

XI.

A DESCRIPTION OF ASAM,

BY MOHAMMED CAZIM.

*Translated from the Persian, by Henry Vansittart, Esq.**

A SAM, which lies to the north-east of *Bengal*, is divided into two parts by the river *Brahmaputra*, that flows from *Khaṭa*. The northern portion is called *Uttarcul*, and the southern *Dacshincul*. *Uttarcul* begins at *Gowahutty*, which is the boundary of his Majesty's territorial possessions, and terminates in mountains inhabited by a tribe called *Meeri Mechmi*. *Dacshincul* extends from the village *Sidea* to the hills of *Strinagar*. The most famous mountains to the northward of *Uttarcul*, are those of *Duleh* and *Landah*; and to the southward of *Dacshincul* are those of *Namrup*, (*Camrup*?) situated four days journey above *Ghergong*, to which the *Raja* retreated. There is another chain of hills, which is inhabited by a tribe called *Nanac*, who pay no revenue to the *Raja*, but profess allegiance to him, and obey a few of his orders. But the † *Zemleh* tribe are entirely independent of him; and, whenever they find an opportunity, plunder the country contiguous to their mountains. *Asam* is of an oblong figure; its length about 200 standard coss, and its breadth, from the northern to the southern mountains, about eight days journey. From

* This account of *Asam* was translated for the Society, but afterwards printed by the learned translator as an appendix to his *Aalengirmanah*. It is reprinted here, because our government has an interest in being as well acquainted as possible with all the nations bordering on the *British* territories.

† In another copy, this tribe are called *Dusteh*.

Gowahutty to *Ghergong* are seventy-five standard coss; and from thence it is fifteen days journey to *Khoten*, which was the residence of *Peeran Wisch**, but is now called *Ava* †, and is the capital of the *Raja of Pegu*, who considers himself of the posterity of that famous General. The first five days journey from the mountains of *Camrup*, is performed through forests, and over hills, which are arduous and difficult to pass. You then travel eastward to *Ava* through a level and smooth country. To the northward is the plain of *Khata*, that has been before mentioned as the place from whence the *Brahmaputra* issues, which is afterwards fed by several rivers that flow from the southern mountains of *Asam*. The principal of these is the *Dhonec*, which has before occurred in this history: it joins that broad river at the village *Luckigereh*.

Between these rivers is an island well inhabited, and in an excellent state of tillage. It contains a spacious, clear, and pleasant country, extending to the distance of about fifty coss. The cultivated tract is bounded by a thick forest, which harbours elephants, and where those animals may be caught, as well as in four or five other forests of *Asam*. If there be occasion for them, five or six hundred elephants may be procured in a year. Across the *Dhonec*, which is the side of *Ghergong*, is a wide, agreeable, and level country, which delights the heart of the beholder. The whole face of it is marked with population and tillage; and it presents on every side charming pro-

* According to *Khondemir*, *Peeran Wisch* was one of the nobles of *Afrasiakh*, King of *Turan*, contemporary with *Kaicaus*, second Prince of the *Kianian* dynasty. In the *Ferhung Jchungeery* and *Borhaun Katea* (two Persian Dictionaries) *Peeran* is described as one of the *Pehlovan* or heroes of *Turan*, and General under *Afrasiakh*, the name of whose father was *Wisch*.

† This is a palpable mistake. *Khoten* lies to the north of *Himalaya*; and *Piran Wisch* could never have seen *Ava*.

spects of ploughed fields, harvests, gardens, and groves. All the island before described lies in *Dacshincul*. From the village *Salagereh* to the city of *Ghergong* is a space of about fifty coss, filled with such an uninterrupted range of gardens, plentifully stocked with fruit-trees, that it appears as one garden. Within them are the houses of the peasants, and a beautiful assemblage of coloured and fragrant herbs, and of garden and wild flowers blowing together. As the country is overflowed in the rainy season, a high and broad causeway has been raised for the convenience of travellers from *Salagereh* to *Ghergong*, which is the only uncultivated ground that is to be seen. Each side of this road is planted with shady bamboos, the tops of which meet, and are intertwined. Amongst the fruits which this country produces, are mangoes, plantains, jacks, oranges, citrons, limes, pine-apples, and *penialeh*, a species of *amleh*, which has such an excellent flavour, that every person who tastes it prefers it to the plum. There are also cocoa-nut trees, pepper-vines, *Areca* trees, and the *Sadij**, in great plenty. The sugar-cane excels in softness and sweetness, and is of three colours, red, black, and white. There is ginger free from fibres, and betel-vines. The strength of vegetation and fertility of the soil are such, that whatever seed is sown, or slips planted, they always thrive. The environs of *Ghergong* furnish small apricots, yams, and pomegranates; but as these articles are wild, and not assisted by cultivation and engraftment, they are very indifferent. The principal crop of this country consists in rice and † *mash*. *Ades* is very scarce; and wheat and barley are never sown. The silks are excellent, and resemble

* The *Sadij* is a long aromatic leaf, which has a pungent taste, and is called in *Sanscrit*, *Tejapatra*. In our botanical books it bears the name of *Malabathrum*, or the *Indian Leaf*.

