

Report by Lieut. E. J. T. DALTON, Junior Assistant Commissioner of Assam, of his visit to the Hills in the neighbourhood of the Soobanshiri River. From the Political Secretariat of the Government of India. With a map.

Pathalipam Mouzah, *January 6th*, 1845.—Reached this yesterday evening from Luckimpore station, preparatory to setting out on a short excursion up the Soobanshiri as far as I can go in canoes, and thence to the nearest Meri villages by land. My object being to pay Temr Hazaree a friendly visit, and to ascertain if it be practicable to make a more extended tour through the country of the Hill Meris and Aboras next cold season.

This day will be consumed in making the necessary arrangements—to-morrow I hope to start.

January 7th.—On the Soobanshiri. With quite a fleet of canoes, I started from the Pathalipam Ghaut at 11 A. M., and considering the difficulty of procuring boats and the number of people to be provided for, there was less trouble, confusion and delay than might have been anticipated.

Including my own boat there are eleven canoes, thirty-two boatmen, and with servants, Tecklas, Katokees and Meri Bhoteas, a guard of five sepoys; not less than seventy individuals, all packed as tight as herrings in a barrel. The canoes are moved by gold-washers who, from constant practice in their gold-washing expeditions, are masters of the art of managing boats in the difficult rapids of this river. Indeed I am told that no other men could venture to work up in canoes to Siploo Ghaut, whence we are to proceed by land. The canoes are very small, and, except a light mat over my boat, no choppers allowed.

Amongst these gold-washers are the Pawwas men, whose business it is to convey the Hill Meris and their families who annually visit the plains by this route from Siploo Ghaut to a Ghaut about six miles above Pathalipam. These men, six in number, being most expert of all, act as our steersmen.

They use paddles of "Hingoree," short and stiff in comparison with the long elastic "Bhola" paddles of the Suddiah and Debroo Thooms. They work the boat however exceedingly well; and no doubt in the pattern and material of their paddles, they have adopted what experience has taught them to be most serviceable for the rapids of this river. In the shallows I see they chiefly work with the luggee poles.

There is a rapid, but a slight one, immediately above Pathalipam; and from this to the Hills the river is divided by wooded islands into numerous channels: two of these islands are partly occupied by Chuttiah Meris, and they are moreover a fruitful source of quarrelling among the gold-washers. On one of them, called "Indoor" Majali, they brought to our canoes, and commenced making preparations for halting there. I protested against this, as it was not 4 o'clock; but they asserted very positively, that there was no ground on ahead fit for encamping on that we could possibly reach that night, and as I liked the appearance of the place, a fine shelving beach of sand and gravel, I gave my consent.

They waited till my cook had arranged his temporary kitchen and the dinner was in course of preparation, and then their object of halting on this island was made manifest. A number of gold-washers from the Bor Dolonee Mouzah, on the left bank of the river, were washing a little above the halting place. The Pathalipam gold-washers considered the ground theirs, and wished me to serve the intruders with a summary ejection. The left bank people as stoutly asserted that they were on their own ground, and it was by no means an easy dispute to decide. It depended on which of the channels is the main channel of the river, but the river takes to them all in turn about.

January 8th. Started after all had breakfasted at 8 A. M. The back ranges of the mountains are disappearing one after the other behind the upstart lower hills. The rapids numerous, but not difficult.

The Sonaris have boat songs, or professional melodies of their own: when wading and hauling the canoes up the rapids they sing a sort of "cheerly boys," the chorus of which is "Yoho Ram," and which heard above the roar of the waters has a good effect. In hollowing out these canoes the carpenters make in them holes of about an inch square to ascertain the thickness as they proceed. These holes are afterwards plugged. In my boat being driven in from above they protruded below, and two of them were at the same moment unshipped as we bumped on the stone of a rapid. The boat commenced rapidly filling, but we got her on shore and the baggage all removed, before any serious damage was done. I mention this as a warning to others. One minute's delay and the boat would have sunk; we were fortunately near shore, had surmounted the rapid, and the crews of the other boats all at hand in a moment to assist.

Digression up the bed of a small stream called the Doolooni, to see the Raj Ghur. This Doolooni was one of the gold streams; but last year its bed of shingle was covered with fine sand which the gold-washers can make nothing of, and they have abandoned it. It forms also one of the passes by which the Turbotiah Meris descend, the Dirjoo flowing through Sugal-doobey, which forms the other starting from near the same point in the hills. The Raj Ghur we found about a mile from its mouth. I have seen this Ghur at Goomeri, where it crosses the Booree river, and there it still bears the appearance of having been constructed as a rampart against the inroads of the hill people; but here it has more the appearance of an old road. It is however a stupendous work, and great is the pity that it is too far north of our population to be used as a line of communication. Previous to the Moran or Muttock wars, the villages of Luckimpore are said to have extended up to this Raj Ghur, and there is every appearance even now of such having been at some period the case. At the mouth of the Doolooni the Soobanshiri expands with a fine broad, deep and smooth basin, which it enters by three channels formed by two islands, where the stream again meets; above them it emerges from the hills, and here we halt for the night; our encamping ground is in the dry bed of the Bergoga.

