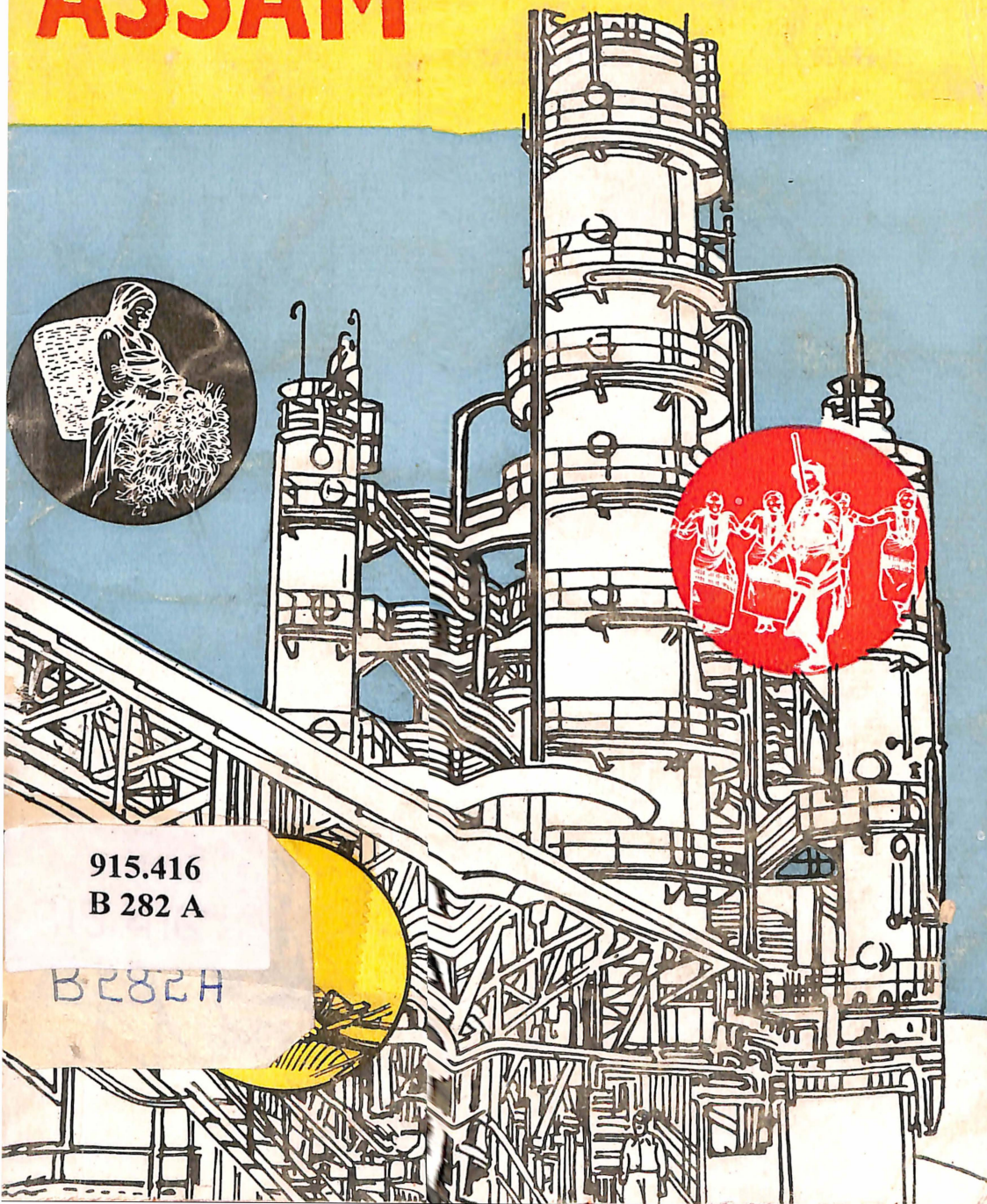


STATES OF OUR UNION

# ASSAM



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*States of Our Union*

# ASSAM

PULIN BEHARI BARTHAHAKUR

PUBLICATIONS DIVISION  
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### ABOUT THE SERIES

This is the sixth book in the series “States of Our Union”. The other five were on *Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh* and *Himachal Pradesh*. The object of the series is to promote greater awareness and understanding of different regions of the country.

The books seek to provide a factual account of the life, culture and economic development of our States and Union Territories, and their contribution to India as a whole. They are addressed to the general reader to serve as an introduction of a State or Territory to other parts of the country.

## 1. THE LAND AND THE PEOPLE

ASSAM is a land-locked territory projecting towards the hilly regions of north-west Burma and south China. The State is the north-eastern frontier of India connected to the mainland by the narrow neck of north Bengal, passing through the foothills of Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim. It is touched by about 3,220 kilometres of international boundary.

Bounded on the north by the Himalayan range south of Tibet, Assam is an undulated tract criss-crossed by hundreds of rivers and rivulets. The mighty river, Brahmaputra, flows through the plains of Assam. The territory thrusts itself like a wedge in the north-east to the hills of Upper Burma. Towards the south, Assam projects itself to the Chin hills of Burma, while in the south-east lie Manipur and Nagaland. The Patkoi range on the Indo-Burma border is India's Khyber of the east, for through these ranges, the cultures of India and South-east Asia came into contact. Ahoms, whose contribution to Assam's history, culture, etc., was very great, came to Assam through this mountain pass from the Hukwang Valley of Upper Burma.

If Egypt is the gift of the Nile, Assam is the gift of the Brahmaputra. Assam's history, civilisation and culture were shaped and reshaped on the banks of this mighty river. The name 'Brahmaputra' means 'the Son of Brahma', one of the Hindu trinity. The total length of the river from the source to the sea is 2,900 km. Its drainage area is roughly 9,35,500 sq. kilometres. It has 120 tributaries.

The land mass of Assam is modulated with hills and dales. The hills vary in height from about 305 metres to 3,050 metres.

The Brahmaputra rises near the Mansarowar and flows eastward as Tsan-po through Tibet and then turns southward cutting the main Himalayan axis. The Tsan-po enters the plains at Pasighat in NEFA. Thirty-two km. south of Pasighat and west of Sadiya it is joined by Lohit. The Lohit-Brahmaputra, after traversing the Mishmi country,

flows through Parasuram Kund, a holy place visited by the Hindu pilgrims every year during winter. From Dibrugarh, the Brahmaputra rolls along through the plains with a vast expanse of water, broken by innumerable islands and 'chars', exhibiting the operations of alluvion and diluvion on a gigantic scale. During rainy season its water contains a large quantity of silt, and the least obstruction in its stream causes a deposit, and gives rise to big sandbanks.

Rainfall in Assam is one of the highest in the world. Moisture-laden monsoon clouds are partially intercepted by the Khasi and Jaintia Hills which, rising to a height of 1,830 metres cause profuse rainfall in their southern slopes. Cherrapunjee-Mawsynram area, records world's highest rainfall which yields an annual average of 500 inches (1,270 centimetres).

Rainfall varies from about 178 centimetres in Kamrup district to about 305 cm. in the north-eastern region. In the Barak Valley in Cachar district, rainfall is about 305 cm. All this rainfall is concentrated during four months, June to September.

The total area of Assam is 1,21,973 sq. kilometres of which riverine area comprises about 12 per cent, the rest being covered by hills. The riverine area is populated by 39 per cent of Assam's population. The density of population works out at 432 per sq. mile.

The Brahmaputra Valley of Assam has a length of 724 kilometres and a width of 80 km.

### **The People**

Assam is known as a 'museum of nationalities'. Originally populated by several non-Aryan tribes, Assam also got Aryan settlement at a very early age. With the admixture of Aryan, Mongolian and local inhabitants, Assam's is one of India's most cosmopolitan societies with its population having a catholicity of outlook, seldom found elsewhere. There is greater diversity here than in any other State of India in the matter of language, race, culture and religion. Through ages, tribes like Naga, Garo, Khasi, Mizo, Dafla, Mishmi, Adi, etc., have lived peacefully with the people of the plains and have built up a composite culture.

The present State of Assam consists of eleven districts, seven of them are in the plains and five in the hills.

Another area of about 90,650 sq. kilometres is covered by sub-Himalayan hills. Grouped under an administrative organisation known as the North East Frontier Agency, this region, constitutionally a part of Assam, is administered by the Government of India with the Governor of Assam as its agent.

NEFA is divided into five districts : Kameng, Subansiri, Siang, Lohit and Tirap. The principal tribes inhabiting NEFA are : Monpa, Apatani, Dafla, Tagin, Galong, Sherdukpen, Adi, Padam, Khampti, Singpho, Tangsha, Mishmi, Wancho, etc., each having a dialect and some special fairs and festivals of its own. The tribes are in varying stages of development, but in recent years, their progress has been phenomenal.

Though these tribes speak their own tongues, Assamese is mainly used as a medium of inter-tribal communication.

Assam has five districts in the hills. Two of them—Khasi and Jaintia and Garo Hills—have recently been formed into an autonomous State known as Meghalaya. The three other hill districts—Mizo Hills, Mikir Hills and North Cachar Hills—have their own autonomous District Councils constituted under the provision of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.

### **Languages and Religions**

Languages spoken in Assam differ widely in their origin and diction. While Assamese comes from Sanskrit, as Bengali and most other Indian languages do, the Khasis possess a tongue the nearest affinity of which is to the distant languages of Cambodia and Annam.

Assamese is the language of 57 per cent of the population. Bengali accounts for 17 per cent, followed by the language of Bodo group (2.9 per cent), Khasi (3 per cent), Mizo (1.8 per cent) and Mikir (1.3 per cent).

In the field of religion, Hinduism takes care of 66.41 per cent of the population, followed by Islam (23.29 per cent) and Christianity (6.44 per cent). Over three per cent of the population professes tribal religions.

## 2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

AS already mentioned Assam presents a unique fusion of different racial and linguistic elements. A peep into the prehistoric movement of people shows that Assam drew its inhabitants mainly from the vast Mongolian races in Western China. The main line of movement seems to have been along the banks of Brahmaputra fanning out toward the west. Austro-Asiatics, Dravadians, Tibeto-Burmans and Aryans came to Assam at different periods of history and the synthesis of different cultural traits gave birth to a composite Assamese culture.

The first mention of Assam is found in India's great epics and religious legends. Aryans belonging to the priestly and warrior classes found their way to Assam at a very early stage of their conquest of the Indo-Gangetic plains.

The ancient kingdom of Kamarupa was swept by a wave of Hindu civilization and it maintained its cultural homogeneity with the rest of India. Though isolated geographically, Assam was not outside the cultural hegemony of the Aryavarta.

Though early Aryan settlement in Assam left very little recorded evidence, various places mentioned in the epics, particularly in Mahabharata, are now identified with sites in the present State of Assam. Mention of Kamarupa is also to be found in Kalidasa's Raghuvamsa, Kautilya's Arthashastra and Kalhana's Rajatarangini.

The temple of Kamakhya, near Gauhati, is a very old shrine. Kalika Purana and Yogini Tantra, two important Puranas believed to have been written in the tenth century, mention of several Assam kings. One of the most famous kings of Assam was Naraka, who founded the ancient city of Pragjyotishpur—the city of eastern light. King Naraka was killed by Lord Krishna in a bloody war. Naraka's domain extended from the present-day Gauhati to Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri and other districts of North Bengal.

Bhagadutta, son of Narakasur, finds mention in Mahabharata as the Lord of Pragjyotishpur. He fought the Pandavas as an ally of



Duryodhana and commanded a big army on elephant-back. Bhagadutta has been mentioned as the king of the Kiratas and his kingdom is said to have extended to the sea. He was defeated and slain by Arjuna in the battle-field of Kurukshetra.

### **Kamarupa Legend**

Legend has it that Lord Siva, while in deep meditation, was disturbed by Kamadeva, the Cupid of Hindu mythology. Enraged, the Lord opened his third eye of fire and the poor Kamadeva was instantly reduced to a heap of ashes. His consort, Rati Devi, prayed hard before Lord Siva, who having been propitiated, agreed to give back Kamadeva's life. The land, where Kamadeva regained his original form (rupa) came to be known as Kamarupa.

Earliest recorded history of Assam can be had in the account of the Chinese pilgrim Hieun Tsang, who visited Kamarupa in 640 A.D. According to him the ruler of Kamarupa at that time was Kumar Bhaskar, a contemporary of Harshavardhana of Kannauj (U.P.) and Sasanka of Gauda (Bengal). Hieun Tsang wrote, "The country of Kamarupa is about 10,000 li (nearly 2,900 km.) in circuit. The capital town is five miles round. The land is low, but is rich and regularly cultivated."

The centuries that followed did not leave much recorded history. The country was divided into petty principalities ruled by local chiefs of Chutia, Kachari, Moran, Koch and other communities.

### **The Ahoms**

The advent of the Ahoms, a Shan tribe, early in the thirteenth century, changed the course of Assam's history. Ahoms fought the local Kachari, Chutia and Moran kings and established their sway in course of time over the whole of the Brahmaputra valley. They ruled the State till the Burmese invasion in the early 19th century. Earlier, the Moghul rulers from Delhi, aided by their governors in Bengal, invaded Assam as many as seventeen times, but the powerful Ahom army repulsed all their attacks. Ahoms gave Assam a homogeneous culture, a recorded history and an orderly government.

During the mediaeval period, Assam was known as Kamarupa, which name now sticks to one district only. The Chinese traveller

Hieun Tsang, referred to Assam as Kamolupo, while the Muslim historians called it Kamru. The origin of the name is associated with the non-Aryan or pre-Aryan Austric culture, from which must have developed the Tantrik-Buddhist faith and Sakti rites. These rites included the belief in magic and sorcery, with which this ancient land is associated since the hoary past.

While the name Kamarupa stands for Purusa-Siva representing a spiritual entity, Kamakhya is the embodiment of Prakriti-Devi, which, with its object of worship, symbolises the geographical area of the entire Assam.

The modern name, Assam, is however, an anglicised form of the Assamese formation 'Asom', which is believed to have been first applied to this land by the Ahoms, when they established their kingdom in the early part of the 13th century. It is not improbable that the name has its bearing on the topographical standing of the land—uneven with hills and plains. It is also probable that Assam is derived from the name of the ruling community, the Ahoms.

During the Ahom rule, the eastern boundary of Assam included the present Sadiya region and a portion of Nagaland and Mishmi hills of NEFA. Ahom kings used to post their own officers in the hill regions to administer the tribes.

Court intrigues resulted in the invitation to the Burmese forces by some Ahom nobles in the early part of the 19th century. The Burmese invaded Assam, deposed the ruling Ahom king and unleashed a reign of terror for a few years, after which came the British intervention. Assam came under the East India Company in 1826 as a gift of the Burmese king at the cessation of hostilities between the British and the Burmese.

Immediately after the British administration spread, Assamese nobles and the common people raised the banner of revolt. These revolts also found an echo in the hills. Patriots like U Tirot Singh, chief of the Khasi kingdom of Nongkhlaw, rebelled and put to death a few British officers.

Gomdhar, Piyali Phookan and Maniram Dewan are some of the Assamese noblemen, who fought against the consolidation of the British rule. Maniram Dewan established contact with the revolting sepoys and the Sultan of Delhi and planned an armed uprising in

1857. The British got scent of the preparations and hanged Maniram at a public place in Jorhat.

Assam also played its part in the nation's 'unarmed' struggle for freedom. In successive movements launched by national leaders, Assam had its due share. Representatives were sent even to the first session of the Indian National Congress at Bombay. Thousands courted arrest and suffered humiliation during the struggle for independence under Mahatma Gandhi. When provincial autonomy was ushered in after the 1935 constitutional reforms, a Congress Ministry took office in 1938.

Independence in 1947, however, brought about partition of Assam. The thickly populated district of Sylhet opted for Pakistan after a referendum.

The district of Naga Hills was separated from Assam and was formed into the State of Nagaland with some areas of NEFA also attached to it in 1961. Two other districts—United Khasi and Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills—were formed into the autonomous State of Meghalaya within the broad framework of Assam in 1970.

### 3. ECONOMY AND DEVELOPMENT PLANS

WHEN India attained independence in 1947, Assam inherited a disturbed economy. The major brunt of World War II had to be borne by Assam, for it was in the advanced line of Allied defence in the East. Japanese forces advanced as far as Kohima, now the capital of Nagaland State.

