THE RED RIVER AND THE BLUE HILL

OR

THE STATE OF ASSAM

HEM BARUA

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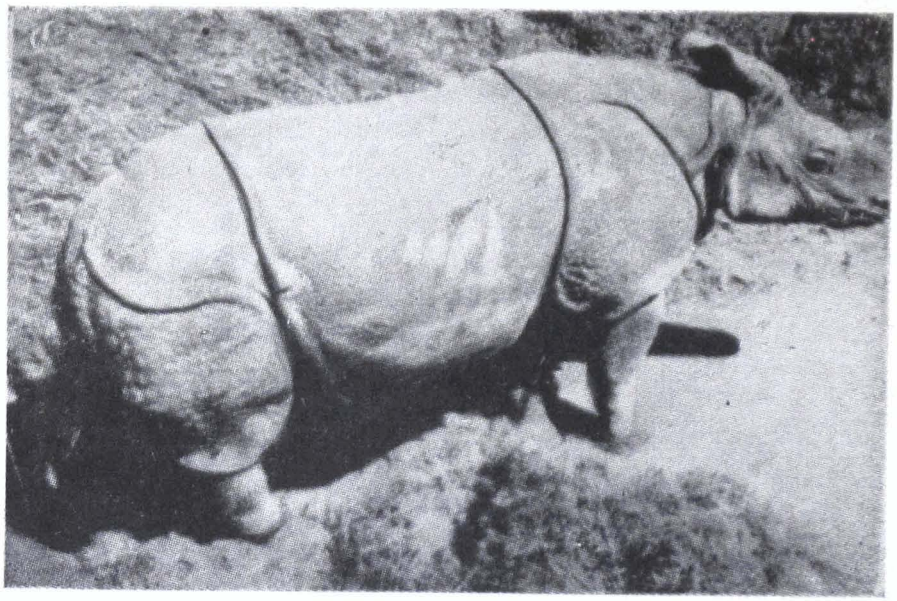

To

Our Departed Great

Against time and damages of the brain
Sharpen and calibrate.

James Agee.

PREFACE

There are a good many people today who want to know about the State of Assam, and its many aspects ; generally they get baffled as there are no such books to meet their needs and quest for knowledge of this distant land. There are a few biggish scholarly volumes no doubt, written with great pain and care ; but they are so big and thick that they donot mouth well in the case of lay readers, whose leisure is limited and interests are very many. There are smaller volumes also. They are, often, lean and flimsy and donot get beyond the limits of pamphlets ; as such, they donot feed the appetite of the average readers as much as one wishes. The commonplace reader does not like to be overfed nor does he like to be underfed. This view has guided me all along in my attempt to prepare this book for students and lay readers. If I have succeeded in it, that won't be my credit alone. If I have not, I tender my apology to all my readers. There is nothing scholarly or out of the way about this book. Not the shadow of it. What I have done in this book is to collect cherryblossoms and chrysenthemums from different gardens and stick them in a pot.

The book is called *THE RED RIVER AND THE BLUE HILL.* Why I have called it so, is given in the body of the book. This picturesque title to a country, criss-crossed with rivers and mountains, was suggested to me by an Army Officer during the last World War. He was tall and straight. He came to this country, like many others, to fight the Japanese. I donot know if this Army Officer is dead or alive. But I know that here was a man whose mind sparkled at the sight of nature and her many beauties. I acknowledge my indebtedness to this unknown soldier and artist.

I must thank my publishers Messers Lawyer's Book Stall, Gauhati,, Assam, and its robust proprietor Mr. B. N. Dutt-Barooa, and also my friend Sri P. C. Bharali for his loving guidance. I thank all those who helped me with their valuable suggestions and with books, pictures and pamphlets.

Gauhati : Assam
1954

Hem Barua

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ASSAM

Scale 1 Inch = 32 Miles

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CHAPTER I

Yea, in my mind these mountains rise.
Walter de la Mare

INTRODUCTORY

What is and where is Assam ? These are some of the questions that arise in inquisitive minds outside ; it is more so in this period of our country's history. To many, Assam is no more than a land of mountains and malaria, earthquakes and floods and the *Kamakhya* temple. To others, it is a green woodland where slothful serpents, insidious tigers, wild elephants and stealthy leopards peep and peer with menacing eyes and claws. Assam, to most people, is mentally a distant horizon like Bolivia or Peru, less known and more fancied.

The history of Assam proper is the history of the Brahmaputra Valley *plus* the hills that dot and surround it. The hills and the plains of this great valley, though the hills were isolated from the plains as "Excluded areas" under the British rule, possess an age-old tradition of common contact and history. The District of Cachar and the Lushai Hills are the two southern-most adjuncts of the State of Assam.

The District of Cachar was incorporated into it in 1832. It was in 1826 that independent Assam passed into the hands of the British from those of the Ahoms under the stress of repeated Burmese invasions of incredible atrocities.

The State of Assam, as it is on the map, bears the appearance of a hawk nestling quietly on a mountain edge ; it looks as though its beak portrudes towards the *Patkoi* ranges. It is these mountain ranges that separate Assam from Upper Burma and

its hills. The pass across the *Patkoi* range has a historical significance for the country ; it can be described as the *Khyber* of the east. It is historically important in the sense that it is the recognised pass through which the Ahoms, a great Mongoloid race of the Hukwang Valley, migrated into Assam in the 13th century. They built an empire here. They succeeded in changing the colour and complex of the country to a distinguishable extent. It is the *Patkoi* pass that was used by the invading Burmans ; they used it for their invasion of Assam at the beginning of the 19th century: all the times the invasion was repeated, the *Patkois* served as the gateway. It was through this pass that the genial current of *Thai* culture flowed into the valley in the 13th century ; it was through this pass again that the red river of blood flowed in the wake of the Burmese invasions ; these invasions dyed the Brahmaputra plains and the minds of men with an unforgettable hue.

Assam presents a panoramic view ; it presents a landscape of deep ravines, of hills and impenetrable forests, and of steppes and slopes. The total area of the State of Assam *plus* the state of Manipur is 62,575 sq. miles ; the population of this area is 80,96,216. If we exclude the state-areas from this total, the area shows itself as 50,167 sq. miles and the population as 73,70,561. Till the first decade of the 20th century, Assam was a land of deep woods, unoccupied tracts of land and great swamps and marshes. With the march of time, the country is undergoing great changes in its texture and composition ; the woods are rapidly vanishing, but the mountain forests are there and the hills and the rivers,—the rivers with their wild courses, and the hills with their tropical nature and primitive population.

The main reason that Assam is little known to the rest of India is perhaps her remoteness from the centre of national life. India is a sub-continent, criss-crossed with mountains and valleys, woven into with different races and

peoples of ethnological affinities. Assam is its easternmost wing separated from the mainland with distant and natural barriers. She is known outside mostly as a land of witchcraft and magic, animism and wild tribes. Here the hills are impenetrable, forests are luxuriant, rivers are numberless and nature is prodigal. Assam is a semi-tropical country ; nature is usually in high tension, particularly in the spring months and in the monsoons.

From ancient times, Assam is known far and wide as a land of *tantric* faith, which is a primitive doctrine with a crude spiritual bias. It originated in the cult of blood and sacrificial rituals of the primitive tribes. The *tantric* faith is often described as a product of the vulgarised forms of *Saktaism* and the decadent phases of Buddhism. To put it in a more direct way, decadent Buddhism and the "nocturnal forces" of *Saktaism* coalesced and gave birth to the religion of *tantraism.* The temple of *Kamakhya* was originally the progenitor of this cult and was vitally connected with the growth of its popularity. The origin of this temple is connected with the mythological episode of Siva and Parvati ; this is the place, as mythology points out, where the pudenda of Sakti fell as her body was cut into pieces by Vishnu when Siva carried it in "frantic sorrow" over hills and dales, after her death. The body, it is said, was cut into fifty-one pieces with the *Sudarshan-chakra* of Vishnu. And wherever a piece fell, it sprang into a place of pilgrimage ; this is the mytho-poetic interpretation of the origin of the temple of *Kamakhya.*

According to tradition, the temple was built by the epical Naraka of the Mahabharata age. It is said that the temple suffered demolition ; and it had to be re-built by Nara-narayan, a powerful king of the Koch dynasty, in the year 1565. On the occasion of the re-opening ceremony of the temple, as many as one hundred and forty human beings were sacrificed in the ritual and their heads were presented to

the goddess on a bronze salver. We learn this from Sir E. A. Gait and his *History of Assam.* It is difficult to say if this sacrifice is a fact; but it is a fact that the temple of *Kamakhya* was once the main-spring of *tantric* faith in ancient Kamarupa. The word *Kamakhya* is supposed by linguists like Dr. B. K. Kakoti to be a Sanscritisation of some non-Aryan Austric formations as *Khmoch, Komuoch* etc. All these words, Dr. Kakoti points out, connect the place with *somebody's dead body.* It is in a sense the grave-yard temple of Sati, the consort of Siva. It symbolises the primordial urge of the mother.

The advent of Vaishnavism in Assam was about the time of Naranarayan; he re-built, as pointed out elsewhere, the temple of *Kamakhya.* It is a major event in the religious history of the country. This new faith succeeded in pushing *tantraism* into the back eddies; it succeeded in clearing the climate of religion of blood-spots and horrors. Over and above this, it diverted the attention of the people from a creed of blind faith to one of deep devotion and sublime worship.

The hills are the ornaments of Assam as are the stars in a peacock's feather. The Brahmaputra Valley is a long, narrow tract of land with alluvial plains, surrounded and dotted with hills on all sides except on the west. The Dafla, the Miri, the Mishmi and the Abor Hills that lie zig-zag to the north of the great river, are sub-ranges of the Himalayas. These hills are inhabited by a sturdy people of different sub-races and dialects of the Tibeto-Burman sub-section of the racial and ethnological map; they constitute an interesting chapter of history and anthropology, and open great vistas of studies in these branches of knowledge.

The sea-blue hills merge with the blue of the distant skies. It is a common sight of winter in Assam; during the monsoons, they roar and rumble and befog the view with clouds and mists. Outside of it, the peaks glisten under a rich sunlit sky; the

blue of the hills invests the supine plains below with a mystic thrill. It is because of this peculiar blue setting perhaps that the hillock on which the shrine of *Kamakhya* stands is called the *Nilachala* or the "blue mountain". To the south of the Brahmaputra, as to its north, lie different hills: they are the Naga, the Mikir and the Garo Hills, inhabited by peoples of the Tibeto-Burman racial group. The Khasi and Jaintia Hills are inhabited by a people after whom the hills take their name; they belong to the Mon-khmer group of the Austro-Asiatic races. The Brahmaputra that runs through the valley and is locked in the midst of the mountain ranges, is a rapid river; it never creeps like rivers that flow through low-lying plains, as hill-pythons do, in sluggish ways. It rushes, and rushes in torrents. It has a good number of tributaries and feeding streams that generally flow out of mountain gorges of roaring waters and great beauty.

The name *Brahmaputra* is an Aryan word: the Ahoms called the river *Nam-Dao-phi*. It means "river of the Star-god". The prefix *nam* in the Ahom language like *di* in the Bodo language means water or river. The Brahmaputra is also known as the *Lohitya* in Sanscrit; it means "red river". It is so, perhaps because of the fact that the river takes this colour during the rainy seasons when it cuts through the red soils and embankments. There is also a mythological interpretation given to the origin of this name. It is connected with Parasurama and his sin: it was in this river, it is said, that the great saint washed off his bloody stains and regained his sainthood. And hence the water of it is red. In fact, Assam might be described as the picturesque land of the "Red River" and the "Blue Hill": the *Lohitya* and the *Nilachala*. Both the river *Lohitya* and the hillock *Nilachala*, on which is situated the temple of *Kamakhya*, have left great impress on the national life and culture of Assam.

The Hindu scriptures hold that the river Brahmaputra rises in the sacred pool of Brahmakunda in the easternmost point of the State. It is a religious sanctuary and is situated about fifty miles east of Sadiya, the headquarters station of the Mishmi Hills District. In fact, the main source of the river lies still unexplored; it is obscure. Of course it is lately shown as identical with the Tsanghpo, the great river of Tibet. This river rises in the west of Tibet near the source of the Sutlej and the Indus, and ultimately joins the Brahmaputra at a lower point near Sadiya and forms into one stream. The Brahmaputra is fed with the drainage of the Himalayas on the north and that of the different Assam ranges on the south. During the monsoons the river presents a grand spectacle with its width and intensity, and dominates the whole panorama. In a sense, so far as rendering the valley fertile, and harvest rich and copius, the river can be compared with the Father Nile of Egypt. The Brahmaputra is bounded on either side, so far its eastern source is concerned, with stretches of summer rice and mustard cultivations, and wild ferns.

The Brahmaputra has two river islets in it; one is as small as the other is big. The bigger one is Majuli in the District of Sibsagar and the other one is Umananda, opposite the City of Gauhati. The island of Majuli lies at the conjunction of the parent river with the river Subansiri, noted for its gold dusts and the trade that once grew round it. Its area is 485 sq. miles. It is a principal place of pilgrimage for the Vaishnavites of Assam : there are several old Vaishnavite colleges or holy sees in it. Of these, Auniati, Dakhinpat, Goramura, Kamalabari are supreme. In this island also dwell the Miris, a Tibeto-Burman tribal population of indigenous habitation; they generally build their villages in riverain tracts. Umananda, with its rocky bed, is in the true sense of the term, a hillock situated in the river. It has a temple of Siva in it. In the monsoons, the waters dash against it

and produce a continuous roaring murmur ; it dashes and breaks and proves perhaps the futility of onslaughts on rocks. Both the islands in their own way add to the grand view of the river.

Across the Brahmaputra, stretching to the foot of the hills, one's eye is feasted with the "pomp of cultivated nature ". The betel-nut trees and the leaves clustering on to them, coconut-groves, bamboos and palms, all together weave a picture of health and plenty. And lost in the little groves of these leafy palms and feathery bamboos and ferns, are the small thatch-cottages of the villagers ; these put together, form the Assamese village. The *namghar* or the village congregational prayer-hall constitutes the key-stone of this organisation. The population in the countryside is of varying intensity ; at places it is thoroughly dense, and at others, it is considerably sparse. The pressure of population per sq. mile here is 146·7. The reason for this separseness is not far to seek ; the internecine feuds and strife under the Ahom rule which led ultimately to three successive Burmese invasions, destroyed a considerable bulk of the country's population. *Kalazar,* which is an acute form of malarial poisoning and a dreadful scourge, is no less responsible for the loss of population. Once prosperous villages with coconut and mango-groves and other valuable fruit-trees, the relics of which only exist now, are today the abodes of wild animals. Often the whole population was swept out and the contours of human existence lost, because of diseases and natural calamities. Floods are a regular feature in Assam together with earthquakes that often come in between.

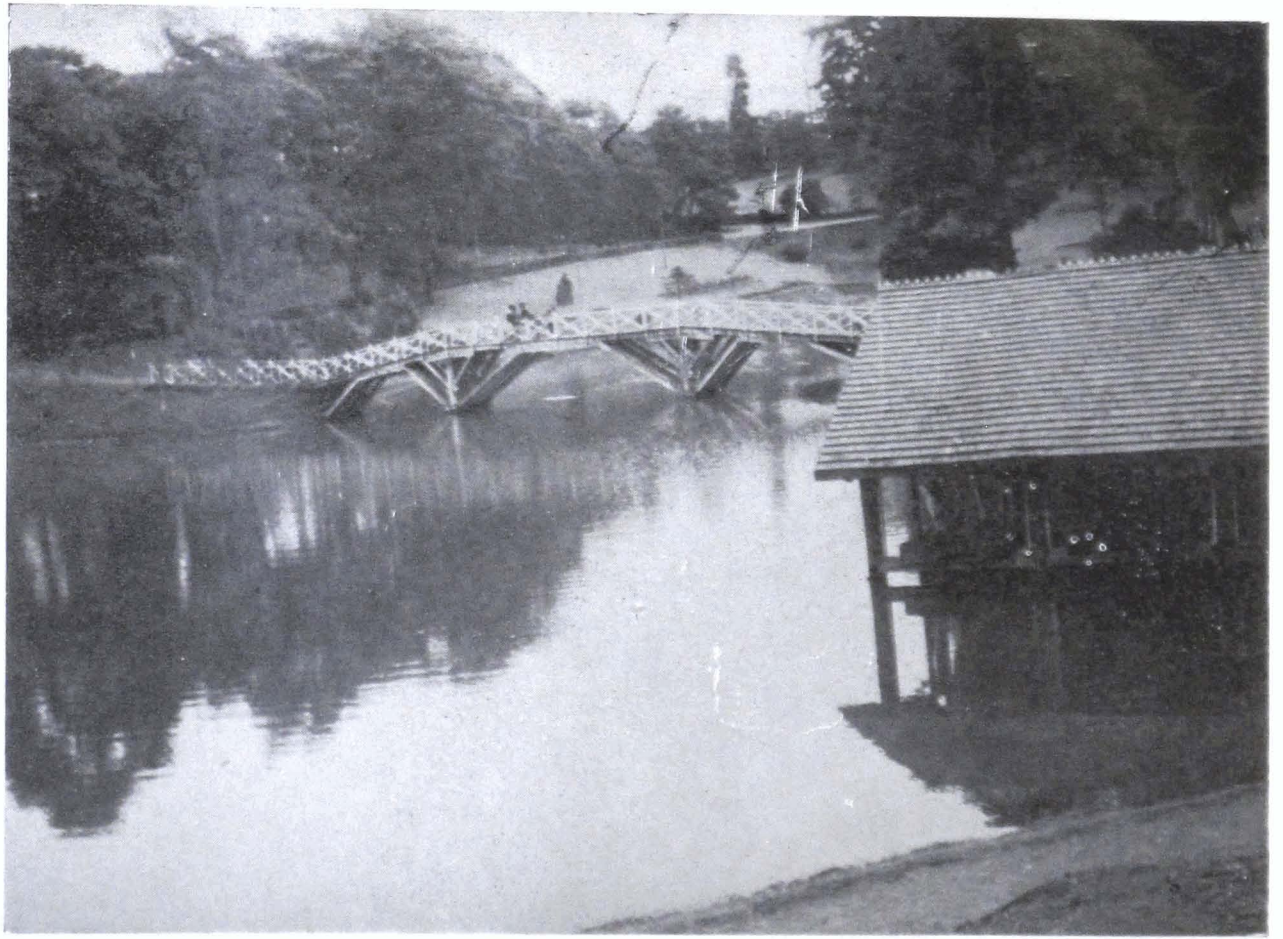
Assam is a wild animals' paradise ; it is, in a sense, nature's Whipsnade. In the Government games reserves, wild animals are being preserved with great care. A good number of wild elephants inhabit the lower ranges of the hills in the submontane areas. Rhinoceroses abound in the valley of the great river ; they are saved from complete extinction by the

Government policy of protection. The Kaziranga Games Reserves in the District of Sibsagar, is the principal games sanctuary. Other animals that roam in the forests and hill-tracts of Assam are the tigers, leopards, bears, wild boars, buffaloes and bisons. The hill tribes, like the Abors, the Daflas, the Mishmis, the Nagas, very often than not, domesticate the wild bisons or hill-oxen for food and sacrifice. The art of elephant-catching developed to such a height here that a whole treatise on the subject called the *Hastividyamaharnava* (*Art of Elephantology*) was writte in Assamese by Sukumar Barkath in 1734. This is an illustrated treatise. Domestication of wild elephants is an Austro-Asiatic technique. It developed with this great people.

The richest flora of Assam is found in the plateaus of the hills ; the Khasi Hills are particularly rich in this. The downs undulate and roll along these hills and the pines, straight as young women, dot them. To add to this, there are various kinds of orchids, balsams, rhododendrons, azalias, wild roses, that weave a carpet of light and colour, red, blue and mauve all through. A wild orchid known as the *Kapauphul,* a flower of delicate colour and beauty that generally appears in April, is a darling blossom of the village beauties ; the *Bhatauphul* or the parrot-flower, a kind of balsam, is another. These are epiphytal growth ; they are found on the stems or branches of living trees. Orchids are found in the plains as much as on the loftiest hills of Assam. They grow on the height of the 10,000 ft.-Mt. Jepho in the Naga hills, as in the Nambor forest of the Sibsagar District. The *Kapauphul* is honey-scented. It is *Aerides Odoratum,* as horticulturists point out.

Assam is noted for certain timber of rare variety ; the *Sal* tree of lower Assam is rightly compared to the oak in its timber and grace. In Upper Assam, it has its counterparts in *Sonaru, Segoon, Ajar, Nahar,* and *Bula.* • Bula, found abund-

SHILLONG FALLS



SHILLONG LAKE

GAUHATI RIVER GHAT.

antly in the Sadiya area, is called the teak of Assam. There are grasses and reeds mostly in the riverain tracts, and often some of them grow to a height of 20 ft. or so. The reeds that serve as useful house-building materials are of three different types: *ikra, khagri* and *nal.* They grow abundantly on the river banks as the thatches and ferns that grow wild mostly along the upper stream of the Brahmaputra.

The climate of Assam is humid in general; it is moist and swampy too. In the winter, the climate is bracing; it is cold and inviting. It is pleasant and long too. The summer is brief; it starts generally with the end of March and continues till June when the monsoons break and fill the earth with copious rains. Rainfall is heavy in Assam; Cherapunji in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills enjoys the reputation of being the wettest spot in the world. The year, as such, can be divided broadly into two seasons; the cold and the rainy. The heat that interperses in between, is seldom excessive. Storms and highwinds, specially during the monsoon months, are not infrequent. Floods are common: the monsoons batter the hills and the plains; torrential rains overfeed the rivers and they swell. Very often than not, they overbrim and spread across the fallow lands and destroy cultivation, human habitation and cattle lives. At times, whole villages are swept away. In a miniature scale, they are like the oft-heard of tidal waves of the Japanese Islands.

Earthquakes are equally menacing as the floods are; geologists hold that Assam is within the eastern earthquake zone that spreads across and cross-connects the Pacific. The Assam Earthquake of June 12, 1897, was no less disastrous as the one of August 15, 1950: they are the two, as pointed out by experts from the U.S.A., of the big five earthquakes in the recorded history of mankind. 1,540 human lives were lost in the Earthquake of 1897; the majority of them were killed by landslides and falling in of river-banks as

well as by shrinkages of the earth. The history of Assam speaks of earthquake havocs since 1548. The Earthquake of August 15, 1950 is the worst in the annals of the land : on this day, the earth rocked and heaved, the hills raged and rumbled, the landscape twisted and turned. The loss sustained was incalculable: it is said that it had the energy and destructive force of a million atom bombs.

On the north of Assam are the Himalaya ranges and the bordering states of Bhutan and Tibet : on the south of it are Burma and the hills. Locked in the midst of these countries is Assam which the Ahoms, as they marched in 1228 into it, hailed as *mung dun chun kham* or the "country of Golden Gardens". It is no wonder that they called it so,—a country in which the mustard flowers smile as golden daffodils and the paddy fields turn yellow in autumn and invest the plains and the hills with the refulgence of gold. Gandhiji, in his simple way, called the country "lovely."

CHAPTER II

The human child arrives, again and again
with eternal assurance.

Tagore

HISTORY

(*a*) *Early times*

Ancient history is in a continual process of re-birth and re-growth, because of the light thrown on it, from time to time. This is true, not only of the history of Assam, but that of the most of other countries too. The very early history of Assam is a dark scroll, veiled in mystery and there is little or no authentic source, available of this period, on which to re-build it with sureness and authority. Though it is not "a distillation of rumours", an expression used by Carlyle to describe history, the reconstruction of the ancient history of Assam depends largely on legends, myths, ancient chronicles and the available relics of sculpture and architecture.

The word *Assam* is an off-shoot of a Sanskrit word *Asom*, which means "unparalleled" or "peerless". It is said that this was the word used to describe the invincible might of the *Ahoms*, who marched into this country in the 13th century from across the Patkoi ranges. As such, it can be easily conjectured that the name *Asom* and its Anglicized counterpart *Assam* are of recent origin. The former is about half a dozen centuries old. And the latter is just more than a century old. Prior to the invasion of the country by the Ahoms, who consolidated an empire here and changed the temper of it, it was known as *Pragjyotishpura* or the "City of Eastern lights". It was because this country enjoyed in ancient times,

a far-flung reputation of being an orthodox seat of eastern astrology and astronomy. It cultivated these sciences to an eminent degree, and the temple of *Nabagraha* or "the nine planets" situated on the out-skirts of modern Gauhati, bears eloquent tstimony to this. It served as an observatory for astronomical and astrological studies. In the *Kalika Purana* it is stated thus: "here Brahma first created the stars and hence the city is called *Pragjoytishpura,* a city equal to the city of Indra or Sakra." Dr B. K. Kakoti puts a different interpretation on the origin of this name; he connects it with some Austro-Asiatic formations viz. *Pagar-juh* (*jo*)-*tic*(*c-ch*), which means a land of great mountain heights. According to him, *Pragjyotisha* is a Sanscritised word made out of non-Aryan formations.

It is said that the kingdom of Pragjyotisha was made up of modern Assam and a great part of Northern and Eastern Bengal at the time of the *Mahabharata* wars. Pargiter is of the opinion that it stretched as far as the Karatoya river and also included a portion of the District of Rangpur. It was a famous kingdom in ancient times, as references to it off and on in the *Mahabharata Epic,* show. It is referred to as a *mlechcha* or *asura* country, that is, a non-Aryan empire: the princes of this great kingdom were invariably of the Mongoloid stock. *Pragjyotisha* is mentioned in the Epic as the country of Bhagadatta, son of the Asura king Naraka who ruled in it, and later participated in the Kurukshettra war as an ally of the Kauravas. There are also references to this country in the *Ramayana.*

The fame of this non-Aryan mountainous country spread far and wide in ancient times and found expression in the epics and legends of the pre-historic Gangetic Valley. In the *Mahabharata,* Bhagadatta is mentioned as a Yavana warrior-king, who was as a prince well-versed in the Vedic rites, rituals, and religion. This Mongoloid prince fought valiantly in the

Kurushettra war, and the elephant force that he commanded, was an outstanding feature of the battle-ground. Bhagadatta was held in high esteem and respect by his *Kaurava* comrades in arms. The army of this Pragjyotishpura king consisted of, as mentioned in the *Epic,* the kiratas and the Cinas. *Kiratas* is the generic name supposed to be given to all Mongoloid people. The Cinas possibly meant the Tibetans and the Bhutanese who joined Bhagadatta's army: these were recruited from the hills. There is direct reference in the *Epic* to the yellow complexion of the Kirata and the Cina soldiers of Bhagadatta's army. The *Epic* states that they "shone like gold" while "Chataka, the *mlechcha* king of Pragjyotishpura, overthrown by Naraka", is described as a "column of gold". All this points to the fact that, inspite of a substratum of Aryan culture existing here and there, ancient Assam was predominantly Mongoloid in character. And the fact of Bhagadatta's interest and scholarship in the Vedas and the Vedic rites on the other hand, points to the evidence of Aryan culture already making its way into this Mongoloid kingdom. The reference in the *Ramayana* to Amurtharaja, son of the great king Kusha, apparently an Aryan prince of Madhyadesa, as the founder of this kingdom, is a milestone in the sense that it corroborates the fact of the Aryan way of life penetrating into ancient Pragjyotishpura to a historically significant extent. The Aryan priests and warriors, who must have come to this country in the remote past, seem to have lacked the instinct for history; they have not left behind them any reliable record or historical account to help unearth this aspect of history.

The *Kalika Purana* and the *Joginitantra* are rich in the systematic mention of names of different princes from ancient Assam, who bore *Asura* or *Danava* titles; these princes were followed by Naraka, who is supposed to be the real founder of the ancient kingdom of Pragjyotishpura. As tradition has it, Naraka ruled over a vast kingdom whose line

could be drawn from the Karatoya river to the Brahmaputra Valley ; tradition further puts it that Naraka met his death in the hands of Sri Krishna, and was ultimately succeeded by his son Bhagadatta of the Kurushettra fame: he was killed there by the third Pandava, Arjuna. Legends say that Bana, who entered into an encounter with Sri Krishna, was a contemporary of Naraka of Pragjyotishpura, and ruled in what was known as Sonitpura, the modern Tezpur, situated on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra. There was great hostility between these two princes and a protracted enmity ensued. Bana was a Saivite and dedicated a temple known as Mahabhairaba near Tezpur, to his family deity Siva. His reign is associated with an episode of romance and elopement of Usha, his lovely daughter with Aniruddha, a grandson of Sri Krishna.

The part that Chitralekha, an artist maiden of the royal palace and an associate of the princess, played in seducing Aniruddha from far off Dwarka for her friend, reads like a faery tale. This led to a fierce encounter between the army of Aniruddha and that of the King of Sonitpura till at last Sri Krishna appeared on the side of his grandson. His appearance in the battle-ground and benign influence did away with all discordance that ruffled the climate of love, and finally succeeded in uniting the lovers in happy wedlock. This story of romance is narrated in the *Bhagabatam* and the *Haribangsham*. Siva's participation in the war on the side of king Bana, and encounter with Sri Krishna not only adds a religious *motif* to this story of love but also exhilarates it with shades of light and spiritual colour.

Ancient Pragjyotishpura came to be known as Kamarupa in the mediaeval times, as Naraka established his suzerainty over the country ; he put himself in charge of the *Kamakhya* temple: this led to the reorientation of the name of the kingdom in the light of new forces. It is connected with a popular legend, in which it is depicted how Kamadeva, the Cupid of

Hindu mythology, demolished to ashes by the fiery glances of Siva, regained his *rupa* like a phoenix in the soil of this country. It is a country where life was bred out of relics, *Kama* (Love) regaining his *rupa* (form). Both the names, Kamarupa and Pragjyotishpura appear almost simultaneously and invariably in ancient Classical Sanscrit literature, particularly that of Kalidasa ; in the *Kalika Purana* and the *Jogini-tantra,* it is the former alone and not the latter that appears. The references to the country by the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang and the Muslim historian Alberuni are but different variations of the word *Kamarupa.* Almost in accord with the latter, Dr. Kakoti holds that the country was popularly known as *Kamru* or *Kamrut* as evidences mentioned in the records of the Chinese pilgrim and the Muslim historian show.

Another episode that connects Assam with the outside Aryan world in pre-historic times is the marriage of Rukmini, a daughter of Bhismaka, who ruled in Kundila (modern Sadiya) in the North-Eastern tip of Assam, with Sri Krishna. The ruins of this city lie on the bank of the Kundila river ; it is about forty miles east of Sadiya. The Mishmis, a hill tribe who live here, claim Rukmini as a hill girl who belonged to their tribe. As a mark of their subjection in war with Sri Krishna, they still wear what is known as *kopalis,* that is silver badges round their forehead. Sisupal was a rival claimant to the hand of Rukmini with whom her father originally settled his daughter's marriage ; in a fierce encounter with Sri Krishna, this prince was vanquished. The fort that Sisupala built, lies within a few miles to the east of the one attributed to Bhismaka.

