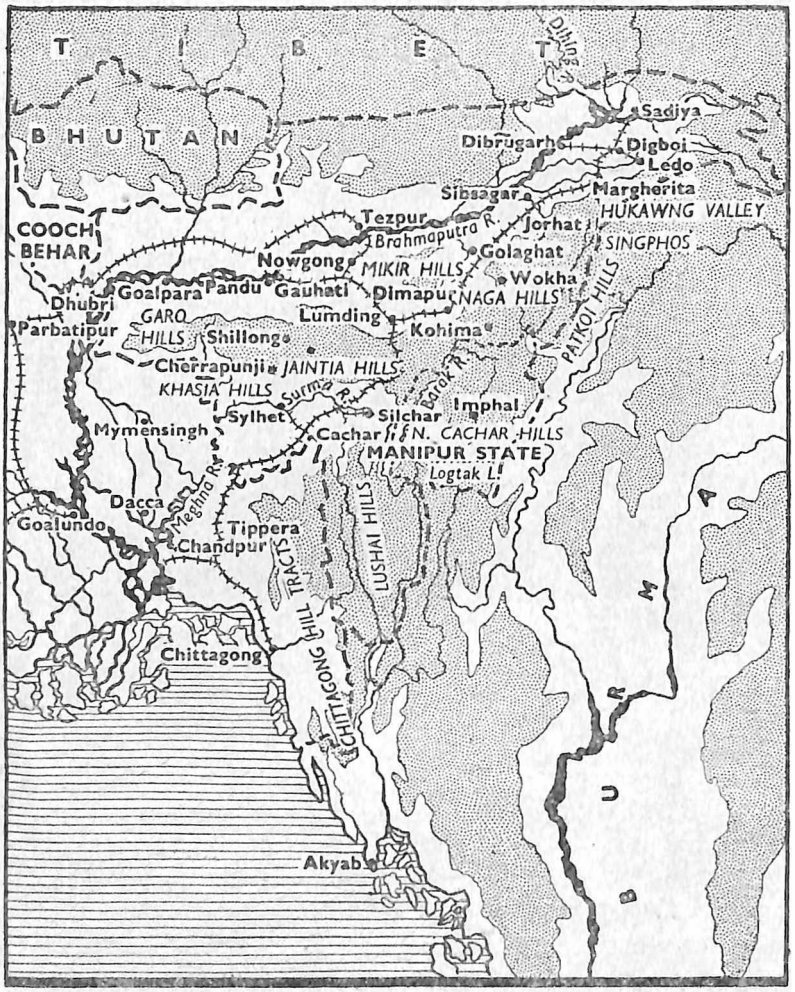
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Brahmaputra R.
Golaghat
SINGPHOS
Nowgong
MIKIR HILLS
Wokha
Goalpara
Pandu
Gauhati
Dimapur
NAGA HILLS
PATKOI HILLS
Dhubri
GARO HILLS
Lumding
Parbatipur
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Kohima
Cherrapunji
JAINTIA HILLS
KHASIA HILLS
Surma R.
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Imphal
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Silchar
N. CACHAR HILLS
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Meghna R.
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CHITTAGONG HILL
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Land Above 1,500'
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ASSAM

OXFORD PAMPHLETS ON INDIAN AFFAIRS
No. 37

ASSAM

BY

ALBAN ALI

&

ERIC LAMBERT

INDIAN BRANCH

GEOFFREY CUMBERLEGE
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

DESPITE its long history, going back to the days of the Mahabharata war, Assam remains largely unknown even to the rest of India. The importance of the north-east frontier province in the Far Eastern war served to bring some prominence to this 'land of magic', though the whole Province's great contribution to the final defeat of Japan is not yet appreciated. To the outside world Assam stands mainly for one thing—tea, which is its chief industry. Yet circumstances are such that the Province draws a disproportionately small share of the revenues which tea and rich oilfields provide. A more generous subvention from the Centre and the development of the Province's coalfields and potential hydro-electric power (added to the improved communications provided by the war) will assure Assam's industrial future. Generous treatment from outside and bold planning within can bring about a complete transformation of India's 'Cinderella' province.

Both the authors of this pamphlet are officers of the Indian Police with more than 16 years' varied experience in Assam. Alban Ali, a pioneer of aviation in Assam, was during the war a Flight-Lieutenant in the air force until recalled to organize Assam's 'Village Defence Parties'. He is the author of a travel book about flying, *The Scarlet Angel*, and a novel, and has broadcast about Assam from the B.B.C. Eric Lambert has had considerable experience among the hill-tribes and was with the Nagas throughout the Japanese invasion. He is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and of the Royal Anthropological Institute.

First published, July 1946

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
AMEN HOUSE, LONDON, E.C. 4
Edinburgh Glasgow New York
Toronto Melbourne Capetown
Bombay Calcutta Madras
GEOFFREY CUMBERLEGE
PUBLISHER TO THE
UNIVERSITY

PRINTED IN INDIA BY W. T. JENKINS AT THE WESLEY PRESS AND PUBLISHING HOUSE, MYSORE CITY, ON PAPER MANUFACTURED AT THE MYSORE PAPER MILLS AND PUBLISHED BY GEOFFREY CUMBERLEGE, BOMBAY

ASSAM

The Country

(I)

THE Province of Assam forms the extreme eastern frontier of the Indian Empire. Little known till recently, it sprang into prominence as the area where the Japanese advance into India from Burma was first held and then repulsed, in the course of which one of the decisive campaigns of the Eastern war was fought.

Assam is actually a country of exceptional interest, and deserves to be better known than it is. Its position on what has now become a vital frontier is likely to invest it in the future with a political importance similar to that held for centuries by the north-west frontier of India. In addition, as will be shown later, it has certain potentialities in the industrial sphere which, if wisely and actively exploited, may in time raise it from its erstwhile obscurity as India's 'Cinderella' province to a proud position in the future Federation of India.

Assam has always been regarded by the rest of India as a land of magic. It is a country of an almost terrifyingly prodigal Nature, overgrown by rank and luxuriant jungle, beaten by rains of tropical fury, intersected by numberless rivers pouring their torrents into the majestic Brahmaputra, and in the past racked by earthquakes and pillaged by elephant, rhinoceros and equally savage man. It is aptly epitomized in the Province's motto *Arva, flumina, montes*—cultivation, rivers and mountains—and in its coat of arms, a representation of the great Indian rhinoceros (now almost extinct, and of which Assam is the last home).

Some of its other curiosities may also be briefly referred to here. It possesses the biggest village in the world (Baniyachang, with a population of 42,000); the wettest spot on earth (Cherrapunji, with an average annual rainfall of over 400 inches, the highest ever recorded being 905 inches in 1861[1]); and the largest freshwater

[1] Its record precipitation for one day is no less than 41 inches. (Cf. London's average *annual* rainfall of 25 inches.)

island in the world (Majuli island in the Brahmaputra, 56 miles long and 10 miles broad). Here is also found the pygmy hog, only 18 inches in length—the smallest pig in the world; the yellow primula (*Floribunda*), found only within the Province; the painted bat with its red wings (the only coloured bat in the world); and the deep-water paddy grown in the Sylhet district, which is the longest-stalked and fastest-growing paddy in the world, it being known to reach a height of 20 feet and to grow at the rate of 6 inches in 24 hours when floods make it necessary for it to keep above water. Assam is also the home of polo, which came to the British from the hill-state of Manipur.