† *Mash* is a species of grain, and *Ades* a kind of pea.

those of *China*; but they manufacture very few more than are required for use. They are successful in embroidering with flowers; and in weaving velvet and *tautbund*, which is a species of silk of which they make tents and * *kenauts*. Salt is a very precious and scarce commodity; it is found at the bottom of some of the hills, but of bitter and pungent quality. A better sort is in common, which is extracted from the plantain-tree. The mountains inhabited by the tribe called *Nanac*, produce plenty of excellent *Lignum Aloes*, which a society of the natives import every year into *Asam*, and barter for salt and grain. This evil-disposed race of mountaineers are many degrees removed from the line of humanity, and destitute of the characteristical properties of a man. They go naked from head to foot, and eat dogs, cats, snakes, mice, rats, ants, locusts, and every thing of this sort which they can find. The hills of *Camrup*, *Sidea*, and *Lucstigereh*, supply a fine species of *Lignum Aloes*, which sinks in water. Several of the mountains contain musk deer.

The country of *Uttarcul*, which is on the northern sides of the *Brahmaputra*, is in the highest state of cultivation, and produces plenty of pepper and *Areca-nuts*. It even surpasses *Dacshincul* in population and tillage; but, as the latter contains a greater tract of wild forests, and places difficult of access, the rulers of *Asam* have chosen to reside in it for the convenience of control, and have erected in it the capital of the kingdom. The breadth of *Uttarcul*, from the banks of the river to the foot of the mountains, which is a cold climate, and contains snow, is various; but is nowhere less than fifteen coss, nor more than forty-five coss. The inhabitants of those

* *Kenauts* are walls made to surround tents.

mountains are strong, have a robust and respectable appearance, and are of the middling size. Their complexions, like those of the natives of all cold climates, are red and white: and they have also trees and fruits peculiar to frigid regions. Near the fort of *Jam Dereh*, which is on the side of *Gowahutty*, is a chain of mountains, called the country of *Dereng*; all the inhabitants of which resemble each other in appearance, manners, and speech, but they are distinguished by the names of their tribes, and places of residence. Several of these hills produce musk, *kataus* *, *hoat* †, *perce*, and two species of horses, called *goont* and *tanyans*. Gold and silver are procured here, as in the whole country of *Asam*, by washing the sand of the rivers. This, indeed, is one of the sources of revenue. It is supposed that 12,000 inhabitants, and some say 20,000 are employed in this occupation; and it is a regulation, that each of these persons shall pay a fixed revenue of a *tola* ‡ of gold to the *Raja*. The people of *Asam* are a base and unprincipled nation, and have no fixed religion. They follow no rule but that of their own inclinations, and make the approbation of their own vicious minds the test of the propriety of their actions. They do not adopt any mode of worship practised either by *Heathens* or *Mohammedans*; nor do they concur with any of the known sects which prevail amongst mankind. Unlike the Pagans of *Hindustan*, they do not reject victuals which have been dressed by *Muselmans*; and they abstain from no flesh

* *Kataus* is thus described in the *Borhain Kates*: "This word in the language of *Rum*, is a sea-cow; the tail of which is hung upon the necks of horses, and on the summits of standards. Some say that it is a cow which lives in the mountains of *Khata*." It here means the mountain-cow, which supplies the tail that is made into *chowries*; and in *Sanscrit* is called *chamara*.

† *Bhoat* and *perce* are two kinds of blanket.