January 9th. Our last night's bivouac was not a comfortable one. A stiff breeze blowing down the bed of the Bergoga, was met by another coming down the valley of the Soobanshiri, and they enjoyed themselves together at our expence, blowing the sand into the people's dinners, and the smoke into our eyes, and knocking the canoes against the stones. But we are now fairly amongst the hills, and truly the scenery is sublime. Beneath these hills, the great river winds in graceful serpentines. The basis forming the cliffs are rocky and precipitous to a considerable height, along which foliage of various hues and a most vernal and velvety appearance waves in the breeze. The stream is about 250 yards in breadth, but of a depth (sounded several places on returning and found between sixty and seventy feet in depth throughout this glen) unfathomable by any means we have at hand. There the rock of storms (the Botahkowa hill) stands boldly out from the mass on a bed of huge boulders screening the mouth of a deep, dark, narrow dell, the winding of which I explored for a little way—a way, where the sun's rays never penetrate; sometimes huge Bon-trees springing from the rocks above stretch their

sinewy limbs over the deep waters, which reflect them ; and the fibres that descend from them, finding no earth below in which to fix themselves, swing in the breeze.

As we advance the river becomes still narrower, but not less deep or smooth. Gockain Potana, a rock not less than 800 feet in height, rises perpendicularly from the stream. The face is almost smooth to the top which is clad with trees ; on the opposite side a similar cliff, but not so high : on the summit of the former a god killed a deer ; and, walking (clever fellow) down the face of the smooth rock with his quarry over the shoulder, he ascended with it the opposing cliff, *sude nomen*. From above, the rock called the Gockain Potana looks like a huge church-steeple rising from the stream. We stopped for sometime at a place called Pabo Ghaut to collect cane to be used in towing the canoes up the rapids on ahead. The Ghaut is so called from its having been some 50 years ago the watering place of a tribe of Meris called Pabon. One of the young men of this tribe stole from her village a young virgin of Tema's tribe, then under the management of his father Temees. For this offence the insulted Temeesans waged a war of extermination against the Pabo tribe. The villages of the latter were attacked by night when the inhabitants slept, and men, women and children were promiscuously slaughtered or carried away, and sold into hopeless captivity amongst the Abors. The tribe, consisting of two large villages, were utterly extinguished. Not far from this we halted for the night, on the right base of the river, at the mouth of a beautiful stream called the Gaïen Panee, issuing from a dark glen and dashing down the rocks into the well-bound channel through which the Soobanshiri noiselessly flows. Notwithstanding the absence of large timber which appears to grow only near and on the summits of these precipitous hills, the verdure of this valley is very beautiful : the rocks themselves are frequently covered with moss and ferns of the brightest emerald green ; whilst springing from the soil above them bamboos of a peculiarly light and feathery appearance, the shafts not thicker than the most delicate trout rod, curve and waive in the slightest breeze. The pine-apple tree, the drooping leaves of which are found upwards of sixteen cubits in length ; the Toka palm, varieties of cane and the mountain plantain, are all characteristic of this scenery, and blend together in luxuriant mass.

10th. Early this morning we emerged from this great glen, and found the first of the great rapids at its mouth. The canoes were safely pulled up with the long cane ropes we had provided; above this rapid the stream widens, the valley expands, and more distant mountains appear in sight. Huge blocks of rock obstructing the river in its descent render the navigation more and more difficult. We were obliged to lighten our boats, and for some distance the baggage was all conveyed by land, whilst the canoes were dragged through fields of hissing foam, or over rocks nearly dry; after surmounting several such rapids we reached Siploo Mookh whence we are to proceed by land.

Luckimpore, February 11th, 1845.

February 21st.

MY DEAR MAJOR,—This being a holiday, I shall devote it to giving you some further account of my late excursion.

I wrote you a few lines from Siploo Mookh, detailing briefly my proceedings up to the date of my letter. On the 15th January all the headmen of Tema's tribe made their appearance, together with the ladies of Tema's family, who came expressly to welcome me—his two wives and daughter. I held an assembly, and particularly explained to the chiefs that if they had the smallest objection to my proceeding further I was ready to return; but they all assured me that such a proceeding would cause them great pain. They would be delighted to shew me all the lions of their country; but only begged, that as the small-pox was raging in the Pathalipam village, I would leave behind me all the Pathalipam men. This I readily consented to do, provided they procured me a sufficiency of Meri coolies. Affairs having been so far amicably arranged, a distribution of salt and rum concluded the conference; and the Gaums in high good humour disported themselves before me, shewing their agility in racing over the rocks, and their prowess in throwing stones across the river: mean time I gave the ladies who had come to greet me some gay colored cotton cloths; and here, alas, was cause for jealousy. The other Gaums would know why Tema's family alone should be thus favored; but I told them that when their wives and daughters came to greet me (as Tema's had done) and were neglected, they might take umbrage at my

