



FOLKLORE OF ASSAM

JOGESH DAS

8.0954162

AS/F P05-CL

P06815

Various racial groups living in close proximity and contributing to intricate social and cultural patterns have made Assam a land of great diversity. Its topography, a mixture of hills and plains, is equally varied. It has a rich and varied tradition of art, folk dance and oral literature, and celebrates through out the year many fairs and festivals, the best known of which is Bihu. Its tribal textile designs, spear motifs and decorative articles are well known for their uniqueness. The book attempts to present a comprehensive picture of the vast treasure of folklore of this important North-Eastern Indian State.

Jogesh Das has been a journalist and is the author of four collections of short stories and eight novels in Asamiya. He has also edited the *Assam Sahitya Sabha Patrika* and the *Prahari* for two years.



Rs 35.00

ISBN 81-237-0145-4

NATIONAL BOOK TRUST, INDIA

Folklore of India

FOLKLORE OF ASSAM

JOGESH DAS



221
Call No.
Acc. No.



NATIONAL BOOK TRUST, INDIA

FOLKLORE OF ASSAM



JOGESH DAS

Call No. 398.095 416 2
Acc. No. 6815

ISBN 81-237-0145-4

First Edition 1972

Fourth Reprint 1999 (*Saka 1920*)

Fifth Reprint 2005 (*Saka 1927*)

© Jogesh Das, 1972

Rs 35.00

Published by the Director, National Book Trust, India
A-5 Green Park, New Delhi-110 016

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For helping me in various ways in the preparation of the book, my grateful thanks are due to the late Hem Barua, ex-M.P. and well-known writer; Sri Pradip Chaliha, Secretary, Lalit Kala Akademi, Assam; Dr. Birendra Nath Datta; Prof. Nanda Talukdar; Prof. Nagen Saikia; Prof. Syed Abdul Malik M.P. and well-known writer; Sri Rudra Barua, Director, Cultural Affairs, Assam, Sri Rosheswar Saikia Bayan, Principal Sangit Satra, Guwahati, Sri Chakra Barua; Sri Umesh Deka; Sri M. Barman and many other friends.

JOGESH DAS

CONTENTS

<i>Chapter</i>		<i>Page</i>
1	The Region and the People	1
2	Myths and Mythology	22
3	Religion and Magic	40
4	Customs and Traditions	61
5	Fairs and Festivals	79
6	Oral Literature	100
7	Folk Music and Dance	125
	INDEX	138

THE REGION AND THE PEOPLE

WHAT DOES an Assamese look like? For that matter, what does an Indian look like? Both questions are difficult to answer precisely. There cannot be a set formula. Almost all racial elements of the world are scattered over the Indian sub-continent. The people of India represent all the broad divisions of *Homo Sapiens*. Yet it is not very difficult to see that a particular division of races dominates in any one of the various regions. The *Vishnu* and *Markandeya Puranas* sum up this division fairly well when they say: "According to the division of the world, India is in the centre with Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras; to the east are the Kiratas and to the west the Yavanas." In the same way, it is easily recognised that the Caucasian races of Nordic Aryans and Mediterranean Dravidians predominate in the populations of the north and the south, respectively; and the Mongoloids predominate in the east which comprises Assam, Arunachal Pradesh (NEFA), Nagaland and Manipur.

This, however, does not mean that there are no other racial elements among each of these broad divisions. For example, the Negroids have intermixed with the Proto-Australoids; when the Aryans were spreading from western Punjab to northern Bihar,

a racial fusion of the speakers of Aryan, Dravidian and Austric languages was taking place. According to Edward Gait: "In Assam (excluding the Surma Valley) and north-east Bengal, the Dravidian type has, to a great extent, been replaced by the Mongolian, while in the Surma Valley and the rest of Bengal a mixture of races has taken place in which the recognisable Mongolian element diminishes towards the west and disappears altogether before Bihar is reached."

So, there has been racial intermixture among the population of Assam. The Mongoloid pressure is heavy because of the large number of tribes of this racial stock. Their physical features are described as "a short head, a broad nose, a flat and comparatively hairless face, a short but muscular figure and a yellow skin". But there are numerous other races also. Traces of the Negroids are to be found among the Nagas as among some South Indian tribes, says Dr. S. K. Chatterji. The Khasis who speak an Austric language might have picked up their speech from some Proto-Australoid race before they migrated to the Assam region. The Kaibartas, a scheduled caste of Assam, are held by some to be "of obvious Dravidian origin" and the Dravidians are said to be distinguished by "a long head, large and dark eyes, a fairly strong beard, a black or nearly black colour, and a very broad nose, depressed at the base, but not so as to make the face look flat". Then there are the Aryans, with a long head, tall and well-built, having a fine, long and prominent nose, and a fair complexion, who came to Assam from across Bihar and Bengal. All these peculiarities of physiognomy one will encounter in Assam.