‡ Eighty *retis*-weights. See page 154, note:

except human. They even eat animals that have died a natural death; but in consequence of not being used to the taste of ghee, they have such an antipathy to this article, that if they discover the least smell of it in their victuals, they have no relish for them. It is not their custom to veil their women; for even the wives of the *Raja* do not conceal their faces from any person. The females perform work in the open air, with their countenances exposed and heads uncovered. The men have often four or five wives each, and publicly buy, sell, and change them. They shave their heads, beards, and whiskers, and reproach and admonish every person who neglects this ceremony. Their language has not the least affinity with that of *Bengal**. Their strength and courage are apparent in their looks; but their ferocious manners and brutal tempers are also betrayed by their physiognomy. They are superior to most nations in corporal force and hardy exertions. They are enterprising, savage, fond of war, vindictive, treacherous, and deceitful. The virtues of compassion, kindness, friendship, sincerity, truth, honour, good faith, shame, and purity of morals, have been left out of their composition. The seeds of tenderness and humanity have not been sown in the field of their frames. As they are destitute of the mental garb of manly qualities, they are also deficient in the dress of their bodies. They tie a cloth round their heads, and another round their loins, and throw a sheet upon their shoulder; but it is not customary in that country to wear turbans, robes, drawers, or shoes. There are no buildings of brick or stone, or with walls of earth, except the gates of the city of *Ghergong*, and some of their idolatrous temples. The rich and poor construct their habita-

* This is an error: young *Brahmens* often come from *Asam* to *Nadiya* for instruction; and their vulgar dialect is understood by the *Bengal* teachers.

tions of wood, bamboos, and straw. The *Raja* and his courtiers travel in stately litters; but the opulent and respectable persons amongst his subjects are carried in lower vehicles, called doolies. *Asam* produces neither horses*, camels, nor asses; but those cattle are sometimes brought thither from other countries. The brutal inhabitants, from a congenial impulse, are fond of seeing and keeping asses, and buy and sell them at a high price; but they discover the greatest surprize at seeing a camel; and are so afraid of a horse, that if one trooper should attack a hundred armed *Asamians*, they would all throw down their arms and flee; or, should they not be able to escape, they would surrender themselves prisoners. Yet, should one of that detestable race encounter two men of another nation on foot, he would defeat them.

The ancient inhabitants of this country are divided into two tribes, the *Asamians* and the *Cultanians*. The latter excel the former in all occupations except war and the conduct of hardy enterprizes, in which the former are superior. A body-guard of six or seven thousand *Asamians*, fierce as demons, of unshaken courage, and well provided with warlike arms and accoutrements, always keep watch near the *Raja's* sitting and sleeping apartments; these are his loyal and confidential troops and patrol. The martial weapons of this country are the musquet, sword, spear, and arrow and bow of bamboo. In their forts and boats they have also plenty of cannon, *zerbzen* † and *ramchangee*; in the management of which they are very expert.

* As the author has asserted that two species of horses, called *goont* and *tanyans*, are produced in *Deteng*, we must suppose that this is a different country from *Asam*.

† Swivels.

Whenever any of the *Rajahs*, magistrates, or principal men die, they dig a large cave for the deceased, in which they inter his women, attendants, and servants, and some of the magnificent equipage and useful furniture which he possessed in his life-time; such as elephants, gold and silver, *badcash* (large fans) carpets, clothes, victuals, lamps, with a great deal of oil, and a torch-bearer; for they consider these articles as stores for a future state. They afterwards construct a strong roof over the cave upon thick timbers. The people of the army entered some of the old caves, and took out of them the value of 90,000 rupees, in gold and silver. But an extraordinary circumstance is said to have happened, to which the mind of man can scarcely give credit, and the probability of which is contradicted by daily experience. It is this: All the nobles came to the imperial general, and declared, with universal agreement, that a golden betel-stand was found in one of the caves that was dug eighty years before, which contained betel-leaf quite green and fresh: but the authenticity of this story rests upon report.

Ghergong has four gates, constructed of stone and earth; from each of which the *Raja's* palace is distant three coss: The city is encompassed with a fence of bamboos; and within it high and broad causeways have been raised for the convenience of passengers during the rainy season. In the front of every man's house is a garden, or some cultivated ground. This is a fortified city, which encloses villages and tilled fields. The *Raja's* palace stands upon the bank of the *Degoo*, which flows throughout the city. This river is lined on each side with houses; and there is a small market, which contains no shopkeepers except sellers of betel. The reason is, that it is not customary for the inhabitants to buy provisions for daily use, because they lay up a stock for themselves, which lasts