War years saw the influx of thousands of evacuees from Burma. A network of airfields and roads were constructed as part of war preparations. Most of food articles produced locally were mopped up for the defence forces, while there was an acute scarcity of articles normally transported from other States.

Partition of the country was a great tragedy for Assam. Sylhet, the most populous and fertile district, opted for Pakistan. Communication with the rest of the country was snapped with the creation of East Pakistan which is sandwiched between West Bengal and Assam. Calcutta was the major industrial and port city for all the economic activities concerning Assam. The city, which demanded only overnight journey from Gauhati, suddenly became a far-off place having no direct rail link. Chittagong, which was the port for the Surma valley districts of Assam, was also lost to Pakistan, making Cachar and Mizo Hill districts even farther than the rest of Assam from a port. Commercial activity naturally got a sudden set-back.

The post-War reconstruction schemes were re-shaped to suit the changed needs of the situation. A rail link through the foothills of the Himalayan ranges in North Bengal was hurriedly planned and established by December 1949. The demands on this link railway were very great, as the erstwhile Brahmaputra water transport route to Calcutta also passed through Pakistan.

Then in 1950, came the great earthquake followed by devastating floods. These events threw all development schemes out of gear, as floods caused widespread damage to property and the transport system.

Coupled with these natural calamities came the great influx of East Pakistan refugees. This influx resulted in a great strain on Assam's already difficult economy.

### **Five Year Plans**

The Five Year Plan came to Assam in the backdrop of all these problems, man-made and natural. The First Five Year Plan was a modest one with a capital outlay of only Rs. 20.5 crores. The First Plan aimed merely at laying the infra-structure for further development and at putting the State's economy, still smarting under the backlash of War and Partition, on an even keel. Priority was given to the development of agriculture and setting up essential institutions of higher education and professional training, besides opening up communication channels.

The Second Five Year Plan, with a capital outlay of Rs. 54.5 crores, laid special emphasis on agriculture, irrigation, power generation, transport, health services and education. The main idea was to carry forward the process of development initiated during the First Five Year Plan.

The achievements of these ten years of planned development could not obviously be spectacular. A stagnant economy, groaning under the heavy pressure of a World War, Partition and unprecedented natural calamity, certainly could not be expected to work miracles overnight. Nonetheless, these two Plans brought a whiff of fresh air into Assam's economy giving it a forward push.

The Third Five Year Plan with a capital outlay of Rs. 132.3 crores laid emphasis on social services, transport, power generation, flood control and industrial development. The implementation of the Third Plan, however, received a jolt with the Chinese aggression in 1962. Assam had to receive the major blow of this aggression. Earlier, thousands of Tibetans fled their country and entered Assam, when the Chinese forces overran Tibet in 1959. Along with the advance of Chinese forces in NEFA, thousands of hillmen came down to the plains of Assam. All this put a great strain on Assam's economy and the progress achieved in the implementation of the Five Year Plans received a slide-back.

The Indo-Pakistani conflict in 1965 was yet another blow to



Assam's economy and development plans. The river route to Calcutta on the Brahmaputra through East Pakistan was sealed off and a large number of Indian steamers laden with goods meant for export from Assam were impounded by the Pakistani authorities.

The Third Five Year Plan, therefore, had only limited success in Assam. Vital sectors like industry, transport and communication could make but little progress.

Taken together, during the first three Five Year Plans Assam's State income (at 1960-61 prices) rose from Rs. 279.2 crores to Rs. 445.6 crores. This works out at 3.2 per cent annual growth rate.

The Third Five Year Plan sought to secure an annual growth rate of about 5.1 per cent. Subsequent stock-taking, however, showed that the growth rate was only around 4.1 per cent. This shortfall is attributed to a set-back in agricultural production during 1965-66 season.

However, a study of the composition of State income during the first 15 years of economic planning shows that a **beginning** in the structural change in the economy of Assam set in by the end of the Third Plan. Infra-structure for further development has been laid and the State's economy is at its take-off stage.

The State's national income has registered an increase of 60 per cent over the period 1950-51 to 1965-66. The per capita income during the same period, however, registered a rise of only 4 per cent—*i.e.*, only 2 per cent on an average annually. This is due to the fact that the economic growth of the State has not marched forward to keep pace with the growth of population.

### **Population Growth**

Population growth in Assam has been phenomenal during the last 70 years. Census reports indicate that the percentage of growth of population in Assam is much higher than that in other States. The 1961 census showed 34 per cent increase of Assam's population during the preceding decade.

The population of Assam was only about 37.13 lakhs in 1901, which rose to 61.66 lakhs in 1931 and 118.73 lakhs in 1961.

A quick survey by the Registrar General of India indicated that the rate of growth of population in Assam has been projected at 3 per

cent per annum during the decade 1961-71. The population is expected to increase at the rate of 2.9 per cent per annum during the decade 1971-81. (The population was 1,48,57,314 according to 1971 Census provisional figures.)

#### **Fourth Plan**

The Fourth Five Year Plan aims at a growth rate of 5 per cent per annum in the agricultural sector.

The investment content of the 4th Plan for Assam is of the order of Rs. 262 crores in the State sector.

Discussions of the Five Year Plans would not be complete unless a reference is made to the Central sector investments in Assam during the plan periods. Development of railways, postal and other communications has also brought about many changes in the economic condition of the State.

During the first two Five Year Plans the Central investment in Assam was of the order of Rs. 72 crores. During the Third Five Plan the investment by the Government of India directly came to Rs. 137 crores. Centre's investment in Assam during the 4th Plan period may be of the order of Rs. 150 crores.

Investment in the private sector in Assam is governed by a variety of complex factors. Though the State abounds in natural resources, exploitation of these resources by private parties has been very slow. This is perhaps due to lack of good communication facilities. Capital formation in the private sector, therefore, is very slow. It is, however, estimated that during the First Plan period investment in the private sector in Assam was of the order of Rs. 150 crores; it was Rs. 136 crores in the Third plan. During the 4th Plan period private investment in Assam is likely to be Rs. 100 crores. Thus a total investment in the public and private sectors in the 4th Five Year Plan is expected to be nearly Rs. 500 crores.

On the basis of the investments indicated above, the State's share in the national income is expected to rise to Rs. 594 crores. This is expected to ensure a growth rate of 5.9 per cent per year. The per capita income was expected to rise from Rs. 332 in 1965-66 to about Rs. 386 in 1970-71.

#### 4. AGRICULTURE AND RURAL UPLIFT

**A**GRICULTURE is the basis of Assam's economy. It sustains about 72 per cent of the State's population.

Important products of agriculture in Assam are rice, various kinds of pulses, jute, tea, etc. Till about 1942-43 little importance was put on agriculture and agriculturists. The State was self-sufficient in foodgrains. The second World War, however, saw tremendous influx into Assam of defence forces and other people resulting in great strain on the State's food resources. The country-wide Grow More Food Campaign was vigorously pushed through. Though not very effective, this movement did succeed in putting some emphasis on the need for a scientific approach to agriculture.

After Independence, the population of Assam increased and the need for augmenting foodgrains production was brought into sharp focus. Agriculture got a boost with the launching of the Five Year Plans.

In the First Five Year Plan, emphasis was laid on schemes for increased agricultural production mostly through the indigenous methods of cultivation. A beginning was also made for building up an infra-structure for the training of agriculturists in modern methods and development of horticulture.

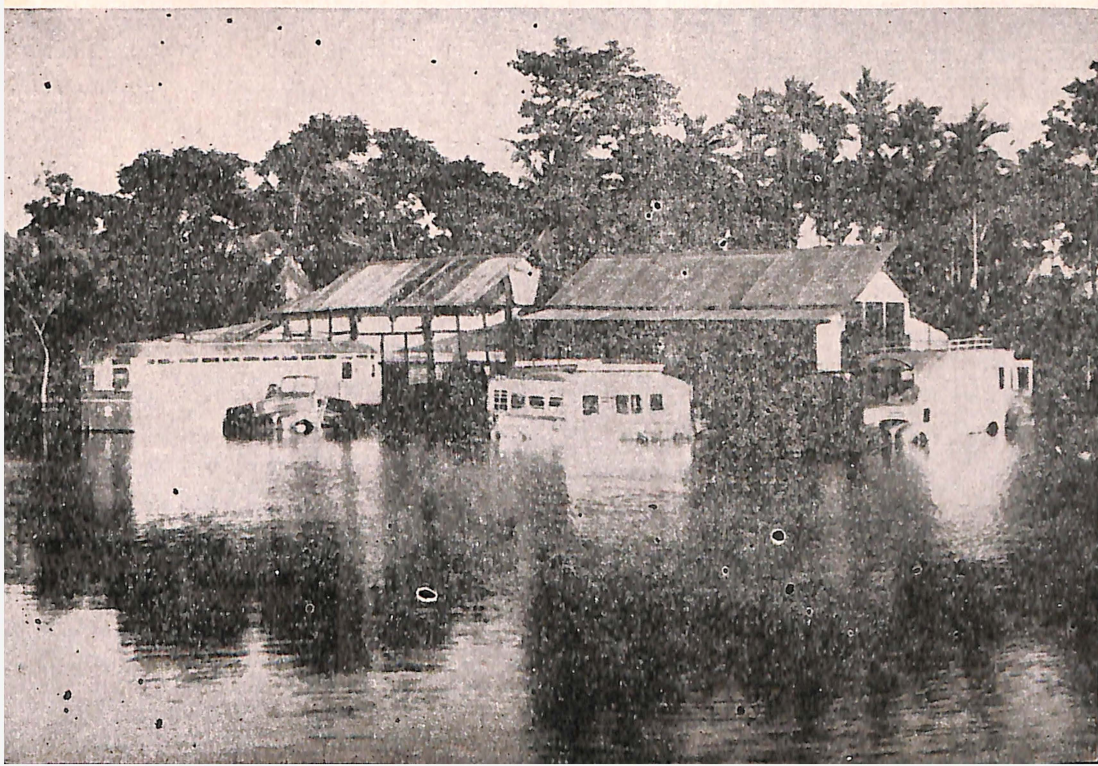
It is officially claimed that the target set in the First Five Year Plan for production of 2.25 lakh tonnes of additional foodgrains was achieved. Agricultural production rose by 10 points, from 85.72 in 1950-51 to 95.79 in 1955-56. Cultivation of paddy occupies nearly 70 per cent of the total cultivated area in the State.

The approach in the Second Five Year Plan was for balanced development of food and cash crops, multiplication and distribution of improved seeds, use of fertilisers, creation of irrigation facilities, etc. Steps were also taken for better marketing facilities for cash crops. The objective was to bring about a better standard of living for the agriculturists.

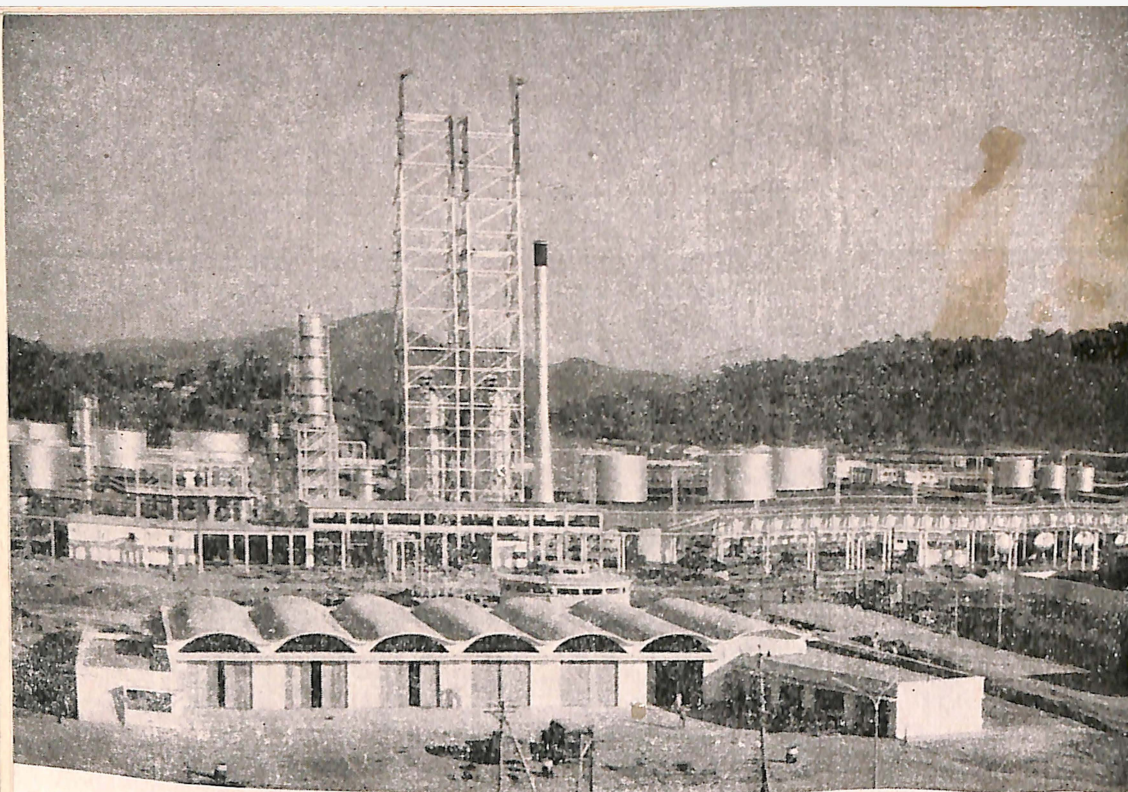
The target set for additional foodgrain production during the



*Cherrapunjee, which records the world's highest rainfall.  
Though Assam is the gift of the Brahmaputra, floods in that  
river and its tributaries often cause considerable damage.*





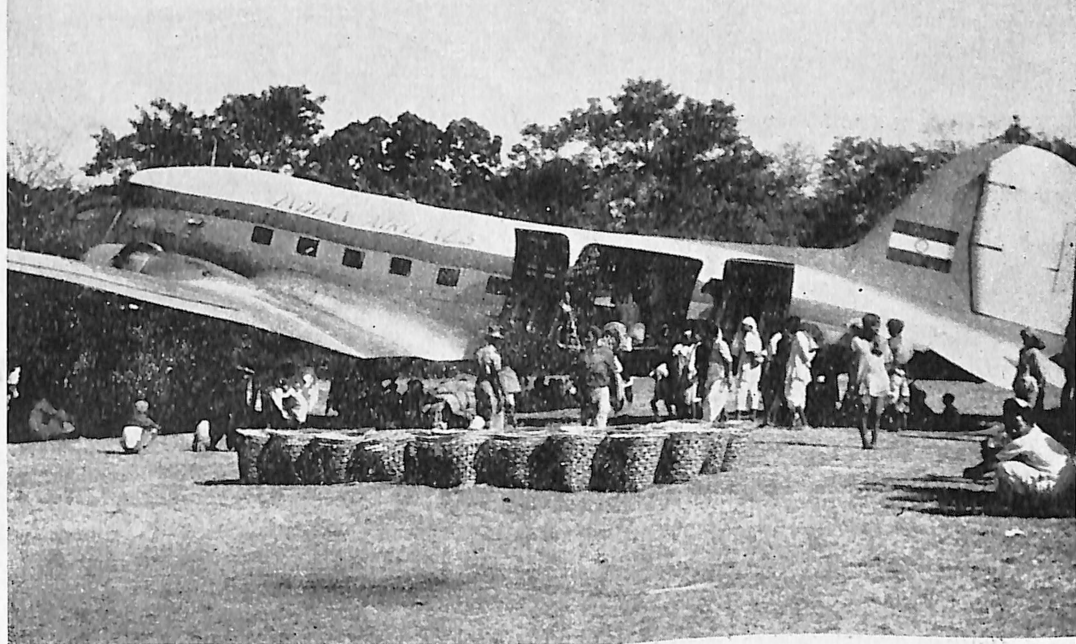


*The first public sector oil refinery at Gauhati. Assam is blessed with rich reserves of mineral oil.*



*The State contributes about two-thirds of the country's earnings from tea export.*