There is no evidence to show that any race of man evolved itself in the whole of the Indian sub-continent. Any ancient Indian race or tribe that settled here had come from across the frontiers, eastern or western. To Assam also wave after wave of tribes and races used to migrate in the remote past, not recorded in history. The Negroids of the eolithic stage of pre-history, traces of whom

are found among the Nagas, were perhaps the first to come. Naga tribes, of course, are Mongoloids who came much later; they might have absorbed some blood of the Negroids of much earlier times. The next race to come to India are the Proto-Australoids of the palaeolithic stage of culture. The Khasis and Jaintias of Meghalaya, like the Kols and Mundas of central India, speak Austric languages belonging to the Proto-Australoids. The Khasis and Jaintias (the Syntengs), again, are Mongoloid by race who had adopted in the remote past Austric (Mon-Khmer) languages before or after they came to Meghalaya. Next in order of time to come were the Mediterraneans who spoke Dravidian languages. Some people assume that the Kaibartas, mentioned above, and the Banias of Assam are descendants of the Dravidian speakers who belonged to a very high stage of civilization, to judge from the finds of Harappa and Mohen-jo-Daro. This would suggest that their time of dispersion from their northern homeland was before 1500 B.C. about the time of Aryan invasion from the north-west.

The Aryans took several centuries to spread eastwards along the Ganga Valley. They are said to have reached northern Bihar only by 700 B.C. As such they must have come to Assam only after that. Anyway, there is evidence in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, estimated to have been written between 500 B.C. and 400 A.D., to show that there were contacts between the Aryans and the Mongoloids. The *Ramayana* even mentions that the kingdom of *Pragjyotisha*, an ancient name of Assam, was founded by Amurta-rajah whose grandson Viswamitra performed his austerities on the banks of the Kausika, probably modern Kosi. Both the epics describe the *Kiratas*, Mongoloid people of Assam, as "shining like gold, handsome, capable warriors and ferocious-looking people".

It is difficult to ascertain when the first settlers of Mongoloids actually came to Assam. But it can certainly be said that when the

basis of Hindu culture was being laid by Aryan, Austric and Dravidian peoples in the rest of India, the Mongoloids made their presence felt in the north-east region. So their arrival in Assam might have been during the time when the Aryans were coming from the north-west after 1500 B.C. or some time later. They are reputed to have made large-scale movements from their original homeland in western China in the first millennium B.C. But it is difficult to ascertain when they reached the territories on either side of the Brahmaputra. From the point of their dispersion, they traversed and spread to Thailand, Indo-China, Burma and the long Himalayan tract from Tibet to distant Ladakh.

Numerous Mongoloid races inhabit the hills and plains of Assam. Also they are scattered all over Arunachal Pradesh (NEFA), Nagaland and Meghalaya. (NEFA was constitutionally a part of Assam, but on 20th January 1972, by the North Eastern Act of 1971, it was turned into a Union Territory named Arunachal Pradesh which was subsequently made into a full-fledged State). A brief survey will enable us to have an idea of their place in the intricate cultural pattern of the region. The Nagas now have their own State, Nagaland, formed in 1960 with the former Naga Hills district of Assam and the Tuensang Division of the then NEFA (now Arunachal). In the Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh live two Naga tribes which have been maintaining close relations with the neighbouring plains district of Dibrugarh in Assam. These are the Noctes with some 12,000 souls and the Wanchos with about 20,000 people. Meghalaya was made a new State with two other districts of Assam, viz, Khasi and Jaintia Hills and the Garo hills. With five districts (1981) Meghalaya is spread out in a region of about 22,429 Sq. Km. with a population of a little over 13,36,000 (1981). The Mikirs, (they prefer to call themselves Karbi) who live in the Karbi Anglong (formerly the Mikir Hills) district of Assam, have a population of about 3,79,310 (Census 1971). Linguistically, between the Kukis and the Nagas, writes Dr. S. K. Chatterji, "the Mikirs appear to be a gifted people, with an imaginative turn of mind, as is noticeable in some of their folk-tales."

The bodos or Boros are, by far, the most noteworthy Mongoloid people in eastern India. In Assam they number about 6,10,500 (Census, 1971), but their compatriots have spread far and wide to the northern regions of Bengal and Bihar, to Tripura where as the Tipra tribe they founded the State, to Sylhet and Mymensing in east Bengal. They might have spread further to Comilla and Noakhali also. The Bodo language falls under the Tibeto-Burman sub-family of the Sino-Tibetan languages. It has greatly influenced the Assamese language in its development. The Bodo language has its ramifications in the Mech, Rabha, Garo and Kachari languages spoken by tribes bearing the same names in Assam. These people are scattered all over the plains of the Brahmaputra Valley and also in the North Cachar Hills district to the south and in the Garo Hills district to the west. It is said that as a Mongoloid race the Bodos first settled in the Brahmaputra Valley and then slowly spread to various other places, far and near, mentioned above. That they did so is evidenced by the many names of the Valley which they are supposed to have given it. The late Bishnu Prasad Rabha, eminent Assamese artist, who belonged to the Bodos and studied them very closely and extensively, has this to suggest: the word *Brahmaputra* is, in fact, an Arya-nised or Sanskritised form of a Bodo expression *bhullung buthur*, meaning a "great river of bubbling waters". He also suggests that the great goddess Kamakhya originally was the *Kamakhe* or *Kamalakhi* of a Mongoloid race. The prefix *di*, meaning water, in river-names, is supposed to be a Bodo contribution as in Disang, Dikhau, Dibru, Digaru, Dibang, Dihang, all well-known tributaries of the Brahmaputra. The Assamese people use the word *Luit* for *Brahmaputra* in poetry and songs and Bishnu Prasad Rabha again suggests that it is only a corrupt form of Bodo expression like *laoti*, *tilao* and *dilao*.