A further possibly unique fact about Assam is that within its comparatively small area no fewer than 120 different languages are spoken.

(II)

With an area (including the State of Manipur) of approximately 67,359 square miles (roughly the size of England and Wales plus one-third of Scotland), Assam has a population of 10,930,388 (1941 census). Thus the population is only a quarter of that of England and Wales, and is just about the same as that of Canada with its 3,700,000 square miles. The density of population of Assam is equal to that of the Central Provinces but much less than that of most of the major Indian provinces. There are two chief reasons why Assam is so thinly populated. Firstly, over half of its total area consists of sparsely-populated hill-tracts; and secondly, the plains districts of the Brahmaputra Valley were seriously depopulated by the civil wars and disturbances which marked the decay of the Ahom Kingdom, and by the subsequent invasion and capture of the Brahmaputra Valley in 1819 by the Burmese, who massacred many thousands of the inhabitants and are said to have carried back with them to Burma some 30,000 slaves.

Out of the present population of almost 11 millions (nearly double what it was 30 years ago), there are some 4½ million Hindus and 3½ million Muslims (mainly Sunnis).

Assam has roughly the shape of an isosceles triangle with the apex pointing to the north-east, the base of the triangle lying on

the north-eastern frontier of Bengal. On the north, Assam is bounded by the eastern section of the great Himalaya range (Bhutan and Tibet being the bordering States), and on the south-east by Burma. To the east of the mountains which sweep round the head of the Brahmaputra Valley (the apex of the triangle) lies the great mass of China.

(III)

Geographically, Assam falls into three natural divisions—the Valley of the Surma or Barak, the Valley of the Brahmaputra (or Assam proper), and the sparsely-populated hill-districts.

The Surma river (navigable by steamers up to Silchar) rises in the mountain ranges on the northern boundary of Manipur, and after a tortuous and branching course of over 500 miles pours its waters into the Meghna, one of the three gigantic river-systems that form the eastern portion of the Bengal delta emerging to the sea below Chandpur.

The Surma Valley of Assam comprises only the two districts of Cachar and Sylhet. Sylhet district is subject to the immense rainfall along the southern border of the Khasia Hills (in which area Cherrapunji is situated). As a result, the plain of Sylhet is covered with numerous *bheels*, flooded in the monsoon and partially dry in the winter, and a large part of the countryside during the wet season becomes one vast sea of water, with villages sticking up here and there on the high ground.

The districts of Sylhet and possibly Cachar are geographically, linguistically, and ethnically part of Bengal. Their population is predominantly Muslim, and there is a strong movement now for their transfer to Bengal.

The Brahmaputra ('Son of Brahma') is one of the famous rivers of the world. Hindu tradition describes this river as rising in the sacred pool of Brahmakund, some 50 miles east of Sadiya, but it has been shown that the Brahmaputra is identical with the Tsangpo, the great river of Tibet. The Tsangpo rises in western Tibet, near the sources of the Indus and the Sutlej, and flows eastwards behind the Himalayas, passing near Lhasa and ultimately debouching (as the Dihang) into the Brahmaputra near Sadiya. The Brahmaputra has a total length of about 1,800

miles, and is navigable by steamers up to Dibrugarh (some 800 miles from the sea).

The lower course of the Brahmaputra in Bengal exhibits one of the most interesting cases of what is known to geographers as 'river piracy', its previous channel having in the course of time been appropriated by the earlier-flooding Surma (Meghna), it being forced to cut across country and join the Ganges at Goalundo.

In the plains of Assam the Brahmaputra runs between sandy banks in a wide strath, forming divergent channels which later rejoin the main stream. The stream is heavily laden with silt, but owing to its comparative swiftness much of the finer sediment is carried down to be deposited in lower Bengal. The least obstruction causes the formation of an almond-shaped sand-bank; hundreds of these *churs* are constantly arising and disappearing, thus making navigation a ticklish business.

The flood discharge at Goalpara is said to be more than half a million cubic feet of water per second. In the monsoon the river is a majestic sight, stretching in places five miles and more from bank to bank.

The Brahmaputra has been described at some length as it dominates the Assam Valley. Most of the important towns therein are situated on or near its bank. Before the building of the railway it formed the main means of communication, and it still carries considerable traffic. Its secular deposits of rich alluvium provide the fertile soil which yield the villagers their ready crops, and which, on banks which stand a few feet above the rice land, produces the tea for which Assam is famous. After China, north-east India is the largest tea-producing area of the world.

Apart from the tea plantations, and the areas of waste land, swamps and forests, the plain of the Brahmaputra is covered with rice and mustard fields and dotted with clumps of bamboos, palms and fruit-trees, in which are buried the houses of the cultivators. The scenery of the valley is noted for its picturesqueness. In the cold weather one is rarely out of sight of the hills, while behind the lower ranges of the Himalayas snowy peaks glisten in the sun. The slopes of the lower hills are heavily

forested, and the numerous tributaries of the Brahmaputra, like those of the Surma, issue from the hills in gorges of exceptional beauty.

Assam is at present almost entirely an agricultural province; its most important industry, tea cultivation, is mainly agricultural, and the tea-gardens themselves are inimical to the growth of urban communities. Of the total population of Assam, 97 per cent reside in villages and tea-gardens. The very small urban population ratio (about 30 per mille) may be compared with 110 for India as a whole, and 800 for an industrial country like England and Wales.

Shillong (with its cantonment) is the capital and largest town in the Province, having a population of about 63,000. Situated at 5,000 feet among pine forests and rolling downs, it is one of the most charming of India's hill-stations.

Gauhati and Sylhet are the leading towns of the Assam and Surma Valleys respectively. Each has a number of colleges affiliated to Calcutta University and is a considerable centre of trade. Gauhati is a town of venerable antiquity, being mentioned under its old name in the *Mahabharata;* it was for long the capital of the early Hindu rulers, and later, under the Ahoms, the residence of the Viceroy of Lower Assam.

Dibrugarh, Jorhat and Silchar are district headquarters and centres of the tea industry. Other district towns are Nowgong, Tezpur and Dhubri. Imphal is the capital of Manipur State.

The third of Assam's three natural divisions, the hill-districts, are dealt with in the section on the hill-tribes.

Climate

The climate of Assam compared with other parts of India is notable for its relative coolness and extreme humidity. The heavy and long-continued rains keep the temperature comparatively moderate, the average temperature of the warm season not going above 84°F. Assam enjoys an unusually long and bracing cold weather, especially in the Brahmaputra Valley.

There is only a very brief hot weather between the end of the cold weather in March and the onset of the monsoon in June;

and even then there is a considerable amount of rainfall between March and May at a time when precipitation over Upper India is at a minimum.

The monsoon season, though relatively cool, is a trying period owing to the 'hot-house atmosphere' caused by the very high degree of saturation.

The rainfall of Assam is always abundant, but is rather unevenly distributed. It averages somewhat over 100 inches a year; but whereas Cherrapunji gets an annual average of over 400 inches, in some places in the Mikir Hills the figure is as low as 40 inches. Sylhet, on the south of the Assam Range, gets a mean rainfall of 159 inches a year, while Gauhati on the north gets only 67.

For the above reasons, famine or a serious failure of crops in Assam is unknown, though periodical floods may do local damage to seedlings or standing crops.