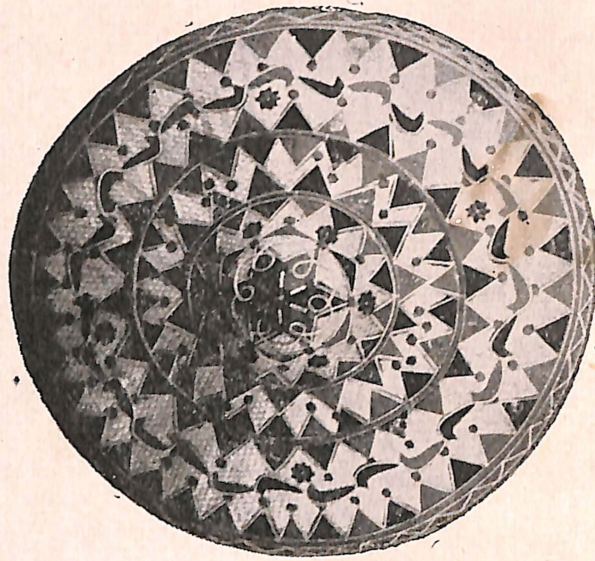




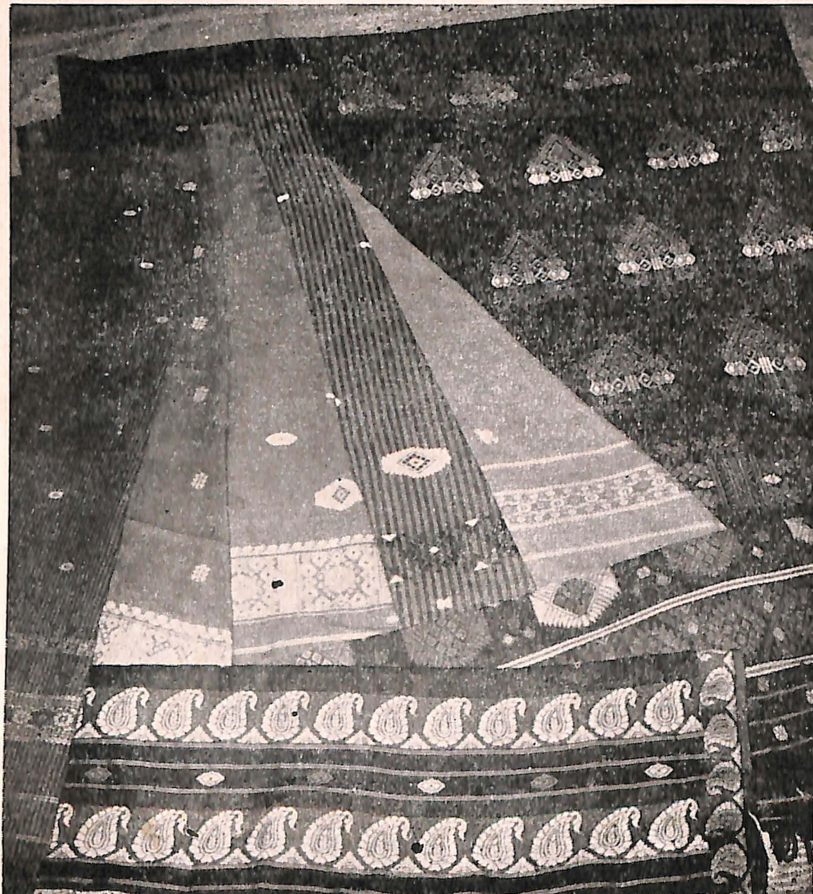
*Surface communications rendered difficult because of the hilly terrain, air service has been well developed in the State. A cargo of oranges being air-lifted. The construction of the huge bridge over the Brahmaputra near Gauhati has removed many bottlenecks in Assam's transport system.*



*Assamese craftsmen produce lovely articles out of ivory, cane and bamboo. This headgear is a sample of their skill.*



*'Every woman of Assam is a born weaver'. Some beautiful textile designs are seen here.*



Second Plan period was 3.82 lakh tonnes. As against this, additional production potential of 2.30 lakh tonnes was created.

Agricultural schemes in the Third Five Year Plan received a setback due to floods and droughts. The target for additional foodgrain production was 4.20 lakh tonnes but the achievement was only 3.87 lakh tonnes. Foodgrain production in Assam in 1965-66 was 19.02 lakh tonnes, as against 19.66 lakh tonnes in the previous year.

Though in physical terms the production had fallen short of the target, the Third Five Year Plan did create the necessary infrastructure for further acceleration of agricultural production. The intake in the State's only Agricultural College was significantly increased. Better arrangements were made for the training of agricultural officers and agriculturists. The extension services at the field level were considerably improved. The use of fertilisers and improved seeds was widely popularised. In the last year of the Third Plan, consumption of fertilisers rose up to 20,000 tonnes, as against about 2,500 tonnes during the Second Plan period.

At the grass-root level, the Community Development Programme accelerated the development in the rural areas. Plant protection measures were also widely taken up.

The area under various crops increased from 24 million hectares in 1952-53 to 29 million hectares in 1967-68. The rate of increase has been over 20 per cent in the 15-year period. Double cropping was also undertaken in 5,14,000 hectares of land in 1967-68.

#### **Fourth Plan**

The Fourth Five Year Plan aims at an average annual growth rate of over 6 per cent. The agricultural plan aims at increasing the production of foodgrains at a rate higher than that of population growth. It also envisages increase in the production of jute which is an important source of foreign exchange.

#### **Tea**

Tea occupies about seven per cent of Assam's total cropped area. About 75 per cent of the area under tea is concentrated in the three Assam valley districts of Darrang, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur. Cachar district accounts for about 20 per cent of the area, while the remaining



five per cent is shared by the lower Brahmaputra valley districts. Sibsagar district has the largest number of tea gardens, but in respect of production, Lakhimpur district takes the lead. There are nearly 755 tea gardens in Assam with a cropped area of 1,76,812 hectares (1969 figure). The total output of these gardens is roughly 201 million kilograms per year, of which 120 million kilograms are exported. The industry has about seven lakh workers on its rolls, while an equal number indirectly derive employment from the industry. Over 62 per cent of India's foreign exchange earnings from tea is contributed by Assam.

### **Forests**

Forests occupy 45,351 square kilometers of area in Assam. They are classed as reserve forests, protected forests and unclassed State forests.

The total forest area covers about 37 per cent of the total land area of the State. Assam forests abound in commercial timber which is a big revenue-earning commodity in the State.

Forests also account for a flourishing agro-based industry in the State. Plywood and various kinds of boards are manufactured mainly to cater to the needs of the tea industry.

Assam forests also abound in bamboo, and it is estimated that 12 lakh tonnes of paper pulp can be manufactured annually out of these bamboos. Two paper mills are shortly coming up in Assam to utilise the bamboo resources.

### **Rural Uplift**

Intensive activities for rural uplift came to Assam in 1952 when the Community Development Programme and the National Extension Service were pushed through. Assam started with only two N.E.S. Blocks in 1952. But the number increased to 162 in 1967. Of these Rural Development Blocks, 120 are located in the plains districts and 42 in the hill districts.

With the enactment of Assam Panchayat Act, 1959, the responsibility for planning and development of rural areas devolved on the elected bodies, viz., Gaon Panchayats (Village Panchayats), Anchalik Panchayats (Block Panchayats) and Mahakuma Parishads (Zilla

Panchayats). There are in Assam 17 Mahakuma Parishads, 121 Anchalik Panchayats and 2,601 Gaon Panchayats.

The Community Development Blocks are the principal agencies for pushing through the agricultural production programmes in the rural areas. They also undertake various programmes for women, children and the youth.

In the field of co-operation, Assam has 7,175 registered societies with a membership of 6,53,000 (1967 figures).



## 5. FLOOD CONTROL AND POWER GENERATION

**B**OUNDED by hills on three sides, Assam has peculiar geo-physical conditions. Moist-laden clouds from the Bay of Bengal, intercepted by Assam Hills, cause heavy rainfall in the hills and the dales of the State which inundates the rivers.

The Brahmaputra is one of world's largest rivers. Its source is in Tibet, at a place called Kubiangiri on the eastern part of lake Mansarowar. The small river here, known as Tsan-po, flows gently for 1,126 kilometres in southern Tibet in an easterly direction parallel to the Himalayas. At a place called Gyala (height 2,835 metres), the river takes a southerly turn and flows through a narrow gorge in a series of rapids and falls.

At Pasighat in NEFA, the river emerges from the foothills and reaches the plains of Assam. Two tributaries, Dibang and Lohit, join here and the river takes the name Brahmaputra. It then flows in the westerly direction through the plains of Assam, receiving tributes from several tributaries. It takes a southerly course again beyond Dhubri and flows into the Ganges at Gualando in East Bengal. The river, now known as Padma, joins the Meghna and falls into the Bay of Bengal, after a long and circuitous travel of 2,900 km.

The Brahmaputra and its tributaries spill over their banks during the monsoons. Floods in Assam is an old problem. The intensity of floods has, however, increased following the great earthquake in 1950, the epicentre of which was at the tri-junction of India, Tibet and Burma. There were extensive hill-slides in the catchment area and huge quantity of silt was carried down the Brahmaputra and her tributaries raising their beds, so as to cause tremendous floods in the whole of Assam.

The floods bring about huge loss of men and materials almost every year.

The following statement gives a comprehensive idea of the damage caused by floods in Assam during the past few years :

Year	Area affected in lakh ha.	Population affected in lakhs	Value in Rs. in lakhs (Agri. crops)	Human lives lost (Nos.)	Total damage to crops, houses, public utilities (Rs. in lakhs)
1	2	3	4	5	6
1953	0.81	4.13	212.00	4	266.00
1954	31.46	16.82	1062.00	32	1576.65
1955	14.05	8.44	246.58	—	420.62
1956	5.99	5.55	309.78	19	326.34
1957	3.96	3.13	107.01	5	451.58
1958	12.45	4.74	170.52	4	270.13
1959	10.35	17.62	606.53	20	839.92
1960	4.73	13.22	762.92	14	776.13
1961	1.92	2.52	43.05	3	57.65
1962	16.22	40.51	190.45	115	2032.75
1963	5.82	8.32	197.40	13	206.15
1964	7.60	7.65	238.77	10	245.61
1965	6.94	2.41	65.00	5	69.00
1966	17.84	46.49	2170.00	57	2253.00
1967	2.55	6.76	218.00	3	224.00
1968	4.05	9.24	803.00	19	836.14
1969	8.05	14.68	550.90	12	846.77
Average	9.10	11.61	569.24	20	688.14

According to tentative estimates, in 1970 also floods damaged paddy cultivation in about 1.27 lakh hectares of land. The total loss is estimated at Rs. 6 crores.

### Flood Control Measures

The Five Year Plans for Assam laid great stress on flood control measures. During the First Plan period an expenditure of Rs. 2.88 crores was incurred on flood control schemes. In the Third Plan an amount of Rs. 11.33 crores was spent on these measures.

A draft master plan for the control of floods in the Brahmaputra and its tributaries has now been drawn up. A high-power Brahmaputra Flood Control Board has recently been set up by the Government of India to undertake schemes for flood control on a permanent basis. The Board has two agencies : the Brahmaputra Flood Control

Commission and the Board of Consultants. The work of the Commission has already started. It is estimated that the requirements of the Commission during the Fourth Plan would be Rs. 30 crores. Out of this, Rs. 15 crores would be available from the State's provision for flood control and the Central Government would contribute Rs. 15 crores.

It is proposed that during the Fourth Plan period an amount of about Rs. 25.98 crores would be spent on flood control schemes in Assam.

It is expected that these long-term measures would be able to eradicate the flood menace in Assam.

### **Power Development**

With so many rivers, Assam has enormous power potential. Before Independence power in Assam was supplied by a few thermal stations in a number of towns. There was only one hydro-electric project, in Shillong.

With the inauguration of the First Plan, great stress was laid on increasing the power-generating capacity. Total hydro-electric power potential in Assam is estimated at 12 million kilowatts, which is nearly 30 per cent of India's total hydro power potential of 30 million kilowatts. In the First and the Second Five Year Plans money spent on power development in Assam was Rs. 20 million and Rs. 58.5 million respectively. In the Third Plan the actual expenditure on power schemes was Rs. 417 million.

The first major power project in Assam was the Umtru Project with an annual capacity of 8,400 kw. The project was commissioned in July, 1957. This was followed by a number of bigger projects like the Uam Hydro-Electric project, Naharkatia Thermal Project and the Noonmati Thermal Project.

Even at the end of the Third Plan, Assam's total generating capacity was only 160 megawatts. This is roughly 1.6 per cent of India's total generating capacity. At present, the total power generation in Assam is around 60 million kilowatts which comes to a *per capita* figure of about 5 kilowatts.

According to the Second Annual Electric Power Survey of India the *per capita* consumption of power in Assam was expected to have

reached 34 kw. in 1967-68. This is as against 166 in West Bengal, 106 in Bihar, 143 in Tamil Nadu, 141 in Orissa, 66 in Andhra Pradesh and 51 in Uttar Pradesh. The total number of small towns and villages electrified is only 96. While Assam accounts for 4 per cent of the villages in India, the State's share of electrified villages is less than 0.2 per cent. At the end of the Third Plan the *per capita* consumption of electricity in Assam was estimated to be 12 kw. compared to 52 kw. for the country as a whole.

Power generation has of course very much improved during the past few years. Assam has now been able to meet, to a certain extent, the power requirements of neighbouring areas like Nagaland, Tripura and Manipur. It also supplies electricity to some north Bengal districts. Proposals are also underway to supply power to Bhutan.

## 6. INDUSTRY AND MINERALS

**A**SSAM has tremendous natural resources hidden in the bowels of the earth. The State abounds in forests and wild life and is exceptionally rich in oil and other minerals. It has considerable reserves of natural gas, coal, limestone, sillimanite, clay, etc., Occurrence of iron ore has also been recorded.

With forest covering a vast area Assam has valuable timber resources. The annual production of bamboo is of the order of 12 lakh tonnes, besides reeds of various kinds estimated at 2.4 lakh tonnes annually. Apart from tea, Assam has many cash crops like jute, sugarcane, oranges, pineapple and other fruits. They offer vast scope for agro-based industries. It is, however, an irony that in spite of all these, Assam is industrially very much behind other States. The share of Assam in India's gross industrial output was only 1.81 per cent in 1965, as against Maharashtra's 23.6 per cent and West Bengal's 21.5 per cent.

In spite of various handicaps, Assam has been trying to speed up its industrial progress. During the first three Five Year Plans, a number of industries had come up. There are now about 200 saw mills, besides a few other factories for the production of jax board, hard board, etc. There is one sugar factory with a capacity of 800 to 1,000 tonnes per day. The present requirement of sugar in the State is placed at 80,000 tonnes per year. It is proposed to set up two more sugar factories during the Fourth Plan.

Of the mineral-based industries, mention may be made of the Assam Gas Company, which is a State Government Undertaking. The company has taken up a project to supply gas in upper Assam through pipelines for industrial and domestic consumption. India Carbon Ltd., a private enterprise with Government capital participation, is engaged in the manufacture of petroleum coke and has an annual capacity of 30,000 tonnes.

There is a cement factory at Cherrapunjee with a capacity of 250 tonnes per day. It is proposed to increase its capacity during the

Fourth Plan to 850 tonnes per day, while another cement factory is likely to be set up at Bokajan with a daily capacity of 1,000 tonnes.

Of late, a few chemical industries have come up in the private sector. A number of steel re-rolling mills have also come up at Gauhati and Dibrugarh. A cycle factory at Gauhati rolls out 40,000 bicycles per year. Factories for steel structurals have sprung up at Tinsukia, Gauhati and Tezpur.

The tempo of industrial activity has, however, been slow. Apart from the public sector oil refinery at Gauhati, there has been no large-scale industries in the State. With a growing population of educated unemployed, the State looks forward to the Centre to accelerate the pace of industrial growth by setting up a number of large industrial units. With the recent discovery of oil resources in upper Assam the demand for rapid industrialisation has been voiced most strongly by both the Government and the people of the State.

The State's Fourth Plan has been framed keeping in view the need for quick industrialisation to break through the present stage of economic stagnation. The object of the Plan is to develop large, medium and small industries to ensure maximum utilisation of the resources and raw materials. A package of incentives like more financial aid and other assistance has also been proposed.

The State Government has already adopted a liberal industrial policy. A number of facilities are now offered to entrepreneurs for setting up new industries. The facilities include preparation of feasibility studies and project reports for certain industries for which there are definite prospects in the State, providing infra-structure and marketing facilities, economic fixation of royalties for raw materials, etc.