The authentic history of Assam dates from 643. This was about the time of the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang's visit to Kamarupa: he has left behind him a valuable record of the country he visited. It was Bhaskar Varma who was then on the throne of Kamarupa ; he was a devoted disciple

of the Saivite creed. The following is a part of the foreign traveller's report:

> The country of Kamarupa is about 10,000 *li* (nearly 1,700 miles) in circuit. The capital town is about 30 *li*. The land lies low, but is rich and regularly cultivated. They cultivate the jack fruit and the coconut. These trees, though numerous are nevertheless much valued and esteemed. Water led from river or from banked-up lake flows round the towns. The climate is soft and temperate. The people are simple and honest. The men are of small stature and their complexion a dark yellow. Their language differs a little from that of mid-India. Their nature is very impetuous and wild; their memories are retentive and they are earnest in study etc.

The account is pithy but comprehensive. The state-religion, inspite of the fact that animism prevailed largely amongst the people, was Brahmanical: "they adore and sacrifice to the Devas. There are abundant Deva temples and different sectaries to the number of several myriads". (Hiuen Tsang). It is said that the Chinese pilgrim found Bhaskar Varma engaged in the worship of Siva in his temple.

The era that succeeded between the tenth and the twelfth centuries is one of darkness, so far as the authentic history of the period is concerned. It might be that after the death of Bhaskar Varma, his kingdom like that of Alexander the Great, fell to pieces and into the hands of local chiefs or aboriginal rulers. But subsequent discoveries of copper-plates, coins and other historical specimens of the period have succeeded, of late, to dispel the gloom of history of this particular age to a great length. These copper-plates, as a matter of fact, are not historical records in the ordinary sense of the term : nevertheless, they throw considerable light on it. These plates contain accounts of lands granted to individual Brahmans or priests or religious institutions by the kings. Like the rock inscriptions of the Gupta Age, they are valuable in the sense that they often contain genealogical accounts of ruling dynasties and their achievements. Often they contain verses on the

princes and their magnanimity in making grants and endowments.

It is a fact that the different Puranas : *Agni, Vayu, Matsya, Garuda, Brahmanda, Markandeya* etc. make passing references to Kamarupa or Prajyotishpura, but they do not throw much light of historical significance. A thousand years wore out between the successor of Bhagadatta and Pusya Varma, with whose reign the history of Kamarupa moulded itself into authentic and distinct lines. The reign of Pushya Varma roughly coincides with the opening years of the famous Gupta Age of Indian history ; it runs parallel to the second quarter of the 4th century A.D.

After the death of Pushya Varma his son Samudra Varma succeeded him ; he reigned over Kamarupa in the latter half of the 4th century A.D., and added to the dignity of his dynasty. For a fuller picture of this period we have to turn to the great *Prasasti* of Samudragupta of the Gupta Era, whose reign extended almost over a period of fifty years from 330 to 380. After Pushya Varma came Bala Varma ; he was sixth in descent from Pralambha, who is taken as the founder of the Varman dynasty by historians. According to them, Prahlambha waded through the blood of the members of the former ruling family and established himself as king. Princess Amritaprabha belonged to this period of Kamarupa history. Kahlan, the author of *Rajatarangini* describes the exploits of this princess who was married to prince Meghabahan of Kashmir. As in this book of Kahlan, there is also in the *Harsha Charita* of Banabhatta, a flood of light thrown on the history of Kamarupa under the rule of Pushya Varma's successors. Bhuti Varma is frequently mentioned in this book ; he was fifth in descent from Bala Varma who came to the throne in succession to Samudra Varma in the latter half of the 4th century A.D. He performed the *Asvamedha-yagna* in imitation of the Pandava princes as the powerful ruler of the

eastern lands. These kings were worshippers of Siva ; their capital city was known as Haruppeswara. They titled themselves as lords of Pragjyotishpura. This is a back glance into the history of the Bhaskar Varma Era.

Bhaskar Varma, during whose reign the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang visited Kamarupa, was fourth in descent from Bhuti Varma ; he was a comtemporary of king Harshavardhana (604-648) of Kanauj, otherwise known as Siladitya of the dynasty of Thaneswara. He was also a contemporary of Sasanka, who ruled in Gauda in north-west Bengal. There was a prolonged conflict between this king and Bhaskar Varma ; ultimately, the latter defeated the king of Gauda and annexed a large part of his territory. Besides, a number of vassals acknowledged the suzerainty of the king. These are mentioned in the *Nidhanpura* inscriptions. Bhaskar Varma died in 650 ; he remained a bachelor.

Bhaskar Varma visited Kanauj, the capital city of Harshavardhana in the spring of 644. It was on his way to Kanauj that he met, it is said, Hiuen Tsang in Bengal and invited the latter to visit Kamarupa.

After his death the dynasty came to an abrupt end. Salastombha usurped the throne in about 655 ; with him was intimated another dynasty ; he ruled till 675 A.D. The fifth in descent to him was Harshadeva or Harsha Varma whose fame extended far and wide. He ruled till the middle of the 8th century A.D. He established matrimonial relations with the king of Nepal ; his daughter Rajyamati was given in marriage to the Nepalese king. Harsha Varma's name is mentioned in the inscriptions of Nepal as the king of Gauda, Odra, Kalinga, Koshala and other lands. He was defeated and killed in war by Jasovarman, the king of Kanauj. Prahlambha, who was fourth in descent from Harshadeva, and his son who succeeded him called Harjara, were powerful kings ; but the kingdom they ruled over was much smaller in size than the one

over which Harsha Varma ruled. The rock inscription of this monarch is dated as 510 Gupta Era ; it is at Tezpur. This date is equivalent to 829 A.D. It was in the latter part of the 10th century that the Salastombha dynasty came to an end.

Early in the 11th century, the Salastombha dynasty was succeeded by a new line of kings. These kings claimed their descent from the mythical Naraka who. it is said, founded the kingdom of ancient Pragjyotishpura. Brahmapala was the founder of this Pala dynasty in Assam ; he, in imitation of the Pala rulers of Bengal, Magadha and Gauda, assumed the surname *Pala*. The third prince of this dynasty was Ratnapala; he was a valiant ruler who built temples in honour of Hinduism and helped to propogate its tenets. It is said that he worked a copper mine in the Bhutan Hills. He built a new capital, erected monuments as souvenirs of his exploits and successes over enemies, and encouraged trade, commerce and religion. This dynasty converged into a few *Deb* kings and subsequently came to an end. Prithu is one such Deb king. Glazier refers to Prithu as a powerful king of Kamarupa ; he constructed extensive fortifications in his capital city. He built a temple of Siva in Jalpaiguri ; on this account, he is known as Jalpeswar. It was during his reign that the Muslim invaders attacked the kingdom of Kamarupa for the first time ; it was led by Ibn-Bukhtiyar in 1206 A.D., and was thoroughly routed by Prithu. He repulsed another attack by Sultan Phiasuddin in 1227 A.D. In the *Tabat-i-Nasiri* of Minhaj, he is mentioned as Bartu or Britu.

Lower Assam and a part of Bengal formed a different dominion ; this was known as the kingdom of Kamata. According to the *Prahlad Charitra* of Hem Saraswati, King Durlabhanarayan ruled here in the 14th century. Sir E. A. Gait's *History of Assam* confirms it. Of the Kamata kings, he was the most cultured and enlightened ; he was a great patron of art and literature. In his court there gathered eminent men of learning as

preceptors, astrologers and poets. He was a patron king of the Vaishnavite poet Hem Saraswati. In the 15th century A.D., the Kamata kingdom changed hands ; a new dynasty known as the Khen dynasty succeeded to its throne. The last and the third in the way of succession, and the most illustrious of Khen kings was Nilambar ; he was, of course, subsequently overthrown by Hussain Shah, the king of Bengal, in the year 1498 A.D. Nilambar, as a matter of fact, attained to great power and he extended the frontiers of his kingdom to the river Barnadi on the east and the Karotoya on the west. He built roads and highways and did much to promote other means of communication ; he constructed a magnificent road leading from his capital city Kamatapur to Ghoraghat.

(*b*) *The Koch Kings*

Biswa Singha was the founder of the Koch kingdom ; before he ascended the throne and assumed this name, he was popularly known as Bishnu ; he defeated a number of local chiefs in battles, and ultimately founded this kingdom in 1515 A.D. Biswa Singha practised Hinduism and was a renowned patron of it ; he was essentially a Saivite but owed allegiance to both Siva and Durga. After a long period of relapse, when the worship of Kamakhya once more came to the forefront of religious devotion, it owned, in no small measure, its popularity to the interest and influence created on it, by king Biswa Singha. There is a popular view that it was he who re-built the temple of Kamakhya on the *Nilachala* hill overlooking the Brahmaputra. He had his capital city situated in Cooch Behar, where he constructed a well laid-out town. He nominated in his life time his brother, who was popularly known as Sisu, and was ultimately known as Sib Singha, to be his successor. He appointed a council of ministers, drawn from twelve influential *Mech* families, and through it succeeded in creating a new aristocracy of the *Meches*. Biswa Singha died in 1546 A.D.

Biswa Singha was succeeded by his son Naranarayana. Before he came to be known as Naranarayana, the heir to the throne was known as Malladeva. He is the most illustrious of all the Koch kings ; his name is remembered with respect and esteem even to this day, because of his patronage of art and literature that flourished in his time. This was the epoch of Vaishnavite art and literature heading towards meridian splendour.

Naranarayan extended his territories in different directions and consolidated an empire. In his campaign for territorial expansion, he fought and routed a number of local chiefs, who came into his way, and also occupied the capital of the Ahoms in eastern Assam. With the help of his brother Sukladhaj, who was both the prime minister of the king and the commander-in-chief of his armed forces, he invaded the Ahom territories, and brought the king under subjugation, who ultimately, fled to Charaikhorong, a mountain resort, for safety. He, however, agreed to leave the Ahom king to himself on the latter's promise and agreement to pay valuable presents, ransom and hostages to him. Naranarayan and his brother Sukladhaj then marched into east Bengal, where a Muhammedan chief, Isa Khan by name, was ruling at that time ; Naranarayan found more than a match in him and was defeated by him ; his brother Sukladhaj was taken prisoner by Isa Khan. Sukladhaj was a valiant soldier ; he possessed great military skill and displayed such ability and examples of personal courage that he came to be popularly known as *Chilarai* or the kite king ; this has passed into a household word in Assam.

Naranarayan's encounter with the Pasha of Gaur, whose territory he invaded, brought him fresh troubles of repeated invasions by the latter of his territory ; incursions followed incursions. The commander of the Muhammedan army of Gaur, as traditions point out, was a Brahman renegade called Kalapahar. This general is extensively known as an iconoclast

and breaker of Hindu temples and images. He was the general of Sulaiman Kararani, who ruled in Bengal from 1563 to 1572 A.D.

Naranarayan was a powerful king; he defeated not only the Ahoms but also the Kachari kings. The kings of Manipur and the Jaintia Hills also paid him tribute. He became an ally of the Moghul king Akbar the Great; thus, two men of great culture and wide outlook met and came to value one another's friendship. It is recorded in the *Ain-i-Akbari* that Naranarayan had a large army, and commanded 1000 horses and 1,00,000 foot soldiers. He ruled over an extensive kingdom, which included the entire territories of Brahmapala *i.e.* the whole of Kamarupa except the eastern portions under the rule of the Ahoms.

Abul Fazl in his book *Akbarnama* has provided a vivid picture and description of the reign of Naranarayan. The account of Ralph Fitch bears evidences to how Vaishnavism and its literary and religious expressions found roots during his reign, and expanded under his wide patronage. Ralph Fitch says that almost all the subjects of Naranarayan were followers of Hinduism and, moreover, they were averse to the killing of animals. The king died in 1584 A.D. after he ruled for about fifty years. As pointed out elsewhere, he re-built the temple of *Kamakhya* after it suffered destruction or demolitions under repeated attacks on it by different Muhammedan invaders. Matters philosophical, cultural and religious attracted the attention of the king more than those of the statecraft, war or invasion; in things like the latter, it was his brother Sukladhaj, rather than the king himself, who provided the spur and the spirit.

Even during his life time, Naranarayan, as fate ordained it, saw his empire crack; it was in 1581 A.D. that Raghu, the son of his brother Sukladhaj, rebelled against the king and demanded a portion of his territory; he was, however, appeased with a

part of the empire to the east of the river Sankosh. Naranarayan retained for himself the territories to the west of the Sankosh ; thus was the empire divided and partitioned, and the king lived three more years to see this tragic spectacle. On his death in 1584 A.D., Naranarayan was succeeded by his son Lakhinarayan ; the dismemberment of the kingdom, as above, was but a prelude to its ultimate dissolution in the hands of his successors.

The two royal houses, as represented by Raghu and Lakhinarayan, came into clash, and ultimately foreign help from the Mughals and the Ahoms respectively was sought by each. As a tragic consequence of it, the great kingdom that Naranarayan built, disintegrated, and finally fell to pieces in the 17th century. Ultimately in 1613 A.D., the Muhammedans occupied and annexed the Koch kingdom over which Parikshitnarayan ruled with his capital at Bornagar in the modern district of Kamrup, Assam. Balitnarayan, brother of Parikshitnarayan, however, sought the help of the Ahom king Susenpha in eastern Assam, and succeeded with his help in recovering his lost territories in the following year. As a natural corollary to it, Balitnarayan became a vassal king of the Ahoms.

Thus, ancient Assam became the battleground of a three-cornered struggle ; the Koches on the west, the Ahoms on the east and the Muslim forces of the Mughals battering from outside. It continued unabated during all these fateful years and disturbed the prospects of a consolidated kingdom.

(c) *The Ahom Rule*

The 13th century is a turning point in the history of Assam and her peoples. In 1228 A.D., the Ahoms, a Shan tribe belonging to the ancient kingdom of Mungman or Pong, situated in Upper Burma on the Irrawaddy river, invaded Assam across the Patkoi ranges. It is said that Sukapha, a Shan prince, who

was deprived of his throne, wandered about in the wilds of Upper Burma with a small but faithful band of followers. The star of this vagrant prince was on the ascent; he ultimately discovered not only a kingdom, but also founded a dynasty of ruling power here. He crossed the Patkois and entered Assam with his small but ardent group of followers that consisted of "eight nobles and nine thousand men, women and children" and a retinue of "two elephants and three hundred horses". The Ahoms, at first, met with stubborn resistance from the local chiefs, mainly the Chutiyas and the Kacharis who ruled in the north-eastern tip of the country; but they gradually overcame them and succeeded in establishing their suzerainty over a considerable portion of eastern Assam.

The Chutiyas are a powerful tribe who originally ruled in the eastern extreme of the Brahmaputra valley, adjoining the Sadiya area; in addition to them, there were other tribes as the Morans and the Borahis of Bodo affinities who had petty principalities spread over this area. The king, who ruled over the Moran territory, was Badancha; and the king of the Borahis was Thakumthe. It did not take much time for the Ahoms to subdue and over-rule them. At the time of their invasion, the two kingdoms of the Kacharis and the Chutiyas flourished side by side; the tract lying beyond the river Disang in eastern Assam contained the Chutiya kingdom; it was a powerful kingdom and a stronghold of the Chutiyas.

The kingdom of the Kacharis flourished much lower down the valley of the Brahmaputra on the banks of the river Dhansiri, and in the territories adjoining it. Sukapha and his followers found these two kingdoms a strong barricade against their campaign of conquest and expansion. At long last, Sukapha was forced to settle down with his followers amongst the Morans and the Borahis of the easternmost tracts. He, however, adopted conciliatory measures and tried to consolidate his empire in a spirit of reconciliation with and recognition of the conquered

people as his equals. This led to social and political intercourses on a footing of equality which resulted in frequent inter-marriages and other social exchanges. It dissolved the artificial racial barriers, and resulted in evolving a single Ahom race through inter-mixture and interfusion of blood with indigenous races as the Morans, the Borahis etc. In course of time, the stream of migration of peoples from across the Patkois appeared un-ending; they, as a matter of fact, swelled the number and strength of the erstwhile invaders and added edge to their racial solidarity and prowess.

The conflict that ensued between the Ahoms and the king of Kamatapura in the 14th century, is an event of great historical significance; it is a common fact of history that the king of Kamata was subdued by the Ahoms who ruled in eastern Assam, and forced to sue for peace at the end. A few years later, they came to be involved in a war with the Chutiyas. After a bitter fight that inflicted heavy losses on both sides, Supimpha was assassinated by the Chutiyas treacherously at a regatta held on the Safrai river, to celebrate the cessation of hostilities between the two camps. This assassination led to the renewal of hostilities on a larger scale, and the Chutiyas were thoroughly routed in the battle that ensued in 1523 A.D.

Suhungmung, who succeeded to the throne of Supimpha, further routed the Chutiyas and annexed the whole of their territory to the Ahom kingdom. The territory of the Chutiyas, thus annexed, was constituted into a dominion under a viceroy, and he was designated as "Sadiya khowa gohain" or the viceroy of Sadiya. Suhungmung was further known as Dihingia Raja; he reigned from 1479 A.D. He was a bold and resourceful ruler; in order to weaken and disintegrate the stronghold of the Chutiyas, concentrated in the upper tip of the valley, he struck upon a novel plan of deporting and diffusing the noble families and some of the other population throughout the valley; he

then asked some of the Ahom population from Gargaon to occupy and settle in the places left vacant by the Chutiyas. Thus was an attempt made to ensure peace and avoid racial feuds and strife through a partial transfer of population of the Chutiyas that challenged the new might.

It was during Suhungmung's time that fire-arms as a war-weapon was introduced into the military history of Assam; during his reign the country progressed in general, and the social conditions of the people engaged his attention. Artisans were encouraged and those from amongst the Chutiyas were imported and granted facilities for development; the Vaishnavite religious and cultural influence also spread and grew during his time.

It was in the year 1490 A.D. that the Ahoms first came into a headlong conflict with the Kacharis; the Ahoms met the Kacharis in battle on the bank of the river Dikhau, and they sustained defeat in the hands of the latter; this set-back of the Ahoms was only a temporary matter, and it did not take very long for them to recover from the shock of this defeat. Thirty years later, Suhungmung or Dihingia Raja challenged the Kacharis to a battle on the bank of the river Dhansiri; though, the Kacharis seemed to gain a few minor successes at first, ultimately, they were defeated and routed. The king of the Kacharis was deposed and a new king Detsung by name was installed in his place. But the lull did not continue for long; in 1536 A.D. fresh hostilities between the Ahoms and the Kacharis broke out and in the battle that followed Detsung was taken prisoner, and was finally put to death. His capital city at Dimapur in central Assam was sacked and, as a result of it, the Kacharis lost their empire in the valley of the Dhansiri and also in the areas to the north of the Kalang river in the modern district of Nowgong. The victorious Dihingia Raja, who was a powerful prince and who succeeded in establishing a strong Ahom kingdom, met his death in the hands of the

assassin in 1539 A.D. He destroyed the might of the Kacharis, and also, as history records it, successively repulsed two Muhammedan invasions.

Suklengmung, who was on the throne from 1539 to 1552 A.D. was the first king to introduce the coinage system in Assam. The *Joginitantra* provides a description of the kingdom of the Ahoms ; it is depicted as octagonal in shape. In accordance with this description the new coins were minted in octagonal designs. These coins, as they were introduced, were struck in the Ahom language and character ; it was only subsequently that Sanscrit inscriptions replaced this character. The reign of Pratap Singha (1603-1614 A.D.) is noted, not only because he repulsed several attacks of the Kacharis and also of the Muhammedans, but also because he undertook certain constructive work for the welfare of the people. Under his behest, roads and embankments were constructed and tanks dug. Further, he appointed ambassadors called *katakis* in hill outposts with the avowed aim and intention of putting a check to acts of oppression resorted to by the hill tribes as the Miris, the Daflas etc.

Assam was one of the few countries that successfully resisted, to a great extent, the invasions of the Muhammedans directed against it from time to time. It is not that that the Mughal invaders did not achieve temporary successes here ; they did. On one occasion at least, they advanced as far as Gargaon, the capital city of the Ahoms in eastern Assam. They were, however, repulsed and driven out with heavy losses. The second Muhammedan invasion was commanded by a general called Turbak. Inspite of a few temporary successes, which he gained over the Ahoms, he was ultimately defeated and slain by the Ahom prince on the bank of the Bhareli ; some of his followers also met with a similar fate. A few of them, who escaped death and punishment, were taken and settled in the Ahom colony ; these settlers are the ancestors of the present day Morias or

braziers, a sect of the Muslims. The wide-spread use of fire-arms, as a weapon of war, dates from the close of this war.

One of the most determined attacks of the Muhammedans was launched on Assam in the year 1627. The aim of this was to avenge the intervention of the Ahom king on behalf of Balitnarayan, the Koch king, as pointed out elsewhere, against the Muhammedans in 1614. It was a twin attack; one was launched on the Koch king Balitnarayan; simultaneously with it was launched another on the Ahom king. This was the ninth invasion of Assam by the Muslims. They invaded the country with a large army of 10,000 horse and foot and a fleet of 400 big boats; they were repulsed and defeated, and Balitnarayan was installed king of the Koch kingdom, as successor to Parikshit, by the Ahom king Pratap Singha. King Shusengpha, who was known as Buddhi Swarganarayan by his Hindu name, repulsed another attack of the Muhammedans in the second battle of Kaliabar; at the end of this victory a great part of the Koch kingdom was incorporated into the Ahom territory, and a Borphukan or what may be called a viceroy, was installed with headquarters at Gauhati to administer these areas. At the conclusion of the attack launched by Abdur Salam, in which he was defeated and taken prisoner, a treaty was concluded between the Ahoms and the Mughals in 1638.

The Koch kings ruled west of the river Sonkosh and were, in fact, vassals of the Mughal rulers. In 1658, Shah Jehan, the Mughal Emperor of Delhi, fell ill and this was followed by confusion and chaos all through his large empire. Prannarayan, who was then the ruler of the Koch kingdom, tried to take advantage of this confusion. He attacked and inflicted a defeat on the Muslim *faujdar* of Goalpara. He was however defeated by the Ahom king Jayadhwaj Singha; Prannarayan was ejected beyond the Sankosh and as a result of it, the whole of the Brahmaputra valley fell into the hands of the Ahoms. In 1661, the Muhammedans under the command of Nawab

Mir Jumla made their eleventh invasion of Assam. Mir Jumla was the Governor of Dacca ; after defeating Prannarayan, the Koch king, he advanced against the Ahoms. His army consisted of 12,000 horse and 30,000 foot and a powerful fleet. Advancing by land and water, as he did, he met with great success in his campaign and captured Gargaon, the Ahom capital in eastern Assam. The Mughal army was defeated and repulsed by the Ahom forces. Like the heavy snows of Russia once playing its part against the onslaught of Napoleon, the battering monsoons of Assam played its against Mir Jumla and his army. Monsoons are like hill avalanches here.

All these invasions are important from the point of view of history, because almost on all occasions, Muslim historians have compiled and left behind them excellent records of their enemies and the country they invaded. They are greatly enthusiastic about the splendours of the royal palaces, the manners and customs of the people, the size and topography of their country etc. They have described the Ahoms, a valiant race of people, though fewer in number, as fearless soldiers. The Mughal forces under the command of Raja Ram Singha, at the behest of Aurangzeb, invaded Assam for the twelfth time ; the battle that ensued was a protracted one, and finally the Mughal forces were thoroughly routed in the battle of Saraighat under the command of the redoubtable Ahom general Lachit Borphukon, whose name has almost passed into a legend. His courage, patriotism and indomitable spirit, all constitute a milestone of the political history of Assam. This victory over the Mughal forces gave the Ahom king territories that originally belonged to the former, upto the river Manah. Likewise, another attack of the Mughals launched against the Ahom king Sulikpha or Ratnadhaja, was repulsed in the battle of Rangamati ; like the battle of Saraighat, the battle of Rangamati is a momentous chapter of Ahom history. Saraighat is within the campus of Gauhati ; even to this day, when people refer to

any possible extraordinary exploits, which would give a thorough rout to the opponent, they recall, unknowingly though, these two battles and say: *"Nai Rangamati, nai Guahati."* (If not Rangamati, it is bound to be Gauhati *i.e.* Saraighat.)

The last attack of the Muhammedans directed against Assam, was under the command of Monsurkhan Nawab ; it was in the early part of the year 1662 when Gadadhar Singha was on the throne. The battle was fought in Itakhuli, and it was in this place that the Mughal invaders met their Waterloo. Gadadhar Singha was in exile in the Naga and other hills before he ascended the throne. The martyrdom of his queen, Jaymati, who was tortured to death by Lara Raja or the Boy-king Chulikpha, who was on the throne at that time, is "a Golden deed" of Ahom history. There stands a lake today to the memory of the brave queen on the outskirts of the Sibsagar town in eastern Assam, where Jaymati bled to death.

Added to the matchless courage and thoroughbred organisation of the Ahom army, nature also played her part in repulsing outside attacks on Assam ; the diseases, pestilences, monsoons and the great forests of Assam did a lot to retard enemies and hold them back. It is recorded about Muhammad Shah thus ; he "sent 100,000 horsemen well-equipped to Assam, but the whole army perished in that land of witchcraft and not a trace of it was left". Witchcraft is a superstition, nature is an undeniable fact.

Gadadhar Singha was succeeded by his son Rudra Singha. His reign was free from all external attacks. Secure in his possession of Kamarupa, he began to extend his territories far and wide. He annexed the territory of the Kacharis who had their capital at Dimapur, the relics of which, even to this day, exist as evidences of a highly developed Bodo culture. Defeated at Dimapur, the Kacharis shifted their capital to Maibong in the North Cachar Hills. Rudra Singh did not stop there ; he finally captured Maibong, the last capital of the Kachari kings. Rudra

Singha was a constructive genius; under him, temples were built and tanks dug. They stand, till to this day, on the ancient site of the Ahom capital *i.e.* modern Sibsagar in eastern Assam as monuments of a well-developed architecture. Rudra Singha's reign witnessed the final triumph and assimilation of Hinduism over the national religion of the Ahoms; it was during the reign of this king that Assam established a widespread contact, mostly cultural, with the rest of India. His successor Siva Singha was an ardent follower of Hinduism of the Sakta sect. It soon transformed itself into a religion of the people; only a few *deodhais* and *bailungs*, Ahom priests and astrologers, remained true to their ancient creed.

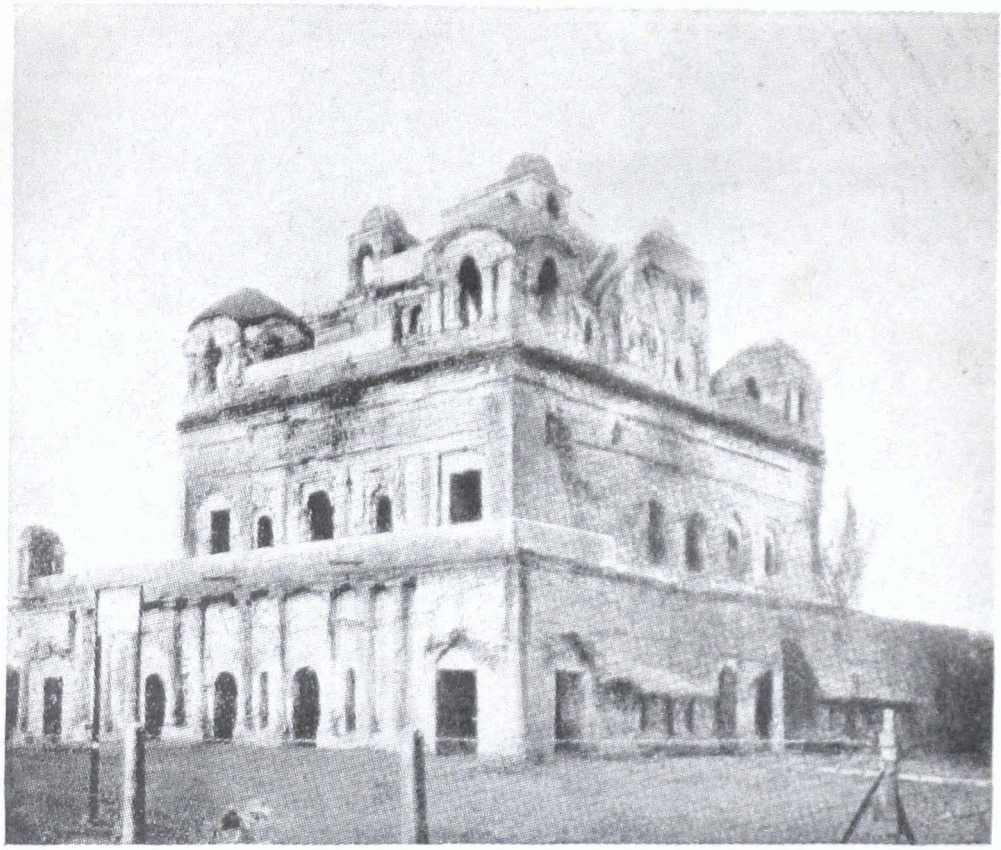
(1) *Decline of the Ahom rule*

The Ahoms, who in course of time, subjugated the whole of the Brahmaputra valley and brought it under their control, ruled over this kingdom for about six hundred years from the beginning of the 13th to the middle of the 19th century. Throughout the latter part of their reign, it became almost a battle-ground of two conflicting religious forces: Saktaism and Vaishnavism. As a result of it, internecine strife and turmoil continued unabated for long. The country, as such, was reduced piecemeal to degradation and suffering; the peak of it was reached when this religious hostility intensified, and finally culminated in a revolution under the banner of the Vaishnavites. The edge of bitterness and retaliation was provided when the queen of Rajeswar Singha openly persecuted the Vaishnavites for their religious professions and faiths. The Vaishnava Revolution, stimulated as it was, by the "leonine violence" let loose by the other side, the main prop of which was however the royal family, gained in strength and force and got wide popular support. As it widened and swept, the creaky joints of the state machinery exhibited symptoms of rapid decay and disintegration.

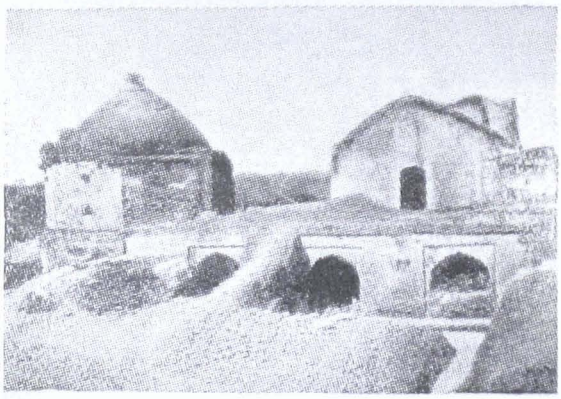
Lakhi Singha (1769-1780), who succeeded Rajeswar Singha to the throne, was a weak-kneed monarch and was not destined to reign in peace. Under his rule, the situation steadily worsened and took a quick turn towards collapse. The nerve of the state was being shattered by terrible uprisings of the Moamarias, a religious sect of the Vaishnavite school. These terrible and successive incursions told heavily on the mind and body of the king. As a natural corollary to it, symptoms of rapid decline developed.