Assam is a permanently green corner in a continent where conditions are generally arid.

Fauna and Flora

Numerous wild elephants inhabit the lower slopes of the Assam Range and parts of the Brahmaputra Valley, and cause considerable damage to crops and property. Before the war the Forest Department obtained a substantial revenue from their capture and sale; both *kh*edda and *mela* methods of elephant-catching were employed. Rhinoceroses are still found in certain swampy parts of the Brahmaputra Valley. They have been saved from complete extinction by the Government's policy of protection; their main habitat is the Kaziranga game sanctuary in Sibsagar district.

Tigers, leopards, wild boar and deer of several species abound. Bears, wild dogs, buffaloes and bison are also found.

Small game is plentiful and includes florican, peafowl, partridges, pheasants, snipe and woodcock, geese and duck, and hares. Assam is also the home of the jungle-fowl, the ancestor of the common domestic fowl.

Excellent *mahseer* and *bokh*a fishing is also to be had in some of the rivers.

Assam not so long ago was renowned as a sportsman's paradise; with the extensive opening-up of waste lands and curtailment of the jungle, however, the game is gradually dwindling. Logtak lake, near Imphal, where the shooting is strictly controlled, is still one of the finest wildfowl shoots in India.

The uncultivated parts of Assam are usually covered with forest, or with tall-growing grass and reeds, several varieties of which are useful as building materials. Of the timber-trees of Assam, the most important commercially is the sal (*Shorea robusta*), of which there are extensive forests. Teak is grown, but does not do as well as in Burma. Recent experiments by planters in growing the *tung* tree commercially are of interest.

The richest flora in the province is found on the Shillong plateau, a succession of rolling downs dotted with groves of pine. Upwards of 2,000 different flowering plants were collected by Dr Hooker within ten miles of Cherrapunji, while various kinds of orchids and balsams, rhododendrons, azaleas and wild roses are found on every side.

History

The early history of Assam is, in Carlyle's phrase, 'a distillation of rumour'. Even the origin of the name is not certain, though it is possibly connected with the Sanskrit *asama*, meaning 'peerless', as applied to the Ahoms, a conquering tribe which arrived on the scene in the thirteenth century A.D. References to the kingdom of Kamarupa and its non-Hindu king Bhagadatta are found in the *Mahabharata* and other early Sanskrit writings. It was then a large and flourishing kingdom with its capital at the modern Gauhati.

Owing to its remoteness and the tales of the animistic tribes and the natural wonders which were to be found there, Assam always figured as the land of mystery and magic in the old traditions of India. The name of the old capital of Kamarupa, Pragjyotishpur, itself means the 'city of eastern (or early) astrology'. Indeed, it is thought that the animistic beliefs of the primitive tribes in these regions supplied the major factor in the orgiastic development of Siva-worship known as Saktism, which finds its chief adherents in eastern India. This cult is based on

the worship of the female principle in creation. To the famous temple of Kamakhya near Gauhati (believed to have been the early home of Tantrism) come pilgrims from far and wide.

The country in olden days was usually referred to by the rest of India as *mlechchha* Assam—that is, outside the Aryan pale.

Speculations as to the identity and affinities of the earliest inhabitants of Assam are fascinating but cannot be touched on here.

The climatic and other conditions of Assam militate against the long preservation of records and buildings, but we first get something definite about the country in the account written by the Chinese pilgrim Hiouen Tsiang, who visited Kamarupa in the seventh century A.D. The country was then under a Hindu king called Bhaskara Varman, and it appears that the kingdom was of considerable extent and of a fairly high degree of civilization.

Apart from a few copper-plate and rock inscriptions little definite light is thrown on Assam after Hiouen Tsiang's visit till the coming of the Ahoms in the thirteenth century, but among much that is obscure it appears that the country later fell into the hands of a line of tribal chieftains who were subsequently converted to Hinduism. About 1515, the line of Koch kings was founded by a Koch or Mech chieftain called Bisu, who became known as Biswar Singh after embracing Hinduism. He built a capital at Koch Bihar, and under his son Nar Narayan the Koch power attained its zenith. This was largely owing to the latter's brother and commander-in-chief, who under the nickname of Chilarai ('kite-king') attained considerable fame and worsted in battle the Ahoms, the Khyrim, Jaintia, Tippera and Sylhet kings, and exacted tribute from the raja of Manipur. Visitors to the modern Cooch Behar may see a memorial to him in the Chilarai barracks which house the State forces.

Chilarai also defeated the Kacharis, another tribe related to the Koches who at one time ruled a large part of Assam, only to be pushed back gradually to the North Cachar Hills by the Ahoms and finally dispossessed by the Manipuris and Burmese.

Nar Narayan was a studious king and a supporter of religion —the Edward the Confessor of Assam. He rebuilt the temple of

Kamakhya, and commissioned the poets of the land to translate the Sanskrit classics, 'for the edification of women and Sudras at present, and of the Brahmans at a later age'. He was also the protector of Sri Sankar Deb, the great Vaishnavite religious reformer of Assam, and his associate Madhab Deb. Sankar Deb's reforms were a reaction against the excesses of the Tantrik cult of the Shaivites: he preached the monotheistic worship of Krishna and opposed Brahmanism, caste oppression, and idolatry and sacrifices, and hence incurred the wrath of the Brahman-dominated Ahom king of Upper Assam. He was obliged to flee from Nowgong to the Koch dominions. The name of Sankar Deb is still honoured in Assam: Vaishnavism is the prevailing form of Hinduism in the Assam Valley today, and its support by Nar Narayan had further important results which will be described in connexion with the Ahom rule.

Assam now became the scene of a three-cornered struggle between the Koches, the Muslim forces of the Mogul Emperor and his Viceroys of Bengal, and the growing power of the Ahoms, and in the result the Koch power, caught between the upper and nether millstones, gradually dwindled away, till it survives today only in the present State of Cooch Behar, outside Assam.

The Ahoms. The Ahoms, who first entered Assam through the Naga Hills as a small raiding party in 1228, were a tribe of Shans from a land called Pong, between Assam and Burma. They had the historical faculty highly developed, and have left their story in numerous chronicles which were written on the dried bark of trees and handed down as heirlooms. Looking down from the Patkoi Hills on this land of promise, like Moses from the mount of Pisgah, they had hailed it as 'the country full of golden gardens'. With them they brought the royal umbrella, and their tribal idol, the *Somdeo,* a jewel set in a cylinder enclosed in a series of seven golden caskets. They were to rule Assam, first locally and later over its whole extent, for six hundred years, until the British came on the scene.

The Ahoms were a vigorous, if ruthless people, and under their kings, whose bodies were sacrosanct and had to be without blemish, they gradually overcame the indigenous rulers—the

Koches, Kacharis, and Chutiyas (a tribe ruling over the Sadiya country at the extreme end of the valley)—and organized it on a feudal basis peculiar to themselves. They built many fine roads, temples and tanks, the best surviving examples of which are to be seen today in and around the town of Sibsagar, their chief settlement.

Assam was one of the few countries permanently to resist the might of the Mogul Empire, whose forces, though winning temporary successes and once occupying Garhgaon, the enemy capital, were always beaten in the end by the alliance of the climate and the Ahoms. The difficulties of the Muslims in the country are exemplified by the expedition of Mohammed Shah (a Tughlak), who 'sent 100,000 horsemen well-equipped to Assam, but the whole army perished in that land of witchcraft and not a trace of it was left'.

