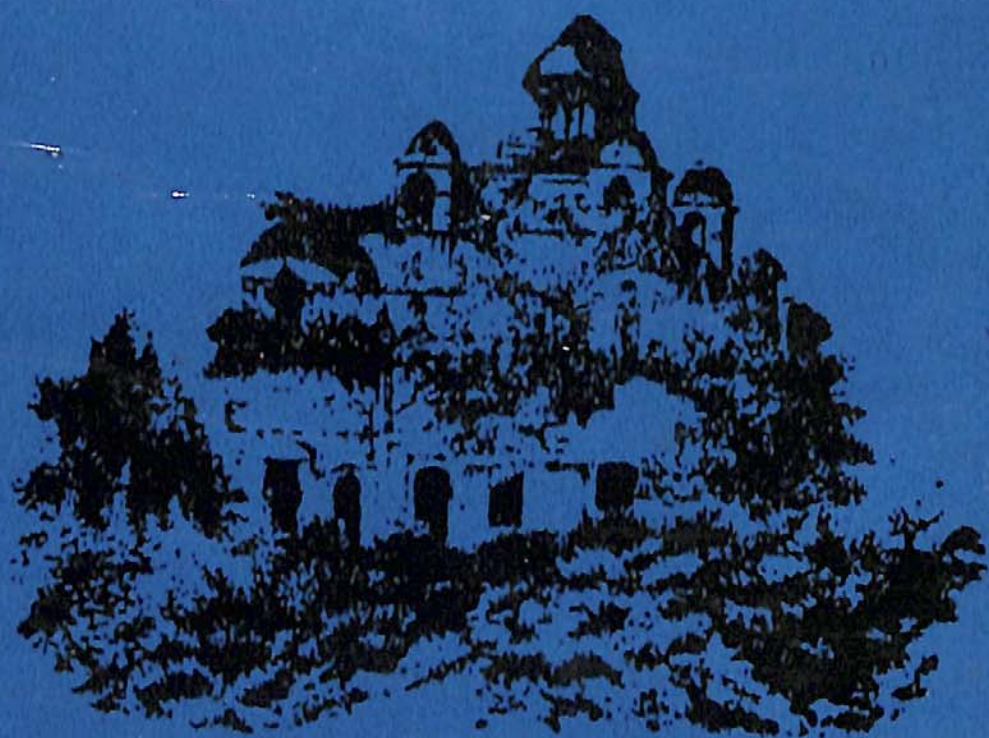


# A HISTORY OF ASSAM



*Sir Edward Gait*

# A HISTORY OF ASSAM

By  
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**PANBAZAR, GAUHATI, ASSAM.**  
**(INDIA)**



**Sir Edward Gait**

**Born—1863**

**Died—1950**

## INTRODUCTION TO FIRST EDITION

Assam is in many ways a country of exceptional interest. Hemmed in, as India is, by the sea on the south-east and south-west, and by the lofty chain of the Himalayas on the north, the only routes between it and the rest of Asia which are practicable for migration on a large scale, lie on its north-west and north-east confines. The so-called Aryans, and many later invaders, such as the Greeks, the Huns, the Pathans, and the Mughals, entered India from the north west while from the north-east, through Assam, have come successive hordes of immigrants from the great hive of the Mongolian race in Western China. Many of these immigrants passed on into Bengal, but in that province they have as a rule, become merged in the earlier population. Their influence is seen in the modified physical type of the present inhabitants who are classed by Mr. Risley as Mongolo-Dravidians, but there very few who possess the distinctive Mongolian physiognomy or who speak Mongolian dialects. In Assam, on the other hand, although in the plains large sections of the population, like that of Bengal, are of mixed origin, there are also numerous tribes who are almost pure Mongolians, and the examination of their affinities, in respect of physique, language, religion and social customs, with other branches of the same family forms one of the most interesting lines of enquiry open to Ethnologists,

Their religion indeed has more than a local importance as in it is probably to be found the clue to the strange Tantrik developments, both of Hinduism, and of Buddhism. The temple of Kamakhya at Gauhati is one of the most sacred shrines of the Sakta Hindus, and the whole country is famed in Hindu traditions as a land of magic and witch-craft. The old tribal beliefs are gradually being abandoned and the way in which Hindu priests established their influence over non-Aryan chiefs and gradually drew them within their fold is

repeatedly exemplified in the pages of Assam History. The various methods of conversion enumerated by Sir Alfred Lyali and Mr. Risley have all been adopted there at one time or another.

Prior to the advent of the Muhammadans the inhabitants of other parts of India had no idea of history; and our knowledge of them is limited to what can be laboriously pieced together from old inscriptions, the accounts of foreign invaders or travellers, and incidental references in religious writings. On the other hand, the Ahom conquerors of Assam had a keen historical sense; and they have given us a full and detailed account of their rule, which dates from the early part of the thirteenth century.

Another claim to notice is supplied by the circumstance that Assam was one of the few countries in India whose inhabitants beat back the tide of Mughal conquest and maintained their independence in the face of repeated attempts to subvert it. Full accounts of these invasions have come down, both from Ahom and from Muhammadan sources, and are interesting not only in themselves but also from the light which they throw on the old methods of warfare, and from the evidence which they afford of how little superior arms, numbers and discipline can avail against difficulties of communication, inadequate supplies and an unhealthy climate.

