Bodo tribe. Karbi tribe, also known as Mikir, usually dwells in the hilly areas of Assam, especially in the North Cachar Hills, Nagaon and Sonitpur districts of the state.



Fig. 42.1: An Assamese Tribal Woman using handpump

On the other hand Mishing Tribe hails from Tibeto Burmese and inhabits the districts of Tinsukia, Sibsagar, Sonitpur, Jorhat and Golaghat, along the banks of River Brahmaputra. Dirugarh and Tinsukia district of Assam, along Dihing River are the settlement areas of Phake Tribes. The Dimasa Tribe lives in the Karbi Anglong District of Assam.

The Lakher tribes of Assam consist of Hawthai, Zuchnanag, Tlongsai, Heima Sabeu and Lialia groups. One can also find a concentration of the Deori tribal community in Assam only in the nearby regions of the Brahmaputra River.

Khamti Tribes, Naga Tribes and Santhals are also some of the oldest tribal groups of Assam. Lalung tribal community is one of the important

tribal communities that have resided in Assam. Besides these the Singpho tribes of the Tinsukia district of Assam also form an important Assamese tribal group.

Karbi Tribe

Karbi tribe generally resides in hilly areas of Assam and form the major portion of population of Karbi Anglong district. They also inhabit places in North Cachar Hills, Nagaon and Sonitpur districts of Assam. They are mentioned as Mikir in the constitution of India.

Mishing Tribe

The Mishing Tribe belonging to Tibeto Burmese group have agriculture as their occupation. They inhabit districts of Tinsukia, Sibsagar, Sonitpur, Jorhat and Golaghat. Mishing people found the most fertile land on the banks of River Brahmaputra and settled on sides of the river.

Though their production was great, frequent floods prevented them from climbing the economic ladder. The main festival of Mishing tribe is Ali-Lye-Ligangin the month of February which is the harvest festival. They speak language known as Mishing language.

Phake Tribe

Residing in Dibrugarh and Tinsukia district of Assam, along Dihing River, Phaki tribe are said to have come here from Thailand in the late 18th century. They speak Assamese language as well as Phake language. This group is also known as Phakial and is a follower of Theravada School of Buddhism.

The tribes of Assam are the colourful people who celebrate some of the most ethnic festivals like Bihu, Baishagu, Rongker, Ali-Ai-Ligang, Baikho and others. Assam became a part of India after the British occupied the region following the First Anglo-Burmese War of 1824-1826. It is known for Assam tea, large and old petroleum resources, Assam silk and for its rich biodiversity.

Assam has successfully conserved the one-horned Indian rhinoceros from near extinction, along with the tiger and numerous species of birds, and it provides one of the last wild habitats for the Asian elephant. It is becoming an increasingly popular destination for wildlife tourism, and Kaziranga and Manas are both World Heritage Sites.

Assam was also known for its Sal tree forests and forest products, much depleted now. A land of high rainfall, Assam is endowed with lush greenery and the mighty river Brahmaputra, whose tributaries and oxbow lakes provide the region with a unique hydro-geomorphic and aesthetic environment.

Assam was known as Pragjyotisha in the Mahabharata; and Kamarupa in the 1st millennium. "While the Shan invaders called themselves Tai, they

came to be referred to as *Âsâm*, *Âsam* and sometimes as *Acam* by the indigenous people of the country. The modern Assamese word *Âhom* by which the Tai people are known is derived from *Âsâm* or *Âsam*.

The epithet applied to the Shan conquerors was subsequently transferred to the country over which they ruled and thus the name *Kâmarûpa* was replaced by *Âsâm*, which ultimately took the Sanskritized form *Asama*, meaning 'unequaled, peerless or uneven'. The British province after 1838 and the Indian state after 1947 came to be known as *Assam*.

On 27 February 2006, the Government of Assam started a process to change the name of the state to *Asom* or *Axom*, a controversial move that has been opposed by the people and political organizations.

PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY

Geomorphic studies conclude that the Brahmaputra, the life-line of Assam is an antecedent river, older than the Himalayas. The river with steep gorges and rapids in Arunachal Pradesh entering Assam, becomes a braided river (at times 10 mi/16 km wide) and with tributaries, creates a flood plain (Brahmaputra Valley: 50–60 mi/80–100 km wide, 600 mi/1000 km long).

The hills of Karbi Anglong, North Cachar and those in and close to Guwahati (also Khasi-Garo Hills) now eroded and dissected are originally parts of the South Indian Plateau system. In the south, the Barak originating in the Barail Range (Assam-Nagaland border), flows through the Cachar district with a 25–30 miles (40–50 km) wide valley and enters Bangladesh with the name Surma.

Assam is endowed with petroleum, natural gas, coal, limestone and other minor minerals such as magnetic quartzite, kaolin, sillimanites, clay and feldspar. A small quantity of iron ore is available in western districts. Discovered in 1889, all the major petroleum-gas reserves are in Upper parts. A recent USGS estimate shows 399 million barrels (63,400,000 m) of oil, 1,178 billion cubic feet (3.34×10 m) of gas and 67 million barrels (10,700,000 m) of natural gas liquids in the Assam Geologic Province.