The State Industrial Development Corporation extends direct financial assistance to new industries through participation in share capital. Concessions are also provided in sales and other taxes on industries, besides ensuring availability of power at economical rates. All these are supervised by a high-power co-ordination committee, presided over by the Chief Minister himself.

### **Central Projects**

Assam needs greater attention from the Central Government in

the matter of industrialisation. There are only two Central-sector projects in the State, the Gauhati oil refinery and a fertiliser unit at Namrup for the production of ammonia, urea, sulphuric acid and ammonium sulphate based on natural gas.

In a statement made in the Lok Sabha on December 5, 1969, the Prime Minister had announced plans for the industrial development of Assam. These include, increasing the refining capacity in the State by a little over one million tonnes in the Fourth Plan period either through expansion of the existing refinery at Gauhati or through setting up of an additional refinery and establishing a petro-chemical complex and a paper and pulp mill in the State. It has since been decided by the Centre to set up a second refinery in the public sector.

### **Oil Industry**

Assam's oil industry is one of the world's oldest. It is said that oil was found in the jungles of upper Assam as early as in 1828 by some British officers. But no follow-up action was taken and the matter was just forgotten.

A member of the Geological Survey of India, H. B. Medlicat, noticed seepage of oil in 1866 while looking for coal near Margherita in Lakhimpur district, close to the Burmese border. He advised boring of wells for oil in the area. The first boring for oil started the same year at Nahor-Pung near Jaypur. This was followed by a few more wells. The result, however, was not very encouraging at that time.

It is significant that oil boring in Assam started almost at the same time as the world's first oil well. Colonel Drake, the father of world's petroleum industry, bored the first oil well in Pennsylvania in the United States of America in 1859. He bored to the depth of 21 metres and laid the foundation of the world's petroleum industry.

After a few years, another member of the Geological Survey of India, F. R. Mallet, made a more detailed survey of the region and reported availability of petroleum deposits in upper Assam. The Assam Railway and Trading Company, a British concern, drilled the first oil well (202 metres) at Digboi in 1889. The well took fourteen months to complete.

It is said oil was first spotted by a few British officers of the Assam Railway and Trading Company from the oil-soaked feet of an elephant they engaged in the jungles for pulling timber. The elephant is stated to have walked over a small pool of stagnant water which was mixed with particles of petroleum oozing out from the bowels of the earth.

The Assam Railway and Trading Co., subsequently formed another company called the Assam Oil Company Ltd., for purposes of oil drilling. Meanwhile, more modern techniques for the development of oil industry was available and the success of Digboi oil fields was phenomenal. In 1921, the management of the Assam Oil Co., was taken over by the Burmah Oil Company Ltd., a branch of the famous Shell Group and in 1923 the Company carried out the first geo-physical survey. A railway came up at Digboi and the foundation of a flourishing petroleum industry was laid in the easternmost corner of India, at the foothills of the Patkoi ranges on the Burmese border.

From 1938-39 search for oil was extended to other areas. While the original oil fields at Digboi are almost at their last stage of development, other areas in upper Assam like Naharkatia, Sibsagar, Moran, Hugrijan, etc., have come up and the oil industry of Assam is now a very sound and strong one.

With the establishment of Oil and Natural Gas Commission by the Government of India and the formation of Oil India Ltd. (a 50-50 shareholding company between the Government of India and the Assam Oil Company) the oil industry in Assam has become well consolidated.

While the old private sector refinery at Digboi continues to produce oil, public sector refineries for processing Assam crude have come up in Gauhati (Assam) and Barauni (Bihar). For supplying two million tonnes of crude oil to the Barauni refinery a 1,152 kilometre-long pipeline has been constructed. This pipeline, one of the longest in the world, crosses 78 major rivers and thick jungles through Assam, West Bengal and Bihar. The first supply of crude oil was delivered to Barauni in 1968. The Gauhati refinery refines 7.5 lakh tonnes of crude every year. A network of petro-chemical industries will also come up to utilise the by-products of the refinery.



According to the Indian Institute of Petroleum the total availability of crude oil from Assam was 4.3 million tonnes in 1970. This will go up to 6.09 million tonnes in 1975.

## **7. TRANSPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS**

WE had discussed in an earlier chapter Assam's difficulties in the matter of communications on account of the Partition of the country. Economic activities in Assam received a jolt for want of direct road and rail links with the rest of the country.

Immediately after Independence, therefore, steps were taken to improve Assam's communications with the other parts of the country. Assam also embarked on a very bold scheme for improving internal communication by constructing roads.

In the matter of railway transport the Government of India took urgent steps. An Assam rail-link was constructed in record time through the submontane regions of north Bengal. The rail-link had to span a series of rivers and pass through thick jungles. The work of the construction was started in early 1947 and was completed in 1949 enabling Assam to have a direct metre-gauge rail-link to the rest of India through Siliguri, Katihar and Lucknow.

### **Road Communication**

There was a meeting of chief engineers from various States at Nagpur in 1943. This meeting evolved a long-term road construction scheme for the country known as the 'Nagpur Plan'. According to this plan, Assam has to construct additional motorable roads to a length of 35,200 km. by 1981.

In 1950-51 Assam's total road mileage was 19,759 km. It rose to 20,200 km at the end of the Third Plan. Roads maintained by the State Government's Public Works Department rose to 21,614 km in March, 1969. Of these, 18,500 km are motorable. There are also 2,400 km. of motorable roads under the management of local bodies. The State has thus a total road network of about 21,100 km.

### **Railways**

Assam had 2,194 km. of railways in 1967. This is only 4 per cent of the total rail length of India. Assam has only 11 km. of metre-

gauge railway for every 1,000 sq. km. as against 18 km. for the entire country.

Since 1967, however, railways have made further progress in Assam. Railways have now gone to a place called Morkengselek at the foot-hills of NEFA on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra. A broad-gauge line has come from Siliguri to Jogighopa in Goalpara district. Tripura, adjoining Assam, has also been connected by a metre-gauge railway line of 31 km. A major event in the history of rail communications in Assam is the construction of a rail-cum-road bridge over the Brahmaputra near Gauhati. Known as the Saraighat Bridge, this Rs. 11-crore bridge has removed many bottlenecks in Assam's railway system. The bridge was opened to traffic in October, 1962. It is expected that in years to come railways will be further extended in Assam.

### **Oil Pipelines**

Mention has already been made in the previous chapter of the pipeline connecting the oil fields of upper Assam with Barauni in Bihar. This 1,157 km. long pipeline was built under the public sector at a cost of Rs. 45 crores. It has a capacity of transporting about five million tonnes of crude oil per year. A shorter crude pipeline connects Naharkatia oil fields with the private sector Digboi refinery. There is also a product pipeline between Digboi and Tinsukia. A modern multi-product pipeline linking Gauhati refinery with Siliguri has also been commissioned in 1964. This pipeline is 418 km. long and can carry about five lakh tonnes of oil products annually.

### **Inland Waterways**

In no other part of India does inland water transport offer such tremendous prospects for development as in Assam. Before Independence most of Assam's trade was by the river route. The Brahmaputra had inland navigation upto a point of 1,126 km. from the sea which was one of the longest inland waterways of the world.

The first regular monthly steamer service up and down from Calcutta through Brahmaputra was started more than 100 years ago. Most of Assam's products like tea etc., used to be transported for export by the river route. Assam's requirements also used to come from

the port of Calcutta by this river route. After the Partition of the country, however, the river route was greatly affected. Only a skeleton service was in operation till about 1965 through East Bengal. After the Indo-Pak conflict of 1965 the route was completely sealed. Within Assam itself there is scope for inland navigation. The total navigable length of rivers in Assam is 4,100 km; of these, 2,200 km. are navigable throughout the year.

### **Air Transport**

Assam's surface communication not being satisfactory air service has been developed considerably during the past few years. Almost every district headquarters town in the plains is connected with air service. Along and Pasighat in NEFA, Agartala in Tripura and Imphal in Manipur are also connected by air.

### **Postal and Telegraph Services**

Postal and telegraph services have greatly been strengthened in Assam after Independence. The number of post offices which was only 1,365 in 1955-56 rose to 3,112 in March, 1966.

There are four broadcasting stations in Assam. There are also broadcasting stations at Kohima in Nagaland, Imphal in Manipur and Pasighat in NEFA. At the end of 1968 there were 1,19,682 licensed radio receiving sets in Assam.

## **8. EDUCATION AND SOCIAL WELFARE**

**I**N olden times, education in Assam was the monopoly of a few; it was confined mainly to the Brahmins and other elites. Brahmin pundits used to maintain schools of the Vedic Gurukul type and students received education in these institutions. Some of these institutions, however, also admitted children belonging to the so-called lower castes.

Queen Phuleswari (third decade of 18th century) established the first school in Assam at Sibsagar, the capital of the Ahom kingdom. This is the first mention of a regular Government school in Assam. After this, however, a large number of schools came up at various places under the patronage of the royal court and noblemen, and students received education in large numbers.

In the British period, education became easily available to thousands of people. When the British left in 1947 Assam had 7,574 primary schools, of which 835 were for girls. There were 191 high schools and 14 colleges.

Immediately after Independence, there was a great spurt in educational activities. The Gauhati University was set up in 1948 and a large number of schools and colleges were opened. When the First Five Year Plan was launched in 1951-52 there were in Assam 10,154 primary schools, 840 middle schools, 254 secondary schools and 20 colleges. At that time the total average annual Government expenditure on all types of educational institutions was about Rs. 174 lakhs. By that time about 18 per cent of Assam's population was literate.

Governmental efforts at spreading education in Assam was amply supplemented by Christian missionaries. Many schools and colleges were established by them. Some of these schools also imparted technical education.

### **Five Year Plans**

Under Assam's First Five Year Plan an amount of 1.15 crores was spent on education. The Plan laid the infra-structure for a modern

educational system. Important institutions for training in medical science, engineering, technical subjects, etc., came up. At the end of the Plan period there were altogether 12,610 recognised educational institutions in the State with a total strength of 8,15,316 students.

In Assam's Second Five Year Plan an amount of Rs. 6.35 crores was spent on education. Educational activities were consolidated and innumerable new institutions sprang up. At the close of the Plan there were 15,979 recognised educational institutions with a student force of 11,25,584.

By March, 1965, the State had 18,953 recognised educational institutions with a total enrolment of 14,52,697. Percentage of literacy which was only 27.4 in 1951 rose to about 38 in 1969.

In 1947 there were only 191 high schools and 742 middle schools in Assam. By the end of March, 1965, there were 983 secondary schools and 2,495 middle schools.

The number of students in the age-groups 11—14 and 14—18 registered a sharp increase. In 1947-48 there were 65,113 pupils in the 11—14 age group, and in the 14—18 age-group there were 31,003 pupils. The number of pupils in the 11—14 age-group rose in 1964-65 to 3,01,357 and in the 14—18 age-group to 1,98,119.

As mentioned above, Assam had only 14 colleges at the time of Independence. The number of colleges for general education rose to 94 in 1967-68. While there were only, 1,700 college students in 1947, 20 years later, their number rose to 42,438.

Assam has now two universities for general education—one at Gauhati and the other at Dibrugarh. There is also one agricultural university at Jorhat. Besides three engineering colleges, there is a regional engineering college established by the Union Government.

### **Social Welfare**

In the field of social welfare, programmes have been taken up for the welfare of children, women, the handicapped, the aged, the infirm, etc. Various schemes for social welfare have been in operation in Assam and they have been able to bring about a significant change in the concept of uplift of the downtrodden. In the 4th Five Year Plan, it is proposed to spend about a crore of rupees on social welfare. Schemes



have also been taken up for the welfare of the labour population in the State. The State also assists in finding employment for the new entrants to the labour force and to rehabilitate retired or infirm workers.

## 9. LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

**A**SSAMESE is a language of Sanskritic origin directly connected with 'Prahya Magadhi Apabhramsa'. The language developed through centuries of cultural fusion with various tribes and races. The influence of Austro-Asiatic, Mongoloid and Tibeto-Burman dialects is very marked in the Assamese language.

The Chinese pilgrim, Hieun Tsang, who visited Assam in the 7th century has said that Assamese language is different from the language prevalent in central India.

A large number of books were written in ancient Assam. It is recorded that King Bhaskar Varma of Kamarupa presented to Emperor Harshavardhana of Kannauj several volumes of fine writings. This was in the 8th century. In those days, Assamese writers wrote in Sanskrit, which was the language of the elite.

The earliest specimen of Assamese literature is found in Buddhistic 'Gan-o-Doha'. Minanath, a Kamarupi fisherman by caste, was the composer of several Buddhistic hymns.

Unwritten Assamese literature is discernible in the aphorisms of Dak, songs and ballads pertaining to episodes of Behula-Lakhindar, Phool Konwar and Mani Konwar. Thousands of boatman songs, marriage songs, shepherd songs and lullabies are also orally handed down from generation to generation. Dak aphorisms are supposed to have been composed prior to the 8th century.

It was in the beginnig of the 13th century A.D., during the reign of Durlabh Narayan of Kamatapur (present-day Goalpara district), that literature in the modern sense came to be written in Assamese, by writers like Hema Saraswati. According to the noted Indologist, Dr. Grierson, "Assamese literature is essentially a national product. It always has been national and it is so still."

### Composite Language

Assamese is a language developed through contact with several tongues. Words from both Indo-Aryan and Indo-Chinese origin found

their way into this language. Pre-Aryan and non-Aryan influences are also discernable in Assamese language.

The following list, from Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee's book "Kirata-Jana-Kirti" illustrates the distribution of Tibeto-Burman words in Assamese language as well as elsewhere:

- (i) Bodo Speeches—Bodo, Mech, Rabha, Garo, Kachari and Tipra;
- (ii) Naga speeches—Ao, Angami, Sema, Tankhul, etc.;
- (iii) Kuki-Chin Speeches of Manipur, Tripura, Mizo Hills as well as Burma;
- (iv) Kachin (Singpho)—Lo group; and
- (v) Burmese and its dialects.

People belonging to above-mentioned language groups—Mon Khmer, Tibeto-Burman, Siamese-Chinese, etc., of the Indo-Chinese family of languages—entered Assam in different successive waves and added to the texture of the Assamese language as a whole.

Ahoms entered Assam in the early part of the 13th century. At the beginning, they used their own language, which was a member of the Siamese-Chinese language group. In course of time, however, they lost their language and adopted Assamese as their own. This was because of two principal reasons : their number was very small compared to the original Bodo and other people of the territory they conquered. Secondly, they were perhaps more receptive to new ideas and were adaptive in temperament.

Though Ahoms ruled Assam for over 600 years and gave Assam an orderly Government and brought about vast changes in the socio-economic condition of the State, survival of Ahom words in Assamese language is significantly meagre. A few words, nonetheless, got stuck and continue to form part of the modern Assamese language. A few examples of Ahom words in Assamese language are given below :—

*Laung*—back; *Pung*—mine; *Kareng*—palace;

*Pukha*—offspring.

Some other words attached to names of places and rivers are also said to be of Ahom origin. They are Namrup, Namdang, Namsang, etc.

Bodo influence in Assamese language, however, is most pronounced. "Di" in Bodo language means water. Most of the rivers in the Brahmaputra valley have the prefix "Di" in their names. Dibong, Dikhow,

Disang, Dihong, Digaru and Dihing are the main tributaries of the Brahmaputra, names of which are of Bodo origin.

According to philologists, the earliest linguistic formation recognisable in India is Dravidian. Dravidians have, however, lost both their linguistic and racial identities in Assam. There is, however a small percentage of Munda element in the formation of the Assamese language. According to some linguists, Munda language is an inter-mixture of Dravidian and Mon Khemer dialects.

The main reason why the Mongoloid and other people in Assam deserted their own languages was religious and cultural. Assamese, with its Sanskritic base, was the language of the Brahmins and priests. Through the course of centuries, Hinduism reclaimed most of the local tribal people of Assam. Assamese kings, after adopting Hinduism, invited Brahmin priests from Uttar Pradesh and Bengal to settle in Assam. These scions of the priestly order, naturally introduced their own languages.

Tibeto-Burmans and Mongoloids invaded Assam from the north-east, while the Aryans from the north-west. Mention of Kamarupa in Hindu epics and subsequent Puranas testify to the fact that the Brahminical order came into Assam at a very early date. Naturally, they brought, along with them, the Sanskrit language as a vehicle of expression and intellectual intercourse. Various influences from the east and the west brought about a fusion and made Assamese a strong member of the Indo-Aryan family of languages.