In spite of this there is, probably, no part of India regarding whose past less is generally known. In the histories of India as a whole, Assam is barely mentioned, and only ten lines are devoted to its annals in the historical portion of Hunter's *Indian Empire*. The only attempt at a connected history in English is the brief account given by Robinson—some 43 pages in all—in his *Descriptive Account of Assam*, published in 1841. Two histories have been published in the vernacular, one by Kasinath Tamuli Phukan in 1844, and the other by the late Ganabhiram Barua Bahadur in 1884. The former deals only with the Ahoms. The latter gives also a brief account of other dynasties who formerly ruled in the Brahmaputra valley. But both are far from complete, and a mass of new material is now available.

The researches of Blochmann have thrown much light on the Muhammadan invasions of Assam, and the late Sir James Jhonstone compiled from records in the Foreign Department of the Government of India a detailed narrative of the expedition of Captain Welsh to Assam in 1793 A.D., and of the causes which led up to it. When I was Sub-Divisional Officer of Mangaldai, in the Darrang District, I caused a translation to be prepared of the *Bansabali*, or family history, of the Darrang Rajas, which contains a great deal of information regarding the Koch dynasty, and gave an analysis of it in a paper contributed to the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal.

In 1894, Sir Charles Lyall, K.C.S.I., who was then officiating as Chief Commissioner of Assam, pointed out that the time had come for a sustained and systematic endeavour to arrest the process of destruction of such historical manuscripts as still survived, and, at his request, I drew up a scheme for the prosecution of historical research in the Province. My proposals were accepted by the Chief Commissioner and a small grant was made to cover the necessary expenditure. In the course of the enquiries that ensued a rock inscription at Tezpur and five ancient copper-plates containing records of land grants by bygone kings were discovered; and these, with two similar copper-plates already known, give a good deal of information concerning the kings who reigned in the Brahmaputra valley between the years 800 and 1150 A.D. In Jaintia five copper-plates were found, as well as a number of coins and a historical manuscript. Manuscripts relating to the rule of the Baro Bhuiya, the Chutiyas and the Rajas of Dimarua were discovered and translated. With the assistance of Indian friends, a careful search for made for all references to Assam in ancient Hindu writings such as the *Jogini Tantra*, a *Kalika Puran* and the *Mahabharat*, as well as in more recent works, such as the *Dipika Chand* and the religious writings of the followers of Sankar Deb.

But the most important results of the enquiries were in connection with the records of Ahom rule. The Ahoms were a tribe of Shans who migrated to Assam early in the thirteenth century. They were endowed with the historical faculty in a

very high degree; and their priests and leading families possessed *Buranjis*, or histories, which were periodically brought up to date. There were written on oblong strips of bark, and were very carefully preserved and handed down from father to son.\* The number still in existence is considerable, and would have been much greater but for the fact that, about a century and a half ago one of the chief ministers of State discovered that in one of them doubts had been cast upon the purity of his descent, and used his influence with the king to cause it to be destroyed together with all others which, on examination, were found to contain statements reflecting on those in power or their near ancestors.

The more recent of these *Buraujis* are written in Assamese which was gradually adopted by the Ahoms after their conversion to Hinduism, but the earlier ones are in the old tribal language, which is similar to that of other Shan tribes, and is written in a character derived from the pali. The knowledge of it is now confined to a few old men of the *Deodhai* or priestly caste. When the mass of the Ahoms accepted Hinduism, the tribal priests gradually fell into disrepute; and, although they themselves long resisted the proselytizing efforts of the Brahmans, they have at last given way and have now all taken Gosains. The result is that the rising generation has been taught Assamese and not Ahom, and in a few years the knowledge of the latter language will have disappeared altogether. To rescue from oblivion the records written in it I selected an educated young Assamese, Babu Golap Chandra Barua, now a clerk in the office of the Deputy Commissioner, Lakhimpur, and gave him a committee of five *Deodhais* to teach him Ahom and to assist him in translating their manuscripts. The work was by no means easy; the *Deodhais* themselves proved far from proficient, and it was nearly three years before all the manuscripts that could be traced were translated. Having no knowledge of the Ahom language

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\*For further particulars see Appendix D. It may be mentioned here that *Buranji* is one of the very few Assamese words which are derived from the Ahom. The literal meaning is "a store that teaches the ignorant." (Bu, "ignorant persons," ran, "teach." and ji, "granary").

myself I have had to rely entirely on the translations made by his Assamese gentleman, but I have every confidence in the accuracy of his work. I tested his knowledge of Ahom in various ways and found it satisfactory. and the comparison of one *Buranji* with another has shown that they agree in a way that would be impossible if there were serious errors in the translations, but also for assistance in the I am indebted to him not only for the translations, elucidation of various questions of Ahom nomenclature and customs.