On the death of Lakhi Singha, Gaurinath Singha was installed king by the nobles in 1780. On ascending the throne, he soon began mutiliating the bodies of other royal princes so as to render them ineligible to the throne. According to the Ahom state rules princes mutiliated in body could not be eligible for the throne. Besides, by his wreckless policy of oppression, Gaurinath Singha once more incurred the wrath of the Moamarias. The Moamarias broke out into a fresh rebellion one night in April, 1782. As a sequel to this, a general massacre of the Moamarias was proclaimed: "many thousands including women and children were put to death". These atrocities did not quell the fire but fanned it into leaping flames of renewed bitterness and revolt. The agitation however went underground, and preparations and subversive activities were afoot in order to sabotage the machinery of the state.

The Moamarias, in their triumph, laid waste the land, destroyed life and property, burnt villages. Gaurinath Singha failed to suppress these incursions and uprisings and so appealed to the British for help. Accordingly, Captain Welsh was despatched from the headquarters in September, 1792. The expedition ended in the conclusion of a treaty between Gaurinath Singha and the British. In the words of Sir E. A. Gait, Gaurinath Singha was the most "incompetent, bloodthirsty, disreputable and cowardly of the Ahom kings". Kamaleswar Singha succeeded Gaurinath Singha in 1795. His



KARENG GHAR



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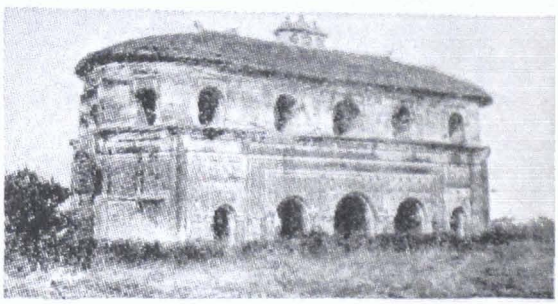

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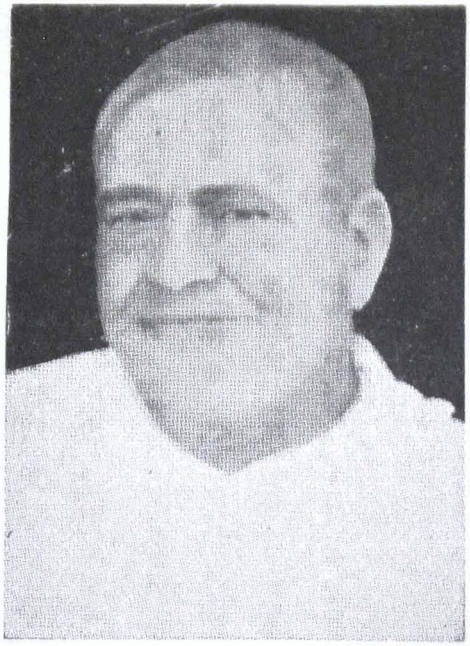

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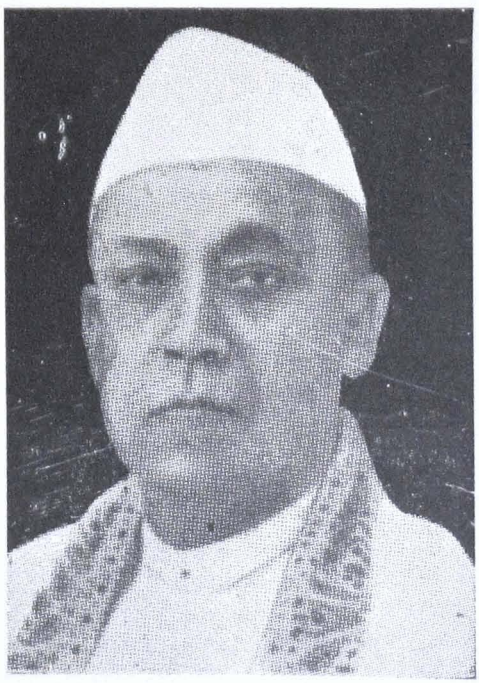


N. C. BARDALAI

G. N. BARDALAI

reign lasted fifteen and a half years during which period he succeeded in restoring order to a great extent. On his death, the Buragohain, who was the keyman of the state, nominated Chandrakanta, the brother of the deceased king, to the throne.

Due mainly to religious and political feuds and repeated rebellions of the Moamarias, the state machinery was on the verge of a collapse. It actually started coming down as a pricked bladder under Chandrakanta's reign when on the invitation of Badan Borphukon, an Ahom noble, towards the end of 1816, an army of about 8,000 men was despatched from Burma to help him against the king. With repeated successes achieved through foreign arms, the Borphukon gained in power and position, and became the virtual ruler in place of Chandrakanta Singha, the ruling prince, whom he reduced to the position of a titular figure-head. The Burmese army that helped him in his mission of power and prestige, secured a large indemnity from him, and finally returned home with a precious booty in 1817. The country, for a time, appeared to gain a tranquillity which was nothing but the tranquillity of the cemetery. This however did not last long; intrigues in the ranks of the nobles and the princes of royal blood started as soon as the Burmese left. Chandrakanta Singha was finally deposed, and he fled to Rangpur in 1818 A.D.

The Buragohain or the Ahom Prime Minister again figured prominently on the scene of history, and through his skilful machinations, Purandar Singha was enthroned monarch. The Borphukon, who invited the Burmese army and plunged the country into blood, was assassinated. As this news reached the Burmese king, he hastened to send an army under a general named Al Minghi in 1819 A.D. After offering a feeble resistance, Purandar Singha gave way and fled, and Chandrakanta Singha, who was formerly deposed from the throne by the Buragohain, sided with the invading Burmese general, and was installed king. But in fact the virtual power was in the hands

of the Burmans, and their sovereignty lasted over this country uninterrupted from 1819 to 1824 A.D. Prompted by greed of gain and the easy victories they achieved over the internally torn Ahom forces, the Burmese led once more an incursion in 1820.

The Burmese however fell foul with the British in Cachar, and came directly into conflict with British arms there. Partly due to this and partly due to the severe reverses inflicted by the British in Burma, the king of Ava was forced to cease hostilities with the Ahoms; ultimately, Assam was handed to the East India Company by the Burmese king under the terms laid down in the treaty of Yandabu concluded in 1826. Thus was Assam incorporated into the British rule in India.

The declining years of the Ahom rule are a dark epoch of history; it was an age of civil strife and feuds with almost unabashed gangsterism ravaging the land from one end to the other. The repeated invasions of the Burmans and the orgy of blood associated with it, reduced what was a mere skeleton into disintegrating bones; their records of atrocities under Mingi Maha Bandula, the Burmese general, overshadow the darkest annals of bloodshed. The following is a historian's account of it:

> All who were suspected of being inimical to the reign of terror were seized and bound by Burmese executioners, who cut off the lobes of the poor victim's ears and choice portions of the body, such as the points of the shoulders, and actually ate the raw flesh before the living sufferers; they then inhumanly inflicted with a sword deep but not mortal gashes in the body so that the mutiliated might die slowly, and finally closed the tragedy by disembowelling the wreched victims.

The condition of the country, after the expulsion of the Burmans, was most deplorable; it was pestilence-stricken and breaking. Anandaram Dhekial-Phookon, a historian, is of the opinion that the invaders "destroyed more than one-half of the

population which had already been thinned by intense commotions and repeated civil wars".

(*ii*) *The Ahom System of Administration*

The Ahom system of administration, in the strict sense of the term, was not a complex or intricate pattern. The king was the sovereign and enjoyed great and wide powers; he could "do no wrong". There was a council of three ministers called the *gohains* to assist and advise him in all matters of statecraft; the *gohains* or ministers held wide authority, and in fact, were regarded as the three most important pillars of the state. The king consulted them in all matters of war and peace, statecraft and external and internal affairs. As a matter of fact, in most cases, it were the *gohains* or ministers who dictated state policy and the king, as a sovereign, gave effect to it or executed it. Though it is usually seen that the son succeeded the father to the throne as a matter of right, which was keenly observed during the early period of the Ahom rule, it was more often than not, violated in later times. The king's person was regarded as sacrosanct and he was referred to in all state matters as *Swargadeo,* meaning heavenly lord, and it was ordained that he must be a prince of the blood, without the slightest scar or blemish on the body, which naturally disqualified a prince to the throne. History shows how this led to attempts on the part of ambitious princes to disqualify rival claimants to the throne by the infliction of scars and wounds on their body.

The coronation ceremony of the king was an elaborate process. Decorated with his ancestral deity called the *Somdeo* and with his ancestral sword called the *hendang,* he entered the coronation hall called the *singari-ghar* and took his seat on a throne of burnished gold. One by one, the nobles came and offered him presents, and in this way the coronation ceremony was elaborated into a rich and ornate process. The *gohains* or

ministers represented the leading families or the aristocracy. In fact the office of a minister descended from the father to his son, but if situation so demanded, the king could exercise his own selection. It was, however, ordained that the selection for ministership must be restricted to the three families of the *gohains*. Each of these three families of the *gohains,* the *Bargohain,* the *Buragohain* and the *Barpatragohain* was assigned a certain number of households attached to it, for personal work. David Scott estimates the number of *paiks* or free-men allotted to each of the *gohain* families for personal work as 10,000. The *Bar-Baruas* and the *Bar-Phookons* were other recognised families of aristocrats in the state ; viceroys to the king, who were usually placed in charge of district administration, were generally selected from these families. Besides these, there were other major offices of state. These offices were organised mainly on functional basis.

The Ahoms maintained a strong navy ; the officer, under whose command it was placed, was known as the *Pani-Phookon* or the *Nausaliya-Phookon* ; it means commander of the navy. The officer in charge of justice was known as the *Nyasodha-Phookon* or officer for justice. The *Deolia-Phookon* was entrusted with the affairs of the temples ; it was like the ministry for religious affairs in some of the modern states. There were other departments, such as departments of gunpowder factories, royal wardrobes, the Queen's business etc. Besides military posts, there were some civil posts that carried with them authority and prestige ; these were, of course, subordinate officials ; some of them were employed as arbitrators, superintendents of works, *katakis* etc. The *katakis* were ambassadors or messengers, who used to conduct diplomatic relations and negotiations with foreign courts, hill tribes and do other allied work.

There were also the *kakotis* or scribes as in ancient Roman or Greek courts, attached to the Ahom courts and noblemen; the *dalois* were astrologers who read omens and determined auspicious days for new enterprises of the state. The important role that the astrologers played in the battle of Saraighat is recorded in *Lachit Borphookon and His Times* by Dr. S. K. Bhuyan. The nobility, who enjoyed the privilege of free services from the *paik*, were exempted from all services by body to the state; these slaves gave their services directly to their masters and not directly to the state. Along with this official aristocracy, the priesthood that was entrusted with all matters, spiritual and temporal, constituted into a sort of sanctified aristocracy or intellectual oligarchy; they were also exempted from rendering bodily services to the state.

The entire population, from the ages of 15 to 50, was liable to give compulsory services to the state in whatever form necessary. The men were organised into a regular hierarchy of offices; barring them, the common population was either known as the *karis* or the shaftsmen and the *paiks* or the foot soldiers. There were graded military officers, each entrusted with the command of a distinct platoon of soldiers; twenty *paiks* or foot soldiers were commanded by a Bora, a hundred by a Saikia, one thousand by a Hazarika, three thousand by a Rajkhowa and six thousand by a Phookon. The whole organisation was under a rigid discipline as that of an army. The *paik* was alloted three acres of land; he enjoyed it tax-free for his services to the state. Over and above this, he received land for his house and garden and had to pay a house or poll tax of a rupee to the state treasury. Most of the nobles and officials had their own estates.

The judicial system was organised on a sound footing; the principal judicial authorities were the three gohains or ministers who bore the responsibility of administrative and legal matters; the Ahom criminal law was characterised by great thorough-

ness; different forms of capital punishment were a special feature common to the law. The system of administration was a thoroughly well-knit organisation; the structure of it was a pyramid, the apex of which was the king and his ministers and the base, the *paiks* and the *karis*. Efficiency and discipline were the outstanding features of this structure. These were maintained with care and solicitude, natural to an organisation of this kind. The discipline was iron and the execution of it was thoroughbred and planned scientifically.

CHAPTER III

In this immensity my thought sinks drowned:
And sweet it seems to shipwreck in this sea.

Leopardi

RACES, RELIGION AND PEOPLE

The early history of race-migration to Assam, as it came in stages and different streams, is obscure ; the anthropology of the different racial groups is only partially explored. It is in this land, where races and peoples from different corners and regions across its borders, met and lived, and in the process of time, evolved a consolidated pattern, with common traditions and aspirations. Through the long columns of history, peoples of different origin and ethnology migrated into this country, fought and rambled in its beautiful valleys and hills, and as years rolled, fertilised its sinews and arteries into a rich and solid entity. This, in a nutshell, is the history of races and peoples that makes the ethnological map of it and weaves its distinct texture ; Assam is a virgin soil for the Verrier Elwins.

The principal races of peoples that have migrated into it are: the Austro-Asiatics, the Dravidians, the Tibeto-Burmans, the Mongoloids, the Aryans etc. The earliest wave of people, to migrate into it, is supposed to be the Austro-Asiatics, as morphological and linguistic evidences, pointed out by philologists like Dr. B. K. Kakoti, show. These were the principal races in the distantmost loom of history that built a culture of its own, and dominated a major portion of south-east Asia as Cambodia, the Nicobar Islands, Upper Burma, and some parts of Australia. In India, they are found, to some extent, in

Chota Nagpur and in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills of Assam. They were a dreamy sort of people, given to agriculture, and to dance and music. Islanded in the hills, and in the midst of peoples of different races and ethnology all around, the Khasis and the Jaintias, races that belong to the Austro-Asiatic group, are an interesting subject of study, from the point of history, and of race migration into these hills. It is, however, believed that these people originally dwelt in the Brahmaputra river-bed, but were forced by successive waves of new migrations into it, to leave their original settlement in search of a home in the hills. This is, of course, a conjecture and it must be said that it may or may not stand historical scrutiny.

It is, however, needless to say that Western China is the vast beehive of the Mongoloid races ; in very ancient times, it threw off swarms of people into the Assam and the Burma hills, and later on, into the plains and river-plateaus of these two countries ; some of them ascended the Tsangpo, a river of Tibet and migrated to the west, and so they spread along the slopes of the Himalayas and peopled the low hill ranges alongside. There were others who migrated down the course of the Chindwin and other rivers to the south and peopled Burma, Thailand and other countries adjoining them. The south-west wave of this great Mongoloid migration descended the Brahmaputra and spread into Assam ; there was a constant flow of these tribes into the fertile plains.

As each swarm was forced to yield to the pressure from behind, it either moved westward or turned to the hills of the Assam ranges. This process of invasion went on through successive generations. In the ancient period of Assam history, it is the Mongoloid culture in particular and the Dravidian in general, that dominated ; their contribution towards the composition of ancient Assamese culture is considerable. The Austro-Asiatic influence, being the earliest, merged itself so thoroughly into the composite texture of Assamese culture

that it becomes almost difficult to distinguish the one from the other. It presents, nevertheless, a picture of complete assimilation and synthesis.

The history of the Dravidians is supposed to be as old as that of the Austro-Asiatics, if not older. According to the *Early History of Kamarupa,* the Dravidians "were a cultured people belonging to the Catholic Age, who in the remote past inhabited the whole of northern India supplanting the Austric races." It might be that the Dravidians were a principal group of people in Assam before the civilisation of the *Mahabharata* times spread; yet, it is taken on authentic grounds that the Aryan civilisation spread into Assam even in the pre-*Mahabharata* Age. In support of this, it can be pointed out from the *Ramayana* that Amurtharaja, a son of an Aryan king Kusa by name, who ruled in Madhyadesa, migrated into Assam with some of his Aryan followers and founded the kingdom of Pragjyotishpura. This shows that Assam came within the pale of Aryan civilisation at a very early time.

The Dravidians might be regarded, in point of time, as next to the Austro-Asiatics to migrate and dwell in this land. There are ethnologists who suppose that the Bania and the Kaibarta communities today, are the remote survivors of this great race. There is a belief that the early Dravidian stock got so mixed up with the early Indo-Chinese people that it led to a chiselling of the edges of both. It is a fact and cannot be dismissed outright. The type that evolved, as a result of this admixture, can aptly be called the Mongolo-Dravidian; the Mongoloid strain is pre-dominant in the Brahmaputra valley.

It is true that the waves of the Mongoloid immigration into Assam, which landed most of them in their present homes "took place at such long intervals and from various sources that there are few general characteristics common to the Mongoloidic population in the aggregate". These Mongolians belonged in general to the Tibeto-Burman family of the Indo-Chinese group.

The Kacharis, the Rabhas, the Meches, the Miris, the Lalungs, the Garos, the Nagas, the Kukis etc. are the members of the early Mongoloid group that migrated into this country.

The invasion of the Ahoms in the second quarter of the 13th century constitutes the history of recent Mongoloid migration into Assam. They were followed by other waves of immigration at regular intervals, comparatively at later times ; they were notably the Shans from Hkamtilong, who entered the country in the 17th century and settled in the Tirap Frontier tracts. The Shans were followed in the early 19th century by other groups of Mongoloid peoples as the Kachins.

The Khasis and the Jaintias are the two groups of Austro-Asiatic people, as pointed out elsewhere, living in Assam. They inhabit the hills that takes its name after them. They are in the habit of erecting peculiar monoliths in memory of their dead ; evidences of a similar practice are found amongst the Has and the Mundas in the state of Chota Nagpur. The language, used by the Khasis and the Syntengs, belongs to the Monkhmer group of languages used even to this day in Cambodia, the original home of the Austro-Asiatics, where they built an empire and a rich history. The Khasis and the Syntengs remained in the hills ; probably the rest of the hordes passed towards the sea. The Khasis, as evidences show, are polyandrists of the matriarchal type, and among them property still descends through the female. A Khasi chief is succeeded not by his son but by his sister's son. Bertrand Russell speaks of such a society thus:

> In a matrilineal society a man inherits from his maternal uncle; the functions which we attribute to the father are divided in a matrilineal society between the father and the maternal uncle, affection and care coming from the father, while power and property come from the maternal uncle.

These characteristics are evident in *toto* in the Khasi matrilineal society.

BODO GIRLS DANCING

A KACHARI GIRL [*P. 43*

Another great division of the Indo-Chinese family of peoples included the Dimasa or Hill Kacharis, the Bodo or plains Kacharis, the Rabhas, the Garos, the Lalungs etc. Both the Bodos and the Kacharis ruled an empire ; their art and culture were developed to a high level of excellence and they constitute a landmark of our cultural history. The Kacharis are a powerful sect and most of their groups, the Rabhas and the Meches inhabit today the grassy plains of the Lower Assam ranges and only a negligibly small fraction of them lives in the hills. In Assam, they call themselves *Bodo* or *Bodofisha,* which means "sons of the Bodo". The Kacharis are known by the name of *Dimasa* in the North Cachar Hills ; the etymology of *Dimasa* like the word *Bodofisa* is *Dimafisa,* which means "sons of the great river". The word *Dimasa,* it is said, is a corruption of the word *Dimafisa,* which the Ahoms further mispronounced into *Timasa.* Originally the Kacharis ruled in the valley of the Dhansiri, where they were, to all intents and purposes, known as Dimasa. At the same time, it is difficult to find out where from the word *Kachari,* as it is used at present to mean these people, originated. In this connection, Sir E. A. Gait may be quoted:

> It may be mentioned that according to Limbu legend of creation given by Risley in the *Tribes and Castes of Bengal,* one of the two progenitors of the human race settled in the Kachar country, which is the name given by the Nepalese to the tract at the foot of the hills between the Brahmaputra and the Kosi river and there became the father of Koch, Mech and Dhimal tribes. If Kachar was an early home of the Mech or the headquarters of a powerful Mech dynasty, the members of the tribe in Assam may well have been called *Khacharis* or *Kacharis.*

That these Kacharis have given the name to the modern district of Cachar is a fact that is beyond dispute ; moreover, they are called Kacharis extensively even in parts removed from these hills. Often it is erroneously believed that the Kacharis are allied to the Koches in point of ethnology ;

but as a matter of fact, it is not so. So far as linguistic affinities are concerned, they are allied more to the Chutiyas, Lalungs and Morans than to any other group of people. In point of ethnology, they are more allied to the Garos and the Tipperas of the southern hills.

It might be that there was a time when the Kacharis ruled over a wide kingdom, comprising of Assam and north-east Bengal, as constituted at present. The allusions made to *Mlechchha* kings in the copper-plates and inscriptions probably meant the Kachari dynasties or similar other Mongoloid tribes. The Kacharis do not have any chronology or written record of their rule as the Ahoms had in their *buranjis* or chronicles. Traditions, as are prevalent today, offer only a vague and unauthentic chronology of kings. The only authentic source, which one has to rely on, for a knowledge of the Kacharis and their kings, is the *buranjis* or historical documents compiled by the Ahom rulers ; they record instances and references to the feuds and wars, these rulers had with the Kacharis and as such, though incidentally, the names of the Kachari rulers come in these chronicles.

Dimapur was the capital city of the Kachari kingdom in central Assam. The ruins of this city exhibit a level of art and architectural design which the Ahoms, great builders as they were, could not attain *pari passu* with the Kacharis in this particular period of history. It is doubtful if the Ahoms knew by this time the use of stones or bricks as building materials ; they used originally at first, as evidences show, timber and bamboos and mud plastered walls. The wall which surrounds Dimapur is made of bricks. The solid brick gateway in this city with a "pointed arch and stones pierced to receive the hinges of double heavy doors" presents a magnificent work of craftsmanship. On the arch-ways one's mind is captivated by "false windows of ornamental moulded brick-work". It is curious to find that on the walls of the palace are found bas-

reliefs of animals drawn by the artists of the Kacharis ; they are usually portraits of elephants, deer, goats, ducks, peacocks etc.

Dimapur was sacked by the Ahoms in 1536 A.D. ; local traditions of the Kacharis however ascribe the ruin of the city to the attack of Kalapahar ; he was a renegade Muslim general of Bengal whose name is still remembered in Assam as a breaker of temples and gods. After being reduced to ruins like this, the capital was abandoned thenceforward ; only the ruins of palaces, gateways, tanks and all that was once great, lie in this historical site today. Like "Kaikobad's palace in ruins", they lie today in the dense Nambor forests, and only a pathless wilderness of trees, stretching for many miles on every side, leads to the tranquil graveyard of an ancient civilisation that was of the Kacharis.

As history shows, the Koches were a powerful tribe, who built an empire in Assam that sustained for long. In the *Puranas* and the *Tantras,* they are referred to as *Kavacha* ; the Muhammedan historian, who accompanied Muhammad Bhakhtiyar Khilji in his invasion of Assam at the end of the 12th century, states that the features of "the Koch, Mech and Tharu tribes resembled those of a tribe of southern Siberia". That the features of the Koches looked like those of the Mongolid people, there can be little doubt. Opinions, as to the origin and ethnic affinity of these people, seem conflicting ; while one set of opinion is that they were of the Tibeto-Burman Bodo origin, the other set holds that they are of the Dravidian origin. Bryan Hodgson groups the Koches with the Bodo and the Dhimal, and this view is supported by Buchanan. On the other hand, Col. Dalton holds that they are of the Dravidian stock. Risley again compromises the two views and suggests that there must have been an admixture of the Koches with the Mongoloid stock, but at the same time the element that predominates is Dravidian. On the other hand it must be

remembered that, though dark, the Koches have a distinctly Mongoloid physiognomy.

The language, that the Koches once spoke, is now extinct; the traces of it that might eventually linger connect it with that of the Garos, the Kacharis and the Lalungs. These people ruled for a long time over Assam and north Bengal, till ultimately, over-thrown by the Ahoms and the Muhammedans about the beginning of the 17th century. In the district of Goalpara, even to this day, the Koches are known as *Rajabangshi,* which means "men of the royal race". Biswa Singha and Naranarayan, both of whom belong to this dynasty, occupy a distinct place in the annals of ancient Assam. There are a good many manuscripts in which there are records of the Koches and their rulers; the most detailed account of it is found in the *bansabalis* or the dynastic monographs of the Darrang Rajas. This monograph is written in Sanscrit on oblong strips of paper called the *sanchipats.*

The Chutiyas originally occupied a tract of land not far removed from the home of the Shans, along the north-eastern tip of the country. The Ahoms, as they entered into Assam after having crossed the Patkoi ranges, had to encounter the powerful Chutiyas. Finally, they were forced to give way and make room for the expansion of the Ahoms in their new homeland. It seems the Chutiyas absorbed a good number of these immigrants through inter-marriage and other social exchanges, and ultimately evolved a new race of people called the Ahom-Chutiyas, born of this interfusion. The lore of the Chutiya race is rich in tradition, and tradition has it that they formed a Hindu dynasty in Sadiya, or what was known as Vidarbha. The religion of the Chutiyas was true to their own tradition and temper; they worshipped the Goddess Kali, the deity of blood and sacrifice, with great ceremony, and in the rituals associated with this worship, they used not the accredited Brahmin priests, but engaged their own tribal priests

called the *deuries*. It was a sensual form of worship; they worshipped that aspect of the goddess which is known as *Kechaikhati* or "the Eater of raw flesh", to whom sacrifices were offered.

The Ahoms appeared, as pointed out before, on the scene in the 13th century; their appearance, and vigorous participation in the life of the country changed the whole course of history, and added one more people of the Mongoloid stock to the ethonological map. A member of the Shan sub-section of the great Indo-Chinese family of people, the Ahoms who eventually became the masters of the whole Brahmaputra valley, built their stronghold, for the most part in Upper Assam, particularly, in the modern districts of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur. Ultimately, they embraced Hinduism in the 17th century and became one of its principal sub-castes.

The Ahoms possessed a peculiar talent for history; they tried to develop this faculty to a great extent, and as a result of it, compiled many memorable documents and records. The priests and the leading Ahom families hold in their custody rare chronicles and *buranjis,* even to this day. The method of writing was traditional and it was done on the barks of trees; these manuscripts were oblong. These manuscripts invariably last for years, and are preserved with great care. The earlier *buranjis* were written in the Ahom language; in course of time, it yielded place to the Assamese language which progressively became popular with them as they accepted Hinduism. Their language soon lost popular contact, and finally came to be confined to a few members of their priestly class or the *deodhais*. As with their language, so with their religion, it was the same history; as Hinduism grew in influence and popularity, the old tribal religion of the people fell into disrepute. The tribal deity which the Ahoms originally worshipped, was known as the *Somdeo*; the image is a jewel set in a cylinder and enclosed in a series of seven golden caskets.

The Ahoms are born fighters; they are robust and well built. They are able builders too; tanks and temples, roads and buildings as the *rang-ghar* or the pleasure palace, the *kerang-ghar* or the royal palace, lying scattered in their ancient capital near the modern town of Sibsagar, are an eloquent tribute to their constructive work and genius.

The beautiful scenery of the hills together with the robust and delightful people who dwell in them, give Assam the colour of a deer with golden spots. The tribes are numerous as the hills they inhabit; on the Patkoi range that separates Assam from Burma, there are the tribes like the Singhphos (Kachins), Nagas, Kukis and Lushais. They draw the border line of Assam and streamline it.

The Nagas are an extra-ordinary population; they once enjoyed the reputation of being the dreaded head-hunters of the frontier. They are, however, not a homogenous set of people; internecine feuds and animosities once used to disturb the otherwise calm depths of their simple life; under the British rule, these things as inter-people differences languished out to a great extent, and they succeeded in evolving a unified pattern of psychology. There are altogether seven or eight principal tribes of the Nagas with a number of sub-sects. They are the Ao, the Angami, the Lohta, the Sema, the Rengma, the Konyak etc. Holcombe and Peal suggest that the word *Naga* is derived from the word *nok* which means "folk" (Cf. *Loka* in Sanscrit) in some of the tribal languages. It is said that when strangers meet in the plains, they ask each other as *Tom nok* or *O nok e*, which means *what folk are you.* Von Furer-Haimendorf puts it thus:

> It is still an open question why the Nagas are called Nagas. Some philologists derive the name from a Sanscrit word for "hill men", others from a word meaning "naked people". But however this may be, let it suffice here that the Nagas not only live in the hills but cover their magnificently modelled bodies as little as any sculptor could wish.

KONYAK NAGA BOYS [*P. 48*

[*With acknowledgement to the Director of Publicity, Government of Assam.*]

Henry Balfour calls the Nagas the "unrisen races" ; they are members of the Tibeto-Burman family of people. According to Dr. Guha, they are *Palae-Mongoloids.* They have their own economic order, social and political institutions, and religious beliefs and customs. Ethnologists hold that conditions that prevail here are *the* conditions that once prevailed in the whole of south-east Asia ; while a more dynamic force has replaced this civilisation of the neolithic man in these areas, that in the Naga Hills is static as yet.

The Nagas, for instance, like all other hill tribes, have their own political institution, the basis of which is the village unit. It is democratically constituted and has through the ages, gained in its wealth of tradition. The system of the Ao Nagas might be cited as an example ; they govern their village republic through a council of elders called the *Tatar.* The leaders of this council are periodically elected by the general masses and they hold their office because of their wealth of experience, soundness of judgment and age. When the council meets, it can be extended to any size, and any member present there has the privilege to join in the discussions and hold opinions ; their views are given due consideration by the council. After a fixed period, the existing tatar of a council vacates office and the accepted custom is that he cannot offer himself for re-election.

The whole council is divided into an elaborate system of grades, and each clan in a village has the right to send its representative to them. All matters relating to village disputes are enquired into and settled through this institution, constituted on a democratic basis. It is a fact that the hill-tracts lying on the Assam-Burma border are among the least accessible regions of south-east Asia. This tribal area is inhabited by an independent, war-like Naga race called the Konyak Nagas ; they represent one of India's most ancient and colourful civilisations. It is believed that these Nagas may well be the oldest stock

inhabiting the Assam hills. It might be that, in course of time, different waves of people, appearing in the hills, either from the east or from the south have pushed the Konyaks to impenetrable heights, or absorbed them completely. Like the Konyaks, the Angamis are a particularly war-like clan ; the Ahom chronicles record a good number of raids perpetrated by the Nagas on the plains ; they had to be satisfied with land-grants called *khats*. Under the British rule, the raids were being repeated and hence they had to be brought under control by stricter methods.

The Nagas are mostly animists ; Christianity has penetrated into some areas of these hills, but on the whole, its influence is but small, if not negligible. Only 20 p.c. of the Nagas profess Christianity, while it is 40 p.c. in the Khasi Hills and as much as 70 p.c. in the Lushai Hills. The Nagas carry on a considerable trade every winter with the plains in commodities, particularly, like cotton and other hill-products, which they exchange in the plains with salt and rice.

Like the Garos, the Daflas are also a people of the Tibeto-Burman origin ; with feathers in their woven cane-cup, they look a picturesque people. They are short and sturdy. They live mostly in the hills of the Darrang district. The Apatanis, another race of tribal people, inhabiting the low Himalayan Assam ranges, are closely allied in ethnology and body-formations to the Daflas. Adjacent to the state of Manipur, the Lushai Hills with its head-quarters at Aijal, looks like a pillar supporting a balcony on the top ; the rest of Assam, as it stands, produces this impression to the casual observer of the map. The Lushais, after whom the hills takes its name, were originally the inhabitants of the Chin hills, from where they migrated into these hills during 1750 and 1850 ; there were originally small tribes living here whom they brought under subjugation before long, and established their own suzerainty on them ; these people were more or less of the same

stock with the Lushais which made the assimilation easier. The Lushais are an artistic people ; they have a well-developed system of chieftainship and the whole district is divided into as many as 300 of them. The succession to chieftainships is hereditary.