The Mizos or Lushais of Mizoram, formerly a district of the State, numbering about 4,94,000 a community of very artistic

people, with a high percentage of literacy are migrants from the Chin Hills and speak a Kuki-Chin tongue of the Tibeto-Burman sub-family of the Sino-Tibetan languages. The Lalungs are another Mongoloid group who live in the Nowgong district. But a recent account likens their dialect to that of the Syntengs or Jaintias from whom they believe they have descended. The Khasi-Jaintia Hills are adjacent to the area inhabited by the Lalungs.

The Chutiyas, a tribe later Hinduised and speaking a Bodo tongue, are mainly confined to the extreme north-east of the State, above the Subansiri river and in the Sadiya area just below the Arunachal (NEFA) hills. They have a very chequered history with a dynasty of their own but were finally completely routed by the Ahoms, a powerful Mongoloid race which ruled Assam for nearly seven centuries without a break. The Chutiyas were and still are to a certain extent, worshippers of Goddess *Kechaikhati* (Flesh-eater), a form of the Great Mother Goddess. Under Brahmanical influence they built up a history tracing the origin of their kings to mythical times. Since the loss of their kingdom, they have mixed with other races and are now scattered over a large area in the districts of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang.

The Miris, or Mishings, as they prefer to describe themselves, are another colourful Mongoloid tribe who, like the Chutiyas, inhabit the riverine areas of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang districts. Originally, they were probably with the Tibeto-Burman-speaking tribes which, trekking down from the point of dispersion, came to the sub-Himalayan hills to the north of the Brahmaputra and were among the Akas, Abors or Adis, and Mishmis of Arunachal Pradesh. Tarun Chandra Pamegam, a Mishing writer, conjectures that they are descendants of two Abor tribes—the Miyongs and the Damras—and that they came down to the plains only when the Chutiyas were overpowered by the Ahoms. Converted to Hinduism, the Mishings are well known for highly moving folk-songs and gay dances.

The Koches, whose dynasties ruled in north Bengal and west

Assamese till the 17th century, are described as Western Bodos of Mongoloid stock as against the Eastern Bodos, the Chutiyas and the Kacharis. Some people feel that Koches are of a Dravidian origin, though they bear clear Mongoloid physiognomy. It may be that they have an admixture of both. They have adopted Hinduism and the Assamese language. Their great king Naranarayana and his conqueror-brother Chilarai were enthusiastic patrons of the great Vaishnava preacher, Sri Sankardeva (1449-1569). The Koches are scattered all over the Brahmaputra Valley. In Goalpara district to the west they call themselves Rajvansis, out of pride, perhaps, to remind themselves that they were once a ruling race. The State of Cooch-Bihar, their original seat of administration, now in West Bengal, is not very far from their present habitation.

The Morans or Matakas, who spoke a Bodo speech but later adopted Assamese, are another Mongoloid people who ruled in the extreme east prior to the Ahoms. They were conquered by the Ahoms who annexed their kingdom and influenced them in various ways. A sect of the Vaishnavas, they once revolted in the 18th century against the Ahoms and even occupied the throne for a short while. They are largely concentrated in the easternmost parts of Lakhimpur district, in the territory lying between Dibrugarh and Saikhowaghat, south of the Brahmaputra, near Sadiya. The Morans are to be found in parts of the districts of Darrang and Sibsagar also, like the Chutiyas and the Mishings.

The Ahoms are the only Mongoloid race whose arrival in Assam is historically recorded. This is because they came very late, viz., in 1228 A.D., and they recorded their own activities in the chronicles called *Buranjis*, meaning "store-house of unknown things". They are also distinguished in many other ways. After the Bodos, they are the only people who made their influence felt far and wide for many centuries at a stretch. Unlike other Mongoloid peoples, the Ahoms spoke Chinese-Siamese. They did not push south-

wards like others from the original point of dispersion in western China, but they moved from the hills of upper Burma and western Yunnan where they had styled themselves as Shans and established small states amongst which the paramount one was known to the Manipuris as Pong. But the Ahoms prefer to describe themselves as Tai. From upper Burma a band of Tai warriors, some 9,000 strong, under the leadership of Sukapha, were trekking along the Patkai Range in the Naga country in early 13th century. It took them some thirteen years from 1215 to 1228 A.D. to emerge in the plains of Sibsagar through Namrup. After drifting for years in search of a suitable spot for settlement, Sukapha at last built a city at Charaideo, some distance from the present sub-divisional town of Sibsagar in 1253 A.D. He and his warriors during their wanderings in the plains subjugated many an early tribe like the Morans and the Barahis. That was the beginning of a long dynasty of kings who by and by proceeded to subjugate other early rulers and chieftains and established a vast empire in almost the whole of the Brahmaputra Valley, a united kingdom never realised before. On either side of the Brahmaputra, their frontiers touched Cooch-Bihar in the west and Cachar in the south, while maintaining friendly relations with chieftains settled in the hills. "This was rendered possible," to quote Hem Barua, "because of the effective administrative apparatus they built up both for war and for peace." They brought the history of Assam to modern times in 1826 A.D. when the British took over from the Burmese who had invaded Assam thrice in quick succession and brought untold destruction to man and property and created a terrible havoc in the mind of the population. The Ahoms, though scattered all over the Valley in large numbers, are concentrated in Sibsagar district, the seat of their administration.