Some of the *Buranjis* go back to the year 568 A.D. when the ancestors of the Ahom kings are said to have descended from heaven. The earlier portions are of course unreliable, and they contain little beyond lists of names; and it is not until Sukapha became king in 1228 A.D. that they can be treated as historical records. From that date however, they are generally very trustworthy. The following is a list of the chief *Buranjis* :—

#### *Ahom*

- (1) From the earliest times to the end of Ahom rule.  
This is a very complete and valuable record.
- (2) From the earliest times to Mir Jumiah's invasion in 1663 A.D.
- (3) From the earliest times to 1695 A.D.
- (4) From the earliest times to 1764 A.D.
- (5) From the earliest times to 1681 A.D.
- (6) From the earliest times to 1810 A.D.

#### *Assamese*

- [1] From the earliest times to the end of Ahom rule.
- [2] From 1228 to 1660 A.D.
- [3] From 1228 to 1714 A.D.
- [4] From 1497 to 1714 A.D.
- [5] From 1598 to 1766 A.D. Deals very fully with the events of Rudra Singh's reign.
- [6] From 1681 to 1790 A.D.
- [7] From 1790 to 1806 A.D.
- [8] An account of the tribute paid to Mir Jumlah.



- [9] An account of the relations with the Muhammadans in the years immediately following Mir Jumlah's invasion.
- [10] An account of the Moamaras.
- [11] An account of the political geography of Assam in the seventeenth century.

The historicity of these *Buranjis* is proved not only by the way in which they support each other, but also by the confirmation which is afforded by the narratives of Muhammadan writers, wherever these are available for comparison. Their chronology is further supported by the dates on various records which have been collected and collated for the purpose of checking it, including those on about 70 Ahom coins, 48 copper plates, nine rock, and 28 temple inscriptions and six inscriptions on cannon.

Most of the materials for the present work were collected while I was serving in Assam, but I had no leisure at that time to devote their critical examination or to the compilation of a continuous narrative. This was done during two periods of leave in England. The book has been printed since my return to India, at a time when heavy official duties have left me but little leisure to devote to the revision of the proof sheets, or to the further consideration of the conclusions arrived at. In these circumstances it is inevitable that there should be defects in respect both of form and matter. For these I can only crave the indulgence of my readers.

E. A. GAIT

Darjeeling,  
8th September, 1905.

## PREFACE TO SECOND EDITION

As a second edition of this work has been called for, the opportunity has been taken to revise it in the light of material which has become available since the original edition was published. This includes :—

(1) The copper-plate inscription of Bhaskara Varman found in Sylhet in 1912 and translated by Professor Padmanath Bhattacharya, and the translation (by Cowell and Thomas) of Bana's *Harsha Charita* which contains various references to the same monarch.

(2) The *Baharistan-i-Ghaibi*, a contemporary account of events in the reign of Jahangir. This has recently been translated by Professor Jadunath Sarkar, who has kindly sent me advance extracts of the passages relating to certain Muhammadan invasions of Assam.

(3) Professor Sarkar's translation of the description of Assam at the time of Mir Jumlah's invasion contained in the *Fathiyya-i-Ibriyya*. This is more complete and accurate than Blochmann's analysis of the same work which was utilized in the first edition.

(4) A manuscript volume in India Office library containing translations of certain *buranjis* made for Dr. Wade in 1792-3. There are some obvious mistakes in these translations and the actual *buranjis* are not forth-coming. It would therefore be unsafe to place very much reliance on them. But they have occasionally been utilized to supplement the information contained in the *buranjis* enumerated in the introduction to the first edition where they are in general agreement with, but more complete than, the latter.

(5) An account of some Jaintia kings contained in Loch's Jaintia Settlement Report of 1839. This was brought to light by Babu Chandra Kanta Sen when working on the Jaintia Settlement of 1897.

A few changes have also been made in the light of comments made by various writers, and in particular by Mr. A. W. Botham, C.I.E., Professor Padmanath Bhattacharya and Mr. H. E. Stapleton.

Finally, some additions have been made to the last two chapters in order to bring the narrative up to date.

E. A. GAIT

Camberley,  
10th February, 1926.

### **Preface to Reprint (1926 ed.)**

#### **A History of Assam**

In the recent past the absence of "A History of Assam" written by Sir Edward Gait in its original or has been greatly felt. Encouraged by a number of well-wishers the publication of the 1926 edition was undertaken in the early part of 1980.

The meaning of History is lost if a book written 76 years ago is not reprinted in its original form. Hence no changes whatsoever has been attempted.

A special word of thanks is due here to Shri-Ranjit Narayan Deka who very painstakingly went through the business of proof reading.

Owing to the continuous demand of the 1926, Reprint, Edition of "A History of Assam." We take the pleasure in bringing out the 2nd edition.

Guwahati, ( Assam )  
1 November, 1983.

K. N. Dutta Baruah  
*Publisher*

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# Chapter I

## Prehistoric and Traditional Rulers

### - Some general consideration

The science of history was unknown to the yearly inhabitants of Assam, and it is not till the Ahoms invasion in 1928 A.D. that we obtain anything at all approaching a connected account of the people and their rulers. For several hundred years previously some scattered fact may be gleaned from a few ancient inscriptions and from the observations of a Chinese traveller. Before then nothing definite is known, and our only information consists of some dubious and fragmentary references in the *Mahabharat*, and in the *Purans* and *Tantras* and other similar records.