This system of rule by chiefs obtains, more or less, amongst all tribes of the Kuki stock. Each chieftain in the Lushai Hills has his own estates, that is allotments of lands. There is, usually, a council of elders, appointed by the individual chieftains called the *Upas* to help and advise him in the administration ; public opinion of the small communities, the reins of whose Governments are in their hands, plays an important role, and works as an effective check on all possible attempts of misuse or license of power. Any subject of a chief who might have any possible grievance against him, can leave that village community and migrate to another without let or hindrance. The operation of the sixth schedule of the new Constitution of India has, however, infused a new life in these hills. The majority of the Lushai tribes are Christian. The percentage of literacy is high in these hills ; it is about 45 p.c. The most powerful political organisation of the Lushais is the Mizo Union ; it stands for the liquidation of chieftainship and the establishment of democratic administration in the Lushai Hills. The total area of the Lushai Hills is approximately 8,000 sq. miles.

The Miris live both in the hills and in the plains ; the Miris in the plains are a riparian people. They are a docile population. Those in the hills inhabit the sub-Himalayan ranges to the north of the district of Lakhimpur. Though of Tibeto-Burman origin, they are not short like the Daflas. They are tall, of well-developed bodies and have the pleasant facial features of the Mongoloid type of people. The plains-Miris have a distinct place in the Ahom history. Some of them held important military posts as Miri-Sandique etc. under the Ahom kings.

The Abors inhabit the sub-ranges of the Himalayan mountains on the northern frontiers of Assam. The word *Abor* means loosely "unknown savages". They speak a language similar to that of the hill Miris, but they are different from the latter in point of character. Their country is difficult to negotiate as the hills consist of impenetrable heights, wooded with deep forests. The Abor country is constituted into small village republics, and the administration of each is entrusted in the hands of a body called the *kebang*; it is, in fact, a council of elders, but the doors of it are open to all in the village who might like to attend its session and participate in its discussions; but they do not enjoy the right to take decisions or formulate policies. This right is invested with the council proper. It decides village matters and disputes, but no decision, however correct, is taken only on the basis that it is supported by the majority. Every matter is threshed out and discussed threadbare till the council arrives at a unanimous opinion. Anything that does not, is dropped even if it enjoys the majority support. This is how democracy works in the Abor society. Their social structure is not a complicated pattern.

Like the Abors, the Mishmis also belong to the northern frontiers of Assam and its hills, and are of the Tibeto-Burman stock. The Mishmis, in general, are devoted to a pastoral rather than an agricultural way of life. A man's wealth in their society is estimated on the basis of the heads of cattle and the number of wives one possesses. The Mishmis inhabit the country between the river Dibang and the Brahmaputra on the north-eastern tip of Assam. There are principally four tribes of the Mishmis.

The Khamtis, a people of the Mongoloid stock like the Ahoms, inhabit the eastern tip of the Brahmaputra valley. They are of the Shan origin; their country is hilly. About the middle of the 18th century, Alaugpya, a Burman king, conquered Mogaung, whereupon the Khamtis are said to have migrated

AN ABOR. [*P. 52*

[*With acknowledgement to the Director of Publicity, Government of Assam.*]

A MISHMI GIRL.

[*With acknowledgement to Sri G. N. Dutt.*]

northwards to the hills, near the upper waters of the Irrawaddy and the Mekong. A section of this Shan tribe turned north-west way and migrated into Assam, crossed the Patkoi range and settled down near what is now known as the Sadiya frontier tract. The Singhphos, called the Kachins in Upper Burma, must have originally lived near the source of the Irrawaddy. They gradually moved southwards, crossed the Hukwang valley, and entered the valley of the Brahmaputra through the Patkoi pass towards the end of the 18th century ; their villages are located today on the Buri Dihing and Tengapani area, east of Sadiya. The Singhphos live side by side with the Khamtis, if not interfused with them. It is probable that a group of them lived in the tract between the Chindwin river and the Patkoi mountains, where they were possibly known as Kakhyens ; at the time they crossed into Assam, the Moamarias were in rebellion in the country. It took place in the year 1793. Gaurinath Singha was the king of the Ahoms during this time.

The word *Singhpho,* which these people adopted after settling down in Assam, means *man* in their native language ; their language has greater similarity with the language of the Abors and the Karens than with that of the original Shans. The Singhphos know the use of iron and their weapons are made of this metal ; they weave their own cloth and colour them in different dyes obtained from the roots of trees, called *khai-khau, romi, chin-lu* etc. They are generally animists ; they differ from their kindred and neighbour, the Khamtis, who are invariably Buddhists of the Burman school. The Khamti temples are made of timber and the various designs and carvings attached to them, speak of these people as a sensitive and artistic race. Their priests are celebates and their holy see is known as *bapu-chang.* The Khamti cottage industry is well developed ; their ivory and wood-work speak of a considerable level of excellence, and remind one of the Burmese crafts and folk-industries as lacquer work etc.

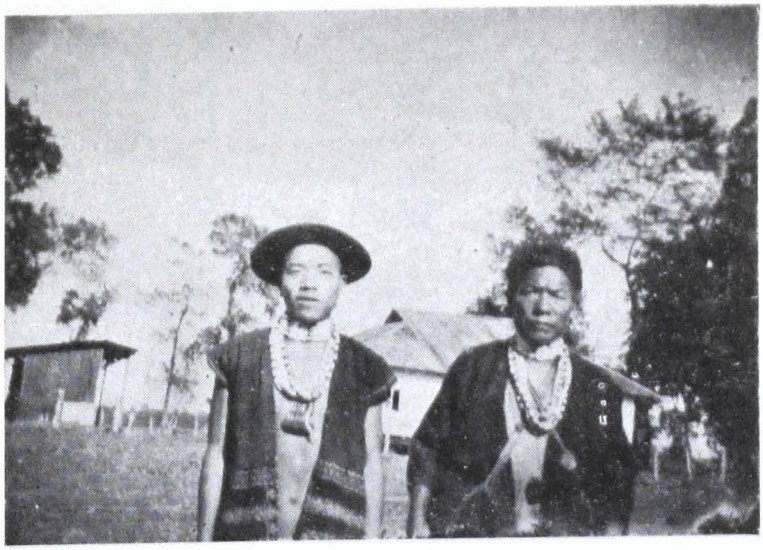
Away from the Khamtis and the Singhphos, in the central tracts of Assam in the districts of Sibsagar and Nowgong, are the Mikir hills, where dwells a tribe, after whom the hills are known. The Mikirs are a peaceful tribe and differ considerably in habit and character from the tribes of the other hills. They speak a language which may be called an intermediary between the Naga and the Bodo. The Mikir dance to "celebrate death", and to make good the loss sustained through death with dance and song, is an interesting feature of their cultural life. Assam is rich in races and tribes; there are other different tribes, the chief of whom are Turungs, Noras, Phakials etc., all of whom dwell in the upper Assam valley and the hills that lie around it.

The North-East Frontier Agency is an area of about 35,000 sq. miles with a population of a million or so. The tribal areas in this Agency come within Section B of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. For administrative purposes, they are divided into political zones or districts. They are: the Sela Sub-Agency, Subansiri Area, Mishmi Hills, Abor Hills, Tirap Frontier Tract and the Tuensang Frontier District. This Agency is under the direct administration of the Government of India which acts through the Governor of Assam. Each district is under a Political Officer. Tezu is at present the head-quarter station of the Mishmi Hills District. Sadiya had to be abandoned due to devastations caused by floods.

The North-East Frontier Agency is honey-combed with different tribes and sub-races. The Monpas, Sherdukpens, Khowas, Mijus, Daflas and Akas live in the Sela Sub-Agency. The Daflas and Apatanis live in the Subansiri Area. Padam, Minyong, Gallong, Bokar, Bori, Palilibo, Tagin and Monpa live in the Abor Hills. Miju, Digaru, Padam, Khampti and Singhpho, Kachin, Tangsa, Wanchow, Howa and Nokte live in the Tirap Frontier Tract. Sangtam, Chang, Yimchungr, Konyak,

TWO SHORDAKPENS FROM RUPA

THREE MONBA (MONDA) GIRLS. [P. 54



TWO $\frac{\text{PADAMS}}{\text{ABORS}}$ FROM DAMRO

AKA COUPLE

Phom and Sema live in the Naga Tribal Area. Let us see what Verrier Elwin says about the primitive people:

> The word "living" is properly applied to them; these Highlanders do not merely exist like so many ordinary villagers; they really *live*. Their religion is characteristic and alive; their tribal organisation is unimpaired; their artistic and choreographic traditions are unbroken; their mythology still vitalises the healthy organism of tribal life.

These tribes belong, more or less, to the same ethnological group. Their manners, customs and dialects, of course, differ from one another, in more cases than one, as chalk from cheese. They are in a primitive stage of development.

An eminent anthropologist, Dr. Hutton is of the opinion that the hill-tribes of Assam are inter-related in their ethnology; it is true in the sense that, more or less, they all belong to the great Indo-Chinese family of peoples. It might be that the Nagas and the Kukis absorbed much from the pre-existing peoples of the Khasi origin in general. Ethnologists describe the Manipuri as a blend of the Naga and the Kuki, and the Garos as a blend of the Khasi-Synteng war-tribes with stocks from the north of the Brahmaputra.

It might be that as the Tibeto-Burmans made their appearance on the east of Assam, the Aryans entered its valley from the west; they migrated into it from the Gangetic plains. The Kalitas, whose main profession is agriculture, are numerous all over the country; they are supposed to be one of the earliest groups of Aryans that came into Assam. The Kalitas are of a fair complexion with high forehead and tall bodies. They are an important sub-sect of the Hindus next to the Kayasthas, with whom the difference is fast ceasing to demarcate itself, as time passes. Like the Kalitas, the Brahmins, an Aryan stock, are also immigrants from the west.

(ii) *Religion*

Hinduism, as history exhibits, is a flexible religion; it absorbed most of the non-Aryan deities and traditional beliefs

that prevailed in early times amongst primitive men. It was these regions *i.e.* Assam and South-India that supplied the major factor in the orgiastic development and growth of Siva worship, known as Saktaism. This form of religion, Saktaism, was the principal form of worship prevalant in ancient Assam. Its adherents base their faiths in the *tantras.* Through a dialogue between Siva and Parvati, various ecremonies, incantations, and prayers are prescribed in the *tantras.* The fundamental creed of *tantraism* is the worship of the female aspect of nature *i.e.* the "procreant aspect of nature as manifested through personified desire."

Tantraism is a religion of blood and sacrifice; it is a sensual form of worship. It is said that human sacrifice was a common feature of this religion. The person, most suited for the sacrifice, must be a man without any physical blemish. It was, in its psychological approach, the same as the ancient Egyptian custom of offering innocent babes to propitiate Father Nile. Haft Iqlim, a Muslim historian, makes references to a form of worship prevalent in Assam, known as the religion of the *Bhogis.* The *Bhogis* were voluntary victims; they were given unfettered freedom to indulge in all sorts of sensual pleasure from the time it was announced that the Goddess wanted them; they were treated as privileged persons. The word *Bhogi* means "one who enjoys". They were ceremoniously sacrificed to the Goddess at the time of the annual festival. Human sacrifices were a cardinal feature of primitive religion, as pointed out in the *Kalika Purana.* The *mantras* chanted are: *Om, Ain, Hrin, Srin.*

Magic played an important part in the religion of the primitive people of Assam. It is but natural in a place, where most of the peoples are animists and worshippers of different aspects of nature. There is an allusion to this ancient practice of Kamarupa in the *Ain-i-Akbari.* The author

BHUTIAS RELAXING [*P. 57*

of this record speaks of various dark practices that once used to obtain here, of which "the most heinous was a divination by the examination of a child cut out of the body of a pregnant woman who has gone her full term of months". It is generally believed that these dark faiths had their birth in the corrupt practices evolving out of Saktaism, as it obtained in its vulgar phases, and the dying forces of Buddhism, as it turned towards a morbid decline ; and they had their steady graftings on the undefined habits and beliefs of the different tribes.

Buddhism penetrated beyond Assam from India into Burma. G. A. Appleton holds testimony to this fact. Though not the principal religion, it flourished, to a great extent, in the ancient Kingdom of Kamarupa, as evidences show. It is, of course, a fact that the influence of Buddhistic culture was not very strongly felt in Assamese life in general. It might be that Buddhism visited Assam in its declining phases. It can be established from the isolated images of Buddha discovered, and the existence of sects as *Ratikhowa Sampradai* (creed of nocturnal enjoyment) that can be connected with the declining phases of Buddhism, that once this religion of the "Enlightened One" prevailed in this country. The following comment in the *Early History of Kamarupa* throws light on it:

> It is difficult to believe that Pragjyotisha, which was so close to Uttar Kosala and Magadha could remain away from Buddhistic influences.

It is said that the temple of Madhaba at Hajo, was originally a Buddhist temple, which ultimately yielded, as a place of worship, to Hindu pressure. The temple deity was known as Mahamuni, and it is, to this day, the place of pilgrimage, not only of the Hindus but also of the Buddhists. Every winter, the Bhutanese of the neighbouring hills, who are Buddhists, visit this temple of Mahamuni. The Bhutanese are a familiar sight in Assam at a particular period of the year. They come for their small trades and commerce.

There are a scattered population of Buddhists, at present, amongst the Khamtis. It is believed that once the Kalitas of Assam were followers of this religion ; there are others, who think, that the Banias and the Kaibartas were originally Buddhists. Whatever the case might be, they are not so today. Due to the proselytising influence of Hinduism of late, the influence of Buddhism must have vapoured out so far as as these peoples are concerned. Till Naranarayan's reign, who ruled in the 16th century, and also covering a considerable portion of his rule, Assam was the home of many creeds and faiths,—offshoots of Saktaism and certain other phases of decadent Buddhism. These faiths were, often, unspeakably crude and primitive ; under their influence witchcraft was exalted into worship and superstition into a dogma. The forms and contents of these religious processes were likewise primitive and imbubed with a crude philosophy.

Darkness, however, could not prevail long. During the reign of king Naranarayan, the first glimmer of light was visible. It was, in fact, a candle flame against a sea of gloom ; nevertheless, it was light. Vaishnavism came like a cleansing storm. Sankardev, who pronounced the doctrine of purified Vaishnavism, and inculcated the doctrine of salvation by faith and prayer, rather than by sacrifice, was the guiding spirit of this religious revolution. Sankardev was born in 1449 A.D. The age in which the Vaishnavite religion came to flourish, was an age essentially of unrest and enthusiasm. The most insistent feature of the age was an impatient progressive spirit, alien to medieval mind. The 16th century was the Age of Renascence in the domain of Assamese culture and religion.

Liberty, not bondage, is the true nature of the soul ; the phenomenal world is unreal or illusory like a mirage or dream. *Bhakti* itself is the gift of a righteous life ; meditation on the incertitude of life and the transitoriness of the world, are the favourite themes of Sankardev. His religion is marked

by a happy. blend of catholicity; the remarkable feature of it is a broad humanity, and a wide democratic sentiment. In the tangled chaos of life, the ideal of *bhakti* was pronounced as the only "metaphysical villa", to use Aldous Huxley's words. The Vaishnavite preachers taught that a life of mere external ritualism, without the spirit that is to underline and actuate the outer life, is a fraud. It is described by Lord Krishna as *mithyachara.*

Sankardev carried on an enormous social work; the Vaishnavite monastery system, that constitutes even to this day the key-position in our social structure, is pre-eminently his creation. It is said by K. R. Medhi that,

> The monastic and congregational systems, the three precious objects (*saranas*), the image processions, the *Padasila,* the *asan* and relics, the offerings of lamps, oil and flowers etc., point to some similarity between Buddhism and Assam Vaishnavism.

This is, of course, true to a great extent. The spiritual heads of Vaishnavism have separate colleges through which they inculcate religion. They are known as *Gossains* or *Sastradhikaras.* They hold a prominent place in the hierarchy of Assamese society. The colleges of the *gossains* are known as *Satras* or sanctified sanctuaries; the spiritual heads and the *bhakats* or resident disciples, have their permanent abodes in the *Satras.* In the principal *Satras,* with the exceptions of a few smaller ones, celebacy is mandatory.

These *Satras* are not educational institutions in the strict sense of the term. In this respect, they differ from the Buddhist monasteries of Burma, whose avowed aim is to impart education. Nevertheless, Assam's Vaishnavite monasteries are good repositories of ancient Assamese art and culture. Though they resemble Buddhist monasteries in their salient features, the inmates *i.e.* the religious disciples never go out, like the Buddhist *bhikus,* into the neighbouring villages to solicit alms. The form of religion that Sankardev preached towards the end

of the 15th century, is known as *Mahapurusia* or "the one pertaining to the Great Soul". It represents a revolt against the pretensions of the priestly class, and the licentuous rites of the corrupted forms of Saktaism. It is uncompromising in its hostility to the worship of idols; it upholds the doctrine of worship of one God in the form of Krishna through hymns and prayers.

It is generally seen that castes in Assam are less rigid; people, from the rest of Hindu India visiting the land in the past, must have found the border line between the different castes indistinct and not well-defined. It is natural in a place where the majority is non-Hindu. The social climate was such that rigid caste distinctions could not flourish and thrive in it. It seems quite probable that alternately each tribal dynasty that came to power, destroyed all such barriers and vestiges of castes, and did, whatever it could, to harmonise society according to its own standard. The evil was puffed out of the social cauldron as they did a genii from a jar.

Saktaism is not without followers in the present-day Assam; their number is small, but it is not insignificant. They worship Kali, which means and represents the procreative force, that is manifested in the female. The temple of *Kamakhya,* situated on the hill *Nilachala,* is the centre and spring-board of Saktaism in Assam. Situated in between the two hill races that follow the matriarchal system *i.e.* the Khasis (a people of the Austro-Asiatic family), and the Garos (of the Mongoloid group), the temple of *Kamakhya* on the Hill Nilachala, is regarded as belonging to a goddess, who represents the procreative aspect of nature; she is a Mother Goddess. In the temple is worshipped no image of the deity; it is a torso, the *Yoni,* of the goddess Sati, which is enshrined in this temple. Dr. B. K. Kakoti puts it thus:

> According to *Kalika Purana* the genital organ of Sati fell here, when her dead body was carried hither and thither in frantic

sorrow by her husband Siva. The mountain represented the body of Siva himself and when Sati's genital organ fell on it, the mountain turned blue. The goddess herself is called Kamakhya, because she came there secretly to satisfy her amour with him.

Sex-worship, in whatever form it might be, was common through the Austro-Asiatic countries in the past. Robert Briffault in his *Sex in Civilisation* says that "the Roman *Saturnalia* and the carnival of Southern Europe are such other instances in the west." V. F. Calverton is more comprehensive in this view, when he says: "survival of sex-worship was common through the dark ages." The temple of *Kamakhya,* where the *Yoni* symbol of the Mother Goddess is regarded as a source of magic influence, "is a living relic of an ancient custom." This temple is supposed to be a relic of the ancient Austro-Asiatic cultural impact on Assam. The word *Kamakhya* is an Aryanised formation of some non-Aryan word-notes, as pointed out elsewhere.

The temple of *Tamreswari Devi,* situated on the north-east frontier of Assam, is a counterpart, in a sense, of the temple of *Kamakhya* in that region ; it was the centre of worship for all the hill tribes of the locality, and through them, it rose to great eminence as a temple of the Goddess known as *Kechaikhati* or "the Eater of raw flesh." This name was derived from the human sacrifices there ; at least, annually once this ritual of human sacrifice was gone through with due *eclat.* The Chutiyas, a powerful Mongolian sect who ruled in that part, were the staunch apogees of this form of worship. This is known as the copper-plate temple, because of the fact that its roof is made wholly of copper. The temple had its tribal priests ; they were called *Deoris.* It is in ruins now.

Though Saivites or disciples of Siva are practically unknown or little known in Assam today, that once it was the most popular form of worship in ancient days, both amongst the tribal and Aryanised population, there is little reason to doubt ;

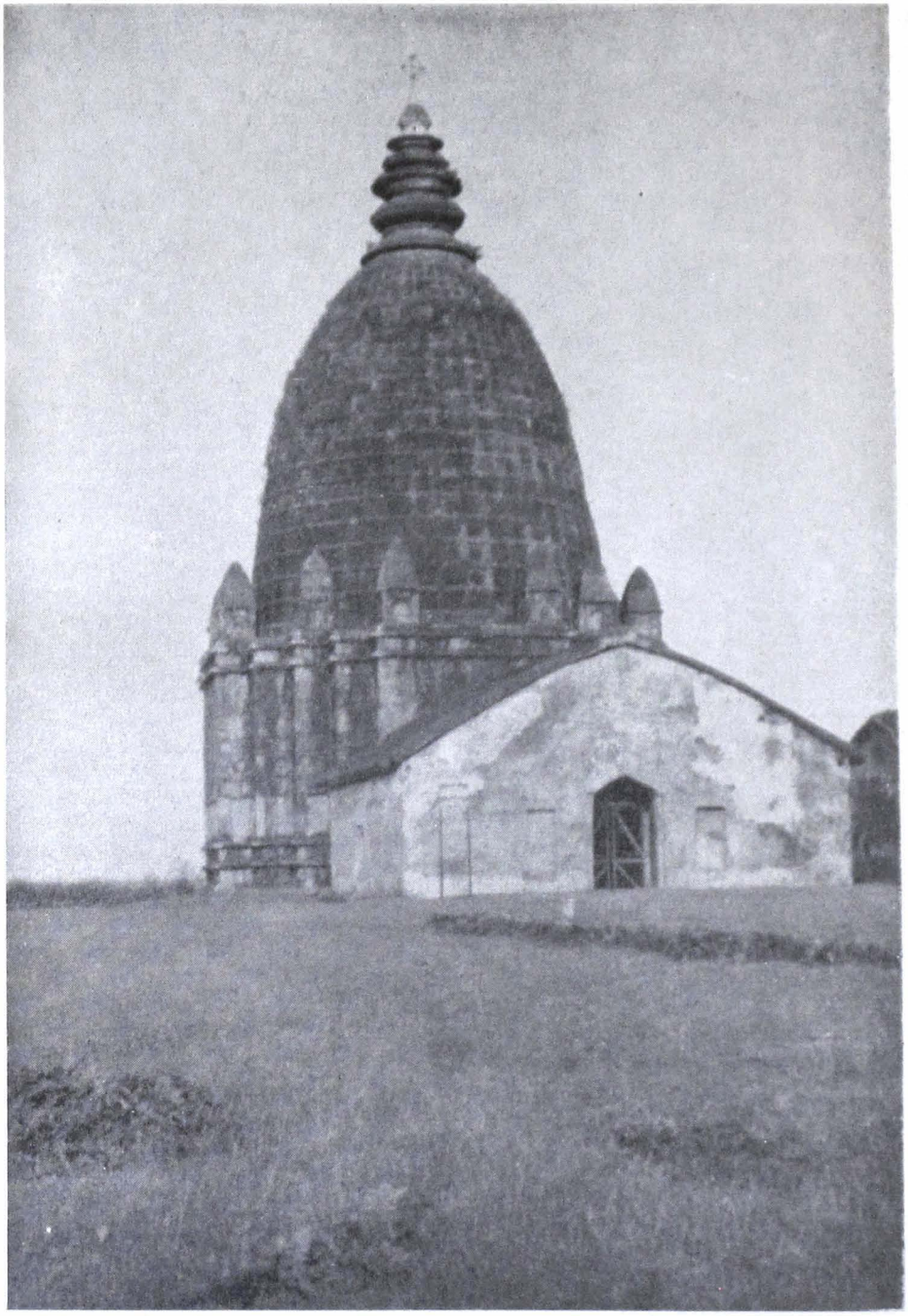
Siva temples were much more numerous during this time than any other temples, dedicated to other individual deities. Hiuen Tsang, the Chinese pilgrim, who visited Assam in 640 A.D. refers to this fact. Siva Singha, an Ahom king who accepted Hinduism, built a temple of Siva called *Siva Dol* in 1720, which lies in the modern town of Sibsagar ; this is a principal *Siva* centre of worship today. The temple of Umananda, situated on a riverain hillock in the Brahmaputra, opposite Gauhati, is another. About the sacrifices prevalent in these temples of Siva, Dr. Kakoti says:

> A curious practice of animal sacrifice is in vogue now in the Siva temples of Assam. On the occasion of the Siva *caturdasi* festival, castrated goats are strangled to death in the precincts of the temples. Their flesh is cooked and a huge feast is held at night in the temples.

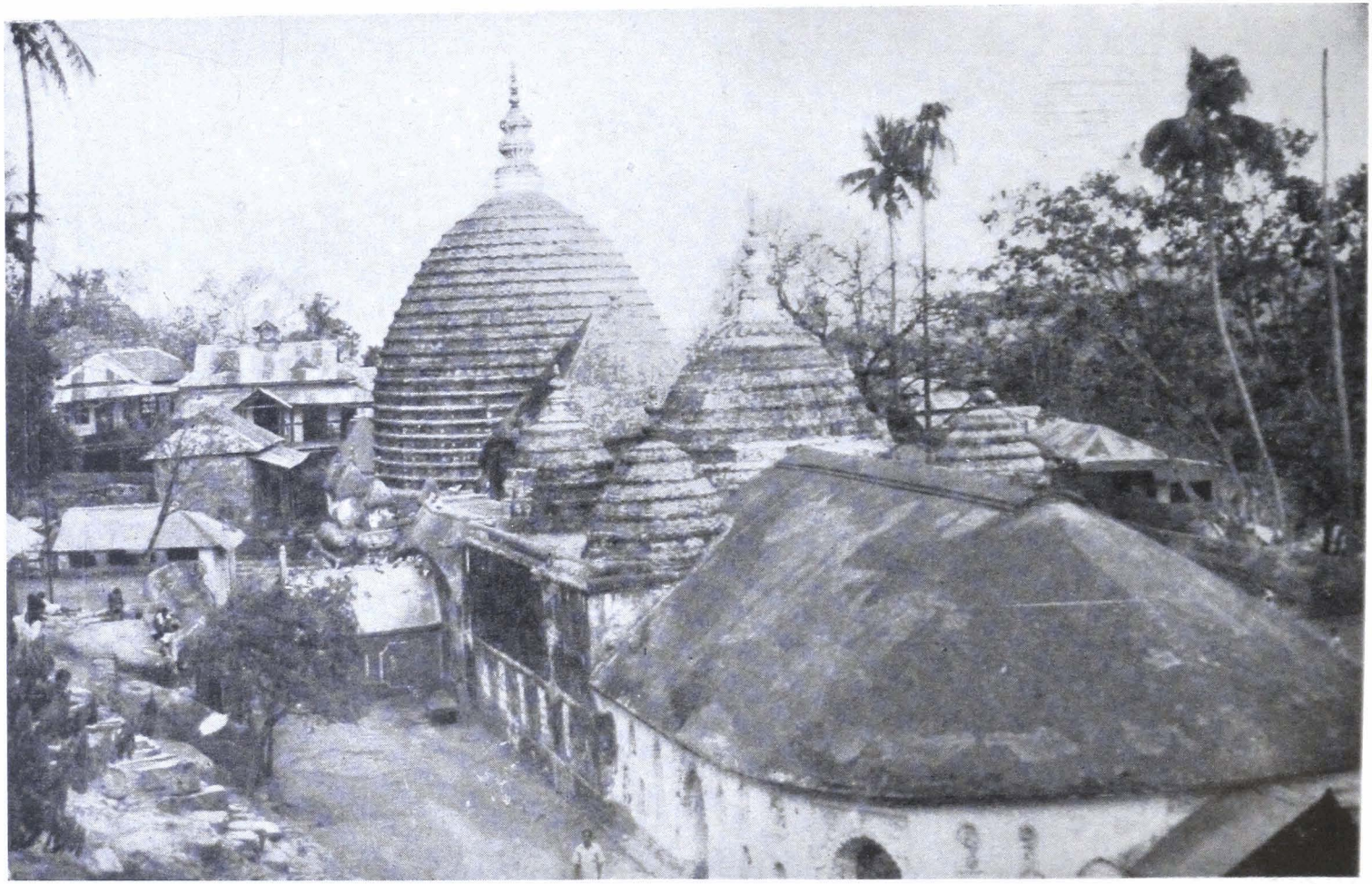
The Saivite creed did not lend itself to the growth of a definite system or school of religion or rituals, with *gurus,* monasteries or sectaries. As such, its influence does not have any definite institutional hold on its votaries. The practice of Durga worship here is only a few centuries old. It came into prominence under Queen Phuleswari Kunwari and the subsequent turmoil under king Rajeswar Singha (1751-1769).

Strictly speaking, it is wrong to divide Assam into distinct Siva and Vishnu zones, on the basis of religious compartmentalism. Things here overlap. The people of the Siva zone are supposed to differ in point of their physical constitution, from the people of the Vishnu zone ; the former is supposed to be more robust than the latter, and the latter is supposed to be more poetic and fragile of the two. In the case of Assam, it is definitely not so. No *Maginot* line, distinguishing people, according to religious pursuits, is possible here.

Thus it is seen that the religious map of India can be broadly divided into four distinct groups: (1) Animism, (2) Hinduism, (3) Islam and (4) Christianity. Assam, as noted



SIBA TEMPLE: SIBSAGAR [*P. 62*



KAMAKHYA TEMPLE.

above, is a Hindu majority state in which it is the Vaishnavite aspect of the Hindu religion that owns a great popularity. True it is that amongst the hill tribes, Hinduism has not penetrated the least, but this must not be allowed to mean that they are all animists. Christianity has made a good headway in the hills. Out of a total population of 25 lakhs of hills people, as many as 10 lakhs or so, are converts to Christianity. The other 15 lakhs follow a sort of animistic belief, which means worship of the different forces of nature, seen through different manifestations of it. The percentage of the followers of Islam in Assam is a small minority ; it is only about 22 p.c. of the total population of the State. In ancient times, during the reign of Ahom and Koch kings, the Muhammedans invaded Assam as many as fourteen times, but, in point of population, they could neither affect any racial change nor produce any ethnological effect. Before Sylhet was separated and made a part of East Pakistan, the Muslim population of the undivided province was 33.7 p.c. of the total people, the Muslim percentage being 60.71 alone in the District of Sylhet. Dr. Rajendra Prasad gives these statistics in his *India Divided.*

Though the Muhammedans invaded Assam on several different occasions, and during one of these times, one of the generals proceeded as far as Sadiya, they could not, however, build a stronghold here. This accounts for the disparity of Muslim population in the State. The Morias or braziers are the followers and descendants of Turbak, a Pathan general, who invaded Assam in the 16th century, and was defeated and killed in this campaign. Muslims of Assam are, for the most part, local converts and, as such, come within either of the broad divisions of the ethnological map.