Assam, the present name of the State, is in all probability an Ahom contribution. The Assamese people call their State *Asam* and their language and the people *Asamiya*. *Asama* in Sanskrit

means unequal or unrivalled, which is supposed to allude to the unequal prowess of the Ahoms; or it may also mean the uneven topography of the land full of hills and rivers; at the same time, it may refer to its unequal scenic grandeur. Dr. B. K. Kakati has tried to show that the word *Asam* used in the old Assamese writings might, in fact, have been derived from a Tai or Ahom word *Cham*, meaning "to be defeated"; the Assamese prefix *A* to it makes it *Acham*, meaning "undefeated" or "conquerors". *Cham* or *Sam* may again have something to do with *Shan*, a name of the Tai or Ahom people. Dr. Kakati writes: "It seems curious that while the Shan invaders called themselves Tai, they come to be referred to as *Āsām*, *Āsām*, *Āsām* and *Acām* by the natives of the province. In *Darrang Raj Vamsavali*, a chronicle of the Koch kings by Suryya Khari Daibajna composed in the sixteenth century, the word *Asām* has all through been employed as a term of reference to the conquering Shans. In *Sankar Carit*, the Shans have been variously designated as *Āsām*, *Āsām*, *Asām*. In *Kamrupar Buranji*, of a much later date, occurs the form *Ācām* also." So it is suggested that the modern word Ahom must have been derived from *Asam* in this way: *Āsām* → *Āsām* → *Āham* → *Ahom*. The British have Anglicized either *Asam* or *Āsām* into Assam.

The Ahoms have also left their impact on various place-names. The Tai prefix *Nam* means water or river, like the Bodo *Di*, as in Namrup and Namdang. There are two Ahom names for the Brahmaputra, *Nam-ti-lao* and *Nam-dao-phi*, now obsolete.

The other Shan tribes who followed the Ahoms along the same Patkai Range route are the Khamtis, Naras, Phakials, Aitaniyas, Turungs and Khamjangs, all Buddhists. The Ahoms were the only non-Buddhists. That only shows that all Shan tribes other than the Ahoms started to leave their original homeland much later, after their conversion to Buddhism. The Khamtis once inhabiting the Jorhat Sub-division had to migrate to the Lohit District of Arunachal Pradesh for various reasons. They are a

highly cultured people, like the Phakials who also first lived with the Ahoms but subsequently moved to their present habitat of Naharkatiya, Margherita and Ledo, adjacent to the Tirap Frontier Tract of Arunachal Pradesh. The Naras, Turungs and Aitanlyas live in Jorhat and Golaghat districts. All of them seem to have appeared in Assam in the early part of the 19th century, as suggested by the late Sarbananda Rajkumar, an the eminent Ahom historian. He says that the Khamtis claim the Turungs and Aitanlyas to be two of their own clans, which is only possible. In addition to being Buddhists, these people also dress similarly. The Ahoms kept close contact with their Nara compatriots before the latter came down to Assam. Some of them were absorbed by the Ahoms. Others remained Buddhists and retained their original mode of life. These Shan people constitute an island of Buddhists in the eastern region. The Singphos, who live side by side with the Khamtis and who migrated from the source of the Irrawaddy in upper Burma to Assam about the same time as these Shan tribes, are animists. Their speech has greater similarity to the Tibeto-Burman Abor than that of the Shans. The Singphos are also reputed for their knowledge of the use of iron in making weapons.

The Aryan Hindus of Assam are numerous with their sub-sects. Dr. B. K. Barua in *A Cultural History of Assam* lists the following principal castes or classes of people of Assam, excluding the tribes enumerated above: Brahmana, Kayastha, Kalita, Koch, Keot, Ganaka or Daivajna, Kaibarta, Kumara, Hari, the last two being potters. This classification is based on old records and present social conditions. They inhabit every nook and corner of the plains. They originally came to Assam from the west. Like other Aryan descendants of northern India, they are also tall and fair. The Kalitas are agriculturists by profession, though during Ahom rule they proved their might as soldiers also. The Brahmanas and Kayasthas are generally given to intellectual pursuits such as learning, diplomacy, statecraft and religious teaching.

It is they who are largely responsible for propagating the scriptures, building up literature and developing the Assamese language.