With the "Tropical Monsoon Rainforest Climate", Assam is temperate (summer max. at 95–100 °F or 35–38 °C and winter min. at 43–46 °F or 6–8 °C) and experiences heavy rainfall and high humidity. The climate is characterized by heavy monsoon downpours reducing summer temperatures and affecting foggy nights and mornings in winters.

Thunderstorms known as *Bordoicila* are frequent during the afternoons. Spring (Mar-Apr) and Autumn (Sept-Oct) are usually pleasant with moderate rainfall and temperature. Assam is one of the richest biodiversity zones in the world and consists of tropical rainforests, deciduous forests, riverine grasslands, bamboo orchards and numerous wetland ecosystems; Many are now protected as national parks and reserved forests.

The Kaziranga, home of the rare Indian Rhinoceros, and Manas are two UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Assam. The state is the last refuge for numerous other endangered species such as the Golden Langur (*Presbitis geei*), White-winged Wood Duck or *Deohanh* (*Cairina scutulata*), Bengal Florican, Black-breasted Parrotbill, Pygmy Hog, Greater Adjutant and so on. Some other endangered species with significant population in Assam are the Tiger, Elephant, Hoolock Gibbon, Jerdon's Babbler and so on to name a few.



Fig. 42.2: A tribal dance of Assam

Assam is also known for orchids. The region is prone to natural disasters with annual floods and frequent mild earthquakes. Strong earthquakes are rare; three of which were recorded in 1869, 1897 (8.1 on the Richter scale); and in 1950 (8.6).

HISTORY

Assam and adjoining regions have evidences of human settlements from all the periods of the Stone ages. The hills at the height of 1500–2000 feet (460 to 615 m) were popular habitats probably due to availability of exposed doleritic basalt useful for tool-making.

According to the Kalika Purana (c.17th–18th AD), written in Assam, the earliest ruler of Assam was Mahiranga followed by Hatak, Sambar, Ratna and Ghatak; Naraka removed this line of rulers and established his own Naraka dynasty.

It mentions that the last of the Naraka-bhauma rulers, Narak, was slain by Krishna. Naraka's son Bhagadatta, mentioned in the Mahabharata, fought for the Kauravas in the battle of Kurukshetra with an army of *kiratas*, *chinas* and *dwellers of the eastern coast*. Later rulers of Kamarupa frequently drew their lineage from the Naraka rulers.

However, there are lots of evidences to say that Mahayana Buddhism was prominent in ancient Assam. After Huen Shang's visit Mahayana Buddhism came to Assam. Relics of Tezpur, Malini Than, Kamakhya and Madan Kam Dev Temple are the evidences of Mahayana Buddhism.

Ancient and medieval

Ancient Assam, known as Kamarupa was ruled by powerful dynasties: the Varmanas (c.350–650 AD), the Salstambhas (*Xalostombho*, c.655–900 AD) and the Kamarupa-Palas (c.900–1100 AD). In the reign of the Varman king, Bhaskaravarman (c.600–650 AD), the Chinese traveler Xuan Zang visited the region and recorded his travels.

Later, after weakening and disintegration (after the Kamarupa-Palas), the Kamarupa tradition was somewhat extended till c.1255 AD by the Lunar I (c.1120–1185 AD) and Lunar II (c.1155–1255 AD) dynasties.

Two later dynasties, the Ahoms and the Koch left larger impacts. The Ahoms, a Tai group, ruled Assam for nearly 600 years (1228–1826 AD) and the Koch, a Tibeto-Burmese, established sovereignty in c.1510 AD

The Koch kingdom in western Assam and present North Bengal was at its zenith in the early reign of Naranarayana (c.1540–1587 AD). It split into two in c.1581 AD, the western part as a Moghul vassal and the eastern as an Ahom satellite state.

Since c.13th AD, the nerve centre of Ahom polity was upper Assam; the kingdom was gradually extended till Karatoya River in the c.17th–18th AD. It was at its zenith during the reign of Sukhrungpha or Sworgodeu Rudra Simha (c.1696–1714 AD). Among other dynasties, the Chutiyas ruled north-eastern Assam and parts of present Arunachal Pradesh and the Kacharis ruled from Dikhow River to central and southern Assam.

With expansion of Ahom kingdom, by c.1520 AD the Chutiya areas were annexed and since c.1536 AD Kacharis remained only in Cachar and North Cachar more as an Ahom ally than a competing force. Despite numerous invasions, mostly by the Muslim rulers, no western power ruled Assam until the arrival of the British.

The most successful invader Mir Jumla, a governor of Aurangzeb, briefly occupied Garhgaon (c.1662–63 AD), the then capital, but found it difficult to control people making guerrilla attacks on his forces, forcing them to leave. The decisive victory of the Assamese led by the great general Lachit Borphukan on the Mughals, then under command of Raja Ram Singha at Saraighat (1671) had almost ended Mughal ambitions in this region. Mughals were finally expelled in c.1682 AD from lower Assam.

British Assam

Ahom palace intrigue and political turmoil due to the Moamoria rebellion aided the Burmese to invade Assam and install Chandra Kanta Singh as a puppet king in 1817. In 1821, Singh switched his allegiance to the British, leading the Burmese to invade again.