Of all the Christian missions, that came to spread the gospel of Christ in this country and win converts to it, the American Baptist Mission is the most popular. It first set foot

in this country in the year 1836; the difficulties, they had to face in this, read like a romance. Dr. S. K. Bhuyan says:

> They came to Assam at a time when the older regime was fast disappearing from the view. They brought with them the indomitable spirit of the early New England settlers and their adaptations to new environments as well as their escapades with the aboriginal tribes in whose vicinity they had to work and preach had their counterpart in the struggles waged by the voyager of the *May Flower* and their successor in the land of their adoption.

Of the difficulties these pioneers had to face, the following incident might be an apt illustration. Rev. Jacob Thomas was rowing up the Brahmaputra to Sadiya in a light canoe and before the party could reach Saikhowa, a point on the river, two trees fell with "a crash across the middle boat in which Mr. Thomas sat, instantly sinking it, the larger one felling the missionary with a bolt of death". This tragedy that befell a disciple of Jesus is sung in a poem by Rev. Brown:

> Alas, the shore thine eye beholds,
> Thy feet shall never tread:
> Yone lofty tree a summons hath,
> To bear thee to the dead.
> The dwellers in this valley ne'er
> Shall hear thy warning voice,
> Nor the wild sons of yonder hills
> At thy approach rejoice.

Christianity has not spread on a wide scale in Assam, specially in the plains. According to the Census Report of 1941, Christians are only 69,148 souls in this country. The progress of conversion to Christianity today, is sufficiently halting. At least, it is not spectacular.

CHAPTER IV

The silted flow of years on years,
Is marked by dawns
As faint as cracks on mud-flats of despair.

Stephen Spender

URBAN AND RURAL LIFE

In Assam's economy it is agriculture that occupies a dominant place ; it is seen that about 89 p.c. of her population live by agriculture. Assam is a peasants' land *par excellence ;* not only her economy, but also her social and cultural patterns, are determined by this avocation. Against this context, it is seen that tea is the only industry, worth the name, that occupies any considerable part of the country's economy ; except this, and oil and coal, she has developed no other big industries in the modern sense. As such no big cities nor any other centres of industrial activities or hub have grown in it. There are, no doubt, a few oil and rice mills scattered here and there, a few printing presses too in the towns, but they are so small in out-put and lay-out that they, by no means, constitute any industrial activity or life. Towns have not grown out of their district headquarters importance ; they are merely administrative headquarters constituted of the Government departments, such as the jail, police, military and the court, with a sprinkling of educational institutions and cinema halls. The percentage of town dwellers, compared to the bulk of the State's population, is small. As a matter of fact, 95 p.c. or so of the population of Assam, is rural. The life of the town, as it is, is only a continuation of the village pushed into a slightly higher tension ; the connection between the two is maintained through the Government offices, cinema halls and market places

in the towns on the one hand, and the rice-bowls in the villages on the other. Assam's rural population live either in the villages or in the tea gardens. The villager comes to the town because he has some business to do in some Government office, or he wants to buy a Hongkong hurricane lamp in the market or a few yards of calico, or to see a devotional picture in one of the cinema houses; the townsman goes to the village, because he wants paddy or other village products cheap, or because he has some landed interests or some of his relatives there.

The green shoots of the tea shrubs, the two leaves and a bud, lend panorama to the rural landscape of Assam; they stretch acres after acres of land, with factory houses, and offices and huts of the labourers spread about; it constitutes the minimum details of a tea estate. There are all told 1,067 tea estates here, and out of this total 743 are owned by European companies; the total acreage under cultivation of tea in the State is 405,709, and this accounts for at least half of the tea area in the whole of India today. The world output of tea is 940 million pounds, and India's total output is 570 million pounds, of which 300 million pounds are contributed by Assam. The Toklai Experimental Station, situated on the outskirts of Jorhat town in the Sibsagar District, meets the scientific needs of the industry. In point of research and other intellectual activities, it is a miniature University.

Tea first came to this country in the year 1815; this was the year in which the Burmans led their first invasion of the country. Tea shrubs were found growing wild in the woods and hills of the province; the local hill tribes used to call it *phinak* and drink its beverage. C. A. Bruce, under whose command the British troops made their first contact with the land, experimented it, and he was the first to give a start to this industry here. In the year 1838, the first despatch of tea to Britain was effected. The first tea companies were formed in the year 1839

TEA GARDEN.

PADDY LAND.

with their headquarters in England. Tea shrubs, discovered in the forests of Assam, were planted, on an experimental basis, in the Botanical Gardens of Calcutta first; the soil there did not help its growth, and as such it had to be abandoned. Tea-makers in the initial stage were imported from China, which eventually led to the great tea industry of the State. Of the tea companies that exist today, the first two are the Assam Tea Company founded in 1839 and the Jorehaut Tea Company founded in 1859.

Assam's tea-garden labour-force, and its adjuncts constitute about a million people. They are recruited from different parts of India, mainly Chota Nagpur and Madras. In 1915, in order to facilitate recruitment of labour, the Assam Labour Board was constituted, and finally it developed into the Tea Districts' Labour Association, after the different recruiting agencies and associations of labour merged themselves into this central body in 1917. Till the other day, the wage level of the garden labour was below the subsistence level; they were given little of educational or medical facilities. Under freedom, the conditions have not much altered, but trade unionism amongst the labour population is growing, and demands are being pressed hard.

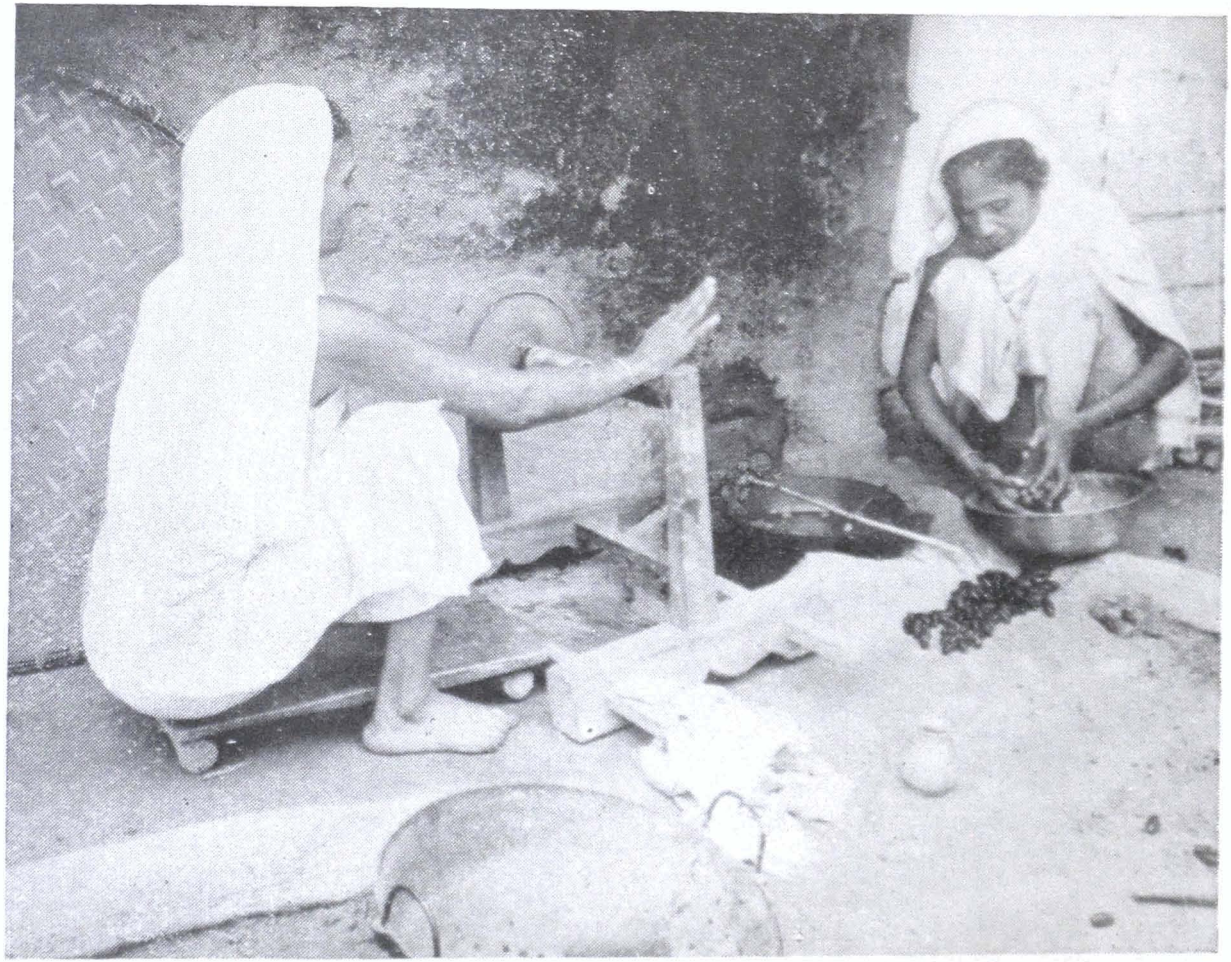
Digboi is the chief oil producing centre of Assam. The total production of crude oil here was 6,51,92,235 gallons in the year 1947, and it was valued at Rs. 1,16,69,410. In 1931 the estimate was 53 million gallons; it employs an army of more than 8,000 labour force. The company is British owned. The total world production of oil is 3,400 million barrels: the present out-put of oil in Digboi is in the neighbourhood of 1.9 million barrels per annum. Oil prospecting is going on at a high pace today; it is believed that the recent find of oil in the Naharkatiya area is going to be, if worked out properly, one of the richest world centres of oil; it is thought that a single well of this fertile oil pit may produce mineral resources eight

times the total output of the whole of Digboi. At present, prospecting is at work in the Naga Hills area also. One of the earliest references to petroleum in Assam was made by C. A. Bruce in 1828. In 1865, H. B. Medlicott also mentioned of the oil springs in Makum Pani, a tributary of the Dehang.

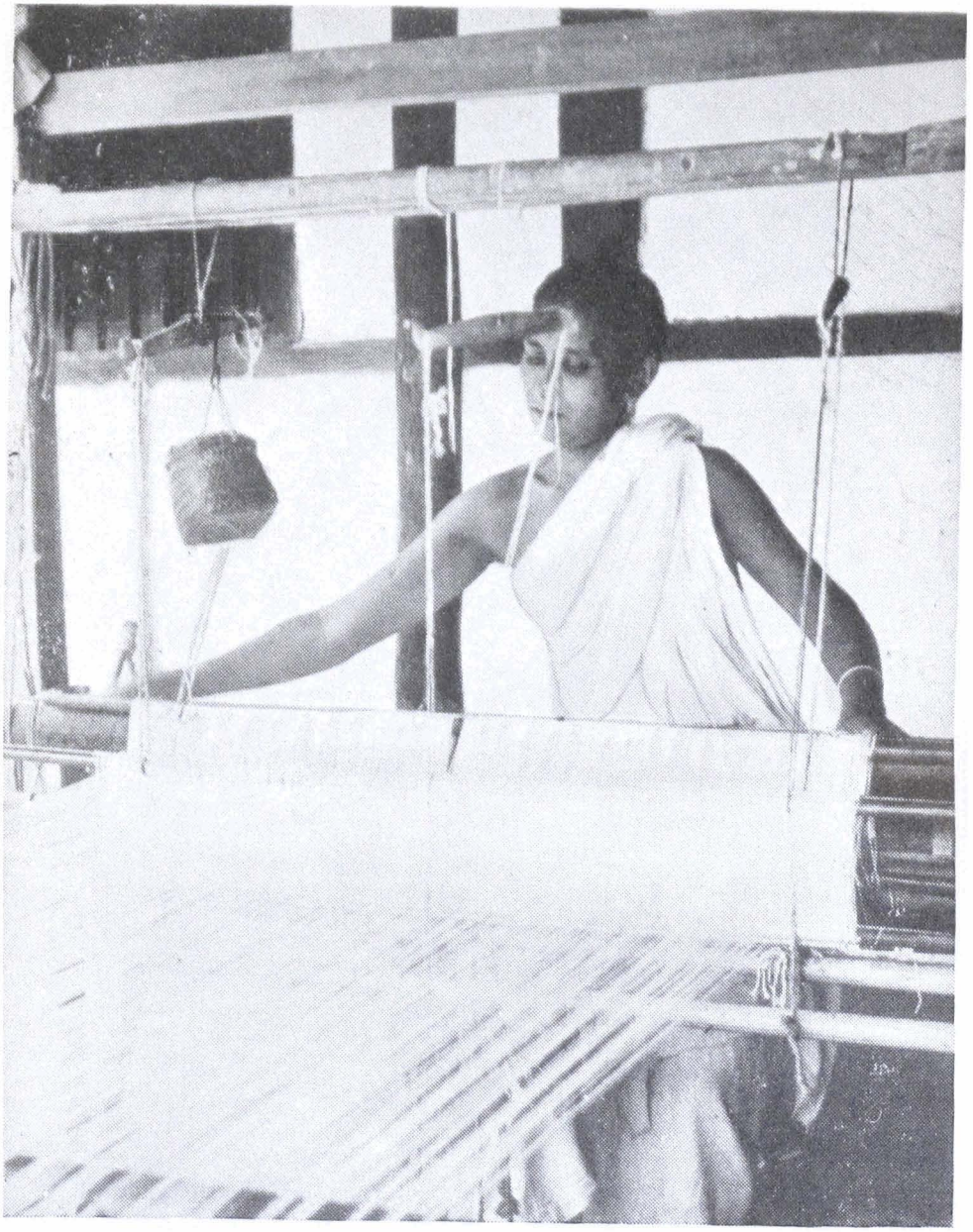
The Digboi labour is recruited from different parts of India, and this town is itself a miniature India, so far as the composition of population is concerned. Ledo, farther to the east, is Assam's principal coal-field; another field is at Nazira in the Sibsagar District. One of the earliest discoveries of coal was near Safrai; it was made in 1828. About 5,000 mds. were actually quarried by men, engaged by the Commissioner of the North-East Frontier by this time. The establishment of a Regional Coal Survey Station at Jorhat, recently by the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research of the Government of India, is calculated to give a fillip to the industry in research and development. It is said that there are in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills about thirteen sillimanite deposits, associated with corundrum, which when worked upon would be a notable contribution to the world's mineral wealth.

Assam, where rainfall is copious throughout the year, provides a fertile soil for cultivation; it provides also a great and valuable wealth of forestry. About 12.2 p.c. of her total area is under forests; they are a good source of revenue for the State Government. Rice is the main crop; it is raised extensively throughout the country; it is the people's staple food. Cotton is produced on a small scale; a certain variety of short staple cotton is grown in the hills and other sub-montane areas. The Garo Hills yield a fine snow-white variety of short staple cotton.

The villages are a network in Assam; these villages are mainly self-sufficient in their economy. And simplicity is their keynote. The peasant ploughs the land and produces his own



MUGA COCOONS AND THE SPINNING WHEEL.



WOMAN AT THE LOOM.

food ; he builds his house with thatch and bamboo collected from the jungle. The women-folk rear silk-worms, and spin and weave for themselves and their family. They have a distinct place in the economy of the family ; they are a useful unit of it. The women-folk, particularly in Eastern Assam, take an active part in the rearing of crops ; they transplant the paddy seedlings, and reap the harvest when ripe. The Assamese girl, engaged in reaping, often brings to the mind Wordsworth's *Solitary Reaper*:

> Alone, she cuts and binds the grain,
> And sings a melancholy strain ;
> O listen, for the vale profound
> Is overflowing with the sound.

The women of this country are distinctive in their dress ; they wear a *mekhela* or long-flowing skirt down to the ankles, a *riha* or breast-cloth, and a shawl. The red pattern embroidered at the end of the *riha* is graceful and symbolic. *Muga* is a regular wear of the women-folk ; men prefer large wraps of *eri* (*endi*) during winter. Silk and cotton cloth, with beautiful designs of indigenous art, are woven by the women at their home looms. Gandhiji says that Assamese women weave faery tales on their textile patterns.

Assam does not have a separate weavers' class ; here, all people, irrespective of caste or creed or social position, weave and almost every house contains a loom. Weaving constitutes the most essential part of a girl's education, and the lack of it does her discredit. The Census Report of 1921 puts the number of household handlooms at one and a half million ; it is still more widely spread in the hills. In fact, sericulture and handloom weaving are the most important cottage industries ; the pricipal variety of silk consists in *eri* (a white silk of the mulberry worm) and *muga* (a yellow buff silk). Assamese women are remarkable for their simplicity in dress ; this simplicity is brought out with taste and decorum. Gandhiji

said that he finds nowhere living examples of such taste wedded to simplicity as represented by the women of Assam except those of Malabar.

Cane and bamboo, and palm-leaf work constitute an indigenous cottage industry in rural areas; things of different artistic workmanship and daily use are made with these materials. They are mostly baskets, fans and oven-shaped hats called *japis*. The *japis* are often ornamented, and they add to people's dignity and social position using them.

Silk-worm rearing is a considerable rural occupation in Assam; silk yarn is obtained through this process. The *pat* worm which yields a golden, lustrous silk, is fed and reared on the *som* tree. Often, this worm is reared on the *chapa* or the *mezankari* tree and in that case it spins a white cocoon; the *eri* worm's attachment to the *era* or castor oil plant has obtained for it this particular name. Generally, the *eri* or the *endi*, as it is known, is slightly drab in colour but its texture is essentially of a fine durable quality. It is light but warm; Sualkusi, a village in the District of Kamrup, is the heart of this industry at present. It has a far-flung reputation in this particular branch of cottage industry.

The chief amusements of the countryside are dancing and singing, stage-acting called the *bhawana*, buffalo-fights etc. These items of merry-making are generally connected with the *Bihus*, a popular agricultural festival; the *Bihus* are supposed to be of Austo-Asiatic origin and their influence on the pattern of Assamese culture, though imperceptible, is potent. The Austro-Asiatic people were well-versed in the art of cultivation; they used to raise crops of vegetable roots, betel nuts, betel leaves, ginger etc. The habit of chewing raw betel nut, as the Assamese do, is supposed to be an Austro-Asiatic custom.

Of the three *Bihus*, the *Bohag*, the *Magh* and the *Kati Bihu*, celebrated at different periods and cycles of

JAPI-MAKING—ASSAMESE COUNTRY UMBRELLA. [*P. 70*

NAMGHAR OR CONGREGATIONAL PRAYER HALL—BARPETA SATRA.

nature, the first is *the* foremost in point of importance and ceremony; it is celebrated with the advent of the Assamese new year, which synchronizes with *mid-April.* This is the time when the winter veil of fog and mist is lifted, and the dry bones of the wintry earth quicken under a mystic touch. And the touch is that of spring gliding into the naked bones of the trees, into the empty fields and hearts of men, with music and joy. The *Bihu* festival is an enactment of the primitive urge for expression, through rites and rituals, songs and dances of a natural fact. It is the fact of nature's pro-creative urge which is symbolised through this festival of *Bahag Bihu.* The primitive man regarded fertility as a blessing "within the bestowal of the gods", as Ruth Benedit says. The Aryans introduced a religious and spiritual colour into it, and associated this folk-festival with certain items of worship. Nevertheless, it is a festival of communal joy without any sectarian bias to colour or vitiate it.

Folk-dances are a common feature in Assamese social life and with the approach of this *Bihu,* held in April, every individual is enlivened with a new spirit; he is caught in the *joi de vivre,* and when he dances, it might be in the open field under a banyan tree or in the shade of a bamboo-grove, or on the embankment of an ancient tank, he does it with an open soul. The drum beats and produces a frantic music that has an appeal on the sinews of the body, the buffalo-horn blows and rouses the softer notes of the young hearts and draws them into the golden world of dreams and aspirations, the texture of which is, no less, woven by passions, born of the *Bihugits* and the *Bongits.* These songs are, for the most part, youthful vibrations and are woven round themes of love and young nature. The following are a specimen:

(i)

My mind, I cannot fix in my home, O' my love;
My mind, I cannot fix in the paddy land;
My mind wants to fly as is the roving cotton.

(ii)

I looked on to the bamboo tops to see
which one is straight;
I looked into the face of my love
and found it was a full moon.

Poetry is the oldest form of literary expression ; when men danced to the "cadence of consenting feet", they sang songs to beat music to its tonic rhythm: This is how the *Bihu* songs originated. These songs are spontaneous in creation, and in point of appeal and aesthetics, seldom do they come within "time's bending sickle's compass". These *Bihu* songs, to use Ostrovsky's words on Russian music, contain in them "the lofty sincere romanticism of a simple people, which is free from all affectations".

Of the other two Bihus, the *Magh Bihu* is celebrated in mid-winter with bonfire and social gatherings and feasts ; it may be called the Harvest Home. It appears that the influences of the hills are potent on it. To the ancient man, the community fire had an utilitarian value. It was the centre of his social life ; ancient art, song, dance and music all grew out of these social gatherings by the fireside ; in fact human civilisation grew out of the fireside. Besides, it was necessary to the primitive man for self-protection against wild animals that infested the earth in those times. This pagan utility of the fire somehow lingered on to later times, and the *Magh Bihu* represents the primitive aspect of life. During this *Bihu,* the bonfire is the conspicuous feature of the rural landscape ; after the harvest is gathered, the earth is empty and barren and the bonfires lend colour to it. The later Aryan migrants added elements of devotional ritualism to this non-Aryan festival.

The *Kati Bihu* is the inconspicuous of all the *Bihus ;* it synchronizes with the time when the green shoots in the fields put forth the first blossoms ; lights are burnt on this occasion and the goddess of prosperity is propitiated.

BHAWANA, FOLK PLAY. [*P. 73*

BODO MUSICIANS: CHIFUNG BAHI

The *Bihu* dances have given rise to a number of musical accompaniments; the *dhols* or the native drums enjoy great popularity. There are people who command considerable proficiency in them. The *mahar singar pepa* is an indigenous flute, made of the buffalo horn. It accompanies the *Bihu* dances.

The Bodos of the plains have an intricate pattern of dances; they are associated with a primitive ritual called *Kheraipuja.* The instruments used in them are indigenous; a flute called the *chifung banhi* is most attractive in its musicalness. The *gagana* is another.

The *bhawanas* are a popular Vaishnavite stage-performance introduced by Sankardev; a cycle of dramas, songs and music has grown about it; it has given birth to a new class of music called the *ankianater git*; They are of a devotional content, as rich and varied as the *Borgits,* a class of divine hymns. They constitute the life of the village *namghars* or congregational prayer halls; the *namghars* constitute the venue of the devotional dramas. The *sutradhara* dance is an integral part of this cultural life; The *Ojapalee* dances of non-Vaishnavite origin are other items of this cultural life; they are usually associated with the worship of the goddess Manasa. Assam is rich in a number of tribal dances besides the Manipuri school of dance that has acquired by now, a far-flung reputation. Of these, the Naga head-hunters dance and the Lushai bamboo dances are particularly soft and graceful. The Khasi *Nongkrem* is another popular tribal dance.

CHAPTER V

Pile up sound on sound
March on with whistle and song.
Vladimir Mayakovsky

LANGUAGE

The two broad divisions of Indian languages are summed up in the *Discovery of India* as follows: "The modern Indian languages descended from the Sanscrit and therefore called Indo-Aryan languages are: *Hindi-Urdu, Bengali Marathi, Gujrati, Oriya, Assamese, Rajasthani* (a variation of Hindi), *Panjabi, Sindhi, Pashto* and *Kashmiri.* The Dravidian languages are: *Tamil, Telegu, Kanarese* and *Malayalam*". The racial content of Assam has its own impress on the linguistic map of the country ; different peoples and tribes from parts beyond the country's frontiers have met here and contributed to the growth of a common speech called the *Assamese.* This word is an Anglicised formation built on the same principle of English syntax as *Singhalese, Canarese* etc. The people call the country *Asom,* and the word, built on it to mean the language or the people who speak it, is *Assamiya.*

Assam, originally, meant the land which the Shans conquered and consolidated in 1228. When the British, after occupation, constituted the new province in 1874, they extended the name to mean the whole territory that came within its purview. Different peoples as the Austro-Asiatics, the Aryans, the Dravidians and the Mongoloids have made their contribution to this common speech but the one that stands out as the most distinctive landmark of all, is the Aryan element and the influences built by it. The contribution made by the Maithili speech towards the composite character of the Assamese

speech is a major fact. It is often supposed that this language, in its modern garb, is an off-shoot of the *Kamarupee*, which in its own turn, contained a large mixture of eastern Maithili elements. Hiuen Tsang, who visited Kamarupa in the 7th century A.D., was of the opinion that the language of ancient Kamarupa "differs a little from that of mid-India." It presupposes the Magadhan element in the modern Assamese language. Dr. Grierson who discovers linguistic affinities between Assam and North Bengal deduces Magadhi as the common source of all the eastern dialects. He writes thus:

> Magadhi was the principal dialect which corresponds to old eastern Prakrit. East of Magadha lay the Gauda or *Pracya* Apabhramsa, the headquarters of which was at Gaur in the present district of Malda. It spread to the South and South-east and here became the parent of modern Bengali. Besides spreading southwards Gauda Apabhramsa also spread to the east keeping north of the Ganges and is there represented at the present day by northern Bengali and in the valley of Assam by Assamese. North Bengal and Assam did not get their language from Bengal proper but directly from the west. Magadhi Apabhramsa, in fact may be considered as spreading out eastwards and southwards in three directions. To the north-east is developed into northern Bengali and Assamese, to the south into Oriya and between the two into Bengali. Each of these three descendants is equally directly connected with the common immediate parent and we find North-Bengali agreeing in some respects rather with Oriya, spoken far away to the south than with Bengali of Bengal proper of which it is usually classed as a sub-dialect.

Often people are prone to hasty generalisations, because of casual affinity between the language of Assam and that of northern Bengal districts, and propound the theory of the former being an offshoot or *patois* of the latter ; this not true. The fact is explained by Dr. Grierson ; subsequent researches on the subject by Dr. B. K. Kakoti has established the independent character of the Assamese language, and the factors that have worked it. Ancient Kamarupa that Hiuen Tsang, the Chinese pilgrim of the 7th century, describes as *Kama-lu-po*, was an extensive kingdom ; it covered a portion of North Bengal.

There are evidences to prove the existence of a close cultural contact between Kamarupa on the one hand, and Videha and Magadha on the other. The Aryan wave that came to this country, started from these two places; of the Aryan population in Assam, a considerable percentage is from North of Bihar. It was subsequently re-inforced by migrations from Uttar Pradesh: this is how Assamese came to be established as one of the Indo-Aryan languages in this place. There are words of every day use in Assamese that bear a close parallel to words in Hindustani, Bihari, Oriya, and other western dialects; of course, there are certain variations in the meanings of these words. It might be that, these words descended from a common source and in different languages developed an individual and local content or meaning. There are other Assamese words that bear a close affinity to words in the Marathi language; it is curious to note that these words are not to be found in Hindustanee. It might be due to some contact existing between the two languages in ancient times. Or it might be due to race migrations.

The reasons given by K. N. Dikshit to justify archaeological affinities between Assam and *mid*-India may be taken to justify linguistic affinities between these two regions:

> The affinities of Assamese art would seem to lie more with the schools of Bihar and Orissa than with the contemporary Pala art of Bengal. This is not unnatural as of the streams of influence that have moulded the culture of Assam, the strongest current has always been from North Bihar and Mid-India.

In fact, Assamese is a composite language into which words of both Indo-Aryan and Indo-Chinese origins have made their way. The Indo-Chinese group of languages is a large family divided into different sub-sections; people belonging to the language groups as the Monkhmer, the Tibeto-Burman, the Siamese-Chinese etc., of the Indo-Chinese family of languages

entered into Assam in different successive waves and added to the texture of the Assamese language as a whole.

Dr. B. K. Kakoti has pointed out in his *Assamese : Its Formation and Development,* the loan-words of the Indo-Chinese group that are to be found in the Assamese vocabulary. They may be sub-classed under the following heads: (1) Austro-Asiatic: (a) *Khasi,* (b) *Kolarian,* (c) *Malayalam,* (2) Tibeto-Burman: *Bodo,* (3) Thai: *Ahom.* Though the Khasis and Syntengs, a principal group of the Monkhmer languages, lived an isolated life in the hills, it would be, however, wrong to say that there were no cultural or commercial contacts between them and the plains. Due mainly to commercial and cultural intercourses, there were mutual borrowings of words. Dr. Kakoti has provided a list of these loan words in his book. The influence was mutual ; it cross-connected these two groups of people in matters of linguistic contact.

The Monkhmer language family was succeeded by peoples of the Tibeto-Burman sub-family. They either pushed the existing population to the hills or gradually superimposed their speech on them. The dialect of the Tibeto-Burman sub-family belongs to three distinct groups (1) Naga, spoken in the Naga Hills, (2) Kuki-Chin, spoken in the Manipur, Cachar and Lushai Hills, (3) Bodo comprises all the non-Aryan elements of the Assam Valley. To the Siamese-Chinese group belong the Ahoms, the Khamtis, the Phakials, the Turngs, the Noras etc. At present, people belonging to this language group, are all found in eastern Assam. Of all the language groups, the Tibeto-Burman is by far the largest ; it contains the greatest variety of tribes and peoples. Of this, the largest is the Bodo language group: the Kacharis, the Koches, the Ravas, the Hojais, the Lalungs, the Garos and, perhaps, to a great extent the Morans and the Chutiyas all of them belong to this great Bodo family

of languages. Most of them speak different dialects but all together contribute to the growth and formation of the Assamese language. The home of the Bodo language group is, in the main, in the Brahmaputra valley; almost all the hill tribes, with the exception of the Khasi-Synteng language group, is believed to have belonged to the Tibeto-Burman family of languages.

The Ahoms, as they advanced and conquered Assam, used their own language; this language of the Ahoms was a dialect of the Shan family which was a member of the Siamese-Chinese language group that belonged to the Indo-Chinese constellation of languages. Though the Ahoms ruled in Assam for about 700 years, the survival of Ahom words in the Assamese language is considerably small. Words like *lang,* meaning "back", *pung,* meaning "mine", *pukha,* meaning offshoot, and a few other Ahom words attached to river and place names as *Namrup, Namsang, Namdang* etc., are a few survivals of Ahom words in modern Assamese language. They, no doubt, built a kingdom here, but the pressure from bottom was such that the captors, so far as cultural conquest is concerned, became ultimately the captives; finally in course of time, they abandoned their own language and adopted the language of the people whom they ruled; with the exception of the *deodhais* and the *bailungs,* tribal astrologers and priests, the Ahom language is nowhere to be found now.

The Bodos have a wider range of influence on the Assamese language; the survival of Bodo place-names and names of rivers today, bears testimony to this fact. *Di* or *ti* prefixes, used before different river-names as *Di*-bong, *Di*-khau, *Di*-sang, in the Brahmaputra valley, mean "water" in the Bodo language; these are Bodo river-names. The Dravidians of Assam have lost both their racial and linguistic identities; philologists, of course,

hold that the earliest linguistic formation recognisable in India is Dravidian ; though it subsists, and is spoken in parts of India, in Assam it is submerged completely by more powerful linguistic influences. Though small, there is a percentage of Munda elements in the formation of the Assamese languauge. Logan is of the opinion that the Munda language is an intermixture of Dravidian and Monkhmer dialects. There are other linguists who hold a different view, and are of the opinion that it is a separate formation. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that it has greater affinity to the Monkhmer family of languages than to any other.