partiality, but not now; and with this they appeared satisfied. Late at night Tema and one of the Torbottiah Gaums again visited me. They said a sufficient number of coolies would by morning be collected, but they expected to be paid for the trip; considering the friendly nature of my visit, and the honor thus done them, they (the Gaums) were ashamed to ask me to pay the people for conveying the baggage, but they had no power to give men without such payment being made; and they therefore wished, if agreeable to me, to be allowed to *defray the cooly expenses between them*. Of course I declined this offer, though I was not a little pleased at its having been made, evincing as it did a genuine good feeling towards me. The rate was to be one seer of salt, or four annas, for the trip for each cooly, which the Gaums assured me was what they paid when, in bringing, as they yearly do, various commodities from the plains, they are necessitated to avail themselves of extra hands. Those who call themselves Gaums have no authority in their hills, but that of the rich over the poor. After the above noticed trait of liberality on Tema's part, and of the independence of the Hill Meris in general, I was not a little amused next morning when the Meri coolies, male and female, were receiving beforehand their seer of salt, to observe amongst the applicants for a load and a *douceur*, Tema's second wife and his eldest daughter, both fine young women; but the latter much disfigured by small-pox. The loads were light, not more than twenty seers; but boys and girls, men and women, were all paid the same rate. Considering all these arrangements had to be made, and that the greater part of the coolies had only arrived in the morning, I thought myself lucky by getting off by 10½ A. M. For the first two miles we proceeded along the left bank of the Siploo flowing from N. W., then turning north ascended a very steep hill; sometimes almost creeping under jungle so dense, that nothing could be seen beyond what was a few yards to our right and left: the path was less difficult than I had been led to suppose it, but is sometimes zigzagged up or wound round precipices in an awkward manner for nervous people. Tema was my constant companion, always prepared to give me a friendly hand if necessary. He seemed at first to be under great anxiety on my account; but finding me more active than he expected, he appeared more at ease.

Of the various timber trees and underwood, you know I am incapable of giving any account; the most remarkable of the former were Seea trees, a

seed of which you returned me split open, the wood is hard, close-grained, and finely colored as the Nahore; the Assamese call it the *Seea Nahore*, and the fruit contains a poison with which the Meris kill fish. Great varieties of bamboos and cane. The Meris thatch their houses with the leaves of a species of the latter called *Tor*, the pine-apple tree, and the fern.

We passed several squirrel traps of an ingenious and simple construction. On an overhanging branch a seed (cheanut) of which the squirrels are fond is placed, and bound to the branch by a double band of cane; the squirrel cannot get at the seed without putting his head through a noose of the cane, and on his disengaging the bait the stone drops and tightens the noose round the squirrel's neck: they eat the flesh of this animal as a great delicacy. As we ascended this hill, the hill people frequently gave us lowlanders a warning to be careful not to loosen a stone from its bed. This was very necessary, people are apt to kick away stones on a hill that are easily dislodged; and had this been done on the present occasion, they must have fallen on or bounded near those coming up the winding path below us. Having descended a valley in which there was water, we commenced the ascent of another and loftier mountain called *Teepooka*. On this hill there are magnificent *Nalok* trees of enormous dimensions; descending again we came to a rocky stream called the *Tiki*, up the bed of which our path now lay, and this was to me the most difficult part of the road. The current was strong, and the rocks slippery as glass. It was difficult for me to maintain my footing, and as I proceeded along slowly and cautiously, the Meri girls with their loads came up and laughingly passed me, bounding with astonishing activity and sure-footedness from rock to rock. This stream takes its rise in the *Moyur* mountain, over which our path now lay; and learning that we should not see water again till evening I halted for stragglers, and when all had come up it was too late to think of attempting to proceed further. Crossing the stream accordingly, we formed our bivouac for the night. *Tema* endeavoured to persuade his people to assist in clearing a space for me, and to cut and bring wood and materials for a temporary hut; they treated his orders with the utmost contempt: upon my applying to them in a more persuasive strain, they bargained that I should shew them some fun with my guns, and in this way I got them to do all I wanted. We started next