The Burmese defeated the Assamese army in 1822, and made Assam a Burmese province under a military governor-general. With the Burmese having reached the East India Company's borders, the First Anglo-Burmese War ensued in 1824. The war ended under the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826, with the Company taking control of Lower Assam and installing Purander Singh as king of Upper Assam in 1833.

The arrangement lasted till 1838 and thereafter the British gradually annexed the entire region. Initially Assam was made a part of the Bengal Presidency, then in 1906 it was a part of Eastern Bengal and Assam province, and in 1912 it was reconstituted into a Chief Commissioners' province. In 1913, a Legislative Council and in 1937 the Assam Legislative Assembly was formed in Shillong, the erstwhile capital of the region.

The British tea planters imported labour from central India adding to the demographic canvas. After few initial unsuccessful attempts to free Assam during the 1850s, the Assamese since early 20th century joined and actively supported the Indian National Congress against the British.

At the turn of the 20th century, British India consisted of eight provinces that were administered either by a Governor or a Lieutenant-Governor. *The*

Assam Province was one amongst those major eight provinces of British India.

During the partition of Bengal (1905–1911), a new province, *Assam and East Bengal* was created as a Lieutenant-Governorship. In 1911, *East Bengal* was reunited with Bengal, and the new provinces in the east became: Assam, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa.

In 1947, Assam including the present Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya became a state of the Union of India (princely states, Manipur and Tripura became Group C provinces) and a district of Assam, Sylhet chose to join Pakistan.

Post British



Fig. 42.3: Ladies of Deori Tribe of Assam

Since 1947, with increasing economic problems in the region, separatist groups began forming along ethnic lines, and demands for autonomy and sovereignty grew, resulting into fragmentation of Assam.

Since the mid-20th century, people from present Bangladesh have been migrating to Assam. In 1961, the Government of Assam passed a legislation making use of Assamese language compulsory. It had to be withdrawn later under pressure from Bengali speaking people in Cachar.

In the 1980s the Brahmaputra valley saw a six-year Assam Agitation triggered by the discovery of a sudden rise in registered voters on electoral rolls. It tried to force the government to identify and deport foreigners illegally migrating from neighboring Bangladesh and changing the demographics.

The agitation ended after an accord between its leaders and the Union Government, which remained unimplemented, causing simmering discontent. The post 1970s experienced the growth of armed separatist groups like United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB).

In November 1990, the Government of India deployed the Indian army, after which low-intensity military conflicts and political homicides have been continuing for more than a decade. In recent times, ethnicity based militant groups (UPDS, HPDC, etc.) have also mushroomed. Regional autonomy has been ensured for Bodos in Bodoland Territorial Council Areas (BTC) and for the Karbis in Karbi Anglong after agitation of the communities due to sluggish rate of development and aspirations for self-government.

Tea history

After discovery of *Camellia sinensis* (1834) in Assam followed by its tests in 1836–37 in London, the British allowed companies to rent land since 1839. Thereafter tea plantations mushroomed in Upper Assam, where the soil and the climate were most suitable. Problems with the imported laborers from China and hostilities of native Assamese resulted into migration of forced laborers from central-eastern parts of India.

After initial trial and error with planting the Chinese and the Assamese-Chinese hybrid varieties, the planters later accepted the local *Camellia assamica* as the most suitable one for Assam. By 1850s, the industry started seeing some profits.

Industry saw initial growth, when in 1861, investors were allowed to own land in Assam and it saw substantial progress with invention of new technologies and machinery for preparing processed tea during 1870s. The cost of Assam tea was lowered down manifold and became more competitive than its Chinese variant.

Despite the commercial success, tea laborers continued to be exploited, working and living under poor conditions. Fearful of greater government interference, the tea growers formed The Indian Tea Association in 1888 to lobby to retain the status quo. The organization was very successful in this, and even after India's independence conditions of the laborers have improved very little.

Subdivisions

Assam is divided into 27 administrative districts. More than half of these districts were carved out during 80s and 90s from original 1. Lakhimpur, 2. Jorhat, 3. Karbi Anglong, 4. Darrang, 5. Nagaon, 6. Kamrup, 7. Goalpara, 8. North Cachar and 9. Cachar districts, delineated by the British. Earlier, during 70s, Dibrugarh was separated out from original Lakhimpur district.

These districts are further sub-divided into 49 "Sub-divisions" or *Mohkuma*. Every district is administered from a district head quarter with the office of the District Collector, District Magistrate, Office of the District Panchayat and usually with a district court.

The districts are delineated on the basis of the features such as the rivers, hills, forests, etc. and majority of the newly constituted districts are sub-divisions of the earlier districts. For the present districts of Assam and their location, refer the attached map.

The local governance system is organised under the *jila-parishad* (District Panchayat) for a district, *panchayat* for group of or individual rural areas and under the urban local bodies for the towns and cities. Presently there are 2489 village panchayats covering 26247 villages in Assam. The 'town-committee' or *nagar-xomiti* for small towns, 'municipal board' or *pouro-xobha* for medium towns and municipal corporation or *pouro-nigom* for the cities consist of the urban local bodies.

For the revenue purposes, the districts are divided into revenue circles and *mouzas*; for the development projects, the districts are divided into 219 'development-blocks' and for law and order these are divided into 206 police stations or *thana*.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Total population of Assam was 26.66 million with 4.91 million households in 2001. Higher population concentration was recorded in the districts of Kamrup, Nagaon, Sonitpur, Barpeta, Dhubri, Darang and Cachar. Assam's population was estimated at 28.67 million in 2006 and at 30.57 million by 2011, 34.18 million by 2021 and 35.60 million by 2026.