It is a moot point whether Mongolian dialects found an existing Dravidian basis or not, to build on. Logan holds it that at the foundation of different Bodo and Naga languages, there lies the Dravidian language as the basis. Dr. Grierson, on the other hand, dismisses this view as wholly untenable. It is a fact that in the course of time, Aryan and Bodo languages completely obliterated Monkhmer dialects in the hills and the plains except in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills where it subsists to this day. Bodo dialects are used today by more than half a million people in Assam.

The reasons, why the Mongoloid tribes as the Ahoms, the Rabhas, the Kacharis etc., have forsaken their tribal languages in favour of the Assamese language, are not far to seek. Assamese was the language of the priests ; and in the process of conversion from tribal beliefs to Hinduism, the priests introduced their own language. While the Tibeto-Burmans and the Mongolians invaded Assam from the north-east, the Aryans appeared on the scene from the north-west. The reference to Kamarupa in the Epics and the Puranas testifies to the fact that Aryan priests and warriors came to Assam at a very early date ; they also brought with them their Hindu religion and the Sanscrit language as an expression of it. These diverse

influences have combined and co-operated to make Assamese, a member of the Indo-Aryan family, the principal language of the Brahmaputra valley. It is surrounded on all sides by different languages of the Tibet-Burman group. Besides, Assamese and dialects of the Tibeto-Burman language, Bengali and Hindi are spoken by a good number of people ; of the other Indian languages, Mundari, Santal, Oriya and the like are spoken mostly by the tea-garden labour people which constitutes a considerable bulk of the population of Assam.

CHAPTER VI

O what is that sound which so thrills the ear
Down in the valley drumming, drumming?
W. H. Auden

LITERATURE

(i) *Old Assamese Literature*

(a) *Popular songs and ballads*

Dr. Grierson is of the opinion that "Assamese literature is essentially a national product. It always has been national and it is so still." The aphorisms of Dak Mahapurusa constitute the earliest didactic Assamese literature, so far recorded in books. Its date is not finally fixed. According to the *Assamiya Sahityar Chaneki,* "the peculiarity of the language leaves little doubt that it belonged to a time prior to that of Sankardev, the father of Assamese Literature". Nothing is known more definitely about this popular poet of great wit and worldly wisdom. His sayings are found popular not only in Assam but also in Bengal, Bihar and Nepal ; these wise maxims tell peasants and people, mostly in verse, when and how they should perform certain tasks relating to agriculture, marriage, and social behaviour. The *Vachanawalis* or sayings of Dak Mahapurusa reflect the spirit of the age ; in some of them there are allusions to the Buddhist doctrine of *dharma.*

Literature of the people's age was essentially of the unwritten type ; it was preserved in the vault of people's memory. Poetry is the expression of a full and spontaneous heart ; it is in folk-songs that we see it at its very source. Assamese literature is rich in folk-music and the characteristics of folk-songs are spontaneity and deep-toned simplicity. Folk-songs are inevitably strophic in form ; in them the same tune

serves for each stanza. Most of the folk-songs in Assamese are connected with the *Bihus*. The following are an example of the *Bihu* song:

(i)

I shall be a bird and swim in your pond,
I shall be a fish and get caught in your net,
I shall be perspiration and roll down your body,
I shall be a fly and settle on your cheeks.

(ii)

I can leave the Dikhau river,
I can forsake the Janji river,
I cannot leave your thoughts:
I can be without food.

Bongits, of the type of woodman's ballads in the west and allied in spirit and thought to the *Bihugits*, constitute a prolific variety of songs in Assamese literature. While engaged in the fields, the gleaner sings; while rearing *endi* and *muga* cocoons in the mulberry groves, the peasant-spinner sings. As he paddles leisurely his boats down the stream, or draws his net in the silent lagoon, the man of the river sings. These songs contain a melancholy emotion and a vague mystic drift. They are often riotous and buoyant in passions, and expressions alike.

The *Nawariagit* or waterman's ballads are allied to the *Bongits* in their expressions of spontaneous joy. Major John Butler wrote in 1885 thus:

> Assam is intersected by rivers; the Assamese prefer moving about in the little canoes to travelling by land: watermen seem greatly to enjoy these boat trips, always singing songs as they paddle along.

Another class of songs called the *Baramahirgit* speaks of an extensive river-borne trade in the past. The Brahmaputra and its numerous tributaries were the principal thoroughfares in those times before land-routes were opened.

Old Assamese ilterature is equally rich in marriage and cradle songs ; many of the marriage songs are replete with direct or indirect allusions to epic legends and scenes ; indispensable, as they are in various rituals, these songs are supposed to be songs of mythological allusions with a spiritual touch ; there are other marriage songs that are purely secular in sentiment and are rendered eloquent with exquisitely homely imageries :

> The birds bring up their offspring
> To beautify the branches of their trees :
> Ah me, to adorn but a stranger's house
> With love my mother brought me up.

The cradle songs are greatly popular and tender in feelings ; they are profuse and vibrant with familiar pictures of the home. These songs touch the fringes of childhood imagination with "pleasant illogicality," as Tagore used to say. The nursery songs or the cradle songs greatly influenced, with their tender kindergarten setting, the composition of Sridhar Kandali's exquisite *Kankhowa* poems ; its author was a contemporary and dear disciple of Sankardev, the father of Assamese literature, who flourished in the 15th century. The greatness of Sri Krishna is revealed through his childhood pranks and personality in these nursery rhymes. Hence its appeal is intensely powerful. It is an artistic poem, evidencing the poet's deep insight into the child's heart, and it depicts divine exaltation.

The sentiment of the age, grouped into two distinct classes through poetry, was both sensuous and spiritual. The *Borgits* or the Vaishnavite devotional songs are spiritual in purpose and purport, and intellectual in theme ; they struck a note of departure from the prevailing temper of the times. Madhabdev, in his *Borgits,* pictures Lord Krishna as a child and *Brajadham* as the mytho-poetic land of Sri Krishna's *lila* or sports. In this land of childhood, among the grown-ups are

the milk-maids of Dwaraka and Jasodadevi, the eternal Madonna. Here Lord Krishna, with his symbolic flute, is conceived not as an amorous youth, a happy melodist "forever piping songs forever new" but as a child with "trinklets" dancing, as it were, "upon the silver edge of darkness," as an English author puts it.

Besides popular songs and Vaishnavite poetry, there flourished a group of poets, essentially non-Vaishnavite in ideas and inspiration under the patronage, primarily of Koch kings. The Koches were a powerful people who gave law and learning to the country for a good number of years ; under their eminent ruler Biswa Singha, they extended their kingdom far and wide, and made themselves the ruler of Kamatapura in the 15th century. Under the patronage of this king, Durgabar, a non-Vaishnavite poet, composed his songs of the *Ojapali* dances, and other songs on the legendary theme of Behula ; there were other songs composed by this poet on the legends of the *Ramayana* and the *Padmapurana*: these songs are known as *Durgaboree* songs. Durgabar was Saivite by creed ; untramelled by religious influences, particularly of the Vaishnavite school, he displays an art on a par with that of the poets of this religious group.

Narayandev, who flourished under the patronage of the king of Darrang, is a member of Durgabar's school of non-Vaishnavite poets. His songs are known as *Sukanamni* ; it constitutes the main item of the *Ojapali* dances. Narayandev's *Padmapurana* is an artificial epic that describes the sufferings and wanderings of Behula. The difference between Vaishnavite and non-Vaishnavite poetry is one of spirit rather than of diction. While the poetry of the first group is spiritual and lofty in diction and sentiment, that of the other is rather sensuous, saturated with the passions and emotions of the earth ; one is divine in inspiration, and the other is mundane. Of the popular poems the ballads, as a distinct class of poetry, are note-

worthy ; the oldest extant ballads in Assamese literature are *Phulkonwar* and *Manikonwar.*

Like the *Homeridae,* a clan that devoted itself to the recitation of the Greek epics before they were finally inscribed on paper, the *Boragis,* a class of minstrels, used to recite these ballads on festive occasions, or in ceremonial gatherings ; so, as they passed through generations from lip to lip, these popular ballads came to live in the course of time on the tongues of men. Like the *Songs of Roland,* growing at least through three centuries, the ballads *Phulkonwar* and *Manikonwar* grew through ages, as interpolations of pictures, depicting different stages of social growth, show. The *buranjis* or chronicles, prepared under the patronage of the Ahom kings, created an interest in secular subjects and made the literary style less highflown. It was in the subsequent ages in particular that literature passed out of the sombre groves of religion and confined itself to subjects, mostly of secular and human interests. Besides this, there are numerous other treatises on astronomy, mathematics, cattle diseases, dance poses etc., that constitute a distinct milestone of Assamese literature of the later period.

(b) *Vaishnavite Literature*

Though folk-songs constitute a large bulk of the old Assamese literature, strictly speaking, it is with Hem Saraswati, who lived and wrote in the 13th century, that Assamese literature started its recorded existence. This poet started his literary career in the pre-Vaishnavite age with *Prahlad Charit ;* the theme of this poem was borrowed from the *Bamana Purana.* Other poets as Harihar Vipra, with his translation of the *Aswamedha Parva* and Kaviratna Saraswati and Madhab Kandali, together with Hem Saraswati, can be regarded as precursors of the Vaishnavite rich dawn that succeeded soon after. The majority of literature in the pre-Vaishnavite era consists in

episodes from the epics such as *Aswamedha Parva, Joyadratha Badha* etc. Rudrakandali, of the pre-Vaishnavite sub-period, translated into Assamese the *Drona Parva* of the *Mahabharata,* while Madhabkandali rendered the *Ramayana* into Assamese under the auspices of king Mahamanikya of Tripura. The literary stronghold of the Vaishnavite period was principally in western Assam, as forces that stimulate growth of literature found a congenial soil there. King Naranarayana's reign is the age of renascence in Assamese life and literature.

Sankardev and Madhabdev, two best known poets of Assam, belong to the later medieval period. Sankardev, a renowned Sanscrit scholar, who was born in 1449, was the first great poet in point of time, of the Assamese people ; in order of merit, he is amongst the first of all Assamese poets. By one of those happy accidents of fate that produces genius like jewels from a rock, he was the central figure of a renascence that touched all aspects of life and culture. He held the magic mirror to the face of a country, torn by religious animosities, almost with the zeal of a crusader and soon with delightful surprise, as if shaken from slumber, the people came to recognize themselves. They could trace in it not only the lineaments of their face but also those of their soul.

Towards the close of the century he was born in, Sankardev, with a view to propogate his religious doctrines and tenets, began to compose literary works, poems and dramas based on the Sanscrit *sastras ;* his popular masterpiece is the *Kirtan,* a book of deeply intellectual and religious verses. Written in a way, destined to be greatly popular, it contains spiritual thoughts gathered from the *Vedanta,* the *Sreemat Bhagabatam,* the *Gita,* the *Padmapurana* etc. "Who ever touches this, touches a man," said Walt Whitman about his *Leaves of Grass.* Whoever touches the *Kirtan* touches Sankardev, the mastermind. He has gone intensely into a nation's aspirations. Sarojini Naidu's words, used in a different context, may best be used

to describe the depth Sankardev reached in a people's dreams and mind:

> Your music on a nation's tongue,
> Your name within a nation's prayer.

Born in 1489, in the district of modern Nowgong, Madhabdev, who died in Cooch Behar in 1596, perfected what his *guru* Sankardev left unfinished. In respect of genius, the disciple is essentially comparable with his master. His poetry came to him as naturally as leaves to a tree in spring. His compositions have invariably a high poetic content and wide appeal. *Namghosa, Bhakti Ratnawali, Janma Rahasya* etc., are some of his principal works. There was not a better musician than Madhabdev ; his mastery of the technique of rhyming is vivid and full of clarity. Himself a deep-voiced singer, he sang his own poems and songs with great musicalness. Like a tempest swaying the reeds, he could sway his listeners with his *Borgits.*

> Be careful, brother
> Till life passes away ;
> The providence of Govinda
> Soon will grant you grace.
> Trifling is life, trifling youth
> All is illusory ; have no care.
> Sorrows, throw them off.
> And fasten thy mind at Hari's feet.
> Desires, cast them off. Break the trap of illusion,
> Saith Madhaba, pin thy faith to the feet of the Lord.

Like Sankardev, Madhabdev, his disciple, also took to the propagation of Vaishnavite tenets and doctrines through songs as the *Borgits* and dramas known as the *bhawanas.* His expressions of the cult of *Bhakti,* as expounded in them, are not only spiritually ennobling but also aesthetically luminous.

Madhabdev's dramas *Chordhora* and *Piparaguchowa* are characterised by a childlike tenderness and temper. The eternal fascination of the child, its simplicity, joy and warmth,

the fond caresses of the mother, her love and affection, are a distinctive feature of Assamese literature of the *Bhakti* school. Madhabdev depicts Sri Krishna as a child in his songs and dramas, seen on a higher plane of imagination. A firm hold on language, a sensitive control on rhythmic climax, a great intensity of passion, all in a nutshell, constitute the keynote of Madhabdev's poetical genius. Besides poetical and religious literature, under royal patronage, the studies of grammar and syntax, and mathematics grew. Purushottam Vidyabagish, for instance, took to the compilation of a grammar and Bakul Kayastha wrote a mathematical treatise in Assamese. *Sri Hastamuktabali,* a scientific treatise on dance-technique, is a monumental work.

Ram Saraswati did the stupendous work of rendering the Sanscrit *Mahabharata* into Assamese. In masterly creation of character, in depth of insight, in beauty and power of language, Hem Saraswati stands on a par with the great figures of old Assamese literature. The staunch career of Bhima, stalking through the Epic as an elemental force, caught the poet's imagination ; to this theme he has devoted a mock-epic called the *Bhimacharit.* Witty and gay, this poem is typically Assamese in quality. Ram Saraswati's *Mahabharata* is, in fact, more an adaptation and less a pure rendering from the original. Like Chaucer improving upon Boccaccio, he improved on his originals as he translated them ; it is more so in the *Bana parva,* in which the glorification of Vishnu is almost carried to the *n* th degree.

Anantakandali, though his identity was veiled in mystery for a considerable time, added to the rich notes of the Vaishnavite orchestra with his musical renderings of mythological themes. He was well versed in Sanscrit ; his *Sahasranam Britanta* and *Dasam Bhagabatam* are scintillating and ennobling in thought and style. In no work of this poet, his genius is displayed more completely as in the idyllic blend of realism, war and

romance, depicted in the *Kumarharan*. He gives a new beauty and wealth of details to an old legend, mentioned in the *Dasam Bhagabatam* and the *Hari Bangsham* and created out of them, a poem of epic brilliance. Anantakandali was a native of Hajo in the modern District of Kamrup.

The poets of the Vaishnavite age are great tellers of stories. Many of the oldest stories are in verse. They accumulated a wealth of storial matter, legends and myths from the epics and the classics. These narrative poems are generally subdivided into two classes, according to subject matter. They are: *Badha Kavyas* or war-poems, depicting the slaughter of monsters, and *Parinoi Kavyas* or wedding epics, describing brave deeds of elopement and marriage. But the undertone of these poems is the same; underneath the wealth of war scenes or brave romance, there is the central theme *i.e.,* the glorification of Lord Vishnu. The *Badha Kavyas* are written on the themes of *Daittyas* and *Danavas* of antiquity like Jaghasur, Kulachal, Aswakarna and others. These are generally adapted and developed from the narratives in the *Mahabharata,* the *Puranas* etc. Like the ancient tales of Scandinavian and Greek literature, of gorgons and demogorgons, fighting in hills and plains or swampy places, the *Badha Kavyas* are epics of supernormal themes of exploits and great deeds.

In Vaishnavite literature this world is conceived as a woods and the desires and attachments of this worldly existence are a fastening snare, in which is imprisoned the soul of man as a deer entrapped.

> The world is a deep forest,
> Spread with the fetters of illusion
> And like a deer I ramble in it.
> The snares of attachments have caught me
> And Destiny like a hunter pursues me.
>
> Sankardev.

The exile of the Pandavas is symbolical of man's exile from heaven on earth. It is a spiritual banishment. The subsequent

wanderings of these Pandavas in deep woods, infested with super-normal forms and their encounter with them, are symbolical of man's brief sojourn on earth, surrounded with malignant forces of life, out to challenge and disturb it. *Hema Sundari,* written by Ram Saraswati, is one of the best poems of the kind. *Kumar Haran* is an excellent example of the type of *haran* or *parinoi kavya ;* it has the freshness of a *St. Agne's Eve,* and it is technically as perfect.

The translation of the *Bhagabata* is a landmark of old Assamese literature. It has produced a deep influence on the minds of men and has brought the fundamentals of religion and ethics nearer to life. Dr. B. K. Kakoti says:

> The religious fervour Sankardev created caught on and innumerable books mostly in verses were composed by his followers. The enthusiasm to make the scriptures accessible to the people in vernacular was so great that some time afer Sankardev, a certain teacher of the school of Sankardev named Bhattadev translated the entire *Bhagabata Gita* and the *Bhagabata Purana* into Assamese prose in about 1593.

Like Giovanni Boccaccio, the father of Italian prose, Bhattadev is the father of Assamese prose.

The religious 'furor', thus created, exhausted itself ; a decline in the great epoch of Vaishnavite literature was all too evident. Poets like Sridhar Kandali tried to enliven its dying ambers, but without much success. This is how the cycle of change in life and culture, as pointed out by Arnold Toynbee, works. The age that succeeded was an age marked by a great political change ; it came under the hegemony of the Tai race called the Ahoms. The cultural tide, naturally enough, changed its course and shifted itself towards the Ahom throne from that of the Koches ; the Ahoms popularised a new kind of prose literature known as the *Buranjis* or chronicles that contained political records of the times. And thus from the beginning of the 17th century, it became an age of history and chronicles ; the change was significant in the sense that it was one from

verse to prose ; with the decline of the Koch kingdom and the consolidation of the Ahom empire in eastern Assam, the centre of intellectual activity moved from the west to the east. With the dissolution of the Vaishnavite literary "compromise," as that of the Victorian era in English literature, a blight fell on Assamese literature as a whole. This was due partly to the rise of a new culture and life under the Ahoms and partly to the fact of the ultimate exhaustion of mythological and religious themes and subject-matter, collected without exceptions, from the epics and other Sanscrit sources.

(ii) *Modern Assamese Literature*

The history of modern Assamese literature is a new growth ; it started with the political change ushered in by the British in 1826 and their subsequent policy of educational reconstruction. Western literary trends and standards entered and came to stay in the new literature of the British period. As a matter of fact, Indian literatures in almost all the languages of this period, derived a large fund of inspiration from foreign lands, particularly Great Britain. Mr. Latif and Mr. P. R. Sen have shown how this has affected modern Urdu and Bengali literatures. The Yandabu Pact ended the *ancien regime* politically ; western education ended it intellectually.

The American Baptist Mission are, in a sense, the torch-bearers of this new age in Assamese literature. With their publication of the Bible in Assamese prose, the new literature started its life. The translation of the Bible was done by Atmaram Sarma of Nowgong in 1818, and it was published by the Baptist Mission of Serampore in Bengal. It was an age of struggle for the Assamese language. As French displaced the Anglo-Saxon tongue in England when the Duke of Normandy ruled there, Bengali, that enjoyed the patronage of the British rulers here, displaced Assamese from offices and schools and super-imposed itself. Like the Cossacks filling the Czarist Army, penmen

from Bengal filled the British offices in Assam. As a result, Assamese was completely jockeyed out of existence and deprived of its legitimate place in courts of administration and educational institutions. Assamese lost not only its rightful place but also its initiative to live and grow.

The redemption, however, came in the hands of the American Baptist Mission, who rightly gave the language of the people a fresh lease of life, and gave it a due share of justice and recognition. Forced by irresistible circumstances, Sir George Cambell's Government initiated an enquiry into the claims of the Assamese language for official recognition. It came in the seventies of the last century, and bore fruits in the ultimate recognition of Assamese as the official language of the province.

The presence in the province of Rev. N. Brown and O. T. Cotter, two American Baptist Missionaries in this hour of crisis for the Assamese language, provided a landmark of history. They came to the province in 1836 ; they brought with them the modern equipment of printing which they instituted in Sibsagar, and made it the home of their religious and literary activities. The printing press accelerated the pace of literary progress. The Christian Missionaries wanted to meet the people through the medium of their tongue. They themselves assiduously learnt Assamese and wrote the first primer to be used in the schools they established. One of the potent forces in the campaign of ultimate restoration of the language from the morass it was consigned to, was Anandaram Dhekial-phookon. He received his education in the Mission school at Sibsagar and then in the Hindu College, Calcutta, during 1881-1884. His efforts in this matter were bold and strenuous.

W. Robinson, an American Baptist Missionary, published a grammar of the Assamese language from Serampore, Bengal, as early as 1840. It encouraged further researches in the

subject, which led to the publication of N. Brown's *Grammatical Notes of the Assamese language;* it served as an authentic linguistic document till the publication of *A few Remarks on the Assamese language by* A. R. Dhekial-phookon in 1855; H. C. Barua's *Assamese Grammar* that saw light in 1897, was closely followed in 1900 by his Anglo-Assamese dictionary *Hem-Kosha.* Miles Bronson's Anglo-Assamese dictionary is a stupendous work, done by a foreigner that contained about 14,000 words. Jaduram Barua is the real Dr. Johnson in the field of lexiography; he was the first to compile a dictionary of the Assamese language; it was done as early as 1839.

N. Brown made great attempts to preserve old manuscripts and antiquated publications as Bakul Kayastha's *Kitabat Manjari,* that was first published in 1845. This led to a collection of about forty old Assamese *puthis i.e.* manuscripts during 1840-50 by the Baptist Mission. It stimulated an antiquarian interest. It was this interest that led to the enthusiastic publication, a few years later, of the *Kirtan,* and the *Assamiya Ramayana* by literary spearheads like Haribilash Agarwalla and Madhab Ch. Bardoloi. This produced an enthusiastic effect and helped to link the present with the past.

The Missionaries started a monthly periodical called the *Oronodoi* in 1846; this constitutes a milestone of literary history. Under its inspiration, writers in the vernacular sprang up and books, pamphlets and periodicals came to be registered. In the *Oronodoi* for the first time, the spoken language of the people came to find its legitimate orbit. In the pre-*Jonaki* age, the influence of the west on Assamese literature was not direct; the Anglo-Bengali trend on it was pronounced. The restoration of Assamese to its legitimate claim and the publication of the *Jonaki* in 1889 by a group of students in Calcutta gave real momentum to the progress of Assamese literature.

The latter part of the 19th century had been an era

of unequalled enthusiasm for Assam. It was an age of deep interest and great inspiration. A wave of literary upheaval, optimism, newness of models and techniques arose as a result. The new type of drama as the *Bhramaranga,* translation of Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors,* ousted the old *nataka* of the Vaishnavite school; and it introduced new forms and subject matter. New poetry of the Romantic school, slowly but surely, came to take the place of the old *kavya* with its panoramic patterns. Besides this, new branches of literature like the novel, the short story, the essay made their way into it together with the new drama and the poem.

In the age that preceded this epoch, Assamese literature was simply didactic; under the auspices of the *Jonaki,* it was shorn of its time-old religious and other didactic motives. It was for the first time that literature was humanized. It witnessed a renascence of feelings. Nidhi Levi Farwell, who was the first convert to Christianity in Assam, and was a collaborator with Rev. Bronson in his compilation of the Anglo-Assamese dictionary, that was subsequently published in 1868, is really the pioneer of literature, and of historical research of this period. He was also the spirit behind the Baptist Mission periodical, the *Oronodoi.*

Bholanath Das and Ramakanta Choudhury are pioneers in the use of the blank-verse in Assamese poetry; they were the first to discard the old and conventional methods of the transition poets and adopt the new technique of the blank verse. In 1875 Ramakanta Choudhury (1846-1888) published his first epic *Abhimanyubadh Kavya* written in blank verse in imitation of Milton and Michael Madhusudan Dutt of Bengal. Bholanath Das (1858-1929) published his blank verse epic *Sita Haran kavya* in 1888; its theme is based on the *Ramayana.* He has to his credit collections of poems like *Kabita-mala* and *Chinta-tarangini.* He stands supreme as a pioneer in the creation of the new nature lyric in Assamese. The greatest

contribution of this age is the innovation of the lyric as a class of poetry.

If Balinarayan Bora popularised the satire, Kamalakanta Bhattacharjya (1853-1937) popularised the patriotic theme as a subject matter of Assamese poetry. He is, truly speaking, the creator of nationalism through literature. His poems in *Chintanal* and *Chinta-tarangini,* as much as his essays *Astabakra,* noted alike for strength and mental vigour, created new landmarks for Assamese literature.

Padmanath Gohain-Barua, noted for his prose work *Sri Krishna* and epic poem *Lila Kavya,* and collection of lyrics called *Juroni,* was born in 1871. The lyric collection *Juroni* was published in 1900. Benudhar Rajkhowa, who belongs to this older group of writers, is the author of *Chandra Sambhav Kavya,* and a number of songs and lyrics. The outstanding personalities of the next group are Lakhinath Bezbarua and Chandrakumar Agarwalla. The indigenous blossoming of human intellect is possible in an age that loosens itself from old and traditional bonds that are bound to grow obsolete with time. The literature of Goethe's Germany shows such a flowering ; the age of the *Jonaki,* with Agarwalla and Bazbarua as two of its pilots, is of such flowering and freedom for Assamese literature. With Hemchandra Goswami, who had great historical and antiquarian interests, and who was the life spirit behind that stupendous work *Assamiya Sahityar Chaneki,* they two, Agarwalla and Bazbarua, constitute the Romantic trio in Assamese literature. Goswami's *Phular Chaki,* a collection of lyrics, that were serially published in the journal *Assam Bandhu,* was published in its present form in 1907. Besides, he is the innovator of the sonnet.

With Hem Goswami's *Puwa,* a subtle celebration of the tender aspects of the dawn, nature poetry, as a class of lyrics, grew ; and it reached its high water mark subsequently in the hands of Raghunath Choudhury. *Sadari,* mostly a collec-

tion of nature lyrics, is an eloquent tribute to this poet. These poets conceive of nature, in the best traditions of English romantic poetry, as active and living with a pulse of life.

The lyric of love is a distinctive gift of the age ; the essence of it is Rousseauite. It aims at sublimation of passions. Bezbarua's love lyrics like *Malati, Priyatamar Saundarjya* and ballads like *Dhanbar aru Ratani,* are noteworthy. His collection of poems is *Kadamkali.* He has to his credit dramas like *Belimar, Chakradhaj Singha* and *Joymati Kunwari* published in 1915 ; these are all historical plays. But his fame rests more surely in his humorous sketches as *Borbaruar Kakotar topola,* and critical appreciations of Sankardev and Madhabdev. The first is unrivalled in rollicking laughter and the second in depth of critical insight.

Chandrakumar Agarwalla is a writer of philosophic verses. His *Protima* and *Bin Baragi,* two collections of such verses, are intense in philosophical emotions. His love poem *Madhuri* is rich in suggestive emotions. As a love poet, Jatindranath Duara, who has to his credit a collection of love lyrics called *Aponar Sur,* is the most popular ; he is serious in his feelings. Though younger in years, Gonesh Gogoi, with his love songs *Papori* and *Swapna Bhanga,* and Deva Barua, with his *Sagor Dekhisa* run almost a close parallel with Duara. Ratna Barkakoti with his *Sewali,* approximates Agarwalla both in his love poetry and philosophic verses. Of the writers of mystic verse, Nalini Devi with her *Sandhiyar Sur* and *Sapunar Sur,* and *Ambikagiri Roy-Choudhury* with his *Tumi* are unrivalled. Nilmoni Phookon, the author of *Jyoti-kona,* is nearer to Agarwalla in his mystic and philosophic attitude than to either of these two.

Of the essayists and prose-writers, Dr. Kakoti, author of the *Purani Assamiya Sahitya,* Dr. S. K. Bhuyan, of *Anandaram Barua* and Benudhar Sarma, of *Maniram Dewan,* occupy a distinct place in modern Assamese literature. Of the dramatists,

Jyoti Agarwalla, author of *Sonti Konwari,* Atul Hazarika, of *Narakasur,* Daiba Talukdar, of *Bamuni Konwar,* Probin Phookon, of *Lachit Borphukon,* and a host of others, are eminent in this field of drama. These dramatists and prose writers have written many other dramas and essays, which space does not permit enumeration here. Of the younger group of prose-writers, Dr. B. K. Barua, Maheswar Neog, Dimbeswar Neog, Prafulla Dutta-Goswami and Tirtha Sarma are well-known. Their essays are mostly critical studies.

Of the novelists, Rajanikanta Bardoloi occupies a pre-eminent place in modern Assamese literature. With his *Monomati,* a romantic story of the time of Burmese invasion of Assam, and *Miri-jiyari,* a border love-story of a tribal population, he did for Assamese literature what Scott did for English literature with his novels. The historical novels introduced by Rajani Bardoloi are succeeded by novels with social background. Dandinath Kalita's *Sadhana* is a pioneer attempt at a novel with a social background and setting. This trend is carried on, and it finds its modern expressions in *Sangram* by Md. Piar, *Chaknoya* by R. M. Goswami and *Kecha patar kapani* by P. D. Goswami. All these are social novels.

The technique of the short story is a new thing in Assamese literature ; Bazbarua and Sarat Goswami belong to the old school of short story-writers. It was just a start in their hands. It did not, and could not gain the necessary momentum. The two universal trends that hold good in the field of modern short story, are evident also in modern Assamese short stories. The one that grew under the influence of Maupassant, is seen in the realistic expressions of life. It is often said that this master of the French *conte* described with sympathy only the "haunches and gorges" (hips and throats) of the Breton servant girls. The short story of Maupassant shows

realism of the body, and all it conjures up, in striking proportions. This tendency grew and was nourished under the auspices of the *Awahan,* a monthly magazine that enjoyed great popularity in the thirties of this century. It was here that the new school of short story writers in Assamese was born. Lakhidhar Sarma with his *Byarthatardan,* a collection of short stories, and Roma Das, with his *Srestha Galpa,* belong to this period. The other, that is the Chekovian atmosphere story , has not grown to full heights in modern Assamese literature as yet ; except a few attempts in this direction, too few to be counted, no noteworthy headway is made in this line. With the growing social consciousness of our writers, the realism that Maupassant taught, is finding a wider expression by directing the attention of the writers to social facts and polemics. This is how social realism is being born through the short story in Assamese. The short story is one of the best mediums for it.

A marked difference in the technique and subject matter of modern Assamese poetry is evident today. The study of Marxian dialectics has led to re-thinking, and newer expressions in the light of it. It has opened new vistas for peotry. There is a departure from the delight in colour, beauty and love of the preceding age of Romantic poetry, and in its place, it strikes a different interest for life and society. Mayakovsky says: "Why must I write about the love of Jack and Jill and not consider myself part of the social organism which is building life?" These modern poets, that mostly grew under the auspices of the *Jayanti,* a monthly journal, came to limelight, and with them, this new tendency during the early and middle forties of this century. But the most pronounced influence on modern Assamese poetry today is that of T. S. Eliot and other modern poets of the west. This has come to life and vogue through the

monthly magazines, the *Pachowa* (now defunct) and the *Ramdhenu*. Once the new forces are released, it has led to the appearance of a good number of younger poets who have chosen this medium of expression, and have thus helped to widen the frontiers of modern Assamese poetry.