For a considerable period under Ahom rule Assam was contented and prosperous. Towards the end of the eighteenth century however the old story repeated itself: the comfort and enervating influence of the land they had conquered had gradually sapped the energy of this once-virile race, and the kingdom began to break up to the accompaniment of disputed successions, over-ambitious ministers, and depredations by the Singphos (Kachins) and other hill-tribes. A further cause of the deterioration in the martial spirit of the Ahoms is stated to have been their gradual adoption of Hinduism and their moral subjection to the Sakta Brahmans. They had to accept a subordinate position in the Hindu caste-hierarchy and to give up the nourishing fare to which they had been used. For some time they used to perform the old tribal rituals alongside the new worship of the Hindu pantheon, recalling the analogous situation in Rome at the time of Constantine the Great's adoption of Christianity.

The break-up of the kingdom was hastened by a series of rebellions by the Moamarias, a dissenting sect of the Sankar Deb Vaishnavas which, supported largely by the lower social orders, had gained a great following in Assam: their resistance to Brahman domination had involved them in considerable persecution, against which they revolted.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the Burmese des-

cended on the country, originally at the invitation of the refractory Ahom Viceroy of Gauhati, and during their five years' reign of terror from 1819–24 they devastated and depopulated the country with inhuman savagery. Finally they came into collision with the British power in Bengal and were thereafter expelled by force of arms from Assam (the first Burmese war).[1] British forces had once before (in 1792) been invited into Assam by the incompetent Ahom king Gaurinath Singh to help him reassert his authority, but they had soon been withdrawn.

British rule. British rule in Assam dates officially from 1826 (Treaty of Yandabo), but at first the expedient was tried of leaving Upper Assam under the Ahom king Purandar Singh as a protected raja. This was not a success, however, and in 1839 the whole of Assam was taken over and administered as part of British India.

The century of British rule has seen the establishment of settled conditions and administration, the rise of the great tea industry and opening-up of communications, and the pacification of the turbulent hill-tribes by a series of expeditions and the taking-over of sufficient of their tracts to prevent raids into the plains.

The early history of the Surma Valley is even more obscure than that of the Assam Valley. It is conjectured that it was formerly occupied by Bodo-speaking tribes and ruled by Bodo kings, and that at one time it was under the sway of the kings of Kamarupa. Later on it seems to have formed part of the dominions of the Sen kings of Bengal. Sylhet (which in early times supplied India with eunuchs) was conquered by the Muslims in the fourteenth century, and in Sylhet town is the renowned shrine of the Pir Shah Jalal, who accompanied the conquerors. Sylhet passed into the hands of the East India Company with the rest of Bengal in 1765. Cachar was annexed by the British in 1832 on the death of the last Kachari raja, Gobind Chandra, without heirs: it has been largely colonized from Sylhet, and by immigrant tea-garden labour.

Languages. The two chief languages spoken in the plains districts are Bengali and Assamese. The former is spoken mainly in

[1] One of the officers accompanying this expedition was Lt. Brooke, later to become the first Raja Brooke of Sarawak.

the districts of Sylhet, Cachar and parts of Goalpara; and Assamese, which is a Sanskritic language akin to Bengali, in the remaining parts.

The People

Assam is a welter of diverse tribes and languages, dear to the ethnologist and philologist. 'There are parts of India', Sir George Grierson remarked of Assam, 'which seem to have had each a special Tower of Babel of its own'; and this description is seen to be fully justified when we consider that no less than 120 separate languages are spoken by the 11 million inhabitants of the Province. Yet, in the words of Sir Andrew Clow, Governor of Assam, 'Nowhere else in India has there been such a mixture of races as in the Assam Valley and nowhere have the peoples lived in more harmony'.

The peoples who form the present population have come from almost every quarter of the compass, and immigration still continues. 'The foundation, however', to quote Baines, 'of the population is a more or less Brahmanized community of the local stock, Kol-Dravidian in the one case, Mongoloidic in the other.'[1]

The earliest inhabitants were probably of Austric stock, followed by Dravidians, of whom the survivors are believed to be the Doms or the Kaibartas of the two valleys. Early Dravidian stock was considerably admixed with the later Indo-Chinese immigration and the resultant type has been called Mongolo-Dravidian, with the Mongoloid strain stronger in the Assam Valley and the Dravidian in the Surma Valley. The Mongoloid waves of migration which landed most of these peoples in their present homes 'took place at such long intervals and from such various sources that there are few general characteristics common to the Mongoloidic population in the aggregate'. The Indo-Chinese group is divided into three language families who probably entered Assam in the following order: the Mon Khmer, the

[1] Here the old linguistic nomenclature is used as being more generally known; for a recent description of the peoples of India, see Oxford Pamphlets on Indian Affairs, No. 22, *Racial Elements in the Population* (B. S. Guha).

Tibeto-Burman and the Siamese-Chinese. To the first group belong the Khasis and the Syntengs, to the last belong the Ahoms, the Hkamtis, Phakials, Turungs and Noras, all now to be found mostly in the upper Assam Valley.

To the Tibeto-Burman group belong by far the greatest variety of tribes, of which one of the largest families is sometimes known as the Bodo group. The Kacharis, Meches, Koches, Ravas, Hojais, Lalungs, Garos and perhaps Morans and Chutiyas are Bodo, but opinion is divided on the Mikirs who may belong to the Bodo (Boro) but are much more likely Nagas. The Chutiyas deny their Bodo origin but their language was certainly of that group. The Bodos are found now mostly in the Assam Valley. All the hill-tribes with the exception of the Khasi-Synteng and War tribes belong to the Tibeto-Burman group, as do also the Manipuris and the Singphos (Kachins).

Probably at or about the same time as the Tibeto-Burman speakers arrived from the north and east, the Aryans started to enter Assam up the Brahmaputra Valley from the west. The Kalitas, who are to be found mostly in the Assam Valley districts, are the descendants of these early Aryan male immigrants who married women from the indigenous population. The Brahmans of Assam are also Aryan immigrants from the west who have kept very pure stock.

In comparatively recent times there have been two more waves of migration into Assam, Muslims from Bengal and tea-garden labourers from Chota Nagpur, etc. The Muslims of Assam consist of converts and the descendants of Muslim invaders. The tea labour does not all come to stay; many labourers come on contract and return to their country when their time is up.

Other peoples in Assam are the Marwari shopkeepers, Sikh artisans, Nepali graziers, Bengali traders and clerks, European tea-planters and Bihari labourers, and away up in the north bordering on Tibet are Tibetans.

The Hill-tribes

One of the most notable features of Assam is the very beautiful hill-country and the delightful people who inhabit it.

The Singphos (Kachins), Nagas, Kukis and Lushais occupy the Patkois, the hills bordering Burma; the Garos, Khasis and Dimasas (or Hill Kacharis), the hills between the Brahmaputra and the Surma Valleys; the Mishmis, Abors, Miris, Daflas and Akas the southern slopes of the Himalayas bordering on Tibet; and the Mikirs live in a range of low hills between the districts of Nowgong and Sibsagar in the Assam Valley.