### **Vaishnava Literature**

Ancient Assamese literature reached its zenith in the 15th century, when two great Vaishnava reformers Shri Sankardev and Shri Madhavdev, preached monotheistic Vaishnavism. That was at a time when a wave of Vaishnava revivalism swept over India. Assamese Vaishnava literature is very rich. It flourished under the patronage of the benevolent King Naranarayan. The two reformers laid a solid foundation of the Assamese literature by their unique contribution in poetry and drama. A rich treasure of devotional songs, known as "Bargeets" and one-Act dance-dramas known as "Ankia Nats" based on the eulogy of Lord Krishna is the distinctive mark of Assamese Vaishnava literature.

### Prose Style

Assam perhaps has the unique distinction of having had a prose literature as early as in the 16th century. Bhattadeva, the father of Assamese prose style, translated the Bhagavad Gita into Assamese prose in 1593.

The centuries that followed Vaishnava revival saw the growth of a full-fledged Assamese literature with contribution on such varied subjects as elephant husbandry (Hasti Vidyarnava), treatment of horses (Asva Nidan), dancing (Sri Hasta Muktavali), astronomy (Bhaswati), arithmetic (Kitabat Manjari) and biographies (Chariputhi), etc.

With the advent of the Ahom rulers, the emphasis shifted from religious verse and prose to chronicles (known as 'Buranjis'). The 'Buranjis' shed a new light on the history of Assam and it is significant that such historical literature did not exist in any other part of India at that time.

Besides 'Buranjis', treatises were compiled on the art of warfare, construction of forts and ramparts, royal palaces, etc.

### Modern Literature

Modern Assamese literature came up after the British conquest in 1826. The American Baptist Missionaries laid the foundation of the modern Assamese literature by translating the Bible and publishing a number of hymns. They published in 1846 a monthly magazine, *Arumodoi* (Sunrise), which enthused a group of young writers to produce books and pamphlets in Assamese language. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Hem Chandra Barua and Jaduram Barua made distinct contribution to Assamese literature of that period.

The pioneering endeavour was followed by the establishment of a number of printing presses in Assam and publication of journals from Calcutta, where most Assamese youngmen of those days went for higher studies. Calcutta continued as the centre till the second World War. Calcutta University had facilities for study of Assamese literature upto the Master's Degree. The post-War period, witnessed a great spurt in literary activities in Assam. Thousands of books embracing all branches of thought have been published. The establishment of the Gauhati University gave a boost to research and scientific study of linguistics.

The second half of the 19th century saw much activity in the field of Assamese literature. Young men educated in English were greatly influenced by the European literature and started a new wave of modern Assamese literature. New type of drama in the Shakespearian style, modern romantic poetry, novels, short stories, essays, etc., came to be written in great numbers. Translation from English also got a boost. Bholanath Das, Ratneswar Mahanta, Baladev Mahanta, Balinarayan Bora, Kamala Kanta Bhattacharyya, Padma Nath Gohain Barua and Benudhar Rajkhowa were some of the pioneers of the western influence in Assamese literature in the second half of the last century. Hem Chandra Barua compiled an Anglo-Assamese dictionary.

The last quarter of the 19th century was indeed a very important period in the development of modern Assamese literature. Four outstanding personalities of the period were Padma Nath Gohain Barua, Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Hem Chandra Goswami and Chandra Kumar Agarwala. In their pens, Assamese literature loosened its bonds of tradition and blossomed into a full-fledged modern literature. Lakshminath Bezbaroa excelled in humour and satire, though his contribution as a dramatist, poet and essayist was no less great. Padma Nath Gohain Barua edited some literary journals and wrote a monumental work on Shri Krishna besides a few long poems (Kavyas). Chandra Kumar Agarwala and Hem Chandra Goswami were philosophical poets. Raghu Nath Chaudhury came into the field as a nature-poet par excellence.

The turn of the century saw the emergence of a host of modern works devoted to almost all branches of modern literature. Jatindra Nath Duara, Ganesh Gogoi, Deva Kanta Barooah, Lakhmi Nath Phookan, Ananda Chandra Barua, Ratnakanta Barkakati, Nalini Bala Devi, Ambikagiri Roy Chaudhury, Nilmony Phookan, Chandradhar Barua, Mifizuddin Ahmed Hazarika, Binanda Chandra Barua, Sailadhar Rajkhowa are among those who have excelled in poetry. Surya Kumar Bhuyan and Benudhar Sarma are two top historians. Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, Atul Chandra Hazarika, Prabin Phookan, Lakhya-dhar Chaudhury, etc., have written dramas, while a few like Birinchi Kumar Barua, Maheswar Neog, Dimbeswar Neog and Hem Barua occupy a place of honour as excellent prose writers and literary critics.

In the field of novels Rajani Kanta Bardoloi, Dandinath Kalita and



Bina Barua were the path-finders. Among those who followed them were Radhika Mohan Goswami, Rashna Barua, Dina Nath Sarma, Syed Abdul Malik, Jogesh Das and a host of other younger writers.

Syed Abdul Malik rides the crest of popularity as a short story writer and novelist. He is the reigning monarch in his field for over thirty years now. Among the other novelists and short story writers are Roma Das, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya, Jogesh Das, Chandra Prasad Saikia, Hitesh Deka, Krishna Bhuyan, Holiram Deka, Mahi Bora, Lakhmi Nath Phookan, Troilokya Nath Goswami, Uma Sarma, Chandra Prasad Saikia, Nirod Choudhury, Bhoben Saikia, Rohini Katoky, Mohim Bora, etc.

English poets like T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and Dylan Thomas have great influence on modern Assamese poets of the younger generation. Intellectual poetry is the current trend in Assamese literature. Among those who excel in this are Nava Kanta Barua, Hem Barua, Hari Barkakati, Homen Bargohain, Keshav Mahanta, Biren Barkataki, Nilmony Phookan (Junior) etc.

### Literature in Hills

Meanwhile, tribal languages like Khasi, Garo and Mizo have also developed literary traditions. In Khasi hills, western education was introduced in 1841 by the Welsh Presbyterian Mission. The Mission started its regular educational programme from 1890.

The first Khasi primer was published by Thomas Jones, a Welsh Presbyterian missionary who came to Khasi hills in 1841. Khasi language is written in Roman script and the Holy Bible was translated into it in 1899. Dr. John Roberts, a missionary surgeon, was the architect of modern Khasi literature. He stayed in Khasi hills for 37 years and wrote several books in Khasi till his death in 1908.

Modern Khasi literature is promising. Among modern *litterateurs*, to name a few, are Rabon Singh, Sib Chandra Roy, T. Cajee, P. Gatpoh, Dr. H. Lyngdoh, H. Elias, Dr. Hamlet Bareh, etc.

In Mizo language, literary traditions developed since the early part of this century. At first Christian religious books were translated into Mizo, but gradually a rich literature blossomed forth with scores of magazines, newspapers, etc.

Both these literatures are now taught upto the degree standard at the Gauhati and Dibrugarh universities.

Assamese today has one of India's richest literatures. With the publication of hundreds of newspapers and journals and thousands of books dealing with all subjects, Assamese literature has received national acclaim.

Some Assamese authors have received awards from the Sahitya Akademy and other national institutions. Among them are Shri Benudhar Sarma, Shri Atal Chandra Hazarika and Shri Birendra Nath Bhattacharyya.

### Journalism

As already mentioned, *Arunodoi* was the first magazine published in Assamese. The paper built up a galaxy of writers, who have made definite contribution to the growth of the modern Assamese literature. They were Ananda Ram Dhekial Phookan, Hem Chandra Barua, Gunabhiram Barua, etc., all non-Christians.

The first weekly newspaper in Assam, *Assam Mihir* was published in Gauhati in 1872. Though an Assamese, Chidananda Chaudhury, its editor and proprietor, published his newspaper in Bengali. Chidananda Chaudhury is the first journalist of Assam in the modern sense. This newspaper, which continued for about a year, was followed by *Goalpara Hitasadhini* (1876-78). This, too, was in Bengali, which was the court language of Assam in those days.

A series of periodicals—though generally short-lived—appeared during the years that followed. They were *Assam Bilasini*, *Assam Darpan*, *Chandrodaya*, *Assam Dipak*, *Assam Tora*, etc.

The father of English journalism in Assam was Hem Chandra Barua, who brought out the first Anglo-Assamese weekly from Gauhati, the *Assam News*. This newspaper created a class of readership, which dominated the social, political and cultural life of Assam of those days.

The short-lived *Assam* published from Gauhati under the editorship of Kaliram Barooah was the third weekly newspaper of Assam. Published in 1894, this paper too had two sections, English and Assamese.

Renaissance in journalism came to Assam with the publication of

the *Times of Assam* from Dibrugarh in 1885. Its founder, Radhanath Chankakati was not a rich man, but had tremendous energy and he built up a powerful organisation from scratch. This journal was complete in all spheres—news, views, advertisement, literary articles, trade and commerce and social events. The tea industry was of immense help to this paper, being its principal advertiser. Among the notable journalists shaped by this paper were Nilmony Phookan, Lakshmi Nath Phookan, Harendra Nath Barua, Kedar Nath Goswami, Sarada Sankar Prasad Dutta, etc.

*Jonaki*, published from Calcutta in 1889 is a milestone in the progress of journalism in Assam. *Assam Bandhu*, *Mow*, *Lora Bandhu*, *Tora* were some of the monthly magazines which came into existence during the last decade of the 19th century. They were all short-lived, but their role in consolidating Assamese language and literature (only recently released from the control of Bengali) was really great. Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Hem Chandra Goswami, Kanaklal Barua, Raghunath Chaudhury and all other stalwarts of Assamese literature were connected with *Jonaki*.

Mathura Mohan Barua was an outstanding journalist of the early twentieth century. Having returned to Assam after serving as sub-editor in the *Hyderabad Chronicle*, he first became the editor of *Assam Banti* and then started his famous weekly the *Advocate of Assam* in 1904. Two other important journals of that period were Krishna Prasad Barua's *Bijuli* and Padmanath Gohain Barua's *Usha*. They were followed by *Banhi* edited by Lakshminath Bezbaroa. Replete with humour and thought-provoking articles alike, *Banhi* had tremendous influence on the enlightened sections of the people.

A landmark in Assamese journalism was the publication of *Asmiya*, a weekly in 1918. It was founded by the poet Chandra Kumar Agarwala. After undergoing many vicissitudes the paper folded up recently.

*Awahan* edited by Dr. Dinanath Sarma and owned by Zamindar Nagaendra Narayan Chowdhury, came out from Calcutta in 1929. This journal has made a distinct contribution to the growth of Assamese short story as a form of creative literature. This journal is still alive. *Parijat*, a children's magazine, ran for about five years.

The two decades between 1920 and 1940 saw the birth of many

newspapers and magazines in Assam—like *Asom Raij*, *Argha*, *Satya Badi*, the *Assam Review*, *Sangram* and *Asom Hitoishi*.

The first women's journal in Assam, *Ghar Jeoti*, was started in 1928. *Pashu Palan* was a magazine devoted to veterinary science and animal husbandry. *Khetiok* was the only magazine devoted to agriculture. The *Bardoichilla* annual published by Kamal Chandra Barua was a very popular magazine. Many other papers, both in Assamese and English, were started during this period but most of them were short-lived.

A glorious chapter of journalism in Assam started with the publication of the *Assam Tribune* weekly in 1939. It was founded by Shri Radha Govinda Baruah and edited by one of the most outstanding journalists, Lakshmi Nath Phookan. It became a daily from 1946. Lakshmi Nath Phookan was succeeded by Satish Chandra Kakati, who has in the meanwhile blossomed into a leading journalist in the country. *Natun Asamiya* came out in 1950 under the editorship of Dev Kanta Barooah. Harendra Nath Barua is its present editor. Ambika Giri Roychoudhury's *Deka Asom* was a very forceful political weekly of those days. *Janambhumi*, a weekly of high standard was started in 1947 under the editorship of Dulal Chandra Bhuyan. Among the monthly magazines of the post-War period were *Ramdheni*, *Abhijan*, *Samaj*, etc. *Asom Bani*, a sister publication of the *Assam Tribune* ranks among the best journals of India.

The decade 1960-70 saw the birth of several newspapers in Assam. *Asom Batori* is the only bi-weekly news magazine in Assam. It has a wide readership. *Ganatantra* and *Asom Raij*, in Assamese, the *Weekly Express* and the *Nation* in English, and *Nav Bharat* in Bengali are some of the popular modern journals in Assam.

Hindi journalism in Assam is of very recent origin. Attempts have been made in the post-War period to bring out Hindi newspapers largely to cater to the needs of the Hindi-speaking population of the State. The journals, however, were short-lived. *Okela* is a good Hindi weekly. Assam Rashtra Bhasa Prachar Samity started a quarterly magazine, *Rastra Sevak*, under the editorship of Rajani Kanta Chakravarty. This journal is widely read in Assam. The first Hindi daily newspaper in Assam was Shri Rama Sankar Tripathy's *Loka Manyal*; it too was short-lived. Of the twenty journals so far started in Assam in Hindi, only a few are still alive.

There are in Assam today two Assamese daily newspapers, one bi-weekly, eight weeklies, twenty-one fortnightlies and other periodicals, besides a good number of monthly and annual magazines. There are three daily English newspapers, three weeklies and a host of other periodicals. There are also a number of journals in Bengali and Hindi.

## 10. ARTS AND CRAFTS

### Painting

AMONG the presents sent to emperor Harshavardhana (Siladitya) by the Kamarupa king, Bhaskar Varman, were “volumes of fine writings with leaves made from Aloe bark and of the hue of ripe pink cucumber, curved boxes of panels for painting, with brushes and gourds attached, and gold-painted bamboo cages for birds.” That was in the seventh century. And that was the first mention of Assamese painting.

Ancient Assamese books were written on barks of trees. The art of making writing paper with ginned cotton (Tulapat) came into vogue later.

Sri Sankardev, the 15th century Vaishnava saint-poet was a great painter too. He painted on Tulapat scenes of “seven Vaikunthas” for a theatrical performance of his drama “Chinha-Yatra”. On another occasion, he painted with vermilion and yellow arsenic the picture of an elephant and pasted it on a wooden book-case, which he presented to his patron-king, Nara Narayan.

Many of the subsequent Assamese manuscripts were illustrated with beautiful paintings. The epics were generally illustrated with paintings and were meant for kings and nobles. Many manuscripts contained pictures of the deadly sins and of ten incarnations of Vishnu. Old paintings of kings, elephants, horses and battle-fields have also been found.

### *Colour Combination*

Yellow and green were the dominant colours in old Assamese paintings. The black ink, used for writing and painting, was of very fast colour and did not fade even after long exposure. Other materials used were indigo, Gerumati (yellow ochre), vermilion (Hengul) and lampblack. A crude variety of chalk (Dhal) was also used in painting.

Making of images of various Hindu gods and goddesses as an art



form came to be developed during the 16th-17th centuries along with the spread of the Sakta form of worship.

A manuscript of the Bhagavata Purana written in the 15th century may be considered as one of the early specimens of illuminated work of art in Assam. The technique and finish show strong influence of Rajput-Mughal paintings, although there were local variations. The figures are mostly in profile.

A famous historian wrote, "Paintings are usually painted in arched or zig-zag panels. The background is usually monochrome red or at times, blue, grey or brown. In figure drawing, a certain degree of angularity is perceptible. The eyes are usually fish-shaped, the eyebrows are arched, the nose is pointed and the forehead is sloping and wide. The waist is usually narrow. These conventions speak of ancient tradition."

Another outstanding work of ancient Assamese art is the book "Hasti Vidyarnava", a treatise on elephant husbandry. "The folios are profusely illustrated with illuminated paintings of superior skill and workmanship, representing various types of elephants and scenes from the Ahom royal court. Some of the pictures are of great artistic and historic value, as they depict how the Ahom kings used to hold their courts and how the game of falconry was played in the presence of the king and how the king rode an elephant in a procession. The pictures are in water colour and a large number of them are gold-plated; they have beautifully preserved their colours and lustre of the gold, in spite of age and rough handling."

The tradition of painting has been preserved till today. In Satras or Vaishnava centres, one can see even today, old mural paintings and wood carvings with folk-art elements in them.

Making of masks and gorgeous dresses for use in dramatic performances is a tradition still to be seen in Assam.