them a year. The *Raja's* palace is surrounded by a causeway, planted on each side with a close hedge of bamboos, which serves instead of a wall. On the outside there is a ditch, which is always full of water. The circumference of the enclosure is one coss and fourteen jerebs. Within it have been built lofty halls and spacious apartments for the *Raja*, most of them of wood, and a few of straw, which are called *chuppers*. Amongst these is a *diwan khañah*, or public saloon, one hundred and fifty cubits long, and forty broad, which is supported by sixty-six wooden pillars, placed at an interval of about four cubits from each other. The *Raja's* seat is adorned with lattice-work and carving. Within and without have been placed plates of brass, so well polished, that when the rays of the sun strike upon them, they shine like mirrors. It is an ascertained fact, that 3000 carpenters and 1200 labourers were constantly employed on this work, during two years before it was finished. When the *Raja* sits in this chamber, or travels, instead of drums and trumpets, they beat the * *dhol* and *dand*. The latter is a round thick instrument made of copper, and is certainly the same as the drum†, which it was customary, in the time of the ancient kings, to beat in battles and marches.

The *Rajas* of this country have always raised the crest of pride and vainglory, and displayed an ostentatious appearance of grandeur, and a numerous train of attendants and servants. They have not bowed the head of submission and obedience, nor have they paid tribute or revenue to the most powerful monarch; but they have curbed the ambition, and

* The *dhol* is a kind of drum, which is beaten at each end.

† This is a kind of kettle-drum, and is made of a composition of several metals.

checked the conquests, of the most victorious princes of *Hindustan*. The solution of the difficulties attending a war against them, has baffled the penetration of heroes who have been styled Conquerors of the World. Whenever an invading army has entered their territories, the *Asamians* have covered themselves in strong posts, and have distressed the enemy by stratagems, surprises, and alarms, and by cutting off their provisions. If these means have failed, they have declined a battle in the field, but have carried the peasants into the mountains, burnt the grain, and left the country empty. But when the rainy season has set in upon the advancing enemy, they have watched their opportunity to make excursions, and vent their rage; the famished invaders have either become their prisoners, or been put to death. In this manner powerful and numerous armies have been sunk in that whirlpool of destruction, and not a soul has escaped.

Formerly *Husain Shah*, a king of *Bengal*, undertook an expedition against *Asam*, and carried with him a formidable force in cavalry, infantry, and boats. The beginning of this invasion was crowned with victory. He entered the country, and erected the standard of superiority and conquest. The *Raja* being unable to encounter him in the field, evacuated the plains, and retreated to the mountains. *Husain* left his son, with a large army, to keep possession of the country, and returned to *Bengal*. The rainy season commenced, and the roads were shut up by inundation. The *Raja* descended from the mountains, surrounded the *Bengal* army, skirmished with them, and cut off their provisions, till they were reduced to such straits, that they were all, in a short time, either killed or made prisoners.

In the same manner *Mohammed Shah*, the son of *Toglac Shah*, who was king of several of the provinces of *Hindustan*, sent a well-appointed army of an hundred thousand cavalry to conquer *Asam*; but they were all devoted to oblivion in that country of enchantment; and no intelligence or vestige of them remained. Another army was dispatched to revenge this disaster; but when they arrived in *Bengal*, they were panic-struck, and shrunk from the enterprize; because if any person passes the frontier into that district, he has not leave to return. In the same manner, none of the inhabitants of that country are able to come out of it; which is the reason that no accurate information has hitherto been obtained relative to that nation. The natives of *Hindustan* consider them as wizards and magicians, and pronounce the name of that country in all their incantations and counter-charms. They say that every person who sets his foot there, is under the influence of witchcraft, and cannot find the road to return.

*Jcidej Sing**, the *Raja of Ascan*, bears the title of *Swergi*, or *Celestial*. *Swerg*, in the *Hindustani* language, means heaven. That frantic and vainglorious prince is so excessively foolish and mistaken, as to believe that his vicious ancestors were sovereigns of the heavenly host; and that one of them, being inclined to visit the earth, descended by a golden ladder. After he had been employed some time in regulating and governing his new kingdoms, he became so attached to it, that he fixed his abode in it, and never returned.