morning at 8 A. M., and commenced a toilsome ascent of the Moyur mountain, the summit of which we did not reach till 11 o'clock; the ascent was very severe in many places, the natural ladders afforded by the roots of the trees alone rendered it practicable; near the summit it was less precipitous, and here were the timber trees and Sees, wild mangoes, chestnuts and oaks, the seeds of all which I have sent you; but unfortunately the acorns were all dead. From the top of the Moyur no view was obtained; descending occasional openings gave us glimpses of new mountains, for we were now on the north side of the great range seen from Luckimpore, but no extended view; the path less difficult, but occasionally presenting a mere ledge over a precipice, and dangerously slippery from decayed leaves. We descended about one-third of the distance we had ascended, and then crossed over several smaller hills, the northern outworks of the Moyur. In one place a large tree had fallen across a chasm deep and dark and was used as a bridge. It was slippery as glass, and even the Meris passed over very slowly and cautiously; I did not like it much, but Tema gave me a hand, and I got safe across. We now came to hills that had been cleared for cultivation, and other symptoms of a near approach to human habitations; not that the road was better, it continued just as before, but here Myttons had been grazing, and they do not stray far from their villages. Several times we passed what appeared to be a well cleared path, but I was told that they led to where spring bows had been set to kill wild animals, and the clearance was made to warn human beings not to go that way. Depending much upon such stratagems for a supply of animal food, they have various ingenious methods of taking or killing wild beasts. A deer trap is constructed by running a light palisading between two precipices or other obstacles, in the centre of which the trap is placed. It appears to offer an exit to the unwary animal, whose course has been obstructed by the palisading, and through it he attempts to rush, when the top composed of logs of wood bound together drops on and crushes him. Bina Meris village was now before us, and drawn up on the side of the road a deputation of the Sonrok Meris (the Bor Dolonee Meris) awaited my approach. These Sonroks I had hitherto regarded as not near so well affected to us as the Temas and the Torbottiah tribes, and I had been informed by Tema that they were very irate with him for having encouraged this excursion of mine. I was by no means

anxious to meet them, and had not invited them to an interview: but there they were, and I could not decline it, so putting a bold face on the matter, I took a seat under a tree and gave them an audience. After having explained my object in visiting these hills, and thanked them for their civility in coming to meet me; very much to my surprise, instead of any objections being raised, they gave me a most cordial and pressing invitation to proceed to ~~the~~ villages too, saying as I had come as a friend to visit Tema, it was not fair that the honor should be conferred on him alone; they too were most anxious to entertain me, and would gladly provide every thing necessary. One of their villages, that in which the principal Gaum resides, was an easy march from where we stood. They did all they could to induce me to go, overruling all my objections as started. I had only supplies for three days,—they would provide every thing. At last I said it would be improper for me to go to their village without bringing with me some presents to bestow on their wives and daughters to cause them to remember my visit. That of the few things I had brought of this description, had been disposed of, or were bespoke, and were I now to go empty-handed to visit them, they would all say that I had bestowed many marks of favor on Tema's people and to them had given nothing. I therefore could not now go; but if all turned out well, and they behaved themselves properly on their next visit to the plains, they should receive a visit from me at another season intended for them, as my present visit was for Tema. With this they appeared satisfied, and only further begged that I would excuse the old Gaum coming to meet me in another Gaum's village, which would be derogatory to his dignity, and allow him instead to pay his respects at Siploo Mookh, or on the road down. This was so ruled, and thus quietly ended the conference with these ferocious Sonroks. Bini Gaum's village which we now entered, is situated on one of the low hills under the Moyur mountain; the houses are long, and raised considerably on posts of cleft timber, indiscriminately constructed on the top or side of the hill, but the level of the flooring is tolerably well preserved by varying the height of the supporting posts. It contains only ten dwelling houses; but as each house holds an entire family, including brothers and their wives, and married sons and their children, each may on an average contain about twenty individuals. The situation of the village is very beautiful. The

low hills around,—some partly cleared for the purposes of cultivation, some entirely so, and now covered with the straw of the crop last reaped,—appear in fine contrast with the dark tints of the lofty mountains of Moyur and Yaloo, and others more distant that surround it. The inhabitants, men, women and children, far from evincing any signs of fear, crowded about me as I passed through the village. The road from this to Tema's village, which is about two miles distant and north-west of this village, continues over low hills, many of which have been cleared and are now fallow, and after a time will be again taken up. Between the villages barricades are constructed in different places to keep the Myttons from the cultivation when necessary. We followed the windings of a stream called the Kutoo; and were led by it into a pretty little valley comprising a level space of cleared ground of some extent, watered by the Versing river which winds round the hill on which Tema's village is built, and here we encamped; Tema's village within hail above us to the S. E., the river flowing from the N. W. Here were assembled to meet me, besides the notables of the three villages of Tema's, or the Pambottiah tribe, all the headmen of the *Torbottiah* ~~tribe~~. They* seemed to wonder much at my visit. What could it portend? and to be in some alarm; but this soon wore off. They describe their country as much better worth seeing than this. The villages are larger, more numerous, and nearer to each other than those of this dewat; the nearest a day's march from this, about twelve miles in a direction north by west. The villages are six in number, and within hail of each other, on hills as Tema's and Bina's, and the houses similarly fashioned; their cultivation is more extensive, the crops fewer and more varied. They have asso, dhan, and hali; but the latter is not planted out. They sow the seed as we sow peas. They kept me talking till dinner time, and then all retired with Tema, who had a grand feast, not less than eighty individuals were entertained by him; all that came to see me were invited, and I am told his house was crammed: nor were we neglected, a fine fat kid and fowls and eggs, yams and sweet potatoes and Indian corn were supplied. Tema asked me if I would drink *mhud*, the spirit they distil; but this I declined, or doubtless a large supply would have been sent.