It is difficult to say exactly when the first Aryans appeared in the Assam plains. Hindu civilization, an outcome of racial fusion of the Aryans, Dravidians and Austriacs, reached north Bihar by the 7th century B.C. So the Aryans must have made contacts with Assam by that time. The existence of Mongoloid peoples was noted long before that date, in the 10th century B.C. when the Vedas were being compiled. It was made possible, perhaps, by the presence of Dravidian and Austric speakers who had already settled here and so had some sort of a link with their compatriots in the west who were helping to build up Hindu civilization. We have to depend much upon the two epics and the various *Puranas* for any reference to such contacts. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* were taking shape between 500 B.C. and 400 A.D. That is about the only probable historical time when any Aryans crossed the western borders of Assam, then known as Pragjyotisha and Kamarupa. When the famous Chinese pilgrim Yuan Chwang visited Assam in 643 A.D., it was still known as Kamarupa. He travelled east, as he himself wrote, from Pur-na-fa-tan-na (Purnavardhana), crossed the great river Ko-lo-tu (Karatoya) and then arrived at Ka-mo-lu-po (Kamarupa). According to the *Ramayana*, the kingdom of Pragjyotisha was founded by an Aryan named Amurtarajas hailing from the country around the Kosi river. The *Mahabharata* gives both the names Pragjyotisha and Kamarupa to Assam. It is possible that the name Pragjyotisha was still prevalent during the *Mahabharata* days, but was in process of being replaced by the new name Kamarupa. Hence, K. L. Barua in his *Early History of Kamarupa* holds the view that Pragjyotisha was a very ancient name of the land and Kamarupa was used in medieval times. The *Puranas* and the *Tantras* also used the word

Kamarupa. Narakasura, a great mythological king from Videha or north Bihar, a son of Vishnu but fostered by the Videha king Janaka, came here to establish a new kingdom. He and his descendant-successors in the same line had their capital in Pragjyotishapura, modern Gauhati, as the *Mahabharata* says. He established himself by defeating and slaying Ghatakasura, a powerful Kirata chief. Before Ghataka, another dynasty beginning with Mahiranga Danava ruled the land. Naraka's son Bhagadatta was a great warrior who, surrounded by troops of the Kiratas, the Cinas and other sea-coast dwellers, fought on the side of Duryodhana in the great Kurukshetra war. These were evidently Mongoloid soldiers. They are variously described in the epics as *priyadarsanah* (pleasant-looking), *hemabhah* (shining like gold), skin-clad and ferocious. Appellations like Danava and Asura to the kings suggest that they were of a non-Aryan origin. But that Naraka came from north Bihar and his son Bhagadatta fought for Duryodhana would suggest, on the other hand, that intimate contacts were already being made between Aryans and Mongoloids. We must not forget, in this connection, that the Kiratas were mentioned in the *Yajurveda*, a work of the Aryans. It is probably a pointer to racial assimilation which was largely responsible for evolving a Hindu civilization. Vyasa, "the father of Aryan literature", reputed to be the poet of the *Mahabharata*, the eighteen Puranas, compiler and editor of the four Vedas, was evidently a half-caste. His father Parashara was a Brahmana (Aryan) and his mother Satyavati the daughter of a Dasa, probably a fisherman of Dravidian origin. The legends of Naraka as narrated in the Puranas and Tantras also suggest such examples of fusion. According to these legends, Naraka after establishing himself in Pragjyotisha settled many Brahmanas at Kamakhya. Vishnu greatly favoured Naraka, it is said, and asked him to worship Goddess Kamakhya. This may point to Aryan migration. Again, Naraka later on fell from Vishnu's favour as he grew irreligious and wanted to take the

goddess herself as his wife; he oppressed Brahmanas like sage Vashishta and held sixteen thousand damsels captive in his harem. So Vishnu as Krishna came to punish him and in a fierce fight slew him. Krishna must have been some Aryan invader who came into this non-Aryan land with his troops. History has some records of such expedition. In 105 A.D. Samuda, an Indian king, was ruling in upper Burma; another prince from north-west India founded a kingdom in Thailand. They must have passed through Assam to their kingdoms.

Krishna is also associated with two other mythological kings, Bana of Shonitpur (modern Tezpur) and Bhismaka of Kundin, near Sadiya. Both the kings were non-Aryans, or in all likelihood Mongoloid. Krishna came all the way from far-off Dwaraka in Gujarat and carried off Bhismaka's daughter Rukmini from her *swayamvara*. The story is narrated in two Puranas, *Harivamsa* and *Bhagavata*. Bana's story is to be found in the *Bhagavata* and the *Vishmupurana*. A contemporary of Naraka, he influenced and led Naraka astray from the path of piety, for which he was punished by Krishna. Krishna's grandson Aniruddha followed the path of his grandfather and came to woo the hand of Bana's daughter, Usha. He was caught red-handed in her secluded palace and the furious Bana held him prisoner. Krishna dutifully came to the young man's rescue and fought Bana in such a fierce and prolonged battle that a river of blood began to flow (hence the name Shonitpur). Bana, of course, was vanquished and the young lovers were united. These stories can also be interpreted as examples of Aryan penetration into a land of non-Aryan races. Thus racial and cultural fusion was brought about in those mythological times. Dr. S. K. Chatterji says that Krishna himself, like Vyasa, was the son of an Aryan prince Vasudeva and Devaki, a sister of the non-Aryan king Kamsa of Mathura. He in his teachings tried to make a synthesis of diverse ways; for example, he accepted the non-Vedic rites of *pujas* originated by the Dravidians. The Mongoloid tribe of Akas

living in the northern hills above Tezpur till this day traces its ancestry to the dynasty of Bana.