In short, when we consider the peculiar circumstances of *Asam*; that the country is spacious, popu-

* Properly *Jayadhwaaja Sinha*, or the *Lion with burners of conquest*.

lous, and hard to be penetrated; that it abounds in perils and dangers; that the paths and roads are beset with difficulties; that the obstacles to the conquest of it are more than can be described; that the inhabitants are a savage race, ferocious in their manners, and brutal in their behaviour; that they are of a gigantic appearance, enterprising, intrepid, treacherous, well armed, and more numerous than can be conceived; that they resist and attack the enemy from secure posts, and are always prepared for battle; that they possess forts as high as heaven, garrisoned by brave soldiers, and plentifully supplied with warlike stores, the reduction of each of which would require a long space of time; that the way was obstructed by thick and dangerous bushes, and broad and boisterous rivers: when we consider these circumstances, we shall wonder that this country, by the aid of *God*, and the auspices of his Majesty, was conquered by the imperial army, and became a place for erecting the standard of the faith. The haughty and insolent heads of several of the detestable *Asamians*, who stretch the neck of pride, and who are devoid of religion and remote from *God*, were bruised by the hoofs of the horses of the victorious warriors. The *Musselman* heroes experienced the comfort of fighting for their religion; and the blessings of it reverted to the sovereignty of his just and pious Majesty.

The *Raja*, whose soul had been enslaved by pride, who had been bred up in the habit of presuming on the stability of his own government, never dreamt of this reverse of fortune; but being now overtaken by the punishment due to his crimes, fled, as has been before mentioned, with some of his nobles, attendants, and family, and a few of his effects, to the mountains of *Camrup*. That spot, by its bad air and water, and confined space, is rendered the worst place in the world, or rather, it is in one of the pits of hell.

The *Raja's* officers and soldiers, by his orders, crossed the *Dhoree*, and settled in the spacious island between that and the *Brahmaputra*, which contains numerous forests and thickets. A few took refuge in other mountains, and watched an opportunity of committing hostilities.

Camrup is a country on the side of *Dacshincul*, situated between three high mountains, at the distance of four days journey from *Ghergong*. It is remarkable for bad water, noxious air, and confined prospects. Whenever the *Raja* used to be angry with any of his subjects, he sent them thither. The roads are difficult to pass, insomuch that a foot-traveller proceeds with the greatest inconvenience. There is one road wide enough for a horse; but the beginning of it contains thick forests for about half a coss. Afterwards there is a defile, which is stony and full of water. On each side is a mountain towering to the sky.

The Imperial General remained some days in *Ghergong*, where he was employed in regulating the affairs of the country, encouraging the peasants, and collecting the effects of the *Raja*. He repeatedly read the *Khotbeh*, or prayer, containing the name and title of the Prince of the Age, King of Kings, *Alemgeer*, Conqueror of the World; and adorned the faces of the coins with the imperial impression. At this time there were heavy showers, accompanied with violent wind, for two or three days; and all the signs appeared of the rainy season, which in that country sets in before it does in *Hindustan*. The General exerted himself in establishing posts, and fixing guards, for keeping open the roads and supplying the army with provisions. He thought now of securing himself during the rains, and determined, after the sky should be cleared from the clouds, the

lightning cease to illuminate the air, and the swelling of the water should subside, that the army should again be set in motion against the *Raja* and his attendants, and be employed in delivering the country from the evils of their existence.

The author then mentions several skirmishes, which happened between the *Raja's* forces and the Imperial troops; in which the latter were always victorious. He concludes thus:

“ At length all the villages of *Dacshincul* fell into the possession of the Imperial army. Several of the inhabitants and peasants, from the diffusion of the fame of his Majesty's kindness, tenderness, and justice, submitted to his government, and were protected in their habitations and property. The inhabitants of *Uttercul* also became obedient to his commands. His Majesty rejoiced when he heard the news of this conquest, and rewarded the General with a costly dress, and other distinguishing marks of his favour. ”

The narrative, to which this is a supplement, gives a concise history of the military expedition into *Asam*. In this description the author has stopt at a period when the Imperial troops had possessed themselves of the capital, and were masters of any part of the plain country which they chose to occupy or over-run. The sequel diminishes the credit of the conquest, by showing that it was temporary, and that the *Raja* did not forget his usual policy of harassing the invading army during the rainy season: but this conduct produced only the effect of distressing and disgusting it with the service, instead of absolutely destroying it, as his predecessors had destroyed former adventurers. Yet the conclusion of this war is far from weakening the panegyric which the author has passed upon the Imperial General, to whom a difference of situa-

tion afforded an opportunity of displaying additional virtues, and of closing that life with heroic fortitude which he had always hazarded in the field with martial spirit. His name and titles were, *Mir Jumleh, Moezzim Khan, Khani Khanan, Sipahi Salar.*

R E M A R K.

The preceding account of the *Asamians*, who are probably superior in all respects to the *Moguls*, exhibits a specimen of the black malignity and frantic intolerance with which it was usual, in the reign of *Aurangzib*, to treat all those whom the crafty, cruel, and avaricious emperor was pleased to condemn as infidels and barbarians.