* The Torbottiahs.

Next morning I proceeded to the village, and found them all busily engaged in divination as to whether my visit was to bring them good or evil. I was told that the auspices were favorable. A man sat apart from the rest holding in both hands a pany chicken, and invoking all the spirits of the woods by name. Those deities who delighted in the blood of Myttons, and those who rejoiced in the slaughter of pigs; those who were propitiated by the sacrifice of fowls, or those who were content with a vegetable offering, all are on such occasions invoked; and after the *Chout* is terminated, the chicken is cut open and the entrails examined; from which they augur good or evil. Often as this "auspicious" to my knowledge has failed them; they most pertinaciously adhere to the practice; and undertake no expedition, journey or work, without consulting it. I was skotching, and when the "auspicious" were being taken, and when the ceremony was concluded, they sent to me to beg of me to return to my hut to give audience. I desired Sir Peace to take to give it where I saw; but the Tobottins who wished to pay their respects in regular form, could not, they said, with propriety do so in Tema's village. However, previous to descending I paid Tema's house a visit; to which he made no objections. The house is seventy feet long, raised on timbers, some perpendicularly and some diagonally placed; in which is laid a platform of bamboos for a flooring. The roof has gable-ends, and is pitched very high; the thatch being composed of the leaves of a species of cane as before mentioned. Under the gables a cross chopper covers in an open balcony, one at each end. The interior consists of one long apartment sixty feet by sixteen, from which a passage extending the entire length is partitioned off. In the large apartment down the centre no less than four fires were burning on hearths of earth. On one side were ranged, with some appearance of order, their arms, pouches, travelling apparatus, &c.; another portion of the apartment was decorated with trophies of the chase. In the centre between the fires frames of bamboos suspended from the roof served as tables, on which various domestic utensils were deposited. I had hoped that the passage which was partitioned off from this apartment contained the dormitories of the family, but on examination it was found to be the *mhud* cellar. In it were ranged conical baskets lined with plantain leaves, in which the *mhud* is fermented, and received in vessels placed underneath: in the large apartment the whole family eat, drink and sleep.

Tema and his wives in the upper end or first fire, his sons and daughters round the next, other members of the family round the third, and slaves and dependents round the fourth. Fearful of being pillaged by the Abors, they do not venture to display much property in their houses. The greater portion of it lies buried in some remote spot known only to the heads of the family. Besides cattle, ornaments, arms and wearing apparel, it consists of large dishes and cooking vessels of metal, and what are called Dao Gnat, such as little bells with various devices and inscriptions, in what I fancy must be the Tibetan character; but I know it not. The Meris do not know where they come from; a few are occasionally obtained in barter with the Abors, but the most of them have been handed down as heir-looms in the family, and they are regarded as the most valuable portion of their property. They are occasionally used as money, and valued at from four annas to twelve rupees each, according to shape, size and ornament. Those with inscriptions inside and out are most highly prized. Those without inscriptions are little valued. These bells are common amongst the Dufflas, who can give no better account as to how they became possessed of them. I am told the Butias sell them, and if so you can perhaps tell me something of their origin. The Meris tell the same story if asked where they get their fine blue beads, i. e. that they are heir-looms; very seldom, they say, are they now procurable in barter or exchange, though some few are occasionally procured from the Abors.

It is not impossible that numbers of these bells and beads thus handed down as heir-looms may have been brought with them from the country from which they originally emigrated. Regarding their migrations they have no traditions. They believe, and they are not singular in the belief, that many orders and races of men were created, whom the Creator allotted to dwell where soil and situation were best adapted to the constitution and habits he had given to each; and thus that the Meris were created for, and have ever dwelt in these hills. Their religious ideas are very vague. They believe in a future state, and have an indefinite idea of a spirit who presides in the regions of departed souls, as is shewn in their mode of disposing of their dead. The body is interred fully clothed and equipped with arms, travelling pouch and cap, in a deep grave, and surrounded by strong timbers to prevent the earth from pressing on it. Nor do they omit to supply

the departed for his long journey with food, cooking utensils, and ornaments of value, so that he may make a respectable appearance in the other world. They attach great importance to their dead being thus disposed of and buried near the graves of their ancestors. If a man of any influence dies in the plains his body is immediately conveyed to the hills to be so interred, should the disease of which he died not be deemed contagious.