In 2001, the census recorded literacy in Assam at 63.3% with male literacy at 71.3% and female at 54.6%. Urbanisation rate was recorded at 12.9%. Growth of population in Assam has experienced a very high trajectory since the mid-decades of the 20th century.

Population grew steadily from 3.29 million in 1901 to 6.70 million in 1941, while it has increased unprecedentedly to 14.63 million in 1971 and 22.41 million in 1991 to reach the present level. The growth in the western and

southern districts was of extreme high in nature mostly attributable to rapid influx of population from the then East Pakistan or Bangladesh.

Assam has many ethnic groups and the People of India project has studied 115 of these. Out of which 79 (69%) identify themselves regionally, 22 (19%) locally, and 3 trans-nationally. The earliest settlers were Austroasiatic, followed by Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryan speakers, and Kradai speakers.

Forty-five languages are spoken by different communities, including three major language families: Austroasiatic (5), Sino-Tibetan (24) and Indo-European (12). Three of the spoken languages do not fall in these families. There is a high degree of bilingualism.

RELIGIONS

Major religions are Hinduism (64.9%) and Islam (30.9%). Others include Christianity (3.7%), Sikhism (1%), Animism, Buddhism (Khamti, Phake, Aiton etc. communities).

Hinduism

The Hindus of Assam perform several dances to practice their devotion to their Gods. One category of them is the Sattriya Dances. Kamakhya, dedicated to Goddess Durga is the eastern-most pilgrimage of Hinduism.

Popular forms of God in Assam are Durga, Shiva, Krishna and Narayana, although several tribes practice devotion to local deities as well.

Brahmo Samaj: Assam is the home of Kalicharan Mech, a Bodo Hindu who stopped the British Christian missionaries, spread ahimsa and vegetarianism. He was deeply influenced by the Brahmo Samaj. He later became known as "Gurudev Kalicharan Brahmachari" or "Guru Brahma".

His principles were established as the Brahma Dharma. Perhaps his teachings can be summarized by his given phrase, "Chandrama Surya Narayans Jyoti", meaning, "*the light (jyoti) from the sun is capable from dispelling darkness and taking people to Brahma (Narayans).*"

From the teachings of Guru Brahma, the "Bodo-Brahmas" (the Bodos of this sect) have boycotted alcohol and heavy dowry as well as meat-eating. This sect is written by scholars to be Vedic and Upanishadic. As per Vedic rituals, the priests perform Horn Yajna, which was begun by Guru Brahma to organize the Bodos.

While the Bodo Christians today are laying stress on adopting a Roman script for the Bodo community, the Bodo-Brahmas prefer the traditional Bengali-Ahomi script.

Islam

Muslims constitute the second largest religious group in Assam. Muslims make up 30.92% of the population. In 16th century Ajan Fakir, a Islam saint from Baghdad had come to Assam.

Christianity

The Bible was translated into Assamese in the year of 1819. In 1827, an attempt was made to start a Baptist church in Guwahati, but it made no permanent converts in the area. Later the American Baptist Foreign Missionary Society was able to make some headway in Guwahati.

Although these earliest Christian missionary endeavors which were focused in the north-east of India, were in Modern Assam, the great success of Protestant missionaries in North-East India which they achieved in late 19th and the 20th Centuries, was primarily in areas such as Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya which are not part of Assam anymore.

As of 1991 only Tripura of the seven eastern states of India had a lower percentage of Christians than Assam. The 3.32% Christians in Assam was well below even Arunchal Pradesh's 10% Christians.

Despite this there were more Christians in Assam than in Mizoram even though Mizoram was the second most Christian state in India at the time. Besides the Protestants there are also Catholics. There is a Roman Catholic Archdiocese in Shillong.

Sikhism

Sikhs have been living in Assam for approximately two hundred years. Ninth prophet of Sikhs Guru Tegh Bahadur visited Assam in 1670. Also in the year of 1820, few hundred Sikh soldiers went to Assam at the initiative of Maharaja Ranjit Singh to help Ahom rulers in a war. Their descendants are mostly concentrated in Nagaon district of Assam.

Buddhism

The religion is practised by very less percentage of the Assam population. Among them are the Chakma and Boruas. The Chakmas of Assam are located mostly in Chachar and Karbi Anglong with very lesser presence in Nagaon district. Guwahati has lots of Buddhist temples, the most prominent being the Bamunimaidan Buddhist temple.

CULTURE AND ITS EVOLUTION

Assamese culture is traditionally a hybrid one developed due to assimilation of ethno-cultural groups in the past. Therefore, both local elements and the

local elements in Sanskritised forms are distinctly found. The major milestones in evolution of Assamese culture are:

- Assimilation in the Kamarupa Kingdom for almost 700 years (under the Varmans for 300 years, Salastambhas and Palas for each 200 years).
- Establishment of the Ahom dynasty in the 13th century AD and assimilation for next 600 years.
- Assimilation in the Koch Kingdom (15th–16th century AD) of western Assam and Kachari Kingdom (12th–18th century AD) of central and southern Assam. Presenting 'Gayan Bayan' in Majuli, the Cultural heritage of Assam:
- Vaishnava Movement led by Srimanta Sankardeva (*Xonkordeu*) and its contribution and cultural changes. Vaishnav Movement, the 15th century religio-cultural movement under the leadership of great Srimanta Sankardeva (*Xonkordeu*) and his disciples have provided another dimension to Assamese culture. A renewed Hinduisation in local forms took place, which was initially greatly supported by the Koch and later by the Ahom Kingdoms.