The hill-tribes are all, according to Professor Hutton, inter-related to probably a very considerable extent (some of course more closely than others), and probably all of them contain some elements common to most of the others. The Nagas and Kukis have absorbed much from pre-existing people, probably of Khasi affinities. The Manipuri is a blend of Naga and Kuki, and the Garo a blend of Khasi-Synteng-War (Mon Khmer) with stock from the north bank.

The British connexion with the tribes came during the early part of the nineteenth century and penetration since then into the hills has been very slow, necessitated only by tribal depredations into the plains. The northern tribes looted for gain and slaves whilst the Nagas were largely interested in heads.

The administration of the hills is not yet complete and it will probably be many years before it is; nor is the administration yet the same as that of the plains or the rest of India. Under the 1935 Act, the Governor has special responsibilities for the welfare of the hill-tribes. The hillmen are administered chiefly according to their own local usages and customs, and these differ widely, as does language, from tribe to tribe. The hill-districts and frontier tracts are known as the Excluded or Partially Excluded Areas, and the best known parallel elsewhere is probably the Indian Reservations of the U.S.A. and Canada.

Assam's hillmen are a fearless, cheerful people. They are generally Mongoloid in appearance, fair-skinned and well built, though on the whole small. They live a hard life, depending on rice as their staple crop. One or two tribes have adopted terrace cultivation, but the others depend on the *taungya* or *jhuming* system, which is very wasteful.

Villages are usually situated on the tops of the most inaccessible hills, each village site being sacred. The site is also specially

chosen for purposes of defence, and to this day many villages still retain their stockades and their great wooden doors.

The people of Assam's hills are animists or spirit worshippers, though many have been converted to Christianity of recent years.

It is nearly always possible to recognize a hillman from a plainsman in Assam by the colour in his costume and the many beads and other ornaments worn.

The Nagas, who are probably the best known, are noted for their head-hunting propensities, and though this has now ceased in the administered areas it still continues in the unadministered territory on the Burma border. Villages war between each other and rarely combine to attack, probably due to fear of treachery.

The future of the Assam hill-tribes when India gains independence is one of considerable difficulty.

This and the loyalty and excellent showing of the hill-people of Assam during the war are alluded to in subsequent sections.

Resources, Trade and Communications

The resources of Assam are manifold, but they are as yet little tapped, apart from the tea and oil industries, both of which have been developed almost entirely by foreign capital and labour. To the outside world, Assam signifies tea: a separate section has therefore been devoted to this. Oil is produced by the Assam Oil Company (a subsidiary of the Burmah Oil Company) chiefly at Digboi, near Tinsukia, where the company has built a model township. The output of crude oil amounted in 1931 to over 53 million gallons, and over 8,000 persons (chiefly foreigners) were employed. Unfortunately, as will be explained later, the revenues of Assam benefit very little from what should be a major source of income from these two industries.

Coal is produced chiefly at Margherita (near Digboi) and near Nazira. It is of soft quality and most of the outturn is consumed within the Province. Over 6,000 males were employed in the mines in 1931. The coal-measures of the Shillong plateau have not yet been exploited owing to their distance from a railhead, but surveys are now in hand for a new railway-line round the Garo Hills.

An uptodate cement factory has recently been opened at

Chhatak, in Sylhet district, and there is a match factory at Dhubri. There are a number of scattered sawmills, rice mills, oil mills, engineering workshops and printing presses, but they are of small output; most are owned by non-Assamese.

As mentioned previously, 97 per cent of Assam's population live in villages or tea-gardens. The tea-garden workers are almost all foreigners, which indicates the overwhelmingly agricultural interests of the Province's inhabitants. Assam is mainly a land of small peasant proprietors, and would be almost entirely so but for the two permanently-settled districts of Sylhet and Goalpara. In Sylhet the worst aspects of the permanent settlement as exemplified in Bengal were mitigated by settlement being given not to big zemindars, but to the actual tillers of the soil. All the same, the uncertain rights of tenants result in most of their savings being frittered away in fruitless litigation. In Goalpara district the land is mostly owned by very big zemindars, the Bijni Raj alone comprising over 1,000 square miles.

Rice is the main crop; the land is naturally fertile and there is seldom any shortage of produce, but the standard of production of the Assamese cutivator is considerably below what it might be, and little is produced beyond the actual needs of the Province. Of recent years there has been an ever-growing influx of land-hungry immigrants from eastern Bengal (chiefly Muslims) who have been opening up more and more of the waste areas and whose pressure now against the lands of the more easy-going Assamese has led to a serious political crisis. They also cultivate the cash crops, jute and mustard, and impartial observers estimate that the Mymensinghia produces from two to three times the amount the Assamese cultivator does from a similar acreage. This and other economic problems are referred to in the final section.

Potatoes and oranges are grown in the Khasia and Jaintia Hills, the latter crop supplying most of Assam and Bengal.

Assam has extensive forests, and the usual forest products are extracted, such as timber, elephants, honey, beeswax, lac, cane, and bamboo for paper-making. Rubber used to be produced, and a certain amount of short-staple cotton is grown in the foothills.

The main cottage-industries of Assam are sericulture and handloom weaving. The three chief types of silk produced are *eri*, *pat* (the white silk of the mulberry worm), and *muga* (a golden silk peculiar to Assam). The silk is mainly for local use, and it is a very pretty sight to see the women of Assam on a gala occasion dressed in the silks of their own making. There were nearly half a million handlooms in the Province according to the 1921 census, a figure not approached by any other province in India.

There used to be a flourishing cottage-industry turning out bell-metal utensils, but this is now dying out.

There is a curious and unfortunate tendency in Assam which causes any social progress of a caste or community to be accompanied by a growing aversion to manual work. This attitude, carried a step further, underlies the serious and growing problem of middle-class unemployment, caused chiefly by the glorification of educational attainments of doubtful value to the detriment of manual and even business employments. A mass of matriculates and graduates competes in a limited market for Government and 'white-collar' jobs while the foreigner with no such aspirations waxes fat on the resources of the country.

Hydro-electricity. Assam's rich resources have not yet been properly surveyed. But their existence is a fact, and for their intensive development the Province holds a trump card in its splendid hydro-electric possibilities. Assam is ideally situated for this: it is in the shape of an inverted E, the strokes being represented by mountains down whose sides pour thousands of horse-power of potential hydro-electricity which could serve industries in the two valleys, each traversed by railways and cheap river-transport. Extensive grid-systems supplying electric power at half-an-anna a unit could bring prosperity and happiness to the villages, whose existing cottage-industries are in a doubtful productive state, and where many other forms of small industry could be initiated or developed. An irrigation expert (Sir William Stampe) has even suggested the practicability of controlling the wasteful water distribution of the Surma Valley by electrical pumping of surplus water from the *bheels* on to the higher lands, thus vastly improving at a stroke the cultivation on both. There are also numerous possibilities of electrifying the existing big industries and starting

important new ones, such as chemical industries exploiting the large limestone deposits, a big fertilizer industry based on the fixation of atmospheric nitrogen, coal-mining and the extraction of coal derivatives on a large scale, paper mills, gunpowder works, china, pottery and glass factories, plastic works and a number of other industries for which Assam possesses the raw materials.

It is not too much to say that Assam possesses here a treasure of inestimable worth: to profit by it, however, it is necessary to break the deadlock of industrialists declining to come to Assam owing to the absence of hydro-electric power, and Government being naturally unwilling to undertake its initiation because there are few industries. Bold planning is needed.