### Music

Legends have it that music and dance were nurtured in Kamarupa since time immemorial. Lord Siva and his consort Parvati were supposed to be the originators of the Indian dance and music. It is said Usha, daughter of King Bana of Sonitpur (modern Tezpur) was given lessons in music and dance by Parvati herself.

Usha is said to have opened an academy, where she used to teach music and dance to her friends. One of them, Chitrlekha, was deputed to Dwaraka (modern Gujarat) to dance in the court of Lord Krishna. Chitrlekha succeeded in enticing away a Yadava prince, Aniruddha, to Tezpur and arranging his marriage with Usha.

Bhagadutta, king of Kamarupa, is stated to have led a troupe of Gandharvas (musicians) to the court of the Pandavas on the occasion of their Rajasuya Yagna. Chitrangada, a Manipuri princess, enchanted Arjuna, the Pandava prince, with her music and dance.

The seventh-century Chinese pilgrim-traveller Hieun Tsang, had recorded that he was entertained to music and dance every evening by the king Bhaskar Varman, during his sojourn in "Kamalupa" (Kamarupa).

Music is a part of the everyday life for the common Assamese. Lullabies (Nichukani-geet), marriage songs (Bia-Nam), songs of religious ceremonies (Ai-Nam), pastoral ballads (Ban-geet), Bihu songs, etc. are the most treasured heritage of Assam. Composed by unnamed composers, these songs have been handed down from generation to generation throughout centuries. Though modern experiences and ideas have been incorporated from time to time, these songs retain their pristine purity even today.

### *Marriage Songs*

Assamese marriage is a musical affair. At every stage of the celebration—from negotiations between parents to the departure of the bride to her husband's home—women present sing appropriate songs. The leader (Namati), sets the melody and leads the chorus. The others follow her. The language is simple and racy. The allegories used are those of a marriage between Vishnu and Lakshmi or Siva and Parvati.

Another aspect of marriage songs is the kind of instantly-composed songs to tease the women of the opposite party in a marriage. These teasing songs (Jora-Nam) are satirical in intent and are designed to cut jokes at the members of the opposite party. Reports are also hurled through similar songs.

### *Religious Songs*

Assamese women sing a variety of religious songs (Ai-Nam), most of which are directed towards appeasing the goddess of small-pox,

one of the most dreaded diseases in Assam. The goddess of small-pox is addressed as Ai (mother) and the songs are couched in a language replete with deep reverence to her. Ai is supposed to be one of the seven sisters. They have a flower garden and one who enters the garden and plucks flowers is afflicted with the disease. The songs, therefore, beg the goddess to excuse the human being for his impertinence. The English translation of an Ai-Nam will be like this :

1. *"They are coming : Ai's seven sisters,  
across the seven hills;  
All bow their heads—the grass and creepers and trees,  
for Ai is coming."*
2. *"I have entered the garden of Ai  
Without recognising what it is;  
I have plucked a bud from her garden  
Without knowing what it is,  
Oh Bhagwati, forgive this first crime of ours,  
We pray you by touching your feet."*

#### *Deh-Bichar Geet*

Deh-bichar geet or songs on the consideration of the human body, are popular folk songs in the lower part of Assam. These songs have their roots in the Tantrik form of worship, though now they are overlaid with Vaishnava influences. These songs are sung by wandering minstrels to the accompaniment of Tokari, a one-string indigenous instrument. These songs are of philosophical content and seek to draw the listeners' attention to the need for self-discipline for the attainment of eternal peace. There are also some Muslims who echo these sentiments. The Muslims trace the origin of their songs (known as Jikir) to the teachings of Ajan Fakir, a Muslim divine who came to Assam in the 17th century and secured popular and royal admiration.

#### *Bihu Songs*

Bihu Nams are the most popular form of folk songs. These songs mainly glorify youth and are associated with romance and love. They

are sung to the tunes set by indigenous musical instruments like Dhol (drum), Pepa (flute), Tal (cymbal) and Toka (a bamboo contraption). Young men and women dance to the strains of Bihu music. (Bihu dances and songs are discussed in some detail in the next chapter).

Akin to the Bihu songs are the "Oi-Nitam" songs of the Miri tribal community of Upper Assam. These songs express feelings of yearning and frustration of the youth in love. They are also sung as part of the Bihu festival by the members of this community.

### *Ballads*

One of the most important forms of Assamese folk songs are the long descriptive songs—the ballads. Ballads of Phul Konwar (Prince of Flower), Moni Konwar (Prince of Gem), Jana Gabharu (Jana, the young lady), Pagala Pagali (quarrel between a husband and wife), and Kamala Kunwari (Kamala, the Queen) are household songs in Assam. These are long, legendary narrations. A few historical ballads like Barphukanar Geet (songs on Barphukan) and Maniram Dewanar Geet (songs on Maniram Dewan) have also become popular in Assam during the last century. These songs, composed by unknown rural poets, are sung by wandering minstrels in the villages.

Phul Konwar is a prince who rides a magic horse to the withered garden of an old Malini (flower woman) and his touch rejuvenates the garden into full bloom. He enters the chamber of a princess as a bumble-bee and secures her love. The ballad of Jana Gabharu describes incidents like the hero throwing up his adversaries into the skies.

Pagala-Pagali Geet describes the quarrel between a husband and his wife, supposed to be Siva and Parvati. The husband tries to chastise the wife for her negligible faults; the wife runs away to her mother's place; the husband tries to bar her path; she assumes a different form; the husband assumes another form to catch her up; the various forms continue alternately; but at long last the wife comes out victorious. In the end, the husband bows down saying—"Oh darling Pagali, even if I wish to forsake your two tender hands, I cannot."

Badan Barphukan, a viceroy of the Ahom king, fled to Burma and invited the Burmese army to invade Assam. Victory was with the invading army; the king left his capital and the Burmese perpetrated

untold atrocities on the people of Assam. The ballad of Barphukan laments the action of the viceroy thus :

*“Why have you brought the  
‘Man’ (Burmese), oh Badan?*

*Why have you brought the Man?  
Lest a scar on your character*

*For ages to come?”*

Kamala Kunwari was a queen, in whose kingdom there was acute drought. People dug tanks, but water would not spring up. At last, the king was commanded by the rain-god to sacrifice his dear queen. Kamala Kunwari readily agreed to sacrifice herself for the good of her subjects. She was made to stand at the bottom of an empty tank. She sang songs and water started coming up from the bowels of the earth. By a slow process water came up to her thighs, to her waist, to her neck. Undaunted, Kamala Kunwari continued her singing. Ultimately water came up to her mouth and head and she was soon drowned in the water while the strains of her sweet melodies continued to ring in the ears of her subjects, whom the benevolent queen loved so much.

Maniram Dewan was an Assamese nobleman, who was publicly sent to the gallows for his participation in the 1857 rebellion against the British. Ballads on Maniram Dewan became popular through innumerable wandering minstrels who sang these songs to the accompaniment of the Tokari. A passage from the ballad :

*“You smoke the hookah of gold,  
oh Maniram,*

*You smoke the hooka of silver;*

*What treason against your own  
people you had committed,  
oh Maniram,*

*For which you had to take the  
noose round your neck?”*

### *Ojha-Pali*

Ojha-pali songs are popular in the lower part of Assam. They are narrative songs sung by a group of singers with a leader (Ojha) to lead the chorus by appropriate dances and caricatures. The Ojha mainly sings the story of Beula-Lakhindar and Chand Sadagar. This form of folk song and dance is believed to have been in vogue in Assam from the pre-Vaishnavite era. These songs and dances are associated with the worship of the snake-goddess, Manasa.

### *Classical Music*

The traditional classical songs of Assam are the Bargits, associated with Vaishnavism. These songs are in the Indian tradition of Bhakti-inspired Vaishnavite lyrics, in line with the bhajans of Mirabai, Jayadev, Chaitanya, Tulsidas, Tukaram, etc.

The Bhakti movement of the 15th century promoted the Dhrupad style of singing in many parts of the country. In Assam also, neo-Vaishnavism brought forth a culture of music. Sankardev and his principal disciple Madhavdev wrote many Bargits. Vaishnavite monasteries (Satras) became great centres of teaching and learning of the Bargits and other forms of classical Assamese music. The tradition grew with the passage of time and the head of a Satra invariably composes Bargits and dance-dramas and arranges local performances. This practice resulted in accumulating plenty of classical songs which are rich in tone and variety.

As Dr. Maheswar Neog, Professor of Assamese literature at the Gauhati University says, "In the full-scale execution of a *bargita* or *ankīyā* gita there are the usual two parts of *rāga* music, *ālāpa* or *anibaddha* part and the *gita* or *nibaddha* part. In the *ālāpa*, popularly known as *rāga diyā* (the giving of the *rāga*, that is, its basic form) or *rāga tanā* (the extension of the *rāga*), words like Rāma, Hari, Govinda, and not the solfa syllables, are used. It is generally divided into four parts, which do not have any particular names except the third, known as *tolani* (the raising of the voice to a higher pitch). These four parts may perhaps be compared to the four parts of classical *ālāpa*, corresponding to *āsthayī*, *antarā*, *sāncārī* and *ādhoga*. The singing of the text then follows, and this is timed to a *tāla*. The *tāla* has two parts,

*mūl bājāna or gā-mān* (the main part) and *ghāt* (sharp extensions of the main pattern of the *tāla*). The *gā-mān* is played on the *khol* or *mrdanga* and cymbals as the text of the song is sung. When the singer is in rest at intervals, the drummers play the intricate patterns of *ghāts*."

### Satriya Dance

Associated with the Bargits and the Bhakti-inspired dance dramas (Ankia Nat), was a school of dancing known as Satriya dance. This classical form of dance has some common features with the Manipuri school, which derived inspiration from Assamese Vaiṣṇavism. Manipur, of course, came under the Vaishnava spell only in the 18th century; but the dance forms travelled to Manipur much before that.

Satriya form of dancing has a distinct grammar, intricate and developed choreographic patterns and distinctive costumes including a variety of masks. The accompanying music is provided by Khol (Mridang), cymbals, supporting Ragas etc.

Satriya school of dancing does not admit any woman dancer. Feminine roles are played by boys. In fact, Assamese Vaiṣṇavism does not admit women into its order. Principal Satras and their Namghars (Prayer Halls) even bar the entry of women.

### Drama

Study of drama was a part of education in ancient Assamese educational institutions, known as Tols. Run by a Brahmin pundit, usually in his own premises, Sanskrit dramas and acting as an art, were taught there to pupils. Performance of a drama was also arranged to entertain an honoured guest. Ancient Assamese kings patronised performance of Sanskrit dramas in their courts.

According to some scholars, Visakhadutta's famous Sanskrit drama, "Mudra-Rakshasa" was composed under the patronage of Avanti Burman, who was a king of Kamarupa.

Assam has also a tradition of puppet plays. "Kalika Purana," an important Purana, believed to have been written in Kamarupa in the 10th century, refers to puppet performances.

Study of ancient Sanskrit dramas was a part of an Assamese intellectual's education. Development of the Assamese drama and stage,

however, has been on record only from the time of Vaishnavite renaissance in the 15th century.

Sri Sankardev (1449—1569) is the father of Assamese drama. "Chinha-Yatra" was the first drama written by him while he was only 19. It is recorded that Sankardev not only composed this drama, but also directed the performance. He painted scenes of seven Vaikunthas (heavens) on papers made of ginned cotton. He also led the chorus with himself playing musical instruments. He is also stated to have appeared in one role himself. On one occasion, Sankardev referred to his father, Kusumvara Bhuyan, as a Gandharva incarnate.

In ancient Assam, a drama was known as Ankia Nat. After "Chinha-Yatra", Sankardev himself composed several other Ankia Nats, on his return from a long pilgrimage, during the course of which he visited most of the north Indian religious centres and held discussions with scholars. His principal follower, Madhavdev, also composed several Ankia Nats and arranged their performance.

Ankia Nats in Assam can be classed in the same category as the Middle-age folk dramas like Yakshagana of Karnataka, Kathakali of Kerala, Terukuttu of Tamilnadu, Bhawai of Maharashtra and Ram Lila and Rasa Lila of North India.

In common parlance, Ankia Nat is called Bhawana. This medium was used by Sankardev for propagation of his Bhakti movement among the masses. In doing so, he retained the essential features of old Sanskrit dramas, although with local variations. The dramas mainly unfolded the victory of the gods over the devils. The themes selected were from the Puranas, Ramayana, Mahabharata and the Bhagawat. Some of the plays dealt with the life and work of Lord Krishna. The following were the dramas written by Sankardev : Chinha-Yatra (The journey to heaven through pictures), Kaliya-daman (Subjugation of Kaliya, the serpent, by Krishna); Patni Prasad (Favour to the consort); Keli Gopal (Gopal in sports); Rukmini Haran (The abduction of Rukmini by Lord Krishna). Parijat Haran (taking away of the Parijat flower from heaven by Krishna) and Ram Vijay (The victory of Ram).

Madhavdev (1489—1596 A.D.), the principal disciple of Sankardev composed the following nine dramas : Chor Dhara (The capture of the thief [Krishna] who steals milk); Bhumi Lutiya (roll-



ing on the ground by child Krishna), Pimpara Guchua (Removal of the ants—Krishna's plea that he had gone near the milk pots only to remove the insects and ants); Bhojan Bihar (enjoying food by child Krishna with his mates); Brahma Mohan (delineation of Brahma); Bhusan Haran (theft of Krishna's ornaments); Rash Jhumura (circular dance of Krishna), Katora Khela (Krishna's play with cups) and Arjun Bhanjan (the breaking of an Arjun tree by child Krishna while running away from his mother).

In an Ankia Nat, the dialogues of the gods and goddesses are in verse. The language is not the ordinary type of spoken Assamese, but Brajabuli—the language of Braja. Brajabuli is a mixed language of Assamese, Maithili and Bhojpuri. The common characters, however, speak in the ordinary spoken Assamese.

The Bhawanas (Ankia Nats) are dance-dramas. All the characters enter the open-air stage dancing to the tune of music conducted by the Sutradhar, the conductor. Unlike in Sanskrit dramas, the Sutradhar in an Assamese Bhawana remains on the stage all through the performance and explains the significance of various scenes with the help of songs and dances.

After the two 15th century Vaishnava saints, Assamese dramas were written by countless writers, specially by the Satradhikars—heads of Vaishnavite monasteries. It became customary with the Satradhikar to compose an Ankia Nat and to arrange its performance to mark his accession to the religious and social leadership of his disciples.

### *The Modern Theatre*

The modern stage came to Assam during the second half of the 18th century. New European ideas came with the British rule and the spread of English education. At first dramas were written on mythological and historical themes and they became very popular, particularly in the urban areas.

Whereas, Ankia Nats are One-Act dance-dramas, modern Assamese dramas have several Acts. There are One-Act plays also, but they are not similar to the ancient Ankia Nats. Brajabuli was replaced by the standard language.

Though the mythological and the historical fervour was a dominant trend in early modern plays, social themes also came to be used in them.

The first modern Assamese drama was Kaviyar Kirtan (in praise of the opium-eater), written by Hem Chandra Barua (1835-1896). This satirical drama exposed the evil effects of the opium habit, which was very popular among the Assamese at that time. Gunabhiram Baruah's Ram-Navami, composed in 1857, is a social tragedy. It deals with the love affairs of Navami, a Brahmin widow, with Ram. The story ends with the suicide of the young lovers.

The third play in the series of early modern Assamese dramas is Bongal-Bongalani (a pair of foreigners) composed by Rudra Ram Bardoloi in 1871. This is the story of an Assamese girl marrying a non-Assamese. Though a modern play, it had some elements of the ancient Assamese drama, inasmuch as the author introduced the character of a Sutradhar.

The first three modern plays were valuable as literary pieces, but were not popular on the stage. After a sterile period of a few decades, many dramas, historical and social, were published by a galaxy of young writers. Some of the notable playwrights of the period up to the beginning of the second World War are : Benudhar Rajkhowa, Daiba Chandra Talukdar, Atul Chandra Hazarika, Madhav Chandra Sarma, Lakshmidhar Sarma, Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Nakul Chandra Bhuyan, Hari Chandra Bhattacharyya, Kamakhya Nath Thakur, Prabin Phukan, etc. Jyoti Prasad Agarwala was the most outstanding playwright, dramatist and stage director of that age. He wrote several successful dramas, like Karender Ligiri (Maid of the place) and Sonit Kunwari (Princess of Sonit Pur). Agarwala also produced and directed the first movie film in Assamese, *Joymati*, (based on a drama by Lakshminath Bezbaroa on the popular Ahom princess who lost her life in the atrocities committed by the enemy of her husband, Godadhar, who was an aspirant to the Ahom throne in the 17th century). Agarwala also produced the second Assamese movie film, *Indra-Malati*, based on a social theme. Prabin Phukan is even today a very popular playwright.