Fig. 42.4: Karbi ritual drum (cheng), chong (shield) and nok (swords)

The resultant social institutions such as *namghar* and *sattra* (the Vaishnav Monasteries) have become part of Assamese way life. The movement contributed greatly towards language, literature and performing and fine arts. It is also noticed that many a times, Vaishnav Movement attempted to introduce alien cultural attributes and modify the way of life of common people.

Brajavali a language specially created by introducing words from other Indian languages had failed as a language but left its traces on the Assamese language. Moreover, new alien rules were also introduced changing people's food habits and other aspects of cultural life. This had a greater impact on alienation of many local ethno-cultural and political groups in the later periods.

Historically, it is not difficult to understand that on one hand, during the strong politico-economic systems under stronger dynasties, greater cultural assimilations created common attributes of Assamese culture, while on the other during smaller politico-economic systems or during political disintegration, more localised attributes were created with spatial differentiation.

Time-factor for such integrations and differentiations has also played extremely important role along with the position of individual events in the entire series of sequential events. With rich traditions, the modern culture is greatly influenced by events in the British and the Post-British Era.

The language was standardised by the American Baptist Missionaries such as Nathan Brown, Dr. Miles Bronson and local pundits such as Hemchandra Barua with the form available in the Sibsagar (*Sivasagar*) District (the ex-nerve centre of the Ahom Kingdom). A renewed Sanskritisation was increasingly adopted for developing Assamese language and grammar.

A new wave of Western and northern Indian influence was apparent in the performing arts and literature. Increasing efforts of standardisation in the 20th century alienated the localised forms present in different areas and with the less-assimilated ethno-cultural groups (many source-cultures).

However, Assamese culture in its hybrid form and nature is one of the richest, still developing and in true sense is a 'cultural system' with sub-systems. It is interesting that many source-cultures of Assamese cultural-system are still surviving either as sub-systems or as sister entities, for e.g. Bodo or Karbi or Mishng. It is important to keep the broader system closer to its roots and at the same time to focus on development of the sub-systems.

Some of the common and unique cultural traits in the region are peoples' respect towards areca-nut and betel leaves, symbolic clothes (Gamosa, Arnai, etc.), traditional silk garments and towards forefathers and elderly. Moreover, great hospitality and Bamboo culture are common.

Symbolism

Symbolism is an ancient cultural practice in Assam and is still a very important part of Assamese way of life. Various elements are being used to represent beliefs, feelings, pride, identity, etc. *Tamulpan*, *Xorai* and *Gamosa* are three important symbolic elements in Assamese culture. *Tamulpan* (the areca nut and betel leaves) or *guapan* (gua from *kwa*) are considered along with the *Gamosa* (a typical woven cotton or silk cloth with embroidery) as the offers of devotion, respect and friendship.

The *Tamulpan*-tradition is an ancient one and is being followed since time-immemorial with roots in the aboriginal Austro-Asiatic culture. *Xorai* is a traditionally manufactured bell-metal article of great respect and is used as a container-medium while performing respectful offers. Moreover, symbolically many ethno-cultural groups use specific clothes to portray respect and pride.

There were many other symbolic elements and designs, but are now only found in literature, art, sculpture, architecture, etc. or in use today for only religious purposes. The typical designs of *assamese-lion*, *dragon*, *flying-lion*, etc. were used for symbolising various purposes and occasions.

The archaeological sites such as the Madan Kamdev (c. 9th–10th AD) exhibits mass-scale use of lions, dragon-lions and many other figures of demons to show case power and prosperity. The Vaishnava monasteries and many other architectural sites of late medieval period also showcase use of lions and dragons for symbolic effects.

LANGUAGES

Assamese and Bodo are the major indigenous and official languages while Bengali holds official status in the three districts in the Barak Valley and is the second most widely spoken language of the state (27%).

Traditionally Assamese was the language of the commons (of mixed origin – Austroasiatic, Tibeto-Burman, Magadhan Prakrit) in the ancient Kamarupa and in the medieval kingdoms of Kamatapur, Kachari, Cuteeya, Borahi, Ahom and Koch. Traces of the language are found in many poems by Luipa, Sarahapa, etc. in Charyapada (c.7th–8th AD).

Modern dialects Kamrupi, Goalpariya, etc. are the remnant of this language. Moreover, Assamese in its traditional form was used by the ethno-cultural groups in the region as lingua-franca, which spread during the stronger kingdoms and was required for needed economic integration. Localised forms of the language still exist in Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh.

The form used in the upper Assam was enriched by the advent of Tai-Shans in the 13th century. Linguistically modern Assamese traces its roots to the version developed by the American Missionaries based on the local

form in practice near Sibsagar (Xiwoxagor) district. Assamese (*Oxomeeya*) is a rich language due to its hybrid nature with its unique characteristics of pronunciation and softness. Assamese literature is one of the richest.