Communications. The two main rivers, the Brahmaputra and the Surma, are the primordial arteries of the country, and still carry tea and other heavy goods down to Calcutta. The railways were built largely as a result of the opening-up of the country by the tea industry. They are all metre-gauge, the main lines running along the two valleys and having a number of short feeder lines. The Brahmaputra Valley system joins the broad-gauge of Bengal at Parbatipur. There is a river-crossing by steam ferry at Amingaon-Pandu, though the bridging of the Brahmaputra there or near Goalpara lower down has several times been mooted. This system is joined at Lumding by the Surma Valley system, which runs through the picturesque hill-section in the North Cachar Hills.

Road-making in Assam is difficult owing to the torrential monsoon rainfall, and the numerous hill rivers which rise suddenly and sweep away bridges. The trunk roads in the two valleys have been greatly improved as a result of the war, that of the Brahmaputra Valley now being surfaced for most of its length. A first-class road runs over the Shillong plateau from Gauhati to Sylhet via the capital, connecting the two valleys, and there is a good road from the railhead at Dimapur through Kohima to Manipur State. Apart from these and short branches serving administrative headquarters and tea areas, the roads of Assam are mere tracks often disappearing in the monsoon. It is interesting to note that carts apparently were not used in upper Assam

until the nineteenth century. The Ahom kings of Assam, however, built a number of long straight roads raised on embankments, some of which are still used. The building of roads through to Burma is described in the section on 'Assam and the War'. In this connexion it may be remarked that as long ago as 1896 the Hukawng Valley was surveyed for a railway over the Patkoi Range into Burma, which it was estimated would cost Rs. 383 lakhs for a length of 284 miles. (The Stilwell Road is stated to have cost ten times this amount.)

Many fine aerodromes have been built in Assam during the war at vast cost, and it is hoped that some of these may be utilized later for civil air services.

The Tea Industry

The great development of Assam which has taken place during the last hundred years has been practically entirely due to its most important industry—tea. 'As China is the classic tea country, Assam, in the modern way, may be termed the romantic.'

First mention of tea in Assam came in 1815 and at the end of the first Burmese war, C. A. Bruce put out the first garden in Assam. The first tea was dispatched to Calcutta in 1836, and to England in 1838, where it sold at 20 shillings a pound. The first tea companies were formed in 1839, but they made a very slow start, due mostly to labour difficulties—a great deal of the labour first used was Chinese and Indian labour too was unsatisfactory. There was no local labour then as now, except for the hillmen who would come down from the hills in the cold weather and help to clear new sites, but not take part in the actual cultivation. In 1881 came the formation of the Indian Tea Association in Calcutta to promote the common interests of the various companies and in 1903 the Indian Tea Cess Act was passed, which enabled the Customs Department to collect a levy of 2 annas for every 100 lb. of tea manufactured. This money is utilized by the Cess Committee in expanding exports. In 1931-2 nearly £100,000 was collected from a cess of 6 annas per lb. The scientific side of the industry is looked after by a well-staffed and well-equipped laboratory at Tocklai near Jorhat. In 1841 the Assam Company had 2,638 acres under tea. In 1941 the total acreage under tea

in Assam was 431,000 acres and there were approximately 1,000 gardens. In 1941 the tea output of Assam was 289,000,000 lb.

One of the greatest difficulties the tea industry in Assam has to contend with is the finding of labour. There is no local labour for the tea-gardens—the Assamese villager having a sufficiency of fertile land for his own needs—and as a result it has to be imported from outside.

The Assam Labour Board was created in 1915 to supervise the recruiting of labour, and in 1917 the various planting associations connected with the supply of labour were amalgamated under the Tea Districts' Labour Association. Labourers recruited by the T.D.L.A. mostly come from Chota Nagpur and Madras. Women, too, are used greatly in the industry for plucking, and the children join in as well.

Labour on the whole is contented and well-run. The Government of Assam takes a keen interest in the industry, and periodical visits by medical officers and district magistrates to the various estates ensure that the many laws regarding the treatment of labour by the industry are observed.

Something like 1½ million foreign labourers are dependent on the tea industry in Assam.

The majority of the tea-estates are European-owned and established with capital from abroad, but there are a number of efficiently-operated Indian concerns.

The tea industry helped very considerably during the war in the East particularly in the improvement of communications and in the opening of new roads to Burma, as also in the evacuation of refugees in 1942.

The Administration

Assam when the British took over was a kingdom. The king was the head of the administration, but he was assisted by three great Counsellors of State, the Gohains. The Gohains were in charge of provinces and also acted in an advisory capacity to the king, particularly in matters of internal and foreign policy. As the kingdom grew, other Governors had to be appointed and some of the duties of the sovereign delegated to them. Thus grew up a system of district administration. The king also had

other important officers of state. There was the Commander of the Royal Boats; the Nyaya-sodha Phukan was in charge of the administration of justice; the Nausallya Phukan was the Chief Naval Commander; the Deoliya Phukan looked after the temples; and there were officers in charge of gunpowder factories, the royal wardrobe, the queens' affairs and so on.

There were also subordinate state officials, who were employed as arbitrators, superintendents of works, Katakis who conducted diplomatic relations with the hill-tribes and foreign courts, writers, and the Dalais who read the omens and determined auspicious days. Excepting the nobility, their slaves, and the priesthood, all the male population between 15 and 50 was liable to render compulsory service to the State. These men were carefully organized with a regular hierarchy of officers. Exemption from service could be purchased. Each *paik*, or foot-soldier, was allowed about three acres of land tax-free for his services. He received land for house and garden, and for this he paid house or poll tax of a rupee a year, except in one district where the tax was on the hearth. If he cleared more land he had to pay a tax of two rupees for every three acres. Artisans were taxed at a slightly higher rate. The chief nobles cultivated their private estates with the aid of retainers and slaves. 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' was the system of justice in criminal cases, though in civil matters Hindu law was generally used. The Ahoms had on the whole a fairly efficient system of administration when the British took over.

Assam is divided into three parts for the purposes of administration under the Government of India Act of 1935. The plains are administered directly by the Chief Minister and a Cabinet which is democratically elected by the people, and the normal apparatus of district administration obtains as in the rest of British India. The hills, however, are given different treatment; the Garo Hills, the Mikir Hills and the Khasia and Jaintia Hills are known as the Partially Excluded Areas, and their administration is a joint charge between the Cabinet and the Governor. The Frontier Tracts, the Naga Hills, the Lushai Hills and the North Cachar Hills are Excluded Areas and are administered directly by the Governor, the Ministry having no say in their

administration except in providing the funds required by the Governor.

There are in addition the petty Khasi States and the State of Manipur which, though lying in Assam geographically, are nevertheless independent Indian States: for them the Governor of Assam is Agent to the Crown Representative. There are other areas on the Burma, Tibetan and Bhutan frontiers which are known as the Tribal Areas; these again are the specific charge of the Governor as Agent to the Governor-General.

The Legislature, as described below, is bicameral. The Legislative Council (Upper House) is a permanent body not subject to dissolution, but one-third of its members are to resign every year. The Assembly unless sooner dissolved continues for five years. Assam also has four seats in the Central Legislative Assembly and one in the Council of State.