Lakshminath Bezbaroa, the most outstanding personality in Assamese literature, distinguished himself in farcical drama, though he had a number of popular historical plays also to his credit.

Among others who wrote farces were Padma Nath Gohain Barua, Durga Prasad Majindar Barua, Padmadhar Chaliha, Mitradev Mahanta, Bisay Ram Mahajan and Binanda Chandra Barua.

Mythological dramas were very popular in the stage during those days. Among those who distinguished themselves in this form of plays were : Rama Kanta Choudhury, Purna Kanta Sarma, Durga Nath Changkakati, Ratneswar Mahanta, Ananda Chandra Barua, Jugal Chandra Chaudhuri, Thaneswar Hazarika, Navin Chandra Bardoloi, Kamalananda Bhattacharyya, Pampu Singh, Dandi Nath Kalita, Gonesh Chandra Gogoi and Sukleswar Bora.

A large number of dramas were translated into Assamese during that period. Mention may be made of the following : Julius Caesar (Kumudeswar Barthakur, 1931), Chandravali (Shakespeare's As You Like It, by Durgeswar Sarma, 1907), Tara (Shakespeare's Cymbeline, by Ambika Prosad Goswami, 1937), Mona Lisa (Spanish author Jacinto Benavente's, by Ramesh Chandra Barooah—1937), Rajnati (Raja Sudraka's Sanskrit drama Mricchakatikam, by Prabhat Chandra Sarma, 1939), Sakuntala (by Atul Chandra Hazarika, 1940), etc.

Many Bengali dramas were also translated into Assamese. The Yatra type of performances, popular in Bengal, were also popular in many parts of Assam.

#### *Post-Independence Plays*

The post-Independence period saw the emergence of a rich dramatic literature in Assam. Dramatic clubs and theatres have sprung up at innumerable places and a powerful Assamese stage has developed. In place of long several-Act plays, dramas have become brief—in three or four scenes only to facilitate easy performance. Social themes dominate the field.

Independence opened the flood-gates of new ideas in all fields. Modern Assamese dramas also deal with social, and economic problems but the manner of expression is more subtle and couched in the language of realism. Subjects like class-conflict, psychological variation due to generation gap, unemployment problem, lack of opportunities, aspirations of the middle classes and freedom in love are some of the dominant themes in modern dramas. Some of the modern dramas also contain elaborate instructions about stage-setting. Use of the flash-back technique, so common in the movies, is another recent trend in modern Assamese dramas.

Jyotiprasad Agarwala's Labhita (1948) is a weighty social drama. The backdrop of the drama is the Allied war preparations in Assam,



*Assam, having several tribes, is known as a 'museum of nationalities'. Khasi girls carrying water.*



*A group of Mizo girls.*





*The famous Kamakhya temple, an excellent specimen of Assamese architecture.*  
*In and around Sibsagar lie Assam's impressive monuments. A panel in the Vishnu temple is shown here.*



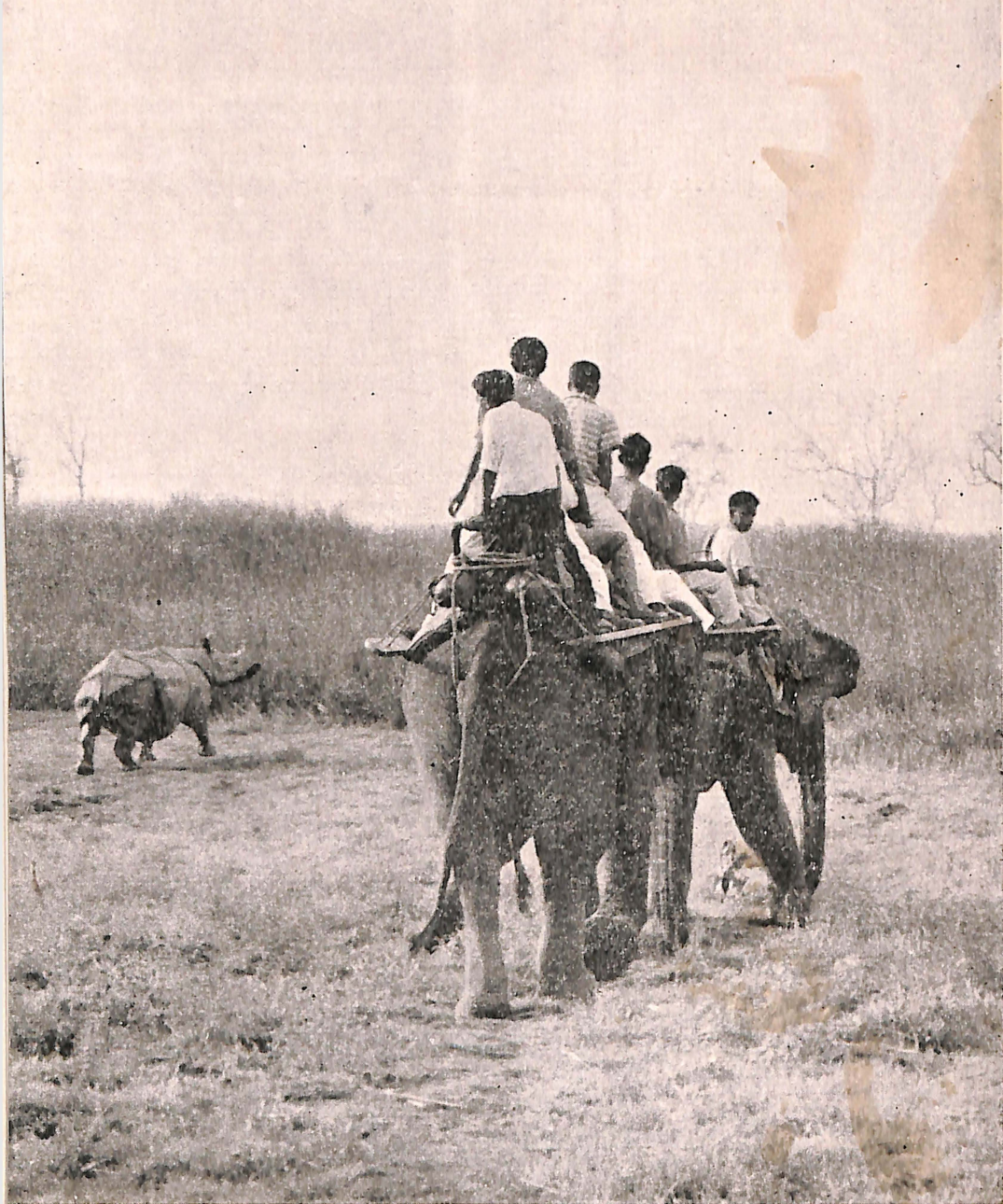


*The Satriya dance is one of the fine flowers  
of the Vaishnavite renaissance in the State.*

*The Bihu festivals are celebrated throughout  
Assam with exuberant dances and amorous songs.*







*The premier national park at Kaziranga is the home of the rare one-horned rhino, which can be viewed at close range from elephantback.*

freedom movement in 1942 and Indian National Army's occupation of Kohima. Labhita, a village girl, joined the British army as a nurse after being persecuted in her village. At Kohima, she fell into the hands of the advancing Japanese forces and joined the Indian National Army under Netaji Subhas Bose and died in the battle field at the hands of the British army.

Atul Hazarika's 'Ahuti' depicts a social theme in the background of the 1942 struggle.

The establishment of the All India Radio Station at Gauhati has made it possible to bring to great popularity a new type of plays, the radio-dramas. This form of plays also opened up another vista, that of one-Act social plays. These are very popular in Assam.

Among modern playwrights, to name a few, are, Satya Prasad Barua, Arun Sarma, Durgeswar Barthakur, Sarada Bardoloi, Abhoy Deka, Phani Sarma, Janardan Thakur, Prabir Malla Bujar Barua, Sarbeswar Chakravarty, Amerendra Pathak, Anil Choudhury, Prafulla Bora, Phani Talukdar and Narayan Bezbarua.

Among the popular stage-actors of the present day are Lakshyadhar Chaudhury, Sarbeswar Chakravarty, Chandradhar Goswami, Chandra Nath Phukan, Satya Prasad Barua, Anupama Bhattacharyya, Baruna Choudhury, Jibeswar Chakravarty, Chandra Nath Phukan, Sarada Bardoloi and Phunoo Barua. Phani Sarma and Bishnu Prasad Rabha, two other prominent actors, died recently.

### **Cottage Industries**

"Every woman of Assam is a born weaver. No Assamese girl who does not weave can expect to become a wife. And she weaves fairy tales in cloth", said Mahatma Gandhi in the course of an article in the *Young India* after a visit to the State in 1921.

Cottage industries serve as an important subsidiary occupation to many families in Assam. In certain areas cottage industries, particularly weaving, take precedence over agriculture. Silk weavers of Sualkuchi, cotton weavers of Karimganj and bell-metal and brass workers of Sarthebari and Hajo pursue agriculture only as a secondary occupation.

Among the basic cottage industries, the handloom, sericulture, smithy, carpentry and making of bell-metal and brass utensils are promi-



ment. Cane and bamboo articles also occupy a large number of artisans.

The cottage industries which have taken firm roots are sericulture and weaving. Assam is famous for her mulberry and other kinds of silks known as Pat, Eri and Muga. Muga is a non-mulberry silk and it is produced nowhere else in the world except Assam.

Handloom industry is the oldest and the most important one. It provides employment to about 15 lakh people. Every family in Assam has its own handloom. Dexterity in weaving silk and cotton cloth is considered an essential qualification for an Assamese girl.

Assamese womenfolk have a distinctive dress consisting of three parts—Mekhala (the lower skirt), Riha (the upper cloth) and a Chaddar worn over the Riha. Most women weave their own clothes.

The most common dress of Assamese ladies is made out of Muga silk. Women in the hills weave their cloths with their own distinctive designs. Textile designs in Assam hills are very colourful.

Assam's jungles abound in elephants. Ivory carving is another important handicraft in Assam. So are cane and bamboo works. Assamese craftsmen produce lovely articles out of cane and bamboo.

## 11. FESTIVALS

**A**SSAM has a large number of colourful fairs and festivals replete with mirth and music. Different races and communities who inhabit the State have their distinctive fairs, festivals and folk dances.

### Bihu Festivals

Bihu festivals are celebrated throughout Assam. The Assamese observe three Bihu festivals during the year.

Bred in the ancient peasant tradition, the people of Assam observe a sort of pagan devotion to nature. The Rangali Bihu (or Bohag Bihu) is a spring festival of dance and music. It is celebrated at a time when nature opens out in light, beauty and colour.

Bihu dances are a superb expression of a vigorous art. A sing-song chant punctuated by drums called "Dhols" form the musical accompaniment, to which young men and women dance in gay abandon. "Gogona" is another important instrument. Other instrumental accompaniment in Bihu dances is provided by "Pepa" (a flute made of buffalo horn) and "Toka" (an indigenous gadget made by splitting in the middle a piece of about two-foot long bamboo). Community feasting and social visits are other essential parts of Bihu festival.

Being agricultural in the main, Bihu festivals also provide for looking after the domestic cattle. Cows and bulls are taken to a river or a pond or a stream, where they are given a good wash. The wash is followed by decorating the cattle with garlands made of brinjal and bottle-gourd pieces to the accompaniment of pastoral songs, which in essence seek to propitiate them so that they might multiply year by year.

Bihu festivities and dances are the expression of genuine folk joy. It is a spring festival devoted mostly to the advent of the agricultural season. Torrential rains caused by monsoon bring the earth to a state of fertility. In this season, earth is ready to receive seeds sown for cultivation. The Bihu dances are, therefore, a kind of fertility ritual

having as their main import amorous and emotional instincts of the heart. The dances express mostly the exuberance of youth. Many of the songs associated with the dances are the expressions of amorous feelings. The dances also in a way exhibit the preponderance of romance and sex.

The origin of Bihu festivities, dance and music is shrouded in mystery. Many scholars opine that these festivities are a popular relic of the distant Austro-Asiatic civilisation. Austro-Asiatics, wherever they have settled, give primary importance to agriculture. Assam's civilisation originally came from the Austro-Asiatics who were the inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley before they came into contact with the Aryan civilisation. Though there had been natural fusion in the course of countless centuries of the Austro-Asiatics with the Aryan and Dravidian civilisations, Assam's society did retain certain strong influences of the distant Austro-Asiatic civilisation. Even in many Assamese words in use today the influence of Austro-Asiatic languages is discernible.

The Austro-Asiatic dance festival connected with the harvest season is a popular social event. This is also to be seen among the people of Java, Upper Burma and in the Nicobar island. Similar harvest dance festivals are also celebrated by some tribes in Australia.

A very rich folk music has developed through the centuries around the Bihu festivities. These songs are the most cherished heritage of the Assamese people. Composed mostly by the unsophisticated and unlettered village youths, the dominant theme of these songs is love and nature. They are mostly in couplets. They exhibit simple experiences of day-to-day life and display a strong creative urge.

Some of the Bihu songs, translated into English are given below :

1. *"I shall take wings,  
Dip into the pond you fish in  
And thus be a catch in your net.  
I will be the sweat trickling down your face,  
As a fly I flutter,  
And kiss your gay cheeks."*
2. *"I cannot fix my mind at home, my love,*

*Neither can I fix it in the field,  
Like carded cotton it likes to fly about."*

3. *"When you blow your pipe yonder,  
And the tune your fingers play,  
My eyes move for a passing glance,  
Beyond the precincts of the gateway,  
The shuttle falls, as my hands quiver,  
Though I sit with the loom well near."*
4. *"I want to dance the Bihu song,  
O darling,  
I want to dance the Bihu song.  
Do not entice me away,  
As I dance the Bihu song."*

### Other Festivals

Other festivals of the hill and the plains people have some religious basis. "Ojha-pali" and "Satriya", are some of the other local dances of the people in the plains districts.

The tribal people, in the hills as well as in the plains, have a large number of festivals in which their distinctive folk dances and folk songs predominate to the accompaniment of their indigenous musical instruments. "Kherai Puja" of the Bodos, "Nongkrem Puja" of the Khasis, "Wangla" of the Garos and "Sekreni Genna" of the Nagas are some of these festivals.

"Habajanai", "Natpuja", "Bugrumba" and "Maigainai" of the Bodo-Kacharis are picturesque folk dances performed to the accompaniment of local musical instruments called "Madal", "Chifung", etc.

The "Laho" folk dance of the Jaintias and the "Sad Nongkrem" of the Khasis are colourful dances to the tune of music provided by "Dhol" and a kind of Shehnai.

"Khuallam" and "Chiraw" are distinctive folk dances of the Mizos. Garos have a vigorous folk dance Called "Wangla". The Wangla festival lasts for seven days. It is celebrated after the harvest is done. The girls who participate in the dance don long robes and adorn their

heads with turbans having feathers on them. A number of mixed dances are also performed during the “Wangla” festival.

The Miris and other people living in the plains districts celebrate Bihu festivals with dances and songs with slight local variations.

The “Shakti” worshippers perform a different kind of dance before the images of Durga and Kali to the accompaniment of “Dhols” (drums). “Deodhani” and “Devadasi” are some of the old dance forms, which are gradually disappearing.

“Ojha-pali” in the Kamrup district and “Bou-natch” in Cachar are some other local forms of folk dances.

## 12. PLACES OF INTEREST

### Historical Monuments

**ASSAM** has a large number of monuments, which speak profusely of the architectural skill of the ancient Assamese. These monuments are mostly temples dedicated to various gods and goddesses.

The oldest architectural remains of Assam have been found at Da Parbatia village near Tezpur. They belong to a brick temple of Siva of the Ahom period. This temple is built upon the ruins of another temple identified as belonging to the Gupta period (6th century A.D.). The Ahom Siva temple collapsed during the great earthquake of 1897, revealing the door-frame of the older structure. This door-frame belongs to the Pataliputra School of Indian architecture. The beautiful lintel found here is one of the best specimens of its class of the Gupta period.