Bodo is an ancient language of Assam. Spatial distribution patterns of the ethno-cultural groups, cultural traits and the phenomenon of naming all the major rivers in the North East Region with Bodo-Kachari words (e.g. Dihing, Dibru, Dihong, D/Tista, Dikrai, etc.) reveal that it was the most important language in the ancient times. Bodo is presently spoken largely in the Lower Assam (Bodo Territorial Council area).

After years of neglect, now Bodo language is getting attention and its literature is developing. Other native languages of Tibeto-Burman origin and related to Bodo-Kachari are DEORI Mishing, Karbi, Dimasa, Rabha, Tiwa, etc. Rajbongshi also known as Kamatapuri/Goalpariya is also widely spoken by the people of western Assam. Nepali is also spoken in almost all parts of the state.

There are smaller groups of people speaking Tai-Phake, Tai-Aiton, Tai-Khamti, Tai-Khamyang etc., some of the Tai languages. The Tai-Ahom language (brought by Sukaphaa and his followers), which is no more a spoken language today is getting attentions for research after centuries long care and preservation by the Bailungs (traditional priests). There are also small groups of people speaking Manipuri, Khasi, Garo, Hmar, Kuki, Zeme Naga etc. in different parts.

Bengali is the official language in Barak Valley, although the widely spoken language is Sylheti, a dialect of Bengali. Bengali is also largely spoken in the western districts of Dhubri, Barpeta, and Goalpara. Santhali or Santali is also spoken widely by the tribal population in the tea garden districts of Assam. These people who were initially brought as tea estate labourers by the British to Assam have now made it their home state. Bishnupriya Manipuri language is also spoken by a small minority of people in Barak Valley.

FESTIVALS

There are several important traditional festivals in Assam. Bihu is the most important and common and celebrated all over Assam. Durga Puja is another festival celebrated with great enthusiasm. Muslims celebrates two Eids with much eagerness in all over Assam.

Bihu is a series of three prominent festivals. Primarily a non-religious festival celebrated to mark the seasons and the significant points of a cultivator's life over a yearly cycle. Three Bihus, *rongali* or *bohag*, celebrated with the coming of spring and the beginning of the sowing season; *kongali* or *kati*, the barren bihu when the fields are lush but the barns are empty; and the *bhogali* or *magh*, the thanksgiving when the crops have been harvested and the barns are full.

Bihu songs and Bihu dance are associated to *rongali* bihu. The day before the each bihu is known as 'uruka'. The first day of 'rongali bihu' is called 'Goru bihu' (the bihu of the cows), when the cows are taken to the nearby rivers or ponds to be bathed with special care.

In recent times the form and nature of celebration has changed with the growth of urban centres. Moreover, there are other important traditional festivals being celebrated every year on different occasions at different places. Many of these are celebrated by different ethno-cultural groups (sub and sister cultures).

Performing arts

Assam has rich tradition of performing arts. *Ankiya Nat* (*Onkeeya Naaf*) is a traditional Vaishnav dance-drama (*Bhaona*) form popular since 15th century AD. It makes use of large masks of gods, goddesses, demons and animals and in between the plays a *Sutradhar* (*Xutrodhar*) keeps on telling the story.

The Bihu dance and *Hucory* performed during the *Bohag Bihu*, *Kushan nritya* of Rajbongshi's, *Bagurumba* and *Bordoicikhla* dance of Bodos, Mishing Bihu, *Banjar Kekan* performed during *Chomangkan* by Karbis are some of the major folk dances. *Sattriya* (*Xotriya*) dance related to Vaishnav tradition is a classical form of dance.

Moreover, there are several other age-old dance-forms such as Barpeta's *Bhortal Nritya*, *Deodhoni Nritya*, *Oja Paali*, *Beula Dance*, *Ka Shad Inglong Kardom*, *Nimso Kerung*, etc. The tradition of modern moving theatres is typical of Assam with immense popularity of many large theatre groups such as Kohinoor, Srimanta Sankardev, Abahan, Bhagyadevi, Hengul, Rajmahal, Apsara, etc.

At the same time musical tradition is also rich. Folk songs and music related to Bihu and other festivals dates back to time-immemorial. *Borgeet*, the popular Vaishnav songs are written and composed in 15th century. Assam has large numbers of traditional musical instruments including several types of drums, string instruments, flutes, cymbals, pipes, etc.

The indigenous folk music has substantially influenced the growth of a modern idiom, that finds expression in the music of such artists like Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, Bishnuprasad Rabha, Parvati Prasad Barua, Bhupen Hazarika, Pratima Barua Pandey, Anima Choudhury, Luit Konwar Rudra Baruah, Jayanta Hazarika, Khagen Mahanta, Deepali Borthakur, "Ganashilpi" Dilip Sarma, Sudakshina Sarma among many others. Among the new generation, Zubeen Garg, Jitul Sonowal and Angaraag Mahanta have a great fan following.

Traditional crafts

Assam has a rich tradition of crafts; presently, Cane and bamboo craft, bell metal and brass craft, silk and cotton weaving, toy and mask making, pottery and terracotta work, wood craft, jewellery making, musical instruments making, etc. remained as major traditions.