Evolution of Self-government

In 1874 the districts which now form the Province of Assam were separated from Bengal and formed into a Chief Commissionership with headquarters at Shillong. In 1905 Assam had its first experience of a Legislative Council as part of the short-lived Province of East Bengal and Assam, under a Lieutenant-Governor with headquarters at Dacca. In 1911 the Province was reconstituted in its present form with a Legislature of its own (under the Morley-Minto reforms). As a result of the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms, in 1921 Assam became a Governor's Province, and was given an expanded Legislative Council and a dyarchical form of government with two Executive Councillors administering 'reserved' subjects, and two Ministers responsible to the Legislature handling those classed as 'transferred'.

The modern political history of the Province dates from 1937, when the new constitution framed under the Government of India Act of 1935 was promulgated, giving autonomy to the provinces of India. Assam was given a bicameral Legislature, against the recommendation of the ci-devant Government, and it may be noted that this provision was enforced when the Government of India Bill was actually in the House of Lords.

The first Ministry under the new constitution was formed in

April 1937 by Sir Muhammad Saadulla, with five Ministers. Sir Muhammad has been at the head of affairs for the greater part of the nine years of the present constitution; a Member of Council from 1912 to 1921 under the Morley-Minto regime, and both Minister and Executive Councillor under Dyarchy, he has held nearly all the portfolios in turn at one time or another.

The Saadulla Ministry was reshuffled at the budget session of 1938, the Ministers being increased to six.

In September 1938, the Ministry resigned as a result of some of its followers crossing the House. A Congress Coalition Government of eight members (Congress and Independent) was formed by Mr Gopinath Bardoloi and held office till November 1939, when, in common with other Congress Governments, it resigned over the war issue.

It was succeeded by a new Saadulla Ministry of ten, which continued in power till December 1941, when, following the resignation of Mr Rohini Kumar Choudhury, and other defections, it went out of office. The then Governor, Sir Robert Reid, being unable to call on any alternative administration which would be both stable and solidly behind the war-effort, invoked Section 93 of the Government of India Act, and for nearly a year Assam was without a Ministry.

Sir Muhammad Saadulla again took office in November 1942 with ten Ministers, having in the meantime strengthened his position in the House. This Ministry lasted till the budget session of 1945, when it had to be reconstituted as a Coalition Ministry including five non-Congress nominees of Congress.

The Assembly was dissolved on 1 October 1945 preparatory to the holding of fresh general elections. The new House returned in January 1946 was far more homogeneous than the old—Congress winning 58 seats, the Muslim League 31, and the remaining small parties only 19. Congress, having a substantial working majority, formed a new Ministry, again under Mr Gopinath Bardoloi, prior to the budget session of 1946.

From the population figures for the two chief communities given on page 4, it will be apparent that, with the present tendency of politics to run on strictly communal lines, the Congress party can count on having a serviceable majority in

the House, though previous Governments have generally been loose coalitions.

It is of interest to note here that Assam has had one woman Minister, Miss Mavis Dunn (a Khasi lady).

Assam's Upper House (which at present has a woman President) has 22 members (18 elected and 4 nominated). The Legislative Assembly has 108 (including the Speaker), divided into the following constituencies: General (Hindu), 47 seats (including 7 reserved for Scheduled Castes); Mohammedan, 34; Women, 1; European, 1; Indian Christian, 1; Backward and Tribal Areas, 9; Planting, 9; Commerce and Industry, 2; Labour, 4.

During the nine years since 1937 the reformed Legislature has passed sixty-eight Acts. Amongst the most important of these may be mentioned the tenancy legislation aimed at improving the lot of the peasant in the permanently-settled districts of Sylhet and Goalpara; and a number of new taxation Acts, of which the Assam Agricultural Income-Tax Bill of 1939 (bringing an increased revenue of about Rs. 25 lakhs) was the most important and controversial. This latter, having been rejected by the Council after being passed by the Assembly, led to the first and only instance in Assam of a joint session of both Houses, at which the Bill was finally enacted in virtually its original form.

Before leaving this brief account of Assam's recent political history, reference should be made to the Province's financial position. Its present revenue is less than Rs. 4 crores; this is comparable with the revenue of Calcutta Corporation, and compares but poorly with its neighbouring province Bengal which, of roughly equal area, has a revenue (excluding Calcutta) of some Rs. 16 crores. The result is that Assam is very seriously handicapped on the financial side in effecting those improvements and developments which are so much needed and desired. The Province for example has as yet no High Court, University, or Engineering or Medical College of its own. It cannot afford them.

In this matter Assam feels that it has been very unfairly treated in the financial settlement accompanying the new constitution. Lord Eustace Percy's Federal Finance Committee recommended an annual subvention of Rs. 65 lakhs from the

Centre to enable the Province to run on an even keel, though this was less than Assam had asked for. In the subsequent settlement based on Sir Otto Niemeyer's recommendations, however, the Province found itself allotted only a niggardly Rs. 30 lakhs. This is felt particularly keenly as the same settlement awarded a subvention of as much as Rs. 1 crore to the other frontier province of India, the North-West Frontier Province.

The considerable revenues which Assam might be expected to draw from its two main industries, also, have proved largely chimerical. The provincial rebate on the income-tax paid on the profits made by tea companies with their Managing Agents in Calcutta—there are no Managing Agents in Assam—goes almost entirely to Bengal. Similarly, though Assam gets some Rs. 10 lakhs as royalty on crude oil produced in the Assam oilfields, the excise duty on the petrol (about Rs. 2 crores) goes entirely to Central revenues.

This situation cannot be regarded as in any way satisfactory.

Assam and the War

It is very little known even in India what part Assam played in World War II, and that it was in Assam that the Japanese suffered their first major defeat in south-east Asia.

Prior to 1941 the rest of India hardly realized the existence of this remote province. The north-west, with its problems and its defences, was familiar: but it was the north-east frontier that had to bear the brunt of the attack when it came—the north-east with its undeveloped resources, its poor communications and its lack of artificial fortifications. Nevertheless Assam rose to the occasion, and it was the people of Assam, both of the hills and the plains, who, co-operating with the army and serving both inside and outside it, first held the Japanese in 1942 and later on, when they had invaded India, drove them back across the frontier of Burma, a smashed army which was still running when the first atomic bomb burst and the Japanese sued for peace.

Assam was not prepared for defence when the war came to the Province; as in the past, the hills on the Burma border and the Himalayas in the north were looked on as a natural barrier which could hold up any enemy. These hills had, however,

been penetrated by armies before—by the Ahoms, the Burmese, and even earlier by the Bodo peoples. In 1940 the possibility of air attacks on Assam was realized and the first airfield construction started. With the declaration of war by Japan in December 1941, and the almost immediate invasion of Burma, steps were taken to augment A.R.P. measures (begun in November 1940) and to place the Province on a war footing. Shortly afterwards the widening and extension of the Manipur Road commenced, and later on it became necessary to start the construction of two other roads from Ledo—one to go up the Dihang Valley to the Chaukan Pass and so to Fort Hertz *en route* to China, and the other a 'jeep road' to Shingbwiyang in the Hukawng Valley. Conjunctly it was decided to increase very considerably the number of airfields in the Province, and shortly before this, at the suggestion of the then Premier of Assam, Sir Muhammad Saadulla, to raise an Assam Regiment. Prior to this, recruitment had been only to the navy, the merchant marine and the hospital corps. At the same time, as casual and technical labour was being heavily recruited for construction works, and as recruitment continued for the armed branches of the services, heavy calls were also being made for additional police personnel and men for A.R.P. (Between the years 1941 and 1944 the Assam Police doubled its strength from 4,700 to 9,500 men, and 3,000 men were recruited to Civil Defence.)