From this mythological period to the 4th century A.D. when reliable historical data begin to emerge, there were a number of traditional kings. Their popular accounts point to Aryan infiltration. Dharma Pala, a Kshatriya from the west, founded a kingdom somewhere near Guwahati. He is said to have brought a number of high-caste Hindus like Brahmanas from upper India to his new kingdom. Ram Chandra, the last king of his line, built his capital in Majuli, world's biggest river-island, in the midst of the Brahmaputra in upper Assam. Then we have three colourful kings associated with three high embankments still extant. Ram Chandra, while performing a *yajna*, made an offering of his beautiful queen to the Brahmaputra. The pregnant queen, floating away, was blessed with a son, Arimatta, who subsequently founded his own kingdom at Vaidyagarh, a high embankment still to be seen in the north of Kamarupa district. Arimatta fought and killed his own father Ram Chandra, not recognising him. Arimatta in turn was slain by Phengua, who threw up another high embankment, which is still in existence and is known as Phengua-garh, 16 km west of Vaidyagarh. Phengua was ultimately defeated by Arimatta's son Ratna Singh, who lost his kingdom owing to a Brahmana's cause. Another son of Arimatta, named Jongal Balahu, founded another kingdom fortifying his capital with high embankments, known till this day as Jongal Balahu Garh, in the district of Nowgong. He was overthrown by the local Kacharis, a Mongoloid Bodo tribe. These popular traditional accounts, though not corroborated by historical data, at least prove that the Aryans from outside were trying to push as far east as possible, with the help of the sword if necessary, for there was local resistance. Firishta's history mentions Shankaladib, a powerful Koch king of Kamarupa, who conquered Banga and Bihar, founded the city of Gaur or Lakhauti and then inflicted a crushing defeat on Kidar

Brahman, an equally powerful king of North India. Shankal, at last, was crushed by Afrasiyab, a Persian king, with whom he fought fiercely with 50,000 Mongol soldiers. His encounter with Kidar is another instance of local resistance to Aryan penetration.

From the 4th century A.D. we have a clearer picture of the history of Assam. Yuan Chwang's travel accounts, Bana's *Harshacharita* and above all various land-grant plates and epigraphs supply valuable historical material. From these we gather that Pusyavarman of the Varman dynasty ruled in Kamarupa in the 4th century A.D. and was followed by other kings of the same line till the 7th century when Bhaskaravarman ruled as the last king. This dynasty is held to be the descendants of Naraka. Confirmed accounts of political and cultural links established between Kamarupa and the rest of India are to be found in the history of this period. Many Varman kings performed the *Asvamedha Yajna*, a horse sacrifice, a proof of growing Aryan influence. Pusyavarman was the contemporary and personal friend of Chandragupta I. Some of the kings of this period assumed the title of *maharajadhiraja*. Others made land gifts to the Brahmanas. The greatest of them all was Bhaskaravarman, the last king, of whom this is what Edward Gait has to say: "Bhaskaravarman, the greatest monarch of this family and one of the most remarkable rulers of medieval India, is undoubtedly an important study." He secured friendship with King Harsha of Thaneswar, another great name in Indian history, and they exchanged valuable gifts besides ambassadors. He was well-versed in the *sastras* and was ever keen to enrich his learning. He wrote to the head of Nalanda, Silabhadra, seeking a visit of Yuan Chwang to his country. The Chinese pilgrim came and was very much impressed by the Kamarupa king's thirst for knowledge. The king and the pilgrim went together to the great religious assembly at Kanauj held by Harsha. Bhaskaravarman, who went with 500 elephants, was the guest-in-chief in that assembly. Yuan Chwang took leave of him from

that assembly after promising Bhaskara to translate the teachings of Lao-Tse into Sanskrit for his benefit and accepting a fur-lined cap from Bhaskara, the only mundane gift he accepted before leaving for China. Bhaskaravarman was a celebate and with him ended the line of the Varman kings.

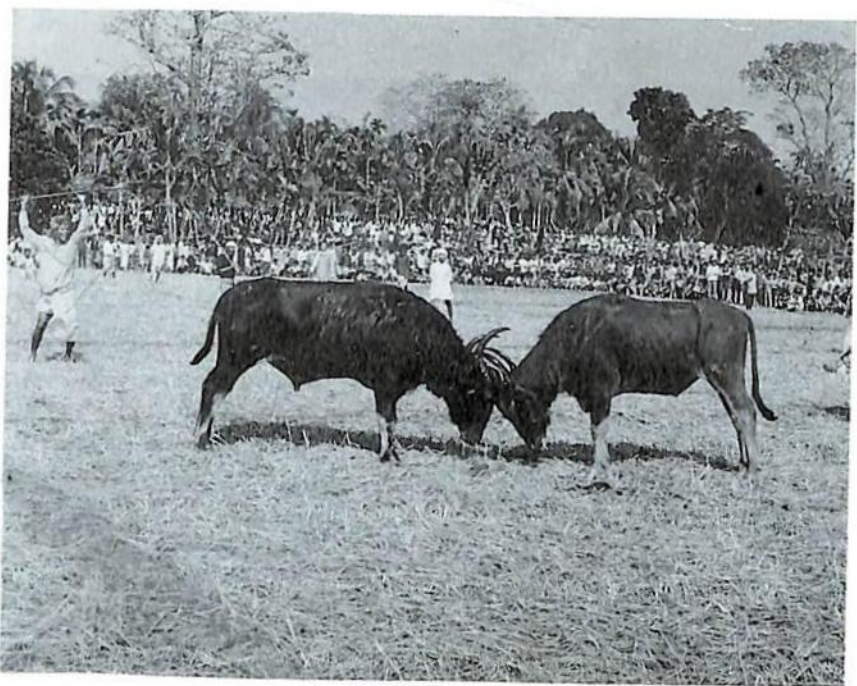
After the Varmans we have three other dynasties which ruled Kamarupa, the first beginning with Salastambha, the second the Palas and the third the Khens. It is during the rule of the Khens that Mohammedans first invaded Assam. In 1204 A.D. Bakhtyar Khilji, Emperor Mohammed Ghori's *subedar* (Governor) in Bengal, attacked the first Khen king Niladdhvaj but had to flee defeated. The next Bengal *subedar* Giasuddin also attacked Niladdhvaj in 1228 A.D. and annexed a part of the kingdom. There followed two more successive Mohammedan invasions that destroyed the rule of the Khens and their capital city of Kamatapur. The Mohammedan hold did not last long, but many of the invaders stayed on and they were the first Muslim settlers of Assam.