The stories culled from the latter sources cannot of course be dignified with the name of history. They are at the best, ancient traditions, but even this cannot be asserted with certainty, and some of them may have been interpolated by interested copyists in comparatively recent times. They do, however, contain a substratum of fact, and, in any case, they are fondly remembered by the people.

But before dealing with these stories, we may refer briefly to some general indications regarding the ancient movements of the people which are suggested by philological and ethnographical considerations. So far as philology is concerned, it is, of course, admitted that language is no real test of race. The Ahoms have abandoned their tribal dialect in favour of Assamese, and Rabhas, Kacharis and other tribes are following their example. The reason in these cases is partly that Assamese is the language of the priests, who are gradually bringing these rude tribes within the fold of Hinduism, and partly that it is the language of a higher civi-

lization. But there is another way in which one form of speech may supplant another, *viz.*, by conquest. When one nation brings another under subjection, it often imposes its own language on the conquered people. Thus within the last hundred years the Shan tribe of Turungs, while held in captivity amongst the Singphos, abandoned their native tongue and adopted that of their captors. It may safely be assumed that one or other, or both, of these processes has always been in operation, and that, just as Assamese is now supplanting Kachari and other tribal languages, so these in their turn displaced those of an earlier generation. There is however, this difference, that whereas now, the caste system, to a great extent, preserves a distinct physical type, the earlier philological changes were accompanied by racial fusion. We know that this occurred after the Ahom invasion of Assam, when many Chutiya, Moran and Borahi families were incorporated in the Ahom tribal system and, by lapse of time and inter-marriage, gradually came to be recognised as genuine Ahoms. The Ahoms themselves are Shans, who, according to an eminent authority,\* are the outcome of an intermingling of Mons, Negritos and Chinese. The Koches appear to have been originally a Bodo tribe, closely allied to the Meches and Kacharis, but many of them now present the physical characteristics of the Dravidian family.

The fact the refore that, excluding immigrants during historic times a few communities, like Kalitas, of reputed Aryan decent, and a few others, such as the Doms, of obvious Dravidian origin, the bulk of the population of the Brahmaputra valley is comprised of tribes whose peculiar dialects belong to the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Indo Chinese family by no means indicates racial uniformity. All that it can fairly be held to show is that the most recent conquerors, prior to the Ahoms, were speakers of such dialects, and that they imposed their language on the older inhabitants, whose identity gradually became merged in that of their conquerors.

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\*M. Terrin de la Couperie, in his Introduction to Colquhoun's *Amongst the Shans*. See also, *The Cradle of the Shan Race*, by the same author.

With these preliminary remarks the general conclusions to be drawn from a study of the languages and physical type of the people may be briefly set forth.

The human race has been classified by Professor Flower under three main types—the Negroid, the Mongolian and the Caucasian. The Caucasian is further subdivided into the dark group, which includes the Dravidians, and the fair which includes the Aryans.\* The Negroid type has its headquarters in Africa, the Mongolian in the eastern part of Asia, whence it overflowed into America and the Caucasian in Europe and Western Asia. The predominant type in the population of India (excluding Burma) is the Dravidian. This type is distinguished by a long head, large and dark eyes, a fairly strong bread, 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. In the south of India there is a Negretic element which is thought to be derived from a stock akin to the Veddahs of Ceylon, the Andamanese and other tribes of the Indian ocean, and possibly the aborigines of Australia. This very primitive type of humanity may perhaps have drifted eastwards from Africa at a very remote period when the remains of the land area that once linked India with Madagascar were far more extensive than they are at the present day. The Negretic element is probably pre-Dravidian, but our knowledge of the very early distribution of the human race is still too rudimentary to justify any positive statement as to the relative antiquity in India of these two elements of her population.

Some three or four thousand years ago a number of tribes of Aryan race entered India from the north-west. Like the Dravidians, these tribes had a long head, but unlike them, they were tall and well-formed, with fine and prominent, but not long, noses, and a comparatively fair complexion. They almost obliterated the earlier Dravidian type in the Punjab and adjoining parts of north-west India.

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\*A good deal of confusion has been caused by the fact that the philologists made use of the terms Aryan and Dravidian (which were originally applied to races) to designate linguistic families at a time when it was thought that race and language were correlative terms. It is too late now to rectify this, but it is essential to remember that these words, used philologically, have no racial connotation and vice versa.

while further east and south they produced a mixed race in which the Aryan element diminishes as the distance from the Punjab increases—gradually amongst the higher, more rapidly amongst the lower castes—and eventually in the south disappears altogether.

From the opposite corner of India, through Assam and the eastern Himalayas, there was a similar influx of tribes of Mongolian origin, whose main physical characteristics are a short head, a broad nose, a flat and comparatively hairless face, a short but muscular figure and a yellow skin. 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 recognizable Mongolian element diminishes towards the west and disappears altogether before Bihar is reached. The Aryan invaders spoke languages of the "Aryan" or Indo-European linguistic family, and languages of this family have now become the speech of the vast majority of the inhabitants of Northern India, where they have displaced, not only those previously spoken by the Dravidian races but also, to a great extent, those of the later Mongolian immigrants. Except, in the south of India, non-Aryan languages survive only in limited areas (chiefly hills and uplands) which were, until recent times, covered with forest and difficult of access.