Historically, Assam also excelled in making boats, traditional guns and gunpowder, ivory crafts, colours and paints, articles of lac, agarwood products, traditional building materials, utilities from iron, etc. Cane and bamboo craft provide the most commonly used utilities in daily life, ranging from household utilities, weaving accessories, fishing accessories, furniture, musical instruments, construction materials, etc.

Utilities and symbolic articles such as *Xorai* and *Bota* made from bell metal and brass are found in every Assamese household. Hajo and Sarthebari (*Xorthebaary*) are the most important centres of traditional bell-metal and brass crafts. Assam is the home of several types of silks, the most prestigious are: Muga – the natural golden silk, Pat – a creamy-bright-silver coloured silk and Eri – a variety used for manufacturing warm clothes for winter.

Apart from Sualkuchi (*Xualkuchi*), the centre for the traditional silk industry, in almost every parts of the Brahmaputra Valley, rural households produce silk and silk garments with excellent embroidery designs. Moreover, various ethno-cultural groups in Assam make different types of cotton garments with unique embroidery designs and wonderful colour combinations.

Moreover, Assam possesses unique crafts of toy and mask making mostly concentrated in the Vaishnav Monasteries, pottery and terracotta work in lower Assam districts and wood craft, iron craft, jewellery, etc. in many places across the region.

Fine arts

The archaic Mauryan Stupas discovered in and around Goalpara district are the earliest examples (c. 300 BC to c. 100 AD) of ancient art and architectural works. The remains discovered in Daparvatiya (*Doporboteeya*) archaeological site with a beautiful doorframe in Tezpur are identified as the best examples of art works in ancient Assam with influence of Sarnath School of Art of the late Gupta period.

Many other sites also exhibit development of local art forms with local motifs and sometimes with similarities with those in the Southeast Asia. There are currently more than forty discovered ancient archaeological sites across Assam with numerous sculptural and architectural remains.

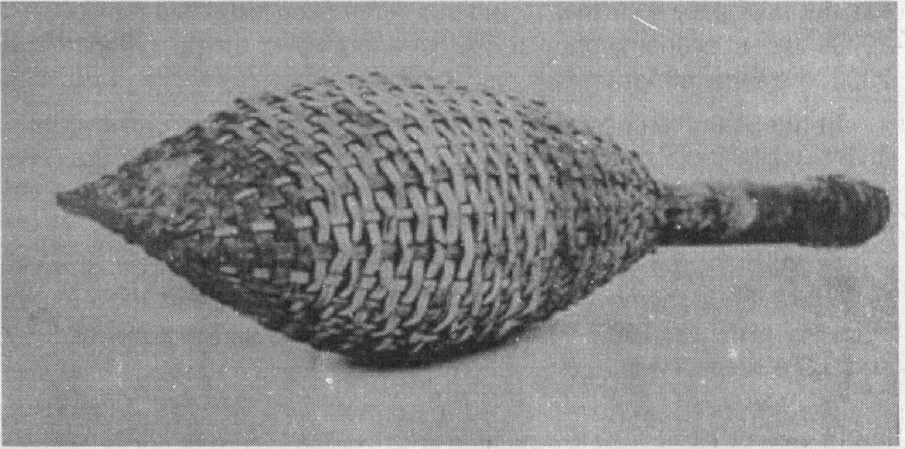


Fig. 42.5: Unusual Basket from Kheruni Village, in Mikir Hill

Moreover, there are examples of several Late-Middle Age art and architectural works including hundreds of sculptures and motifs along with many remaining temples, palaces and other buildings. The motifs available on the walls of the buildings such as Rang Ghar, Joydoul, etc. are remarkable examples of art works.

Painting is an ancient tradition of Assam. Xuanzang (7th century AD) mentions that among the Kamarupa king Bhaskaravarma's gifts to Harshavardhana there were paintings and painted objects, some of which were on Assamese silk.

Many of the manuscripts such as Hastividyanava (A Treatise on Elephants), the Chitra Bhagawata and in the Gita Govinda from the Middle Ages bear excellent examples of traditional paintings. The medieval Assamese literature also refers to chitrakars and patuas.

There are several renowned contemporary artists in Assam. The Guwahati Art College in Guwahati is a government institution for tertiary education. Moreover, there are several art-societies and non-government initiatives across the state and the Guwahati Artists Guild is a front-runner organisation based in Guwahati.

ECONOMY

Macro-economy

Economy of Assam today represents a unique juxtaposition of backwardness amidst plenty. Despite its rich natural resources, and supplying of up to 25% of India's petroleum needs, growth rate of Assam's income

has not kept pace with that of India's; differences increased rapidly since 1970s. Indian economy grew at 6% per annum over the period of 1981 to 2000, the same of Assam was only 3.3%.

In the Sixth Plan period Assam experienced a negative growth rate of 3.78% when India's was positive at 6%. In the post-liberalised era (after 1991), the differences widened further. According to recent analysis, Assam's economy is showing signs of improvement.

In 2001–02, the economy grew (at 1993–94 constant prices) at 4.5%, to fall to 3.4% in the next financial year. During 2003–04 and 2004–05, the economy grew (at 1993–94 constant prices) more satisfactorily at 5.5% and 5.3% respectively.