Marriage, although its violation is considered the direst of offences, is with them a mere matter of barter or exchange. Young ladies are in the first instance valued according to the wealth and respectability of their parents. The price is such that few suitors are able to make it up for several years after preliminaries have been arranged, and they pay it accordingly by instalments. It consists, if the damsel be of high family, of two or three Myttons, twenty or thirty pigs, fowls, mūd, and sometimes clothes. When the parents are content, or the stipulated amount has been paid, they invite the suitor with his family and friends to come for his bride, and he is entertained that day by the father of the lady. On his return with his wife all the friends and relations accompany him, and the bridegroom or his parents now in their turn have to feast them and his own friends into the bargain for several successive days. There is no further ceremony. The parties are now considered man and wife; and woe be to him that seduces from her lord the wife so wedded. The adulterer is seized and securely bound, detained under most rigorous treatment for a day or two. If he be powerful his friends come to his assistance, and make offers for his ransom, which must be considerable to be accepted; but the chances are, he is left to his fate, and if such be the case he is put to death. The woman who has committed the *faux pas* is less severely dealt with. A little wholesome chastisement, and she is again admitted into the family circle. It must not be omitted that when a marriage is concluded, the bridegroom expects to get fair value with his bride for his pigs, &c. that he has expended on her. If personally, or in default of an adequate *trousseau* she be found wanting in this respect, there is a dinner, an assemblage of the mutual friends, and the parents of the bride are made to disgorge should it be so determined; or should they refuse, their daughter is treated as a slave, and not as a member of the family: notwithstanding this, a widow cannot leave her husband's family and heirs to contract a fresh

marriage unless she can find the means of defraying all that was originally paid for her; if she can do this and furnish a feast on the occasion, there seems no objection to her making a second alliance. The costume of the women is peculiar: a short petticoat extending from the loins to the knees is secured to a broad belt of leather which is ornamented with brass bosses, besides this they wear round their middles an infinite number of rings made of filaments of bamboo embroidered with the fibres of another plant. A band of similar material, from which a bit of cloth is suspended in front, is bound tightly round the breast under the arms. This is their travelling and working dress; but at other times they wrap themselves in a large cloth doubled, brought over the shoulders, and pinned in front like a shawl. They wear round their necks an enormous quantity of beads, mostly of blue, like tuzquoise, but also of agate, cornelians and onyx, and glass beads of all colors. They have bracelets of silver or copper, and anklets of finely plaited cane or bamboo. Their hair is adjusted with neatness, parted in the centre, and hanging down their backs in two carefully plaited tails. In their ears they wear most fantastic ornaments of silver, which it would be difficult to describe; a simple spiral screw of this metal winding snakelike round the extended lobe of the ear, is not uncommon amongst unmarried girls, but the ear ornaments of the matrons are much more complex. They generally have very sweet countenances, though few could be called handsome. The almond-shaped eye is common, but not universal; mouths generally well formed, and teeth, notwithstanding the free use of tobacco, very fine and white; their complexion what the natives of India would call fair, but they have rosy cheeks and gummy lips, which is a decided improvement on the Assamese complexion; they are very stoutly built, generally short of stature, but to this there are remarkable exceptions. The men have fine muscular figures; many of them tall and with good features, but the countenances of some are repulsive. The variety of feature denotes an admixture of races, and no doubt many of them have Assamese blood in their veins, but usually there is the high cheek-bone and almond-shaped eye, lips rather thin, and face devoid of hair except a few over each extremity of the mouth forming an apology for a moustache. They gather the hair to the front, where it protrudes out from the forehead in a large knob secured by a bodkin;