The non-Aryan languages still spoken by people of the Dravidian physical type belong to two entirely distinct families of speech—the Dravidian and the Munda. Languages of the former family are spoken throughout Southern India and also by certain tribes of Chota Nagpur and the adjacent uplands. Other tribes in the latter area speak Munda languages. There are traces of the former existence of allied languages in the Punjab hills, but there are no indications whatever of their ever having been spoken in Southern India. The Dravidian linguistic family has no known affinity with any languages spoken outside India. Nor, with the exception of a small tribe in Baluchistan\* is

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\*It is not clear how the non-Dravidian Brahuis of Baluchistan came to speak a "Dravidian" language, but the fact that they do



it spoken by any people who are not Dravidians by race. The Munda family, on the other hand, is allied to the Khasi of Assam and the Mon-Khmer languages of Burma, and belongs like them to the Austro-Asiatic family : this again is a branch of the most widely diffused linguistic family in the world—the Austric—dialects of which are spoken in many parts of South-East Asia and in islands of the Indian and Pacific oceans as far as Easter Island off the coast of South America. Though there are many exceptions, the majority of the speakers of this widespread linguistic family are Mongolian by race, and recent research points to the coast of Indo-China as the place where it probably originated.

These considerations suggest that the Dravidians originally spoke languages of the "Dravidian" family, and that the Munda languages were imported by Mongolian immigrants through Assam or Burma whose distinctive physical type became merged in that of the earlier Dravidian inhabitants. In this connexion it may be noted that the Munda-speaking tribes used to erect monoliths in memory of their dead similar to those erected by the Khasis, who are of unmistakable Mongolian race, and that traces of an apparently Mongolian physiognomy are occasionally to be seen amongst them.\*

With the exception of Khasi, the numerous non-Aryan dialects of Assam all belong to the Tibeto-Chinese family and mainly to its Tibeto-Burman sub-family. The dialects of this sub-family which are current in Assam belong in the main to three groups, viz., Naga spoken in, and east of, the Naga Hills, Kuki-Chin spoken in Manipur, Cachar and the Lushai Hills, and Bodo, which claims practically all the

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so is not one to which any particular significance need be attached. As already pointed out it is by no means uncommon for people of one race to speak a language appertaining to an entirely different stock. Aryan languages have displaced other forms of speech in most parts of Northern India, and instances of linguistic instability are common amongst uncivilized races, vide Census of India 1911 Vol. 1, Part 1. page 328.

\*It is greatly to be desired that thoroughly reliable measurement should be made of the Mundas and Oraons of Chota Nagpur. Those effected by subordinates under Risley's instructions are not very convincing, and several competent observers disagree with his conclusion that the physical type of these two tribes is indistinguishable.

surviving non-Aryan languages of the Brahmaputra valley, the Garo Hills and North Cachar ; it includes among others, Kachari or Mech, Garo, Lalung, Rabha and Chutiya. In more recent times there have been several intrusions of tribes speaking Tai (or Shan) language, the most noteworthy being that of the Ahoms.

Although in Assam, Khasi is the only surviving language of the earlier Mongolian invaders, the fact that they penetrated as far as Chota Nagpur and (apparently) the Punjab, shows that they must have entered Assam in great numbers. But as their physical type was similar to that of later immigrants, it is impossible to form any idea as to the extent to which their descendants are represented in the present population of the province. It seems probable that, except in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, they were subjugated by later invaders, adopted their forms of speech and gradually intermingled with them.

Duration of  
Bodo domi-  
nation

The wide extent and long duration of Bodo domination as shown by the frequent occurrence of the prefix *di* or *ti*, the Bodo word for water, in the river names of the Brahmaputra valley and the adjoining country to the west e.g. Dibru, Dikhu, Dihing, Dihong, Dibong, Disang, Diphang, Dimla, etc. In some cases the old name is disappearing—the Dichu river, for instance, is now better known as the Jaldhaka—while in others it has already gone, as in the case of the Brahmaputra, which in the early days of Ahom rule was known as the Ti-lao. The latter word was doubtless the origin of another old name for this river, viz, Lohit or Lauhitya (red). This name has another derivation in Sanskrit literature, where the water is said to be so called because Parasuram washed off his bloody stains in it.\* But there are numerous similar instances of the invention of such stories to explain names taken from the aboriginal languages. Thus the Kosi derives its name from the Khussi, the Newar word for river, but it is connected in Hindu legends with Kusik Raja ; and the Tista, though its first syllable is

\*Kalika Puran, 84th Adhyaya of the Jamadagnya Upakhyana. See also Bhagavat Puran (J. Muir's Sankrit Texts, Vol. 1. pp. 458, 459)

clearly the Bodo *di* or *ti*, is regarded by the Hindus as a corruption of *trishna*, "thirst," or *trisrota*, "three springs." The Ahoms ruled in Assam for seven hundred years, but their word for river (*nam*) occurs only in a few instances in the extreme east, e.g., Namrup, Namtsik and Namsang. They called the Dikhu the Namchau, but the earlier Kachari name has survived in spite of them. The Ahoms, of course, were relatively few in numbers, but they were the dominant race; and the fact that, compared with the Bodo tribes, they have left so few marks on the toponomy of the country may perhaps be taken to show that the period for which the latter were supreme was far longer than that for which the Ahoms are known to have ruled.