The Da Parbatia ruins reveal some of India's best sculptural designs. There is a ceiling slab with an embossed lotus. There are two temple figures of Vidyadharas. Another frieze shows an archer shooting a deer couple in coition. This may represent the Mahabharata story of Pandu killing the deer couple for which he was cursed to die if he enjoyed sexual pleasure.

Some other stone slabs discovered around Tezpur speak of a very developed sculptural art of ancient Assam. One slab has a number of sunken panels, each containing a male or female, or two females or two males. There are panels showing a man fighting a lion, a man playing a flute, and a woman dancing by his side. There are figures of men playing on a drum and a woman dancing, a man playing on cymbals and a woman dancing, a man playing on a lyre and another dancing by his side, or a man playing on a drum and another dancing by his side. The whole composition seems natural and is full of action.

#### *Kamakhya Temple*

The shrine at Kamakhya, the mother goddess, within the present city of Gauhati is a very old place of worship. It probably existed

much before the spread of Hindu civilisation in this part of the country. The original temple was destroyed in the 16th century by the famous general Kalapahar, a Brahmin converted to Islam through marriage to a Muslim princess from Bihar.

The present temple was rebuilt by king Nara Narayan of Cooch Behar in 1566 A.D. It is said that the temple was built with bricks baked in ghee. Statues of king Nara Narayan and his brother, general Chilarai, were also enshrined on an inside wall of the temple.

Kamakhya temple is a specimen of old Assamese architecture par excellence. The Shikhara (the top) of the temple follows the pattern of a beehive, common to most temples of Assam. Some of the panels on the outer walls of the temple depict scenes unusual to most temples. One panel shows an ordinary householder doing his daily chore, while his wife sits by breast-feeding her baby. Another panel shows a woman pouring water into the mouth of an animal, while yet another shows a woman blowing a conch-shell. There are innumerable dancing figures of gods and goddesses and of ordinary mortals.

The approach to the 305-metre high temple on Nilachal hill is through a flight of stairs made of stone slabs which, legends say, were constructed in the course of a single night.

Asvakraṇta temple is on the north bank of the Brahmaputra facing Gauhati city. The temple is dedicated to Vishnu, whose stone image in the pose of eternal sleep is worshipped. As prescribed in the ancient texts, Vishnu is shown here reclining on the serpent Ananta with a tortoise, a frog and a piece of water-weed supporting the God. Brahma, four-headed, is shown sitting on a lotus sprouting from the navel of Vishnu. Two demons—Madhu and Kaitava—are standing by his side together with Mahamaya. Two snake girls (Nagakanyas) are kneeling down before Vishnu with folded hands.

#### *Umananda*

One of the most picturesque temples of Assam is Umananda, the Siva temple in the bosom of the Brahmaputra near Gauhati. The present temple was built in 1694 A.D. by the Ahom king Gadadhar Singha. Rock-cut figures of gods and goddesses on the walls of the temple are some of the finest specimens of Assamese craftsmanship.

The temple of Hayagriva at Madhav in Hajo, about 24 km. from

Gauhati, is one of Assam's most important shrines. Re-built in 1583 by the Koch king Raghudeva Narayan, it is one of the few pre-Ahom temples of Assam. Situated on a hillock, the temple is built in stone, octagonal, about 9 metres in diameter and crowned with a pyramidal roof. Vertically the temple has three parts—a high basement, the middle portion and the top pyramid. A row of elephants, about 40.6 cm. high, decorates the basement. The elephants face outward surrounding the entire temple and look as if they bear the whole edifice on their backs.

The inside of the temple is a 4-metre square to be reached by a flight of stairs. The deity is Vishnu in the form of a huge stone monolith of half man and half horse. Buddhists from Tibet and Bhutan regard it as Mahamuni (the Buddha).

The outside walls of the temple are decorated with life-size sculptures of the ten incarnations of Vishnu, with the Buddha as the ninth. There are also male figures holding the trident (Trishul) in their hands.

#### *Negheriting*

One of the biggest ancient structures in the whole of Assam is the Siva temple at Negheriting in Sibsagar district. The shrine itself is very old and its origin is shrouded in mystery. It is said that the deity was discovered during the reign of the Ahom king Pratap Singha in the 17th century. He built a temple at the site on the bank of the Brahmaputra. The temple, however, was partly damaged in the 18th century by floods. Pratap Singha's son, king Rajeshwar Singha (1751-1769), rebuilt the temple on a nearby hill-top at Negheriting.

The Negheriting temple is built on a grand scale. Apart from the central temple dedicated to Siva, there are four attached temples with their respective porticos dedicated to Ganesh, Surya, Vishnu and Durga.

The temple's architecture is like that of other Ahom shrines. What, however, distinguishes the Negheriting temple from others is that here are five different temples built around a huge edifice with separate entrances but having connecting doorways inside. In height, the main temple is second only to the Siva temple at Sibsagar.

In vertical elevation, the temple consists of the basement, Garbhagriha and the curvilinear Sikhara with a trident at the top. The middle



portion of the temple outside contains a large number of niches to house some graceful sculptures of gods and goddesses.

### *Sibsagar Temples*

The period between 1681 and 1751 witnessed great construction activities in Assam. The Ahom kings, Siva Singha (1714-1744) and Pramatha Singha (1744-1751) were great builders. Temple and palace architecture was given all encouragement during their reigns.

Rudra Singha (1696-1714) built a new capital town at Rangpur, where he constructed a number of temples and a palace and roads and stone bridges.

From the point of artistic merit, the Siva temple at Sibsaigar town ranks as the top architectural monument in Assam. Situated on the bank of a 60-hectare man-made lake, the temple stands over 30 metres high, the tallest of any temple structure in Assam. There are two other smaller temples, one dedicated to Durga and the other to Vishnu.

Around Sibsaigar town, which was the capital of the Ahom kings, there are dozens of smaller temples. Five km. away from the town, stands Rang-ghar or a sports pavilion, perhaps the only one of its kind. The two-storeyed brick structure was the place from which Ahom kings used to watch sports and merry-making on festive occasions. There are the ruins of a brick-built six-storey palace, three storeys of which are said to have been below the ground level. A few kilometres west of Rangpur, there are the ruins of a five-storey palace at Gargaon, built by king Pramatha Singha (1744-1751).

The whole of Sibsaigar district is dotted with the ruins of innumerable palaces and temples.

The ruins of the Kachari dynasty, which disintegrated at the hands of the Ahoms in the eighteenth century, can be found at Dimapur, now forming part of Nagaland State.

### **Wild Life**

Assam possesses probably the richest wild life in any part of Asia. There is perhaps no other part of the world with such a large variety of animals, birds and reptiles.

From the point of rarity and interest, the most important animal is the great Indian rhinoceros, of which the last remaining stronghold is Assam.

Assam has one national park, three wild life sanctuaries and two reserves, where not a bullet is to be shot and where man is a friend of the animals.

There is a State Wild Life Board to advise the Government of Assam on measures to protect the rare animals and birds.

#### *Kaziranga*

The national park, par excellence, is Kaziranga in Sibsagar district. Situated on the south bank of the Brahmaputra, it is on the main national highway at a distance of 10 km. from Gauhati and 96 km. from Jorhat.

Kaziranga is the home of the famous one-horned Indian rhino, the total number of which is about 400. The animal can be viewed at close range from elephant-back. Several trained elephants are available on hire.

For accommodation of visitors, Kaziranga has well-furnished tourist bungalows with all modern amenities. The charges are moderate.

#### *North Kamrup Sanctuary*

North Kamrup or Manas Sanctuary is in Kamrup district on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra, at the foot of Bhutan hills. It provides most fascinating natural scenery, having on one side the beautiful Manas river with excellent camping and fishing sites. Elephants, rhinos, buffaloes, bison and swamp deer are some of the star attractions of the sanctuary. It also has tigers, bears, boars, sambar, hog-deer and barking deer. It is at a distance of about 175 km. from Gauhati.

The Government provides excellent accommodation for the visitors besides motor transport and elephants to go into the jungle fastness.

#### *Sonai Rupa*

This sanctuary is in Darrang district and is 33 sq. kilometres in area stretching along the Himalayan foothills. It is full of rhinos, elephants, bison and a variety of other animals.

The Pabha or Milroy Buffalo Sanctuary in North Lakhimpur subdivision is the smallest in area, but has the distinction of being the only exclusive home of the magnificent species of wild buffaloes.

### Other Important Places

*Shillong* : Capital of Assam and Meghalaya and headquarters of United Khasi-Jaintia Hills. It is situated at about 1,500 metres above the sea-level. The golf link here is said to be the second best in the world. Shillong is one of the finest hill stations in India. Streams, waterfalls, gorges, and the women-dominated Barabazar spell-bind the tourists. It is at a distance of 101 km. from Gauhati.

*Cherrapunjee* : A hilly place, 1,358 metres above sea-level. It is famous for its highest rainfall in the world (1,270 cm per year) Mawsmai, near Cherrapunjee is the fourth highest waterfall in the world. A 58 km. serpentine road leads from Shillong to Cherrapunjee.

*Vasistha Ashram* : A hermitage of sage Vasistha near Gauhati. Three lovely streams—Sandhya, Lalita and Kanta—warmly welcome the pilgrims.

*Gauhati* : Surrounded by low hills, it is the centre of Assam's educational institutions and temples. The mighty Brahmaputra flowing by, Gauhati has one of India's loveliest natural settings. With India's first public sector oil refinery, it has a good industrial base.

*Hajo* : Situated at a distance of 22 km. from Gauhati across the Brahmaputra, Hajo is the focal point of different religious communities. A mosque built by Pir Giasuddin Aulia, several centuries ago, is known as Poa-Mecca (one-quarter of Mecca). A section of the Buddhists a large number of visitors and traders every year from November to griva Madhav.

*Sualkuchi* : Sualkuchi is famous for its production of silk, particularly "Muga". It is about 24 km. from Gauhati.

*Barpeta* : Sub-divisional headquarters. It is famous for its Satra (a Vaishnava monastery) and the Kirtanghar (prayer hall), founded by Shri Madhavdev in the 15th century.

*Darranga* : 80 km. from Gauhati. Its Bhutanese Fair attracts a large number of visitors and traders every year from November to March.

*Tezpur* : In early times it was known as Sonitpur, ruled by the legendary non-Aryan monarch, Banasur.

As already mentioned, his beautiful daughter, Usha, fell in love with

Aniruddha, grandson of Lord Krishna, and succeeded in seducing him from Dwaraka, through her friend Chitrlekha. Banasur prosecuted Aniruddha for trespassing into his palace. Lord Krishna came down to rescue his grandson at the head of a big army. In this battle, Lord Siva sided with Banasur and a terrible fight took place between Lord Krishna and Lord Siva. Banasur was defeated. There was, however, an armistice and through the intervention of the two principal gods of Hindu trinity, Usha and Aniruddha got united. Architectural ruins said to be of Banasura's palace still attract tourists.

*Sibsagar* : A sub-divisional town in Sibsagar district, Sibsagar is one of the most important historical places in Assam. It was the capital city of the Ahom kings, who ruled Assam prior to the advent of the British. King Siva Singha constructed in the 17th century a tank and on its bank, three Hindu temples dedicated to Lord Siva, Goddess Durga and Lord Vishnu. There are three other man-made lakes around Sibsagar.

*Gargaon* : It was the seat of the Ahom kings in the latter half of the 18th century. An old five-storey palace of the Ahom kings still stands there.

### 13. MEGHALAYA

AS mentioned earlier, the hill areas of Assam are divided into five districts (compared to the plains' seven)—United Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Garo Hills, Mikir Hills, North Cachar Hills and Mizo Hills. The Garo Hills has 3.07 lakh people, the Khasi-Jaintia Hills—4.62 lakhs, the Mikir Hills—2.72 lakhs, North Cachar Hills— 67 thousand and the Mizo Hills—2.66 lakhs.

Assamese is the dominant language of Assam with 67.84 lakhs of the population speaking it.

During British rule, these predominantly tribal areas were insulated from the plains. When Independence came, the leaders of these tribal areas demanded a separate State. The Constitution conceded the demand partially. Under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, each of the hill districts was to have a District Council with powers delegated from the State of Assam to make laws and administer the territory in regard to certain subjects which affected them alone, like land, tribal affairs, primary education, etc.

The arrangement did not satisfy many tribal leaders. When the States' Reorganisation Commission was formed in 1954, the demand for a separate State was once again made before it. The S.R.C. proposed an Eastern State embracing the hill areas of Assam, Cachar, Manipur, Tripura and certain other areas. The proposal was, however, not accepted.

The demand for a separate entity for the hill areas of Assam was meanwhile gaining ground. To solve the problem once and for all, Shri Nehru received a delegation from the All-Party Hill Leaders' Conference in 1963 and offered to it the Scottish pattern of autonomy. This plan assured tribesmen wide freedom to manage local affairs within the wider State of Assam. The proposal, however, did not find favour with them.

The Pataskar Commission, appointed to work out the details of the Scottish pattern of administration, submitted its report on March,

31, 1966. The Commission proposed a sub-legislature for the hill areas, consisting of the tribal members of the State assembly. However, the suggestions of the Pataskar Commission did not satisfy any of the parties in Assam.

A proposal was made in January, 1967 offering virtually a separate State to hill leaders, with certain reservations, and the Asoka Mehta Committee was appointed to work out the details. The suggestions offered by this committee also did not find favour and had to be shelved.

### **Meghalaya Scheme**

The Government of India announced its decision to constitute an Autonomous State within the State of Assam on September 11, 1968.\* The autonomous State is to comprise the districts of Garo Hills and Khasi and Jaintia Hills. Two other hill districts—Mikir Hills and North Cachar Hills were given the option to join the proposed autonomous State. The new scheme conferred on the hill districts virtual statehood and the new autonomous State was to be known as Meghalaya.

Mizo hills district has not been given the option to join the proposed scheme until normalcy is restored there.

Mikir and North Cachar Hills districts have later exercised their option not to join the new Meghalaya plan, but to continue in the parent State of Assam.

The Autonomous State of Meghalaya was set up in accordance with the provisions of the Assam Reorganisation (Meghalaya) Bill, 1969, passed by the Parliament. The Bill received the assent of the President on December 29, 1969.

While Meghalaya has wide powers in regard to its administration, with a view to maintaining the overall unity of the State of Assam as a whole, certain provisions have been kept in the Act. Besides a common Governor, High Court and Public Service Commission, the autonomous State shares with the rest of Assam a common legislature and cabinet. Meghalaya also has a Cabinet of Ministers to administer the autonomous State.

The autonomous State of Meghalaya was inaugurated at Shillong on April 2, 1970.

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*\*After the book was written, it was announced by the Prime Minister that the Government had decided in principle to accept Meghalaya's demand for full statehood.*

# ASSAM

CHINA  
TIBET



THIMPHU  
BHUTAN

BENGAL  
GOALPARA  
BRAHMAPUTRA  
Dhubri  
GARO HILLS  
MEGHALAYA  
TURA  
BANGLA DESH

TRIPURA  
AGARTALA

KAMENG  
Bomdila

DARRANG  
Tezpur

KAMRUP  
Bijni

PARA  
BRAHMAPUTRA

Gauhati

KARBI HILLS

SHILLONG

CACHAR

Silchar

Haflong

IMPHAL

MANIPUR

AIJAL

MIZO HILLS

KODI HILLS

Nowgong

Diphu

KOHIMA

NAGALAND

SIBSAGAR

Quorhat

Dibrugarh

Likhapani

Dangor

Teju

LOHIT

LOHIT

SIANG

Along

SIANG

Subansiri

Hapoli

North Lakhimpur

MORONG SELEK

SIANG

BURMA

## LEGEND

- Capital
- Distt. Headquarters
- Railways
- Rivers

Bhutan is in special treaty relations with India.

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Survey of India map, with the  
the Surveyor General of India

ASSAM, or the legendary Kamarup, the land where the god of love is believed to have regained his handsome form, has always held a seductive charm for the people of other parts of India. Right from the epic battle of Kurukshetra, down to the recent freedom struggle and the present adventure of national reconstruction, the Sentinel on the North-east has been actively participating in the affairs of the country. P.B. Barthakur presents here vignettes of a State which epitomizes in itself the national hallmark of unity in diversity.



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