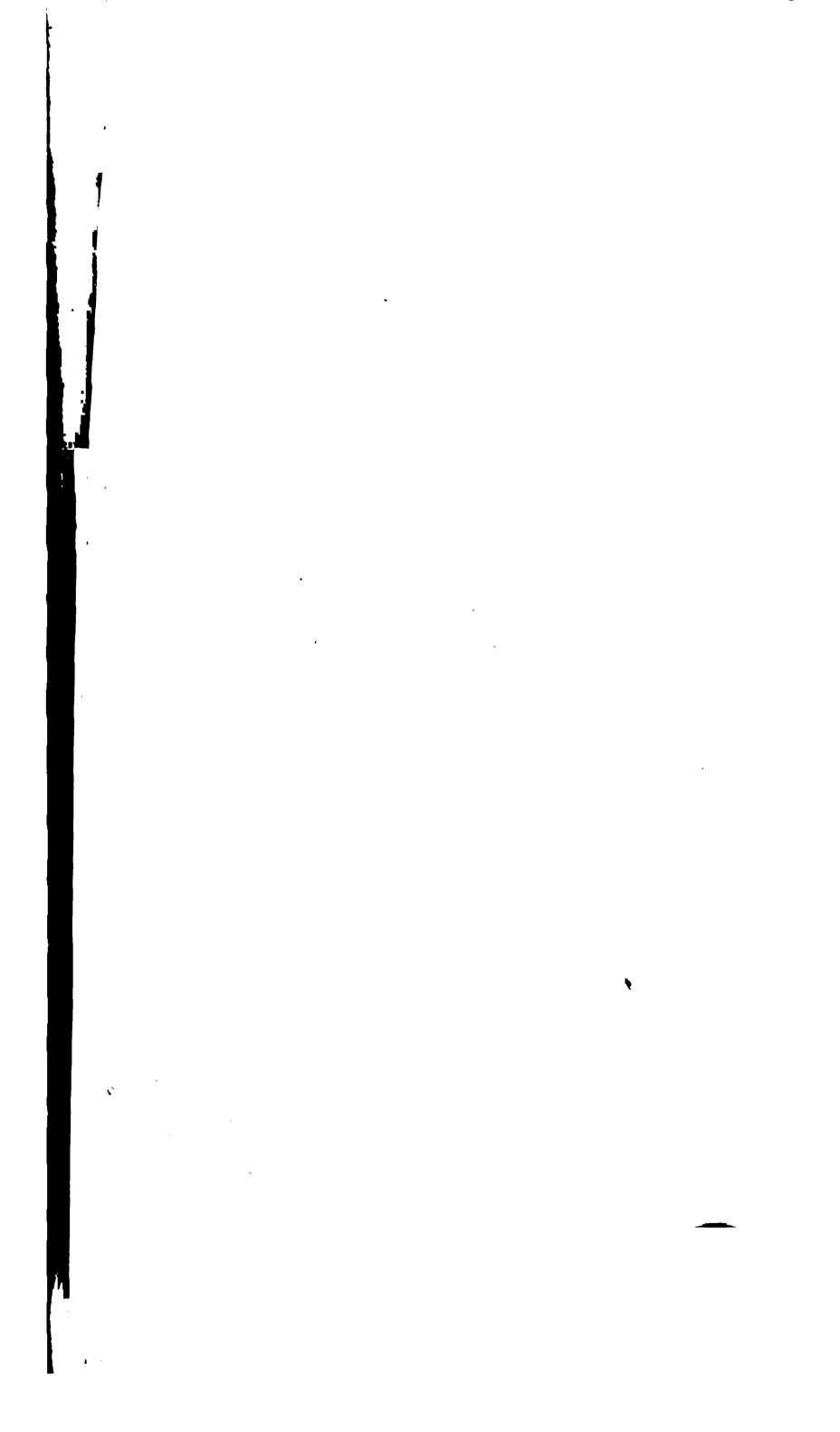
round the head a band of small brass or copper knobs linked together as tightly bound. In their ears they as well as the women wear a variety of ornaments, but of a distinct kind. The lobe is distended so as to hold a knob an inch in diameter. It is gradually enlarged by the insertion of a roll of the leaf of the pine-apple tree. The chiefs wear ornaments of silver, shaped like a wine-glass or egg-cup; young men do not venture to attach so heavy a weight to the slight ligament, and insert a hollow plug of silver instead. The males also wear a profusion of the blue beads before mentioned, and others, all very large. Their costume is simple enough—a band round their hips composed of rings of bamboos, the same as worn by the women but not so numerous; an apron attached thereto before and behind, and a cloth wrapped round their body and pinned so as to resemble a shirt without sleeves; a cap of cane or bamboo work with turned-up peak, which however is worn behind, and over their shoulders as a cloak, which also serves as a pouch or knapsack, they throw a covering made of the black hairy fibres of a plant, which at a little distance resembles a bear-skin. Their costume is not complete without placing on their heads and over their caps a piece cut out of tiger or leopard-skin, the tail of which hanging down their backs has a droll appearance! They are all very filthy in their persons, many of them appear never to have had their faces washed since their birth. As this was not their cultivating season, and the crops had been reaped, it was chiefly from information that I could note any thing on the subject. Each village has a certain extent of ground, comprising hills, sides of hills and valleys, which they have been in the habit of cultivating from time immemorial; but not more than a fifth of this ground is under cultivation each season. They cultivate each patch two successive years, and then suffer it to be fallow for four or five, taking up again the ground that has been longest fallow in lieu. They have a superstition, which deters them from breaking up fresh grounds so long as their "Gra" (fallow) is sufficient—a dread of offending the spirits of the woods and forest by unnecessarily cutting down the trees. In Tema's village the chief crops are "Bobesa" or bobsa dhan, the grain of which is large, pear-shaped; and goom dhan, or maize. Many of the villages have aosa and hali, resembling that which is grown by the Assamese; but the cultivated

tracts appertaining to this village get too little sun for those crops. The bobsa and goom dhan are sown in the same ground and at the same time, and round the squares which contain these crops they plant yams and other edible roots ; they have not got the potato, but it would most likely grow well and be serviceable to them ; they sow red pepper, which succeeds admirably. Tobacco is generally grown in patches near the houses. The labour of cultivation and all labour falls chiefly on the women. They have few of them other implements than their *laws*, which are used to clear, cut and dig with. The men consider it sufficient to occupy themselves in hunting and attending to their various snares and spring bows for wild animals, and when the season arrives for the trade, in collecting manjeet, which is performed by both sexes.