The Bodo dialects, though still spoken in Assam by more than half a million persons, are in their turn giving way to Aryan languages (Assamese and Bengali), and their complete disappearance is only a matter of time.

Although Aryan languages are now predominant in both the great river valleys this is due mainly to the influence of Hindu priests and to the more advanced character of these languages, as compared with the ruder less and efficient tribal dialects; and the strain of Aryan blood is very thin. It is however, apparent in some of the higher castes. The Kalitas of the Brahmaputra valley, who number nearly a quarter of a million, have often a distinctly Aryan appearance and, they are possibly to some extent the descendants of the first Aryan immigrants by women of the country.

The soil of the Brahmaputra valley is fertile, but its climate is damp and relaxing so that, while the people enjoy great material prosperity, there is a strong tendency towards physical and moral deterioration. Any race that had been long resident there, though rising in the scale of civilization and gaining proficiency in the arts of peace, would gradually become soft and luxurious and so, after a time, would no longer be able to defend itself against the incursions of the hardier tribes behind them. The latter would then encroach in all directions, and would harry the plains with constant raids, killing the men and carrying off the women, and reducing the country to a condition bordering on anarchy. Then would come the opportunity for some enterprising hill

Probable  
cause of  
successive  
invasions

chief to swoop down with his tribesmen, or a confederacy of kindred tribes, and, after sweeping away the effete remains of a worn-out nationality, to establish his followers in its place. For a time the material resources of the plains would add to his strength, and he would be able without much difficulty to consolidate his rule and beat back external aggression. But time would bring its revenge; and, in the end, the new dynasty would sink just like the one which it had subverted. The history of the Ahoms shows how a brave and vigorous race may decay in the 'sleepy hollow' of the Brahmaputra valley; and it was only the intervention of the British that prevented them from being blotted out by fresh hordes of invaders, first the Burmese, and then the Singphos and Khamtis, and also, possibly, the Daflas, Abors and Bhutias.

The same was doubtless the case in the Surma valley, which must have been dominated by Bodo tribes, allied to the Tipperas on the south and the Garos and Koches on the north. At the present day, there are very few traces of a recent aboriginal element, but this is due largely to the absorbent power of Hinduism: at lately as 1835 Pemberton found that members of the Jaintia royal family were able in course of time to gain admission to the Kayasth and Baidya castes, and if these castes opened their portals to aborigines of high social position, other less exalted communities doubtless did the same to those of a humbler status.

In the Brahmaputra valley Koch, formerly the name of a tribe, has become a caste which admits proselytes to Hinduism from the ranks of the Kachari and other aboriginal tribes. A similar process has no doubt taken place in the Surma valley where various communities now regarded as Hindu castes consist largely of aboriginal elements.

In the hills of the Assam range the changes may have been fewer and less violent, but here also there have quite recently been movements, such as those of the Kukis, who in the last century were pushed northwards by the Lushais, and of the Mikirs, who once inhabited the Jaintia Hills. Amongst the Nagas also there are well-established cases of slow racial drift. Some of the tribes, again, that are now found in the hills were at one time in occupation of the

southern Kacharis, who were pushed back into the North Cachar Hills by the Ahoms.

Apart altogether from external aggression there was a strong external tendency towards disintegration. There was <sup>Other causes of disintegration.</sup> no strong national spirit or other cohesive element amongst the Mongolian tribes of Assam, and their natural condition was probably that of a number of small communities, each under its own chief or headman, and independent of its neighbours; a state of things, in fact, very similar to that which existed at the time of the British conquest amongst the Garos, Khasis and Nagas, whose organization in many cases was of a distinctly republican type. From time to time a local chief of unusual enterprise and ambition, or possibly some Kshatriya adventurer, would reduce these petty states and make himself master of the whole country. So long as the central administration was young and vigorous, the tribal headman would be held in check, but as soon as it became weak and effeminate, as usually happened after a few generations, the latter would recover their lost independence, and enjoy it until it was again subverted in the manner already described.

The comparatively short existence of the old Assam <sup>Slow progress of Hinduism in the past</sup> dynasties explains the slow and intermittent character of the progress of Hinduism in past generations. Hindu priests and warriors undoubtedly found their way to Assam at a very early date. The Indian king Samuda who, according to Forlong, was ruling in Upper Burma in 105 A.D., must have proceeded thither through Assam, and so must the Hindus who led the Tchampas or Shans in their conquest of the mouths of the Mekong in 280 A.D\*. The chief ruler in Assam in 640 A.D. was a Hindu who claimed to be a Kshatriya. And yet, in the Brahmaputra valley, large sections of population are still outside the pale of Hinduism or in the lower stages of conversion, where their adopted religion still sits lightly on them and they have not yet learnt to resist the temptation to indulge in pork, fowls and other articles regarded by the orthodox as impure. The reason seems to be that in early days the number of Hindu

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\*Phayre, History of Burma, Pages 3, 4 and 15.

settlers and adventurers was small, and they confined their attention to the king and his chief nobles, from whom alone they had anything to gain. They would convert them, admit the nobles to Kshatriya rank and invent for the king a noble descent, using, as will be seen, the same materials over and over again, and then enjoy as their reward lucrative posts at court and lands granted to them by their proselytes. They would not interfere with the tribal religious rites, as to do so would call forth the active animosity of the native priests ; nor would they trouble about the beliefs of the common people, who would continue to hold to their old religious notions. If the dynasty lasted long enough, the influence of Hindu ideas would gradually filter down to them and they would follow the example of their betters, as has now actually happened in the case of the Ahoms. But before this could come to pass, the dynasty would ordinarily be overthrown ; the down-fallen survivors of the old aristocracy would become merged in some Hindu caste,\* such as the Kalita, and Hinduism would sink into insignificance until, in course of time, its priests should succeed in inducing the new rulers, to accept their ministrations.