After the fall of the Khens, the Koches rose to power in about 1515 A.D. But by that time the Ahoms were also expanding their rule from the east. The Chutiyas were ruling in the extreme north-east, the Kacharis in mid-Assam and in between them a number of petty chieftains called *Bhuyans* were holding sway over the Brahmaputra plains. The Ahoms subjugated almost all of them and consolidated the entire Valley into one empire which they ruled efficiently for seven centuries, though the Koches in the west and the Kacharis in the extreme south were not altogether vanquished.

Every small tribe that has made its home in one corner or another, in the plains or the hills, possesses a living tradition of some kind of political organisation of its own, with a king or perhaps a powerful chieftain and a band of warriors. Even today there are kings in the hills. The Ahoms established and maintained good relations, sometimes even through marriage, with most of them.



Bhelaghar, a makeshift cottage built for merrymaking during Bhogali Bihu.



Buffalo Fight : An item of great interest in Bihu sports.



Deodhani, a ritual dance.



The cattle are given a good wash during *Rangali Bihu*.



Bhaona, a theatrical performance of a Vaishnava Ankiya Nat or one act play.



Bodo Maidens performing a Ceremonial Dance.



Oja-Pali.

But historical records about them are nearly nil as the tribes did not know the art of writing.

Towards the close of the 18th century A.D., the Ahoms began to disintegrate owing to internal strifes born of misrule. In 1816 thousands of Burmese troops mounted an attack on Assam. They were invited by Badan Barphukan, the Ahom Governor at Gauhati, who quarrelled with the prime minister, who was also the father-in-law of Badan's daughter. Owing partly to the then Ahom king's misbehaviour and partly to lure of easy loot and plunder, the Burmese hordes came again in 1819 and for the third time in 1821 for the same reasons. They virtually ruled all over Assam from 1819 to 1824, killing people ruthlessly, plundering their property, burning village after village, dishonouring women at their own sweet will, thus reducing the country to ruins and the whole social system to a shambles. They took some 30,000 people as slaves to Burma; put about half the population to the sword; destroyed the very foundations of political and social systems built up during the centuries. Noblemen fled to places beyond the borders. Many went to the hills. The poor lived on wild roots as there was no cultivation worth the name. But when the Burmese clashed with the British in Goalpara, they were driven back with superior weapons and better battle tactics and finally crushed and defeated, leading to the Treaty of Yandabu in 1826, by which the Burmese King gave away Assam to the British. Assam was the last territory of so-called British India to go to them. That is why an Assamese poet, Parvati Prasad Barua, refers to her as the "youngest daughter of Bharat."

It was but natural to expect that all these races and tribes would find their rightful place in the new India when Independence was attained. The Government of India under Jawaharlal Nehru's leadership devised plans of development to suit the tribal people who were not at the same level as their other brethren. Independence has certainly opened avenues of high hopes and new

aspirations. But the Scheduled Tribes, various Mongoloid tribes listed in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, have lagged behind others in many ways. So special arrangements have been made to afford them an opportunity to bring themselves abreast of modern times. They and the Scheduled Casts and other backward classes have been given special facilities by way of award of scholarships, appointment opportunities and reservation of legislative seats. Six autonomous hills districts for the Garos, Khasis and Jaintias, Karbis and Kacharis, Nagas and Mizos were created, so that these people could run their affairs through district councils. It is well-known that the Government of India intended to merge NEFA (Arunachal) with Assam in course of time for geographical reasons, and also because the two regions have been keeping a close touch with each other from time immemorial for intimate cultural contacts. Yet NEFA, after Independence, was kept as a separate entity under the Centre's direct control to ensure the development of the various tribes there according to their own genius. Schools have been opened in remote villages where teachers from the plains teach. The Panchayat system is sought to be introduced in Arunachal where a similar system already exists in the form of tribal councils. On 15th August, 1975 the Pradesh Council, with five counsellors representing the five districts, was transformed into a legislature. Now a Governor is the head of the administration in the State with a council of Ministers. With ten districts, Arunachal Pradesh is spread out in a region of about 83,743 Sq. Km. bordering Tibet in the North. It has a population of a little over 6,32,000 in 1981. These tribal people are slowly being drawn into wider Indian life. The late D. Ering, former Central Deputy Minister and Lummer Dai, who won a Central government literary prize for his excellent novel in Assamese depicting life in Arunachal Pradesh, both belong to the Abor or Adi tribe of Siang. Shri Gegong Apang, Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh belongs to the Adi tribe of East Siang district.