Often, this age is called an age of decadence for Assamese literature. But then, it is also true to say that often decadentism contains in its womb, germs of many future growths. The dying world will die, but before it dies, it *must* give birth to the green shoots of a living world.

CHAPTER VII

This is the land. We have our inheritance.
T. S. Eliot

ASSESSMENTS AND ANTICIPATIONS

The picture of Assam as it is today, would not be complete without a rapid flash back into more recent years. This state, of all the other Indian provinces, was the nearest to the theatre of the last World War. It was through it that the evacuees from war-torn Burma in their thousands, maimed and battered, streamed back to their respective homes. It was where the Allied troops were amassed for action against the Japanese. Naturally, the face of the country changed. It changed rapidly, and it was occupied, during these war years, with barracks and guns, air-fields and brown uniforms.

Great preparations for defence were speedily made. Woods became level grounds and the sky rang with spitfires and mosquito-bombers, anti-air-craft guns and flash-lights. And in the wake of this, there came untold sufferings for the people, want, starvation, and uncertainty all around. Scarcity haunted the land as a nightmare ; prices of everything including rice, which is its staple food, rose to hurricane heights. The peasant was forced to sell his paddy at Government rates fixed by the Procurement Department, and buy other things, his necessaries of life, at rates, fixed in the black market. This became the pivot of Assam's economic life during the war years.

The lands were requisitioned by the Government and the military authorities, without any consideration given to the village needs ; this affected agriculture and led to country-wide resentment and misery. Woods and bamboo-groves were destroyed and cultivation too, without any adequate compensa-

tion made to the owners. Education came to a stand still. When Nippon bombed China during the last World War, the Chinese academies and universities went underground. On the other hand, here the educational institutions were the first target of bureaucratic attack ; educational institutions, even in the remotest villages, were seized and converted into military godowns or barracks.

To add to this, the August Revolution of 1942 provided an excellent excuse to the Government for instituting a police raj ; villages were ravaged for the hounding of alleged "underground" agitators ; collective and punitive taxes were imposed on the people for alligning themselves with this freedom fight, which the police and the military realised with abominable thoroughness. The incident of Nidhan Rajbongshi, a tribal peasant of village Kokira in the District of Goalpara, who was bayonetted to death, as a wild boar, for his inability to pay his share of a collective fine of rupees eight, is ghastly reading. This shows how the hounds of oppression in this particular period of history were let loose, and the atrocities mounted to giddy heights.

All this paints a gloomy picture of the post-war Assam. The problem that faces her today is one of urgent re-construction. The economic life of the people, devastated during the war years, needs planning on a popular basis ; the vast mineral and other natural wealth of the country need development. Experts are of the opinion that, besides coal and petroleum and limestones, there are about thirteen deposists of "sillimanite associated with corundrum" in the hill areas of Assam ; these reserves, when explored and worked, would constitute the world's largest contribution in this mineral. Assam needs a thorough geological survey ; this, it is expected, would dig mines of wealth for this frontier state. Petroleum and coal, at present, are a capitalist monopoly, "incorporated" in foreign lands ; for the country to grow,

this must cease or else the economy of the State would scarcely develop, as needed. Assam is rich in forest wealth and water-power ; researches in forestry would, no doubt, add to a rich economy for the state, as of Burma, in this commodity. The establishment of a Forest school, a few miles from Gauhati, it is expected, would give the advantage of scientific knowledge to forestry. The numerous rivers and hill streams of Assam, are the perrenial sources of hydro-electric power. Hydro-electric power develops industry and also helps the rural areas to improve their faces. The Government of Assam is undertaking such a scheme, called Umtru project. In the development of the sciences, lies the renascence of the twentieth century Assam.

(a) *Political*

Assam lost her independence in 1826 to the British. The flame of freedom was not dead in her, and it threw sparks that really burnt. Assam was relentless in her opposition to these new rulers, and never missed an opportunity to stand against them, when it came. She fought against them, and played a redoubtable part in the battles for freedom, raged since the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. Before this came, Piali Bar-Phukon, son of Badan Bar-Phukon, who invited the Burmans, organised an attack on British power stationed here. This rebel and martyr was born in 1796. Maimed of body, he had a heart of steel. He himself led the attack and set fire to a British powder magazine in eastern Assam. The might of an empire was set on him, and subsequently he died on the gallows.

Maniram Dewan is a product of the Sepoy Mutiny. He was born in 1806 and was twenty when Assam lost her freedom. When the Mutiny raged, he organised his movement this side of the country to "drive the British out". His plans were discovered. And he was awarded a death sentence as the *fons*

et origo of this revolutionary crusade. His execution took place in 1858. He "mounted the gallows with a smile on his face", and paved, with his idealism and sacrifice, the way to greater national cohesion.

Assam's participations and the part she played in the national struggles from time to time, under the auspices of Gandhiji and the Congress, are a landmark of history. And she writes these brave deeds in letters of flame. Tarunram Phookon and Nabinchandra Bardoloi, and a few others were the first to initiate the people into the revolutionary idealism of the Congress. It was due to their untiring efforts that the Congress session at Pandu, off Gauhati, in 1926, exactly hundred years after Assam lost her freedom to the British power, was a great success. It moved Gandhiji to eloquent tributes. The gospel of *Swadeshi* was spread amongst the people : they were taught to be economically self-reliant. They were taught to out-bid the middleman in Birmingham. The nation rose to this message. M. Chalapathi Rao describes this in his *Tours and Marches* thus:

> In Assam Gandhiji put it bluntly to a crowd of 25,000. *Would they content themselves with merely hearing him speak and then quietly return to their home? Or would they work for Swaraj?* Twenty-five thousand voices greeted him: *We can never allow you to leave us.* If they were genuine, Gandhiji said, let them surrender their foreign cloth. A huge bonfire followed. The long triumphal tour was illuminated throughout with bonfires.

The people responded to the call of Gandhiji, and to struggles for freedom that he launched since 1921, with great enthusiasm and sacrifices. The people's pyramid of patriotic passions and sacrifices was built with their life blood. It attained rapier sharpness in the uprising of August, 1942. The people of Assam now, as before, faced bayonets and bullets, prison sentences and untold miseries, and made '42 ring through history. The credit of it goes mostly to Assam's womanhood. The names of martyr Kanaklata, a girl in her teens, and Bhogeswari,

an elderly woman, who laid their life at the altar of freedom, are now household words. Margaret Cousins, a British woman, says: "Give Indian woman a cause to fight for and see how she responds." Gandhiji's clarion-call to "do or die" gave them a "cause" to fight for, and they responded to it wonderfully. Kusal Konwar, a scion of the brave Ahoms, was executed on June 14, 1943 for his participation in the struggle of '42. Kamala Miri, an illiterate member of the Miri tribe, gave his life in the prison cell for the cause he held dear. These are records woven in the hearts of a people that time can never deface nor age defile.

The Congress Co-alition Government of Assam, under the leadership of Gopinath Bardoloi, resigned in 1940 on the issue of "individual Satyagraha" against the British policy of associating India with World War II. After the intervening years of the War and the '42 Revolution, the Congress came to power again in 1946. This was the year of feverish and expectant activity for the transfer of power to Indian lands. As a first concrete step towards it, the British Cabinet Mission visited India. It issued the State Paper of May 16th, 1946, in which were provided "sections" and "groups" with the right to "opt" out, if the constituent units so decided. This was a concession given to Jinnah's demand of Pakistan, who hailed it as 75 p.c. Pakistan. Assam was included in Group C.

According to it, Assam, a distinctly non-Muslim province, was tagged on to Bengal, a Muslim majority province. The percentage of Muslim population in undivided Bengal was 54, whereas that of Assam, barring the District of Sylhet, was 20 or 22 p.c. This meant death and disaster for Assam. Under the Cabinet Missions "proposals", she was alloted a negligible fraction of ten members in a house of seventy to frame the constitution of the Group 'C' Government of Assam and Bengal. It meant a thorough ruination of the aspirations of

the province. Prime Minister Bardoloi put it, in his determined way, thus:

> The group compulsorily imposed is the very negation of democracy. It is absurd that the majority should dictate the form of constitution under which we are to live. It is against the spirit even of the provincial autonomy under the 1935 Act.

Prime Minister Bardoloi fought against the 'proposals' with a rare determination, and he undid it. He had the blessings of Gandhiji with him. On July 16, 1946 the Assam Assembly passed a resolution, piloted by Bardoloi against compulsory "Grouping" without a division. This was a momentous decision for the province.

Further, there was a suggestion in the Cabinet Missions proposals to keep the "Excluded Areas" of Assam as "excluded." The hills were treated as such under the British. It was decided in the "proposals" to appoint an Advisory Committee for them. This meant a solid dismemberment of the province. This suggestion was first made by Prof. Coupland, the British constitutional expert. This was an attempt at driving a wedge into the body politic of Assam, which, of course, ultimately proved *effete*. "Mandated territories" or "crown colonies" are a ghost of the past. This is what the leaders of the Cabinet Mission counld not understand.

(ii) *Land Settlement Problem*

The land settlement problem assumed great complicity during the pre-Independence days. The movement of immigrant population from east Bengal was not only economic, but also political. Immigration, particularly of Muslims from east Bengal into Assam, began in 1911. The Zamindars of Goalpara, in this year, invited a few persons to settle in their lands on better conditions than were available in east Bengal. Since then, the flood of immigration has not abated. About the

increased pressure on land by this people, Mr. Mullan writers in his Census Report of 1931 thus:

> Probably the most important event during the last twenty-five years, an event, moreover, which seems likely to alter permanently the whole future of Assam and to destroy more surely than did Burmese invaders of 1820 the whole structure of Assamese culture and civilisation, has been the invasion of a vast horde of land-hungry Bengali immigrants, mostly Muslims, from the districts of eastern Bengal and in particular from Mymensingh. I have already remarked that by 1921 the first army corps of the invaders had conquered Goalpara. The second army corps which followed them in the years 1921-1931 has consolidated their position in that district and has also completed the conquest of Nowgong. The Barpeta sub-division of Kamrup has also fallen to their attack and Darrang is being invaded. It is sad but by no means improbable that in another thirty years Sibsagar district will be the only part of Assam in which an Assamese will find himself at home.

The Muslim population of the Assam valley districts, excluding the Garo Hills, was 355,320 in 1911. It rose to 585,955 in 1921, to 943,252 in 1931 and to 1,305,902 in 1941. The result of it was that twenty lakhs of bighas of the best cultivable land were settled on by immigrants; six lakhs of bighas were acquired by them through trespass; and all other available lands were being gradually swallowed up.

In the post-*Swaraj* Assam, the problem is further complicated and made more acute by the immigration of thousands of Hindu refugees from east Bengal. They are the victims of the division of India; the task of relief and rehabilitation presented, is stupendous. While the Government figure of these refugees is given at about three lakhs, the popular estimate is much more than that. It is in the neighbourhood of five lakhs or so. Due to local riots, a few years ago, the problem of "displaced Indian Muslims" also cropped up in Assam, during 1950-51; this, according to Government statistics, numbered about 53,000 families; they had to be rehabilitated in implementation of the Indo-Pak Agreement of April 8, 1950. The Land problem is confined

not to the refugees and the displaced persons alone ; it is no less acute in the case of indigenous Assamese population, the percentage of landless people amongst whom is considerable. The system of Zamindari obtains in the District of Goalpara ; elsewhere it does not. There are petty landed interests all over. The Government of Assam has made available 32,2000 bighas of land to the people presently, by dereserving a few village grazing reserves. The abolition of the Zamindari system and redistribution of land, on the basis of economic holdings, are the crying need of the hour.

(iii) *Tribal problem*

Before partition of India, Assam constituted 18,429 sq. miles of "Excluded areas" with a population of 3,88,923. The " Partially excluded areas " consisted of 9984 sq. miles with a population of 4,34,055. These tribal areas were defined as (1) *De facto* and (2) *De jure* tribal areas under Sec. 60 of the Government of India Act of 1919. The only *de jure* tribal areas are in the Naga Hills. The administration of the tribal areas was a special responsibility of the Governor of the Province under Sec. 91 and Sec. 92 of the Government of India Act of 1935. The British rulers introduced the principle of isolationism in the hills areas ; they introduced, what is called the Inner Line Regulation, in 1873, under which the hills were isolated from the plains. In 1880, a further barricade of isolationism was created, when they introduced the Frontier Tracts Regulations and created the "Excluded" and "Partially excluded " areas. Thus was the debacle complete.

The British *Raj* completely neglected the hills ; nothing particular was being done to improve the conditions of the hills people, from the Neolithic stage, to those of the twentieth century. They are poor, ignorant and primitive. Except the Lushai Hills, where the percentage of literacy is very high, other hills are unimaginably backward. The

Census commissioner of 1931 writes thus: "The hills is the worst natural division from the point of view of literacy, the proportion of literates being only 62 per mile". And this educational fraction, however negligible, is due to the work of the Christian Missionaries.

Prof. Coupland advocated a "Crown Colony" of the hills of Assam and Upper Burma constituted into a Dominion under the British ; this however did not work. When freedom came, it came for the whole of the Indian Sub-continent. The Indian Constituent Assembly appointed a Hills Sub-Committee to examine into the question of these hills with Gopinath Bardoloi as the Chairman. The memorandum submitted to it by the North-Cachar Hills tribes speaks for itself:

> On account of natural and peculiar position of land and for deliberate "exclusion" by Government (British) from outside relations, we have little connections with the plains people and consequently we have nothing in common with them. Unlike our brothers in the plains who have had the opportunity to reap full benefit of British administration and thereby have advanced in all spheres of life, we have made no progress whatsoever inspite of so many years of British rule in our hills. . . . .
>
> Our natural desire, therefore, is that Government should not treat us on equal footing with the plains people. The system of administration we have here is quite different from that prevalent in the plains and we desire that even under the new Indian Government we should be allowed to manage our own affairs according to our social customs and usages.

The British held the hills of Assam for seventy years or so. Naturally, the withdrawal of foreign power from the hills, has enlivened the desire to remove backwardness and develop in their own way. This hills people are today experiencing a new movement of the mind, and an urge for self-expression.

The Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India is, in a sense, a bold experiment of the principle of self-determination. Under its terms, the hills are constituted into "autonomous districts" with District councils for each, consisting of "not more than twenty four members, of whom not less than three-

fourths shall be elected on the basis of adult suffrage." The District councils and the Regional Councils are invested with the powers of making laws, and also those of administration of justice under specified terms in the Constitution. The Assam tribal areas are specified in parts A and B, as follows:

Part A

i. The United Khasi-Jaintia Hills Districts
ii. The Garo Hills District
iii. The Lushai Hills District
iv. The Naga Hills District
v. The North Cachar Hills
vi. The Mikir Hills

Part B

i. North East frontier tract including Balipara frontier tract, Tirap frontier tract, Abor Hills District.
ii. The Naga Tribal area.

In five of these six tribal areas, the District Advisory Councils, as laid down in the Constitution, are working. In the Naga Hills, it could not be due to the demand of the Nagas, led by their National council for a "Separate Nagaland", independent of the Indian Constitution. In May, 1951 they organised a plebiscite on this issue; it met with unprecedented success. The aim of this plebiscite was to focus the demand of the Nagas for a separate homeland into International spot-lights. Besides the District Council, they are given the right to elect their own representatives to the State Assembly and the Republican Parliament. They boycotted the last General Elections. The spear-head of this movement is the Naga National Council, the only political organisation of the Nagas. It was born on February 2, 1946. The present

President of this Association is Mr. Z. Phizo, an Angami. He is an ex-service man of the Azad Hind Fauj.

The Naga National Council claims the "right to choose their own form of Government." According to it, the proposed "Nagaland" would comprise of the following areas : (1) The present Naga Hills District *plus* the Centrally administered area (2) The contiguous Naga areas of the Districts of Nowgong and Sibsagar and of the State of Manipur and the Union of Burma. The population of the Naga Hills District, as claimed by them, is 215,000 and the area 4,280 sq. miles. There are 70,000 Nagas in Burma accross the Indian border. When all totalled, "Sovereign Nagaland" would be an area of 10,000 sq. miles and a population of one million.

As against this, it can be pointed out that Mr. T. Sakhrie, Secretary of the Naga National Council, wrote to Pandit Nehru in 1946, August 5th thus:

> This Naga territory must form part of India and of Assam with which it has developed such close associations. At the same time it is our policy that tribal areas should have as much freedom and autonomy as possible so that they can live their own lives according to their own customs and desires. Thus the solution would be that the Naga territory should be an integral part of Assam Province and yet should have a certain measure of autonomy for its own purposes . . . . The Nagas should have representation in the Assam Provincial Assembly and should participate fully in the life of the Province. . . . I agree with your decision that the Naga Hills should constitutionally be included in an autonomous Assam in a free India with local autonomy and due safeguards for the interest of the Nagas.

The Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution, as evident, was framed with due regard to these wishes and aspirations of the hills people of Assam. While it is working in the other autonomous hills districts, it is difficult to find what it is that turned things topsy-turvy in the Naga Hills. On a successful solution of problems like this lies the solidarity of the Indian Republic. The Naga demand is tanta-

mount to the further dismemberment of India : this would weaken our natural frontier. On the other hand, the aspirations of a people need close scrutiny. In the light of this, one feels that a maximum possible autonomy within the set-up of a real democracy and socialist economy granted to them, would go a long way towards the solution of a political and psychological problem as the Naga demand for a "Sovereign State".

The Congress rules Assam since 1946. Gopinath Bardoloi was the first Chief Minister, after India became free on August 15, 1947. He was born in 1891. He headed the Congress Co-alition Government of Assam in 1938. Then followed World War II and the stormy days of '42. Bardoloi again became the Chief Minister of Assam when Congress came to power in 1946 and continued till death on August 5, 1950. Bardoloi had a stout heart and a deep and wide vision. His bold and determined stand against 'Grouping' has enshrined him in the hearts of his countrymen. Bardoloi was succeeded by Bishnuram Medhi as Chief Minister. Medhi is known as a strong man.

The General Elections held in 1951 returned the Congress to power with a big majority. Assam was divided into three zones for this purpose. Elections to the State Assembly and the House of people were completed on three different dates, scheduled for the whole of the State. The principal political parties that participated in the Elections are the Congress, the Socialist Party, the Kisan Mazdur Praja Party and the Communist Party. The legislature in Assam is unilateral.

(b) *Educational*

Education in the pre-British days was a concern of the Vaishnavite monasteries, Sanscrit *tolas* and *guru-grihas* (houses of preceptors). Education of this period was mostly ritualistic ; the masses were far beyond its pale. The strictly vocational or scientific character of education did not develop.

While this basis was not very much disturbed, there came a re-orientation of education under British rule. The history of western education in Assam is a history of Christian Missionary effort. The American Baptist Mission, who visited Assam in the early half of the 19th century, opened schools and encouraged the study of Assamese and English. The different Missions have continued their educational activities till today. They are working amongst the backward classes by establishing night and day schools in town and mofussil areas. Female education, as a matter of course, owes greatly to the efforts of the Missionaries here. At present, there are about twentyfive High schools for girls and three colleges for women in the State with provision for co-education in most of the Colleges and some of the schools. Most of them are Government-aided: a few of them are Missionary enterprises.

The Government in the past neglected the education of the hills ; it was rightly or wrongly left in the hands of the Missionaries. It is only in recent years that they have realised their mistake ; the Government of free India is diverting its attention towards it. The hills need roads and schools and medical facilities. It is through education that the hills and plains can be brought together and nearer. The hills have their own culture, own song and dance as much as the plains have. Education would bind the hills and the plains by encouraging better understanding and wider outlook. A few schools in the North-Eastern Frontier Tracts, *i.e.* in the Abor and the Mishmi Hills are established, where education in the Assamese script is being imparted to the hill boys and girls. The Abors have shown a great mental alertness and the demand for schools in their hills is fast growing. There is a High School at Kohima, the headquarters station of the Naga Hills District. There is another school at Mokokchang, a sub-divisional town of the same district. The present state of things must change, and special provisions should be made to

develop the "undeveloped" portions of India. The tribal populations constitute, the backbone of the new Indian Republic.

Assam is essentially a plantation area ; the tea-garden labour population is round a million. It accounts for about 12 p.c. of the total population of the State. The problem is one of educating these masses of people. It would be relevant to quote from the report of the Investigation Committee of the All India Women's Conference, July 1946 on this issue:

> The mental development of tea-plantation labour is pathetic in the extreme and compares unfavourably not only with that of the jute workers but even with that of the mine labourers whose development in this respect is well known . . .
>
> The Committee did not find satisfactory arrangements for schooling in a single garden they visited either in the Surma or in the Assam Valley. In some gardens a semblance of a school does exist. The Government also contributes towards the pay of the school teachers whenever the garden authorities require their help.
>
> It was invariably said that the children of the tea-plantation labourers did not take advantage of school facilities as the parents wanted them to add their earnings to the family wage. The obvious solution that is, that the family wage be increased without the children's contribution and that children under fourteen be prohibited from working in the garden, did not seem to occur to the authorities of a single garden

It is a gloomy picture but true. Conditions in this respect have not changed much even under freedom. Education must reach these people, lost in superstition and ignorance. At present, due to the growing consciousness of the garden-labour and the work of the trade unionists there, certain headway is being made. The Government of Assam is instituting a Central Education Board for the removal of illiteracy among tea-garden population together with other welfare schemes.

Illiteracy like famine is a great scourge. It famishes the mind as famine starves the the body. The Mass Literacy Campaign was first started in 1940. During the War years, it

suffered a temporary set-back. A Social Education Department is being opened and according to the Government Report "as many as 800 Social Education centres were organised throughout the State during the year 1951-52." In order to make this campaign a success, modern apparatus like mobile cinemas, radio sets, loud speakers and other amenities for visual training are to be made available. The old way cannot meet new problems.

The Government of Assam has introduced basic education in the State. At present five basic training centres with two senior and eighty-five junior Basic Schools under them impart education. Originally the teachers, men and women, were sent to Wardah or the Jamia Milia Islamia, Delhi, for training in Basic education. English has been replaced already with Assamese or other vernaculars as medium of instruction in Secondary and other schools.

Caste is not a rigid system in Assam ; there are in fact no "untouchables" here. All children, irrespective of caste or creed, attend school together. There are, of course, depressed classes in Assam. They are depressed because education has not reached them. With the greater bulk of her population as the hills people and the tea-garden labour lost in darkness and illiteracy, it is education alone that can salvage Assam from the deep morass of backwardness.

Till the establishment of the University of Gauhati under the University Act of 1947, Assam was within the jurisdiction of the University of Calcutta. The movement for a separate University was started about two decades ago. It took a concrete shape when Gopinath Bardoloi as president of the Gauhati University Trust Board, constituted in 1944, launched the campaign for fund collection throughout the province and outside. It developed into a broadbased movement and the people's response to it was unprecedented.

The University was visualised as a residential type, where teachers and taught would meet and through co-operative efforts would build a healthier atmosphere and a renascent Assam. When the Congress came to power, Bardoloi lost no time to bring the University Act through the legislative anvil. In the preamble to the Act, it is said that the aim of it is " to establish and constitute a teaching, residential and affiliating University" with its headquarters at Gauhati. There are at present twenty Arts and Science Colleges and a University Law College affiliated to this University. K. K. Handique M.A. (Cal. *et* Oxon) is the first Vice-Chancellor of the University of Gauhati.

Of all the Colleges under the University, the Cotton College, Gauhati, is the oldest. It was established in the year 1901 as a Government Institution and holds that position to this day. It came to existence under the auspices of Sir Henry Cotton, Chief Commissioner of Assam (1896-1902) whose name the College bears. In 1906 Assam formed a part of Eastern Bengal and it was in 1912 that it was constituted into a separate Province. Since then, the Cotton College has grown from strength to strength. It has undergone rapid expansion in recent years.

The Assam Medical College, Dibrughar, was started in November, 1947. It has been doing useful work in the sphere of medical education since its establishment. Besides turning out medical graduates, the College is designed to " increase the output of trained nurses and other ancillary personnel required for the proper functioning of the health services as envisaged in the Bhore Report." It got the affiliation of the University on 5th December, 1949. A Nurses Training school is attached to the College Hospital. An Ayurvedic College to train personnel in the indigenous system of medicine was established at Gauhati. The Veterinary College at Gauhati is another useful institution. It is being affiliated to the University.

Agricultural Education is a priority in Assam. The Assam Agricultural College (estd. 1948) at Jorhat is established to meet the shortage of trained personnel in this respect, which is a vital need in a place like Assam. It teaches to the Graduate standard and is affiliated to the University of Gauhati. In addition to this College, two agricultural schools were established by the Government of Assam, one at Khanapara, off Gauhati, and the other at Jorhat. There is a Civil Engineering school at Gauhati. Sciences are taught in a good few of the colleges throughout the State. Besides the University, a few of the Colleges have arrangements in the teaching of commerce and commercial subjects.

The year 1948 is a great event for Assam. This year witnessed the establishment of the Assam High Court and the University of Gauhati. The permanent seat of the University is finally selected at Pandu. The All India Radio Station, Shillong-Gauhati (estd. 1948) adds another landmark to this road of progress. With all this ancillary, necessary for a modern state, Assam bids to be self-sufficient in these nation-building subjects, sooner or later. Only now the "Autonomy", granted to the provinces under the Government of India Act, 1935 has come to be real. The North-Eastern Railways in Assam is fairly old. It is interesting too. By 1885, the only Railways in the Assam Valley were the Dibru-Sadiya Railways (metre gauge) and the Jorhat Provincial Railways (two feet gauge). They were ultimately merged in the Assam-Bengal Railways, now known as the North-Eastern Railways. To the Assam Railways and Trading Company Ltd. goes the credit of constructing the Dibru-Sadiya Railways.

Work on the Assam-Bengal Railways was first started in 1891-92. The *Kalazar* havoc that caught the country during 1893-96 hampered the work ; ultimately in 1897, the Gauhati-Jamunamukh section of the Railways was opened for traffic

and this also had to be abandoned as a result of the great Earthquake of 1897. In 1904, Chittagong was joined by Railways with Dibrughar ; the journey from Calcutta to this place that used to take about a fortnight formerly was thus reduced to one of four days by 1904. The history of Rivers Steam Services in the State is equally old. The year 1848 saw the first steam-boats provided by the East India Company ply in Assam waters between Calcutta and Gauhati. The Indian Steam Navigation Company provided in 1860 two vessels to ply at six weeks interval between Calcutta and the Assam Valley. This Steamer Company was established in 1844 ; its first two steamers were known as the *Assam* and the *Naga ;* they belonged to the Assam Company from whom they were purchased by this Steamer Company. The Joint Steamer Companies (The Indian General Navigation and Railway Co. Ltd. and the Rivers Steam Navigation Co. Ltd.) are serving the State for a considerable time ; they connected Assam with Calcutta at a time, when the Railways were in their infancy, by carrying Assam tea outside and by carrying other commodities like foodstaff etc. from outside to this State. During the last World War, they gave laudable services to this North-Eastern bastion of Indian defence.

The year 1950 is one of the worst in the annals of Assam. In this year Assam lost one of her most illustrious sons Gopinath Bardoloi, the builder of an epoch. In this year came the great Earthquake of August 15th that turned world interest to this country. The worst affected areas of this natural menace lie in the North-Eastern regions of the State. This is the place where the unsophisticated hills people, the Abors and the Mishmis, live. It is an area of 17,000 sq. miles ; the landslides caused by this Earthquake in the mountains approximate to about 75 p.c. of the total area. It continued to loosen as a result of floods and earthquake-tremors which succeeded the major shock in a series afterwards. The number of these tre-

mors is estimated to be in the neighbourhood of 500 in total. The topography of these areas changed ; the rivers changed their courses and became uncontrollable and turbulent. The landslides dammed the rivers ; when the snow melted in the hills under the summer sun, millions of tons of water broke the dams, rushed headlong and hit the plains with great force of devastation. The river-beds rose due to unusual deposits of silt, uprooted trees and other debris. This created the problem of flood. People were marooned in river islets with mountains of flood-water all around. They could not be reached with high steam-boats or small river-canoes, the floods were so turbulent. The canoes could not reach them because the tides were too strong ; the steam-boats could not reach them, because the water was not navigable due to rocks below. And as such, people so cut off had to be air-lifted at a considerable risk to both the pilot and the people so marooned. These floods on the wake of the Earthquake led to considerable losses of domestic and wild animal-life *pari passu* with human lives. As a matter of fact, the areas between the Dihang and the Dibang, two rivers of the North-East tracts, held numerous herds of wild animals like buffalos etc. They were considerably depopulated by these natural calamities. Either they were washed away or they got stuck in the silt deposits and quagmires and perished. In this hour of Assam's crisis, the response of the rest of India was most magnificent ; help and relief in men, money and foodstaff, came pouring in, spontaneously.

(c) *Defence Frontier*

Before the dismemberment of India and during British rule, when the fear of possible Russian attack loomed across the Central Asiatic plains, the north-western frontier constituted the country's life-line of defence ; there was a time when it gripped our imagination powerfully, and monopolised the country's resources considerably. *Swaraj* has drawn the map

anew and, as a result of it, the north-eastern frontier is torn away from India; it now constitutes the frontier of Pakistan. Naturally enough, due to this territorial adjustment, the eastern frontier has the spot-light. The value of the eastern frontier, as a bastion of defence and strategy, has increased within this brief span of *Swaraj,* due mainly to the Far East rapidly developing into a theatre of World-politics.

The eastern frontier, of which Assam is the nerve centre, is a long one; it covers a total length of 2,200 miles from one end to the other, and the countries that spread across it, are alien states; Burma, New China and Pakistan are newly born. India's relation with some of the border states as Tibet, Bhutan and China constitutes an interesting chapter of history; our relation with these states has been cordial and peaceful. There is a vigorous political cross-tide in Tibet today and this is significant, as we speak of India's frontier in the north, which is 800 miles in length. During British rule, Tibet laid persistent claims of jurisdiction down to the plains of Assam. By the Treaty of 1914, a boundary called the MacMohan Line, was drawn alongside the Himalayan range and troops were stationed in the Monaba lands, a hill people's country, where Tibetan pressure was greatest. But then, this MacMohan Line is neither inviolable nor sacred.

This is all about the northern belt of the eastern frontier; there is again a circuit of a 800 mile-frontier, contiguous to Burma. The political destiny of this country is uncertain. A section of her hills population, the Karens, have rebelled against the Government; they have demanded a separate homeland. These things are bound to have serious repercussions on the frontier here. The agitation in the Naga Hills and the plebiscite, held therein on the question of a separate Nagaland, has

more in it than meets the eye. It is a matter of deeper political and psychological import. The solution to such matters lies in economic and political adjustments and, on no account, the frontier should be allowed to weaken and dissipate itself due to lack of them.