### The Mythological Period

The ancient  
Kamarupa.

In the Hindu epics and in Pauranic and Tantrik literature there are numerous references to ancient Assam, which is known as Pragjyotisha in the Mahabharat and as Kamarupa† in Purans and Tantras. Its extent varied from time to time. When the stories relating to it were inserted in the *Mahabharat*, it stretched southwards as far as the Bay of Bengal and its western boundary was the Karatoya. This was then a river of the first order, and united in its bed the

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\*The disappearance of former ruling races is one of the most curious phenomena in India history. There is no vestige now of the old Bodo rulers of Sylhet. The Khens, who ruled in the north-west of Assam before the Koches, have also for the most part been absorbed in other castes. In Upper India there is now no visible trace of the Greeks, Huns, and other once dominant races or tribes.

†I have retained the Sanskrit spelling to distinguish the ancient Kingdom from the modern district of the same name which occupies only a small Part of it.

streams which now go to form the Tista, the Kosi and the Mahananda. It was held sacred, ranking almost as high as the Ganges, and its tutelary deity, a mermaid goddess named Kausika, was worshipped all over the Matsya Desh, or the tract between it and the old bed of the Brahmaputra, which formerly flowed past the town of Mymensingh. In the Kalika Puran it is said that the temple of Kamakhya near Gauhati was in the centre of Kamarupa, and in the *Vishnu Puran* it is added that the country extended around this temple in all directions for 100 *yojanas*; or about 450 miles. Allowing for exaggeration, this may be held to embrace the whole of Eastern Bengal, Assam and Bhutan. In the *Jogini Tantra*, which is probably a later work, Kamarupa is said to extend from the Karatoya river on the west to the Dikhu on the east, and from the mountain of Kanjagiri on the north, to the confluence of the Brahmaputra and Lakhya rivers on the south; that is to say, it included roughly, the Brahmaputra valley, Bhutan, Rangpur, Koch Bihar, the north-east of Mymensingh and, possibly, the Garo Hills.

According to the same work the country was divided into four portions, viz., Kampith from the Karatoya to the Sankosh, Ratnapith from the Sankosh to the Rupahi, Suvarnapith from the Rupahi to the Bharali, and Saurnapith from the Bharali to the Dikrang. Elsewhere Ratnapith is said to include the tract between the Karatoya and the Monas, Kampith that between the Monas and Silghat on the north bank of the Brahmaputra, and Bhadrpith, the corresponding portion of the south bank, while Saurnapith as before, is the most easterly tract.

The origin of the name Kamarupa is mythologically explained as follows\* — When Sati died of vexation at the discourtesy shown to her husband Siva by her father Daksha, Siva, overcome by grief, wandered about the world carrying her dead body on his head. In order to put a stop to his penance, Vishnu followed him and lopped away the body piecemeal with his discus. It fell to earth in fifty-one

Origin of the name.

\*The germ of the story is to be found in the preface to the Gopath Brahmana published in Nos. 215-252 of the *Bibl. Ind.* pp. 30-35.

He installed on the throne Bhagdatta, the eldest of Narak's four sons, who sometimes called Bhagirath by Muhammadan writers.

Opposite Gauhati, on the north bank, now stands the temple of Asvakranta, which means "ascended by horses." Krishna is said to have halted there when he came to invade Pragjyotisha, and a number of small holes in the rock near the river are pointed out as the footprints of his horses.

Bhagadatta

Bhagadatta is frequently mentioned in the *Mahabharat* as a powerful potentate ruling in the east. In the *Sabha Parvan*, it is related that Arjun attacked his kingdom of Pragjyotisha. Bhagadatta had a host of Kirats and Chins and numerous other warriors that dwelt on the sea coast, but after eight days' fierce fighting he was defeated and compelled to pay tribute. Later on, when the forces of the Kauravas and Pandavas were being mustered for their final struggle, he went with a powerful army to the assistance of Duryodhan, and no less than four sections of the *Drona Parvan* are devoted to a narrative of his heroic deeds on the field of Kurukshetra, from the time when he rescued Duryodhan from the onslaughts of Bhim to his fight with Arjun in which he was defeated and slain. The issue of this last combat is ascribed to the intervention of Krishna, who rendered harmless the invincible weapon which he had given to Bhagadatta's father Narak.

Subsequent rulers of Narka's line

This king, it is said, succeeded by his son Vajradatta.\* Narak's descendants continued to rule for nineteen generations, the last kings of his line being Subahu and Suparua. Subahu became an ascetic and went to the Himalayas, and was succeeded by his son Suparua, who was afterwards killed by his ministers.