The manjeet grows in steep declivities, interlaced and entangled with other shrubs, so that it is not easy speedily to collect a quantity, at least all that I found of it was little ; the leaf of the genuine kind is small, narrow and pointed, and slightly suffused with a tinge of the colouring matter. There is a bastard kind also found in great quantities, the leaves of which are very much larger and the plant altogether coarser in appearance ; it is called the female manjeet by the Meris, and though similar in growth with the other, its flexible shoots contain scarcely any colouring matter. Nevertheless, it is sometimes brought down mixed with the finer. The Meris assured me that this fraud was not theirs, but was practised upon them by the Abors. I recommended them for their own sake to bring down none but the best, and they promised that none other should leave their country. They collect and tie it up in bundles when fresh and flexible, then lay it on frames or hang it up to the eaves of their houses to dry ; when it becomes rather brittle, it is fit for exportation. The Mytton is the only species of horned cattle possessed by the Meris. It is rather a clumsy looking animal in make ; but a group of Myttons grazing on the steep rocky declivities they seem to love, would be a noble study for Landseer ; some are milk-white, some nearly black, some black and white, and some red and white. To the Meris they are only useful as food. On festive occasions one is killed, and I should think the beef must be excellent ; they feed most delicately on young leaves, and keep in excellent condition. The

cows would, I have no doubt, give a large supply of milk; but the Meris have not yet found this out. I asked them to procure some for me, but received the usual answer, "Meris don't know how, it is our custom." The females appear tame, and submit to be tethered to the bulls rove their own masters, but do not wander far from the tethered females, so are in a measure tethered too; just now they all roam where they please, but when the crops are on the ground a mountain or so is fenced round by strong timbers from tree to tree, and into this enclosure they are driven, and remain till the harvest is stored. They have pigs and poultry in plenty, and a few goats; I suppose there are no people on the face of the earth, more utterly ignorant of every thing connected with the arts than are the Hill Meris. With the sole exception of the bands and other articles of bamboo and fibres above-mentioned, which the women are everlastingly making, every thing they use is imported; were their communications distant from the plains, and indirectly by means of the intervening tribes, the civilized countries on the other side of the great range cut off, the use of metal and of women's clothes would be lost to them. The Abors forge themselves daws, but the Meris know not the art. The distant tribes manufacture coarse cotton cloths; but though they are in constant communication with them, as well as with us, they have not the remotest idea of weaving. They cannot journey to the plains more than three days from their village, without having to cross a considerable river. If it be not fordable, a rough raft of Kakoo bamboos is hastily constructed for the occasion; but though constantly requiring repair, and annually using them, they have never yet attempted to construct a canoe: this is the more strange, as the Abors of the Dabong possess a considerable trade in canoes cut in the rough. I suppose that until the Meris discovered the fertile plains of Assam, which they were first to visit by having killed birds in whose bellies they found rice, and covered by proceeding in the direction of their flight, they were mere savage hunters; the skins of beasts their only clothing, and the flesh their chief, if not only food.

Could they be stimulated to a more industrious course of life, they might considerably improve their commercial relations with us. The great rivers that enter their country abound in gold grains; the pro-





Map to accompany
Lieut. Dalton's Report
on the Meris and Abors
of Assam

265



4 miles to an Inch

266 B1

of washing is simple, and the Meris have had for two centuries constant opportunity of watching it in all its phases.

The last process of separating the gold from the remainder of the sand or scoria, they might leave to the Assamese gold-washers; but the rough washing with the *doorunnee* and bottle gourd might be performed by them, and a considerable quantity of gold introduced. The *doorunnee*, or tray, is very simple and easily made, and the gourds are obtained from the Meris by the gold-washers. This would be a most lucrative trade for them. By a little attention to the manjeet also, which they are too lazy to give, its growth might I think be improved and its collections facilitated, simply by the removal of other plants that choke it. I have not much more to say; but I may send you another chapter* if you are not tired of me and the Meris. But this letter has grown to such a length, I fear you will be inclined to throw it into the fire without reading it.

I have no doubt that there are sundry errors in this account; but I cannot stop to correct them, for I feel sure if I were to read over what I have written I should hesitate about sending it. I had not intended sending you the journal up the river, it was copied to send home with sketches; but as you seem interested in the scenery of the Soobanshiri, I have ventured to add it.

Yours very sincerely,

(Signed) E. T. DALTON.

(True Copy,)

(Signed) F. JENKINS,

Agent to the Governor General.

(True Copies,)

J. CURRIE,

Secretary to the Govt. of India.

* Trade with us and with Abors; position of villages; rough estimate of population; Abors, Accas, not yet touched on. All these however might be included in a public letter applying for leave to make a more extended excursion next year.