There is another 600 miles of frontier to the west, demarcating Pakistan from Assam. India's relation with Pakistan is in the womb of history and it is not safe to foretell the future. The eastern frontier *i.e.* Assam is joined to the rest of the Indian Union through a narrow corridor of barely 40 miles ; possibly Danzig was not less wide. This runs through the one-time princely state of Cooch Behar. Whatever India's relation with Pakistan might be at present, in case of aggression, as matters obtain, Assam can easily be bottle-necked and the frontier battered.

The eastern frontier is closely knit with natural barriers. But then, that the hills-terrain of Assam is not inviolable is also true; there are easy passes across the mountains that lead from Burma to the northern tip of the frontier, *i.e.* the Tirap area. The invasions of the Burmans and the migrations of the Ahoms, the Kachins and the Shans from Hkamtilong, in different periods of history, across the Patkoi ranges and also those of the Lushais from the Chin Hills between 1750 and 1850, all point to the fact that the so-called natural frontier was never a barricade ; it was a gateway of war and movement of peoples, and conditions have not changed.

Defence means good roads and easy communications. Our hills that constitute the sinews of the frontier are deeply wooded and roads, except narrow mountain tracks, are almost absent in them. Roads in a defence frontier as the Eastern Frontier of India, are like arteries in a human body. Armed forces are now mechanised and move on wheels, and wheels need roads. Assam is particularly rich in oil and coal that drive

the wheels of civilisation as also of war. Once the source of this mineral wealth is cut off, due to a vulnerable frontier, it would mean a lot for defence.

In the interest of our freedom, and with an eye to the political cross-currents in the Far-East, the frontier needs strengthening; this can be possible, if all the forces pronging into different direction, are taken into account, and measures are adopted so as to relieve these hostile forces of their edges, and weave out of them, a cohesive and consolidated effort that would lead ultimately to strength. This needs various adjustments, political, social, cultural and economic, in the absence of which, it is rightly feared, that the eastern frontier, as it stands to-day, could not be more substantial than a wall of sands. The future of Assam rests on foresight and vision, and working of plans according to it.

Appendix 1

The Bihu Dances and their significance

The people of Assam, bred in ancient peasant traditions, observe a sort of pagan devotion to nature. It reveals itself in the popular festivals like the Bihus that commemorate changes of seasons. These nature festivities marking the advent of the autumn and the spring, remind one of the primitive man of agriculture who created both rituals and magic out of art, as Jane Harrison says, when he used to see visions of golden corn in the field of his labour. According to Joseph Sachs, ancient art was "communal" in nature and the man in the community sought to celebrate his common "collective" experiences through dances and songs.

> Pastoral and agricultural people mark by their dances the critical moments in the annual round of nature ; seed-time and harvest, the summer and winter turns of the year, the phases of the moon and so forth. (*Man and his Life*).

The Bahag Bihu is a festival of dance and music: it is celebrated in *mid-April, Apperire,* when nature opens out in light, and beauty and colour. It is a gay popular festival where folkjoy is seen in its best and highest ; dance and music add to the colour of the scene ; people's joy overbrims like sunlight in the cup of a smiling lily.

This is the time when nature welcomes the season of birds, and flowers and music ; the birds of spring like the cuckoos sing and the whole atmosphere gets caught in the meshes of a throbbing nostalgia. The sky is bright and blue, and it is only at a distance that the rolling drum of the thunder cloud is heard. Occasionally there is a drizzle before actually the rains set in ; nature, as a result of it, gains in soft and luscious green. April ends and the monsoon clouds of May are heard to rattle and

rumble ; the sky is blanketed deep and dark. The clouds break into thunders and hale, showers and downpours and smother the virgin soil below, and the season of nature's creative activity and fruitfulness begins.

What is the true import of the Bihu dances? It is true that dances are an integral part of man's life, whose history is as old as the story of man. Society has contributed through different stages of growth to its development ; they are a landscape in human civilisation. The history of art and social growth is intimately inter-woven ; the dance of the hunters' age invariably breathes of the war ; Papuan dances and South-African tribal dances are embodiments of this historical truth. According to art-historians, the rock-bottom of ancient art is ritual ; the people of the ritualistic era believed in the magic of art. They lived through their re-created experiences in art, whether of the chase or of agriculture. The Bihu dances are, strictly speaking, an enactment of agricultural and pastoral experiences.

It is historically true that in course of time, the primitive man settled down to cultivation ; the roving hunter became a settled cultivator. The cultivator used to interpret in rituals and, in the course of art that reflected the rituals, the processes involved in cultivation and the experiences bred by it. Folk-dances are mostly symbolic in temper and purpose ; the ancient man used to retire to the field before the season of cultivation commenced and weave its drama in art. Collective experiences found collective expressions through the medium of the body. All ancient art is, strictly speaking, a co-ordinated social effort. Sociologists hold that the dynamics of economics and the laws of biology determine men's social relations in matters of food and population ; man-power was necessary for survival in struggle as primitive man had to seek life in ceaseless warfare against nature ; such an organisation of economic life produced a distinct impress on the evolution of the cultural life of primi-

tive society. This also finds its expressions, if closely viewed, in the Bihu dances in a symbolic way.

The Bihu dances invariably precede the rains and the season of cultivation. In April, when the festival is held, nature becomes bright and buoyant ; it appears as though the "procreant urge", to use Whitman's words, courses through her and is expressed in youthful vivacity with a passion to create and be fruitful. This is the onset of the monsoons in May ; with it, nature's procreation begins. The plough-share tears the earth and the seed is put in ; the earth produces. It is a fact of biology. This whole process is enacted in the Bihu dances ; through it is reflected the ancient instinct for magic enacted in art. The Konyak Nagas have a similar "Spring festival", as Von Fürer-Haimendorf describes in his well-known book *The Naked Nagas*:

> Its (Naga festival) theme is the fertility of the field and the central formula runs: 'As a woman embraces her lover, so may the earth take the seed of the rice into her womb'. The fertility of field and man is closely linked in the mind of the Nagas ; they are different expressions of the same force and the prosperity of the village depends on its abundance.

The Bihu dances enact and express a similar truth ; like their different postures that are often of a sex-appealing type, the songs that accompany the dances are equally erotic. The Bihu-dances impress upon us their ancient origin ; the sunny season of spring invites the youthful heart to the land of romance and beauty ; this is evident in the fact that dance and music are confined to young lads and lasses who sing songs to arouse the emotional instinct of the heart. The emotional appeal of the Bihu songs constitutes themes of love and nature. Like the songs of medieval France composed by the troubadours, these are songs of love natural to the season of spring.

In folk dances, imagination and instinct of the beautiful are everything, ensured as much by its freshness and simplicity

as by its musical composition. In pastoral seclusion, the people dance and sing together, young boys and girls drawn to each other in the golden lure of dreams, songs and the plaintive *Bihugits* and *Bongits*. The light of spring illumines and the message of love overflows the dancers' soul with happiness; these dancing scenes of romance and desire do often ripen into life-long unions.

The Bihu dances are a superb expression of manly art and disport, a sing-song chant punctuated by drums called the *dhols*, form the musical accompaniment in the main, to which the people dance in gay abandon. Like the Russian Polka, the Bihu dances display genuine folk-joy. The *mahar singar pepa*, an indigenous flute made of the buffalo horn, grows faint and distant and the dancers dance to its dying strains; the Bihu dances, in a sense, constitute what may be called a fertility festival as that of the Konyak Nagas referred to above. The Bihus are of a difficult origin; Assam is a land of different races and peoples which has rendered its origin mysterious. It is held today as a popular relic of the distant Austro-Asiatic civilisation, in view primarily of its pastoral origin. Assam is evidently a land of the Austro-Asiatics; though apparently submerged by more distinct tides of cultural floodwater, the rock-bottom of Assamese culture, as anything other than Austro-Asiatic can not rightly be established; this is true as much ethnologically as linguistically and morphologically. The original dwellers of the great river-bed of the Brahmaputra appear to be a branch of the Austro-Asiatic people who spread from East Asia, covering a number of islands in the Pacific.

The Bihu dances reveal, in fact, evidences of Austro-Asiatic influences, with whom dance festivals connected with the harvest season and also seed time, constitute a popular social event; this is seen in places wherever these people have migrated. It is to be found in Java, the Nicobar islands, Upper Burma and other places of India where Austric influences were

prevailing. In Australia where Austric influences are discernible among its native population, the Australian Corroboree dances in enthusiastic abandon in tune with music produced by drumming with fists on opossum rugs that are stretched tightly across the knees. The Bihu dances are a robust relic of this ancient civilisation.

Appendix ii

North-Eastern Hill Tribes: the Abors and the Mishmis

The further-most borders of Assam, where the hills of Upper Burma and of Tibet mingle with hers, constitute the Maginot Line across which different seas of humanity meet. They are the homeland of a sturdy human race of Tibeto-Burman origin called the Abors. Phonologically the word *Abor* means "unknown savages". They are roughly estimated as about three lakhs in number.

The Mishmis, another hills tribe, who dwells close to the Abors, is fewer in number. They are supposed to be not more than sixty thousand in total. Often it is believed, due mainly to neighbourly habitation, that the Abors and the Mishmis have a common origin, a common speech and a common cultural and ethnic affinity. Nothing can be more incorrect than this. The differences between the two can be equated to those between chalk and cheese. Ethnologists wonder how this tiny group of people, so dissimilar in point of culture, language and ethnology, came to be mountained in the midst of the Abors. The Dibong is the life-spring of these hills. *Di* which means *water* is a prefix of Bodo origin. The Bodos, like the Abors, the Duflas, the Akas, the Hills Miris, are Tibeto-Burmans.

A primitive race, till now in the Garden-of-Eden stage, the Abors who dig for cultivation and hunt for food, are like the

Aō Nagas noted for their democratiç institutions. Theirs is a society in which glimpses of pre-Rousseau or pre-*Social Contract* conditions are evident. Every village is a unit ; the units together constitute a federation or super-village wherein the confederating villages co-operate. In all communal matters, power by common consent is vested in this co-operative commonwealth. On the other hand, the independent status of the co-operating villages is not sacrificed at its altar. The village institutions are democratic in method and constitution. The village assembly of the Abors, which is both a legislature and a judiciary, is called the *Kebang*. Village disputes are debated upon and settled in it. The elders who constitute the court of law are throughout the deliberations supplied with hot drinks, their *vodka* called *apong*, free. The house where the *Kebang* meets is known as the *Morang ;* the subscriptions of the Abors, mostly in kind towards the *Morang*, are deposited in a common treasure-house. These consist generally of pigs and fowls. They are a community property and, as such, these things can be used only in festivals and ceremonies of the community as a whole.

Besides voluntary subscriptions, fines realised by the *Kebang* as penalities, go to the common exchequer of the *Morang*. Not only the individual who commits the crime but also the society to which he belongs, has to atone for the crime. The expenses incurred are borne by individuals. There is no death sentence in the Abor body-politic. Often of course, it is an exception in the case of slaves. The *Morang* where the *Kebang* meets contains the Abor bachelor club in the night. The bachelors of the whole village sleep in the *Morang*. It is a sort of barrack-life for them. It constitutes, in a sense, the village defence force. They keep regular night watches.

Uniformity is the keynote of Abor life and society. Every house is about 50 ft. long and 20 ft. wide with a porch attached to it, in the front. It is always built on a wooden or bamboo

platform. Every house is a hall ; there are no rooms inside. Every house has a fireplace ; it accomodates one family only. Unmarried girls are allowed till the nuptial day to live with their parents ; the boys do not get this privilege. As soon as they are married, the couple has to accomodate separately. Marriage in Abor society means immediate separate establishment.

The Abors like all primitive people are pagan worshippers. Every disease has a presiding deity ; they donot believe in the efficacy of medicines, herbs or any thing ; sacrificial offerings to the deity concerned are believed to be sure antidotes. They do not have a separate priestly class ; as a matter of fact, there are no classes in Abor society. They have their fortune-tellers called *deodars* who use entrails of fowls or bears' livers as signs of forecasts. *Deodars* are held in high esteem in society. *Mithuns* or hill-oxen are generally sacrificed to propitiate the deities. There is social provision for the old and the infirm ; they are provided for by the community in the *Kebang* as per-perpetual guests, if they so desire. A contract in Abor society between two parties is sealed by exchange of raw meat. Such contracts can not be trifled away ; breaches are considered as serious offences.

In point of handicrafts, the Abors are not as skilful as the Khamtis, for instance, are. Except the pointed dagger-like *dao,* they have no other implements. With these they dig holes in the lands and put seeds into them ; they are inexperienced in the art of *jhum* or terrace cultivation which the Nagas have carried to a point of excellence. Inspite of this, the Abors produce annually a rich and varied harvest ; sugar-cane, pepper, cotton, rice etc. The most attractive feature of the villages is the suspension bridges made of cane across the hill streams. They are suspended several feet higher than the level of water. The Abors do not walk across them ; they wriggle through them. The complexion of the Abors is not as bright as that of the Mishmis ; they are taller than the latter. They possess a sort

of tan brown complexion. Their voice is well modulated, and the sound is a sonorous baritone.

Generally the Abors use a fibre extracted from the *Udal* tree for their garments. An Abor in his complete native dress is an epic of grandeur. Their dress consists of sleeveless coats of indigenous make. The rest consists of bears' and coloured *mithuns'* furs, boars' tusk etc. Among the war implements are arrows, shafts, javelins, swords etc. Women attire themselves with short skirts striped red and blue. They wear heavy garlands of bones, bears' tusks, beads, etc. Marriages of boys and girls are generally the concern of the parents ; but often it is deviated. Love atom-bombs all social dictums. The Abor boy too sings to his "bonnie bonnie lassie" ; the Abor girl too complains:

> Love in my bosom like a bee
> Doth suck his sweet.

Each in love offers presents to the other ; it is not a bouquet of honeysuckle or a diamond ring: it is on the other hand, either a squirrel or a field-mouse, fat and sleek.

The Mishmis

The Abor and the Mishmi Hills are recently constituted into two different administrative units, each under a political officer. The Mishmis are divided into two broad types, accordas they do their hair. The Mishmis of both sexes wear their hair long. The Chulikatas, a clan by themselves, crop off portions of their hair. There is a myth about it which connects the custom with Lord Krishna's elopement of Rukmini, daughter of Bhismaka, who was the ruler of Sadiya, in the Mishmi land. Mishmi villages stretch to the river Namlang, a tributary of the Irrawaddy. A part of them dwells on the banks of the *Do* on the outskirts of the Brahmakunda.

The Mishmi Hills, with their undulating scenes, present a picturesque panorama. But climbing is difficult. The Mishmis

are primarily not an agricultural people whereas the Abors are. They are to a great extent traders and pastoralists. The main commodity of their trade is domestic animals. The Mishmis rear *mithuns,* which they call *cha* in their language, in large flocks. They are not used for agriculture or milk. As a matter of fact, hill people do not drink milk. The *mithuns* are kept for sacrificial purposes or trade. Besides this, their chief articles of trade are musk, medicinal roots, earthenwares and woollen thing which they purchase from the neighbouring people of Tibet and sell in the market of the plains.

Poligamy is a common thing in Mishmi society, each man having a number of wives. The greater the number of wives, the higher the man's index of wealth. They have separate houses for a woman's period of confinement ; after delivery, in the case of a boy, the mother stays in it for ten days and, in case of a girl, she does so for eight days. The Mishmis worship their own Trinity. *Mujidangra* is the god of thunder ; *Damiphao* of wisdom and games ; *Tabla* of diseases and wealth. In the graveyard of the well-to-do, heads of animals sacrificed are planted ; moreover placed on it, in rows, are articles of foodstaff, wine, weapons, garments etc.

A Mishmi woman wears skirts down to the knees and ties her bosoms delicately with a breast-cloth. She is generally beautiful, supple, well-built, and of rich complexion and unusually bright eyes. The Mishmi woman is a poem. She is fond of rich garments and wears a silver badge on her forehead. The Mishmi, both men and women, have almost an Oscar Wilde-ish love of smoke. They smoke at all hours.

Generally they use brass-pipes which they procure, it is said, from the neighbourly people of China. They are a short but sturdy people. Though of the Tibeto-Burman origin, they are a race by themselves. Their features are wonderfully regular and complexion rich as a red poppy. The Mishmis are primarily of three clans ; *Tan, Mara* and *Mija.*

The *Chulikata Mishmis,* known in their language as *Mithi,* dwell on the outer skirts of the river Dibong. Some of their villages stretch to the border-line of Tibet ; a few of them are situated at great heights. The villages are thin units ; houses are generally sixty feet long with corridors from one end to the other, Unlike the Abor houses, the *Mithi* houses have separate seats for people to sit on. They have rooms in their houses. Villages have their headmen ; their names like *An-ladi, An-laga* have Miltonic charm of proper names. The headman's title is inherited from "sire to son". The *Mithi* body-politic is most crude and primitive. Disputes between individuals and clans are settled by force. Such customs, obtaining in society, often engrain life-long enmity. Social life becomes insecure. Poligamy, as amongst the rest of the Mishmis, is freely practised by the *Mithis.* A *Mithi* woman crops off her forelocks and ties the back hair into a knot wherein are put bone articles of luxury, procupine quills etc. A man wears a cane hat stretching to the eye-brows. *Mithi* Mishmis possess regular Mongolian features. They know the use of wool and cotton which they procure from the border people of Tibet ; at the same time they procure indigenous cloths of fibres extracted from various trees. Often a woman is seen wearing embroidered body garments.

The Mishims have their own weapons of war ; long Tibetan swords, bows, poison arrows, shields etc. The shields are made of buffalo-hides. The Abors seal their friendship by exchange of raw meats, while the Mishmis do it by exchange of arms. They keep up the tradition of a warrior race.

Appendix iii

The Assamese Theatre

The Assamese theatre reached its pristine vigour during the age of Renascence initiated by Sankardev (1449-1569). This was an age of literary upsurge ; it was marked by a cease-

less creative effort. The drama and the theatre appeared as a solid landmark in this cultural spring-tide. Through this visual representation, Sankardev and his great disciple Madhabdev tried to bring the tenets of Vaishnavism to the people. This is manifested through the theatre, they created in the religious monasteries as also in the village *namghars* or prayer-halls. In most cases, the latter even to this day serves as village auditorium and stage for theatrical performances called the *Bhawanas*. It enjoys similar dramatic traditions as the *Therukuthum,* the *Veetinataka,* the *Yakshangana* etc., prevalent in South India.

The word *bhawana* is, in a sense, onomatopoetic ; its meaning can be said to approximate "imitative representation". If "art", as Aristotle said, is "imitation", then the word *bhawana* is an adequate expression. In higher philosophic terms, it means thought--absorption of the Supreme Being, translated into action, on the stage. The drama is, after all, a representation on the stage of a slice of life. This slice of life, as laid out in the Vaishnavite era, was nothing more than a reflection of passions of religious instincts and spiritual thought-absorption.

Sarkardev travelled widely all over India during the years 1483 to 1495 and with open eyes and mind. He was of a dissolving temper ; wherever there was anything in the world of sight or sound, worthy of being absorbed into, he soon got dissolved into it. He was Assam's song-giver, scene-painter and stage-designer. More over, he gave the drama to the theatre, thus created. The idea of the theatre, as a medium of popular art, must have come to him during his tours of the different Vaishnavite art-centres in India. In Orissa and Bihar, during those times, the theatre on Vaishnavite themes was greatly popular and it reached a highwater mark of attainments. In Bihar particularly, the theatre initiated by Vidyapati created a sensation. The initital inspiration in these

matters must have come to Sankardev from these sources ; but it would be wrong to suppose that the river of his genius was thus lost in the rills of influences from outside sources.

Though the theatre, as such, did not exist in pre-Vaishnavite Assam before Sankardev emerged, the basis for it, as "cracks on mud-flats", was already there in the folk-dances, dance-dialogues, dance-passions, dance-characters and folk-rituals. In fact, the parent of all art creation in the ultimate analysis, is folk-culture, as Stephen Spender rightly holds. The *Ojapali,* a popular miniature folk-play that obtains in Assam for long, with music, dialogues and body-movements, must have given sufficient stimulus towards the production of the art-theatres under the auspices of Sankardev.

The *Bhawanas,* as initiated by him, are popular performances on *Pauranic* themes ; they are a happy combination of entertainment and education. Sankardev saw that the theatre is the keynote of the new religious drama, and, as such, his mind was dominated by the sense of the theatre and the atmosphere and the sense of suspense that stage representations generally help to create. He himself painted scenes of *Vaikuntha,* the Vaishnavite paradise, on vast canvas and did stage-setting. The language that he employed as a medium of the theatre was *Brajabuli,* interspersed with Sanskrit.

The *Sutradhara* is a key character of the *bhawanas ;* he is an integral part of the theatre. He is both an actor and the stage-director. He introduces the *dramatis personae* as also situations and episodes ; his function like that of the Greek chorus is to "enlighten and enliven". Each theatrical performance opens with a benediction which the *Sutradhara* recites to Vishnu and, besides this, he serves the modern function of "stage directions". The *Sutradhara* of the *bhawanas* is, in a sense, an extension of the *Oja* in the *Ojapali* dances. Both of them lead and direct their performances respectively. Like Milton, who wore a mixed garment of Latin and Puritanic

theology, Sankardev and Madhabdev, the Vaishnavite poet-preachers wore one of the art of theatre with the metaphysics of religion. All this is, so far as the theme of the theatre is concerned.

One of the main accessories of the old Assamese theatre is the painted masks, a remarkable specimen of folk-art and designs. We find an identity of mask-tradition between Assam and her *trans*-Patkoi neighbour, Burma. Almost every character of the *Bhawanas* in the Burmese theatre like the *Yama Pwe,* enters the stage dancing. Unlike the Burmese theatre, it is not that all characters in the Assamese theatre wear the mask ; there are exceptions made according to the nature of the characters represented.

The *Bhawana* or the Vaishnavite theatre gained an added patronage under the Ahom rule. It was accepted as an item of court entertainment, and, as was usual in feudal society, the *Bhawana* of the people's *namghar* became an object of court possession. This used to be specially ordered for on the visit of honoured guests like neighbouring tribal chiefs to the Ahom courts. Under Vaishnavite cultural patronage, Assamese dramatic literature grew over a period of one hundred years or so from the latter part of the 15th to that of the 16th century. Under the Ahom rule, historical literature grew and not the drama. The theatre, as such, languished out of court patronage and sustained itself on the sap that it drew from the people.

There is a close relation between the literary art of the drama and the stage arts. The historian of the theatre cannot neglect either. Apart from stage setting, costumes etc., necessary adjuncts of the theatre, western traditions, that came with the advent of English education, popularised a new technique of the drama ; it is Acts and Scenes into which a drama is divided, soliloquies, asides, character drawings and blank verse. At first only a cross-section of these influences

came to the new Assamese theatre through the Calcutta stage ; later on, it became more direct through western education and led to the release of new creative forces. Hemchandra Barua and Gunabhiram Barua are pioneers of the new drama and the theatre. They wrote social satires and "satires", according to Dobree, "seek to correct excess". Ramakanta Chaudhury introduced the serious drama and the blank verse into the Assamese theatre. This led to a flood of historical, mythological and social plays. Under this inspiration, the scope of the theatre was widened.

T. G. Williams points out that the theatre is "the orchestration of a number of distinct arts". One of this is the stage technique, which J. P. Agarwalla, who created the romantic drama for the Assamese theatre, knew well. Through it was ensured the much needed co-operation of the audience with the author. Lakhmidhar Sarma is the pioneer one-Act play writer. Other additions to the theatre are poetic dramas and a new technique known as "existentialism". Inspite of this, no permanent theatre has grown here as yet. It is till now an amateur art, and a leisurely enterprise. "No play is complete", Robert Speaight rightly remarks "until it is performed". This needs a permanent theatre as the Old Vic or the Art Theatre in Moscow or the Abbey Theatre in Ireland that helped the people's revolution. Occasional amateur performances, as on the event of the Pujas or like this, do not help to create a theatre. It is, as a matter of fact, environmental emphasis of the audience and the author that breathes life into the theatre. The arena theatre or the open air stage and the mobile theatre are fast becoming popular today in the west ; there is ample scope for development in this way for the modern Assamese theatre.

A permanent theatre helps to create a permanent set of artists ; for this, of course, the audience must grow. The one grows with the other and this inter-dependent growth helps to

sustain both. Women actors, as a class, are yet to grow for the modern Assamese stage. Where are the Edith Evans for this theatre? In fact no "squeaking Cleopatra boy" can regenerate standards and tastes for the theatre. Caudwell perhaps is not wrong.

Appendix iv

Manipur: *Dovecot of music* and *dance*

In point of administration, Manipur is not within the framework of the State of Assam. But in point of geography and ethnography, it is so much connected with it that to know Assam and not to know Manipur would be something like the blind China men of old, trying to know the elephant. This small hilly State, far-flung in reputation because of its dance and music and its delightful people, is situated on the frontier in between the Naga Hills on the north and the Lushai Hills and Burma on the south. In the British days, it was ruled by a dynasty of feudal princes. At present, it is a Chief Commissioner's State. The State of Manipur is a combination of hills and plains; the people of the hills differ, in point of culture, language and ethnology, from those of the plains. And that too considerably. It covers an area of 8,456 sq. miles with a single town Imphal, which is its capital; it has 1,400 villages of which 896 are situated in the hills. The Manipur valley, which is about thirty miles long and twenty wide, appears like a flat alluvial lake locked in the midst of different hills and mountain ranges that surround it. The hills consist seven-eights of the total area of the State with a considerably sparse population. The opposite is the case with the plains where the population is dense and overwhelming.

The hill ranges of Manipur bear a close cultural and ethnical affinity with those of the rest of Assam, from whom, they are in fact, indistinguishable. They constitute a solid

Mongoloid block with the hill tribes dotting Assam. Ethnologists concur in the view that the origin of the Manipuris is a matter of uncertainty. Originally the valley was the melting pot of several tribes, who through the long columns of history, fought and fraternised in it. The principal tribes that constitute this people are *Koomal, Looang, Moirang* and *Meithi;* suzerainty through ages alternated till ultimately the *Meithi* subdued the rest of the tribes and wielded out of the welter a single people. McCulloch, basing his arguments on traditions and philological affinities, opines that the plains Manipuris are no more than descendants of the different tribes that inhabit the hills. He points out that the Coronation ceremony of their princes is performed in the Naga dress and the *Zimchaw* or "great house", the original residence of the hills chiefs, is built in the Naga fashion. The people of the plains, however, deny all these suggestions and trace their origin to different points of the compass.

The Manipuris speak an easy tongue; their language is sonorous, smooth and un-obtrusive. The three principal languages that are used in this State are *Meithi* or Manipuri proper, *Naga* and *Kuki. Manipuri,* as linguists like Dr. Grierson points out, is an offshoot of the Kuki-Chin group of languages. Unlike the other languages of the Eastern frontier, it had a written character of its own, which is now, more or less, a relic of history. At present the Bengali alphabet has displaced it completely.

The Manipuris are by tradition an artistic people; temperamentally also, they are so. The aesthetic sense is their dominating passion. They are a neat and comely people: robust, tall and well-built, they are a handsome people. Their bodies seldom grow bulky or heavy and petulant. Their complexion is usually fair. The Manipuris are an extremely clean people, clean in their life and surroundings. They are excellent livers too. Here women work as much as men do;

they work as efficiently as their men-folks in fields, market places and other places of daily routine. The women are invariably quick, intelligent and alert; they are naturally an emancipated race, independent both socially and economically. *Purdah* is completely unknown here. Manipur did not come under the suzerainty of the Muslims thoughout its history. The Muslim population in this State is meagre. There is no communal or partisan problem in this State.

Dance is a principal item of the social and cultural life of the people of Manipur. Dressed in coloured garments, boys and girls dance together in their many festive occasions. Their dance technique, as pointed out by European observers, parallels, to a great extent, that of a Greek chorus. But in close observation, it appears that this has greater affinity in its *modus operandi* to the dance techniques of South-East Asia and of the old Assamese School of dances than to any other technique elsewhere. The orchestra is generally composed of one or more drums and a string instrument or two. The performers keep time to the tune and music. In one of their dances, the dresses used are extremely colourful, bright and picturesque. The bodice is of emerald green satin covered with silver sequins; the under-skirt is scarlet and the over-skirt, a silvery muslin.

The Nagas with their magnificent spears present a picturesque spectacle in their dances; their dancers wear coloured cloths and strange ornaments and create an atmosphere of fantasy and excess energy. Manipur is a land of colour and music, dance and festivities. The *Holi* festival is the brightest. Vaishnavism is the principal religion of the Manipuri Hindus. *Lai Harba* is a popular folk-dance in Manipur; it is woven round a legendary theme of two lovers and their pangs and passions.

Weaving is one of the main handicrafts of Manipur; women here weave cloths of various designs and patterns. The cotton

employed is grown in the surrounding hills; the looms employed are indigenous. With the coloured tissues and patterns spread out in front of her, the Manipuri woman, as she plies her shuttle with deft fingers, looks as attractive as any painter could wish.

Except for legends and popular traditions, it is difficult to re-build the ancient history of Manipur; it is over-laid with darkness and obscurity. Since the death of King Guru Sham in 1764, Manipur passed through a dark epoch of history. The country was over-run by the Burmans; they pillaged and plundered it. About 1765, the Burmans invaded and defeated the Manipur forces at Tamu in the Kabu Valley and ravaged the whole country. Their annals of atrocity darken all annals of blood in history.

The opening years of the 19th century witnessed a family feud in the Royal palace of Manipur; like all family feuds in general, it led to intrigue, conspiracy and ultimately to disintegration and blood. At the beginning of the century, three brothers contended for the throne; the eldest Churajit obtained the throne, the second Marjit fled to Burma, the third Gambhir Singh remained with his brother in the State.

Like Badan Borphukon of Assam, it is Marjit who plunged Manipur into a cataclysm of blood; he obtained the help of the Burmans, he invaded Manipur in 1812 and dethroned his brother who finally fled to the Jaintia Raja. In 1812 peace was however restored between them; the brothers Churajit and Gambhir Singh ruled in Cachar and Marjit in Manipur. After the expulsion of the Burmans, the sceptre devolved upon their younger brother Gambhir Singh. Finally, according to a Government of India notification dated 21st August 1891, the choice for the throne fell upon Churachand, the youngest of five brothers who were the great-grandsons of Nur Singh through his fifth son Bhogendra Singh. After the Kuki rebellion of 1918, the administration of the Hills was shifted to

the President of the Manipur State Durbar under the behest of the Government of India. He administered these areas in the name of his Highness the Maharaja till the present political set-up.

According to the Constitution of the Republic of India, Manipur is constituted into a "C" class State of the Republic. Imphal, headquarters station of the State, is situated at a sea-level of 2,600 ft., the population of this town is estimated at about one lakh. On the southern part of the State, there are almost as many lakes, swampy places and water-logged areas as there are different hill-ranges surrounding them. Loktah is the largest of the lakes ; during the rains, it spreads over an area of about forty sq. miles. The principal river of the State is the Barak which might be described as a tributary of the Brahmaputra. The river Imphal which runs through its plains is a tributary of the Chindwin in Burma. During the last World War, Manipur became the battle-ground of the Allied and the Axis forces ; the Japanese and the Azad Hind forces advanced as far as it, and beyond it into the Naga Hills. The wounds, these battles wrought, have left deep scars in their faces.