In 1942 Assam had much to do. Through the Province during that year passed a stream of more than 200,000 refugees, and not only had they to be helped in the Province itself but helping hands had to be stretched forward into Burma. Through Assam came the exodus of the Burma Army and more than 6,000 Chinese troops. Porters were urgently needed to help extricate the refugees in addition to assisting tea-garden labour on the roads, and some 22,000 porters were recruited from the hills of the Province by the Civil Porter Corps.

Hardly had the stream from the east begun to thin when a new 'invasion' started, this time from the west, as hundreds of thousands of British, Indian, African and American troops started to move in. Here again the Province had its difficulties—porters who had carried forward supplies for refugees

now had to carry forward supplies for the army, and that not always for regular troops, for the hill-tribes on the border were being banded into guerrilla and irregular forces to serve as sources of intelligence and to work behind the enemy lines should the latter manage to filter through the hills into the Assam plains. It was also about this time that the political upheaval took place and a great additional burden was thrown on the administration, particularly on the police: but it was shared by the ordinary villagers who, under the guidance of Government, formed Village Defence Parties to guard the railway lines and to assist the overworked police in the maintenance of law and order. No less than 100,000 unpaid volunteers participated in this possibly unique organization, a tribute to which was recently paid by Major-General Ranking, 202 Area Commander, who referred to 'the excellent work . . . done by these parties in the past two-and-a-half years; their energy and vigilance has done much to keep intact the all-important railway lines-of-communication passing through Assam'. The Voluntary Civic Guard also had much to do with maintaining the steadiness of the population, as likewise did the bulletins and activities of the new and energetic Publicity Department of the Government. The troops coming into the Province had to be fed, and local shortages of all classes of fresh food were borne cheerfully by the civilian population. With these shortages came price-increases, but the people under the stimulation of a 'Grow More Food Campaign' improved the supply of food in the Province in 1943 by 15 per cent in pulses and 6 per cent in rices.

In the neighbouring province of Bengal came famine, and in the midst of all its other trials Assam was called upon not only to export quantities of food to Bengal but to set up camps and assist a stream of starving refugees.

At the end of 1943 came a slight breathing-space. The refugee problem was negligible; seven large airfields and four fighter strips[1] had been constructed, and vast quantities of supplies were on their way to China by air (including fuel for General

[1] By the end of the war these had been increased to some twenty-five airfields in addition to a number of fair-weather strips.

Doolittle's planes for refuelling after the first raid on Tokyo); the main railway-line had been taken over by a large American organization, though the Indian and British staff continued to serve to capacity; the new roads were progressing well. The Assam Regiment had raised its 2nd Battalion and the 1st Battalion had seen service in Manipur. The food situation had improved, and the possibility of famine in Assam had receded again into the background. Upper Assam had suffered some air raids and the population had stood firm; and finally the tea-gardens had made a good crop and had, despite great transport difficulties, succeeded in getting the greater portion well on the way.

In March 1944 came the next great trial, one of very great disappointment to a harassed province. The people of Assam had thought that by their supreme effort in support of the army the enemy had finally been held, and that all the road-building and pushing forward of supplies would mean perhaps an early Allied invasion and reconquest of Burma; but by April the Japanese had surrounded the Manipur plain and were attacking hard the small garrison of Kohima. The Assam Regiment and the Assam Rifles were the first to take on the invading Japanese in the Naga Hills, holding them up and thereby gaining the few days' respite needed to get the British 2nd Division into position. The Nagas also did their share, and, to quote one only of the many tributes paid them by the army, 'without the intelligence collected through the tribesmen . . . we should not have achieved the success which we have.'

There had been expectation that some signs of panic might occur in Assam, and plans had been drawn up to control a mass evacuation; there was no panic, and movement out of the Province was confined to the non-indigenous population. In the invaded areas of the Naga Hills and Manipur, the villagers merely took to the fields, and when it was all over returned to rebuild their homes. Help in this matter was gratuitously provided by Government through the Assam Relief Measures Organization.

Mention of the part played by the women of Assam, Indian and European, during the war, should not be omitted. By

their voluntary work in the Red Cross, W.V.S., and other activities, they greatly contributed to the comfort and morale of the fighting troops. Many of them also served in the W.A.C.(I).

The War has had what will prove to be great and lasting effect on the political, social and economic life of the people. Certain taboos are disappearing; roads have vastly improved; great numbers of additional buildings are now available for civilian use; a regiment which has been tried in the field has been permanently formed; numbers of the population have been trained in technical trades; and a higher standard of living has been set than the Province has ever known before.

Assam has borne the invasion of friend and foe in a manner which must redound to its credit for all time.

The Future

Assam has for the past century been a happy, if under-developed, province. Relations between the British and the inhabitants of the country have been cordial (partly owing to the circumstances in which the former came to occupy the country); and the various peoples have lived together in amity, though the last few decades have unfortunately seen increasing political and social stress between the indigenous inhabitants of the Assam Valley and the recent immigrants from eastern Bengal who fail to assimilate the customs and language of the former. The future of Assam will depend largely on how this major problem is tackled. Tied up with this problem of assimilation is the necessity for a progressive policy with regard to the hill-peoples, who live on what has been called by Sir Olaf Caroe the 'Mongolian Fringe'. The plains and the hills must eventually mix, but the backward tribes must be given an opportunity of developing in their own way until they are fit to take their place on a level with the peoples of the plains and not, as has happened in the United States, Australia and elsewhere, come into the modern world on the very lowest rung of the social ladder.

The liquidation of the Permanent Settlement, where it exists, has been agreed on all hands to be desirable, and where Bengal is showing the way Assam may follow.

A tentative five-year reconstruction plan has been sketched out

under which Rs. 26½ crores will be spent on communication and nation-building departments. Aviation is a Central subject, but it is hoped that Assam's needs in this respect will not be overlooked. The Publicity Department has proposed an interesting contribution in the form of Village Community Centres grouped round Rural Halls to form the co-ordinating foci of all rural reconstruction and welfare.

The nationalization of certain industries has recently been proposed by the Government.

The services of a Special Officer have been sanctioned for a year to investigate hydro-electric possibilities, and it is to be hoped that developments here will be pushed on with vigour, or Assam may find itself left behind in the race to establish industries: other provinces are already busy, Madras, for instance, being about to spend Rs. 11 crores on the development of electric power in the immediate future.

The progress of the Province in education, industry, power development and other directions is dependent to a considerable extent on a satisfactory revision of the financial settlement with the Centre: this has been referred to above, and its importance to Assam is fundamental.

It seems to the writers that economically the people of Assam stand at the parting of the ways: with the great possibilities of development of the Province's resources in the coming years, they must decide whether they will take their share in its business and industry, or pursue the will-o'-the-wisp of barren degrees and petty gentility, while outsiders grasp the fruits that should be theirs. Political power alone will not protect them: behind the specious excitements of politics loom the inexorable facts of economics, which have raised nations to greatness and plunged them to their fall.

Perhaps it is not too fanciful to suggest that if its needs and possibilities are appreciated and tackled with a will, Assam will live to be known, not as the Country of the Golden Gardens, but as the Country of the Garden Cities.

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