The advanced estimates placed the growth rate for 2005–06 at above 6%. Assam's GDP in 2004 is estimated at \$13 billion in current prices. Sectoral analysis again exhibits a dismal picture. The average annual growth rate of agriculture, which was only 2.6% per annum over 1980s has unfortunately fallen to 1.6% in the 1990s.

Manufacturing sector has shown some improvement in the 1990s with a growth rate of 3.4% per annum than 2.4% in the 1980s. Since past five decades, the tertiary sector has registered the highest growth rates than the other sectors, which even has slowed down in the 1990s than in 1980s.

Agriculture

Accounts for more than a third of Assam's income and employs 69% of workforce. Assam's biggest contribution to the world is tea. It produces some of the finest and expensive teas and has its own variety *Camellia assamica*.

Assam also accounts for fair share of India's production of rice, rapeseed, mustard seed, jute, potato, sweet potato, banana, papaya, areca nut and turmeric. It is also a home of large varieties of citrus fruits, leaf vegetables, vegetables, useful grasses, herbs, spices, etc. Assam's agriculture yet to experience modernisation in real sense.

With implications to food security, per capita food grain production has declined in past five decades. Productivity has increased marginally; but still lower comparing to highly productive regions.

For instance, yield of rice (staple food of Assam) was just 1531 kg per hectare against India's 1927 kg per hectare in 2000–01 (which itself is much lower than Egypt's 9283, US's 7279, South Korea's 6838, Japan's 6635 and China's 6131 kg per hectare in 2001).

On the other hand, after having strong domestic demand, 1.5 million hectares of inland water bodies, numerous rivers and 165 varieties of fishes,

fishing is still in its traditional form and production is not self-sufficient. The Assam Agriculture University is located at Jorhat, Assam. It is the only agricultural university for the Seven Sisters.

Industry

Apart from tea and petroleum refineries, Assam has few industries of significance. Industrial development is inhibited by its physical and political isolation from neighbouring countries such as Myanmar, China and Bangladesh and from other growing Southeast Asian economies; ultimately leading to neglect by the federal government in regards to development – a key motivation for separatist groups.

The region is landlocked, situated in the eastern periphery of India and is linked to the mainland by a flood and cyclone prone narrow corridor, known as the Siliguri Corridor or Chicken's Neck, with weak transport infrastructure that have remained undeveloped since independence. The international airport in Guwahati is yet to find airlines providing direct international flights.

The Brahmaputra suitable for navigation does not possess sufficient infrastructure for international trade and success of such a navigable trade route will be dependent on proper channel maintenance and diplomatic and trade relationships with Bangladesh.

Assam is a major producer of crude oil and it accounts for about 15% of India's crude output, exploited by the Assam Oil Company Ltd., and natural gas in India and is the second place in the world (after Titusville in the United States) where petroleum was discovered. Asia's first successful mechanically drilled oil well was drilled in Makum (Assam) way back in 1867.

Most of the oilfields are located in the Upper Assam region. Assam has four oil refineries located in Guwahati, Digboi, Golaghat (Numaligarh) and Bongaigaon with a total capacity of 7 Million metric tonnes (7.7 million short tons) per annum. Despite its richness in natural resources, the benefits have yet to improve the lives of the people of Assam.

Although having a poor overall industrial performance, several other industries have nevertheless been started, including a chemical fertiliser plant at Namrup, petrochemical industries at Namrup and Bongaigaon, paper mills at Jagiroad, Panchgram and Jogighopa, sugar mills at Barua Bamun Gaon, Chargola, Kampur, cement plant at Bokajan & Badarpur, cosmetics plant (HLL) at Doom Dooma, etc.

Moreover, there are other industries such as jute mill, textile and yarn mills, silk mill, etc. Unfortunately many of these industries are facing loss and closer due to lack of infrastructure and improper management practices. Assam has several institutions for tertiary education and research.

History of urban development goes back to almost two thousand years in the region. Existence of ancient urban areas such as Pragjyotishapura (Guwahati), Hatapesvara (Tezpur), Durjaya, etc. and medieval towns such as Charaideu, Garhgaon, Rongpur, Jorhat, Khaspur, Guwahati, etc. are well recorded.

Guwahati is the largest urban centre and a million plus city in Assam. The city has experienced multifold growth during past three decades to grow as the primate city in the region; the city's population was approximately 900,000 (considering GMDA area) during the census of 2001.

Population-wise and area-wise Silchar is the second largest and important city in the state. It is the economic gateway to the state of Mizoram, Manipur and Tripura. The town of Silchar has tremendous commercial importance. It consequently, witnesses the settlement of a sizeable population of traders from distant parts of India.

The other important urban areas are Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Golaghat, Tinsukia (Tinicukiya), Sibsagar (Sivasagar), Tezpur, Nagaon, Lakhimpur, Bongaigaon, etc. Nalbari, Rangia, Mangaldoi, Karimganj, Hailakandi, Barpeta, Kokrajhar, Goalpara, Diphu, Dhubri (Dhubury), Haflong etc. are other towns and district head quarters. On the other hand Duliajan, Digboi, Namrup, Moran, Bongaigaon, Numaligarh, Jogighopa Rangia, etc. are major industrial towns. Currently, there are around 125 total urban centres in the state.