Independence has brought to the towns and villages in the hills

and the plains of Assam many a change. Now townships have sprung up. Factories have been opened. Schools and colleges have multiplied. Community Development Blocks have been introduced in villages. The population has increased from 90 lakhs in 1951 to 146 lakhs in 1971. The number of school students rose from over 19 lakhs in 1964-65 to about 59 lakhs in 1988-89. Life has become hard and complicated but the new changes have brought in many compensations. Tribal textile designs have captured the imagination of a great many townspeople. Folk music and traditional forms of dance and drama, hitherto confined to villages and almost neglected, have earned the love of the educated and the high-placed. Folk-tunes and folk-dances have been adapted to suit modern tastes on the sophisticated stage. Parties of folk-artistes vie with one another to be selected for the Republic Day Celebrations in the capital. A village artiste whose fame hardly crossed the four corners of his own village is now listened to and appreciated by thousands in huge gatherings or over the radio. In the towns troupes of musicians from remote tribal settlements are to be seen performing with their age-old little instruments. These simple folk have thus responded to the call of the great Indian nationhood and are trying to contribute their mite to a new integrated life. Young men wearing a cotton Abor jacket are not an uncommon sight in Guwahati or even in Delhi. The Bodo *Fali* or Muffler is being used by many non-Bodo people. Women too warp themselves in Naga shawls. The spear motif on neckties is becoming popular. Folk art is also being adapted increasingly for making decorative articles.

But there is a dark side also. The sense of self-respect roused by unheard-of opportunities that Independence has ushered in has also led some people to separatist tendencies. That many of them were left neglected for long by their more advanced brethren is an accepted fact. Many of them isolated themselves from very old times and hardly tried to come out into the big wide world. The remote and inaccessible position of their settlements has also contributed to their isolation. Their backwardness in point of all

that constitutes modern life has made them naturally shy of participation in the new awakening. The Government and makers of the Constitution have never been unsympathetic to them. But the gulf between the stages of development of these people and those of the more advanced is so wide that to bridge it will take a very long time. The so-called "more advanced" and tradition-bound people have not proved as sympathetic and helpful as expected. Naturally the unfortunate people have grown despondent and at times become restive. Demands and agitations for separate political and administrative set-ups, sometimes even for secession from India as in the cases of Naga and Mizo uprisings, are manifestations of such despondency. Some administrative changes have had to be made to satisfy such aspirations.

The Naga Hills district of Assam was carved out and was added to the Tuensang Division of NEFA to make the new State of Nagaland in 1960. Ten years later in 1970 the autonomous sub-state of Meghalaya was created within the framework of Assam with two more districts of the State, i.e., the Khasi and Jaintia Hills and the Garo Hills. It was granted full-fledged statehood on 21 January 1972. The armed rebellion of the underground Nagas and Mizos is well known. The agitation for a separate Hill State launched jointly by Khasi and Garo leaders was a long-drawn-out problem intriguing the minds of national leaders beginning with Jawaharlal Nehru who tried to solve it in various ways. In one of their schemes, since abandoned, the constitution of separate units for hills and plains "not subordinate to each other" was proposed. Some sections have seized upon this opportunity and have demanded such units for their communities. The Plains Tribal Council wants to have some such separate arrangement for the benefit of its own people on the entire north bank of the Brahmaputra. The Tai Mongoliya Parishad (now Ujani Asom Rajya Parishad) also aspires for such an arrangement in the districts of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur for the people of Ahom or

Mongoloid origin Just after the creation of Meghalaya, the District Council of Karbi Anglong and North Cachher Hills has been bifurcated into two separate Councils for the two districts. Two new districts Kokrajhar, where the Bodo people predominate, and Dhemaji, where the Miris or Mishings are concentrated, have been created. The Bodo language has been introduced into primary schools in the areas where the Bodos predominate and the Government of Assam has agreed to introduce it into the secondary schools of those areas also. Some other small communities have also put forward demands for new Sub-divisions where their numbers predominate.

These developments are not cited, however, to suggest that the whole State is in the process of disintegration. They are cited only to emphasise that new hopes and aspirations have found outlets in new India in various forms and these people are only giving expression to them. Otherwise on the silent cultural level influences and counter-influences are still exerting their pulls. Some instances of it have been cited above. Tribal life and languages are being scientifically studied to examine their contributions to Assam and its people as a whole. Customs and beliefs of simple village-folk are being examined by scholars to show how much they have contributed to the general culture of Assam. This certainly is a correct approach to the new problem that presents itself. For, many separate ethnic groups have intermingled here to make the population of today and their cultures have also interfused. As Dr. Chatterji says: "Culture and race contacts are never one-sided in their influence."