General remarks regarding Narka's dynasty.

It is impossible to say to what race this dynasty belonged, but the use of the appellation Asur shows that they were non-Aryans. Nor is there any clue as to when they reigned. Bhagadatta is described as a contemporary of the heroes of the Mahabharat, but that great epic, as is well known is far from being the product of a single age,

\*This is the relationship given in the Mahabharat and the earliest-known copper-plate. In the later copper-plates Vajradatta is said to be Bhagadatta's brother.



and no one has yet undertaken a critical examination of it in order to distinguish the original text from subsequent interpolations. We may ; however, conclude from the numerous references to them in ancient literature, as well as from the remarkable way in which their memory has been preserved by the people of Assam down to the present day, that Narak and Bhagadatta were real and exceptionally powerful kings, and probably included in their dominions the greater part of modern Assam and of Bengal east of the Karatoya.

The story of Krishna's invasion may perhaps be taken to indicate an expedition by some ancient Aryan chief. We have already seen that as far back as 105 A.D., an Indian king named Samuda was reigning in Upper Burma, while in 322 A.D., a prince of Cambod in north-west India set up a kingdom in Siam ; it is, therefore, by no means improbable that other adventurers found their way, at a still earlier period, to Northern Bengal and Assam.

The capital of Narak and his descendants was Prag-Notes of  
jyotishpur, the modern Gauhati. *Prag* means former or Pragjyotisha  
eastern, and *jyotisha*, a star, astrology, shining. Pragjyo-  
shpur may, therefore, be taken to mean the City of Eastern  
Astrology. The name is interesting in connection with the  
reputation which the country has always held as a land of  
magic and incantation and with the view that it was in  
Assam that the Tantrik form of Hinduism originated. From  
its commanding position on the Brahmaputra and its prox-  
imity to the sacred temple of Kamakhya, it is probable that  
many other kings also made this town their capital.

Krishna frequently appears in Assam Mythology. In The rape of  
the *Bhagavat* it is narrated that there was a king named Rukmini  
Bhishmak, who ruled in Vidarbha, which according to  
popular tradition in Assam, is the designation of the coun-  
try round Sadiya. According to ordinary Pauranic account  
Vidarbha corresponds to the modern Behar, but this not  
the only case in which the early Hindu settlers in Assam  
assigned local sites for the occurrences mentioned in Hindu  
Mythology. Numerous similar instances occur in Further  
India, and even in Java, where many of the events narrated  
in the Mahabharat have been given a local habitation. The

Brahmaputra valley was known to the Buddhists of Further India as Weisali. Bhishmak's capital was called Kundina a name which still survives in the Kundil river at Sadiya; and the ruins of an extensive fort, about 24 miles north of that town, between the gorges of the Dikrang and Dibong rivers, are said to be the remains of his capital.\* The walls are of no great height, but they are very well preserved; they consist of from six to nine courses of hewn stone (chiefly granite) surmounted by a breastwork of bricks, loopholed, but without any binding of cement. In the same locality are four large tanks and the brick foundations of what must have been extensive buildings.

Bhishmak had five sons and a daughter named Rukmini, Krishna, having heard of her beauty, was anxious to marry her, but her father had arranged to give her to another prince named Sisu Pal, whose fort may still be seen a few miles to the east of the one attributed to Bhismak. Rukmini secretly sent the news to Krishna and, on the day fixed for her marriage, the latter suddenly appeared and carried her off in his chariot. He was pursued by the crowd of princes who had come to assist at the wedding, but he defeated them and married Rukmini at Kundina amid the rejoicings of the people. Many of the marriage songs current in Assam contain allusions to this legend, which has been translated into Assamese and published under the title *Rukmini Harant*†.

Ban Raja  
Sonitpur

There is another story told in the Bhagavat, and also in, the Vishnu Puran, to which a local site has been assigned Bali, king of Sonitpur, "the city of blood" now known by the Assamese equivalent, Tezpur, had numerous sons, of whom Ban, the eldest succeeded him. Ban, who was the contemporary of Narak, had many sons and one daughter Usha by name. Usha was very beautiful and attracted the attention of Aniruddha, Krishna's grandson, who entered the castle where she was guarded and married her according to the Gandharva ceremony. He was seen and captured after a valiant resistance, but was rescued by Krishna, who defeated Ban in a great battle, which is said to have been

\*These ruins have been described by Hannay in the J.A.S.B.

†Veda Press, Calcutta, 1890.

the site of what is now known as the Tezpur *bil*. This story has been given an Assamese garb in a little book called *Kumar Haran*.\*

Ban Raja's fort is said to have been on the site now occupied by the Tezpur court-house. Numerous carved stones and frescoes are still to be seen in the locality, but they seem to have belonged to temples rather than to a palace. About a mile to the west is an old silted-up tank which is ascribed to his time, and another tank in the same neighbourhood still bears the name of Kumbhanda his prime minister. His grandson Bhaluka made his capital at Bhalukpung, not far from Balipara at the foot of the Aka hills, where the remains of old fortifications are still visible. The Akas are said to claim this prince as their progenitor; and it is perhaps, not impossible that they are the remains of a people who once ruled in the plains and were driven into the hills by some more powerful tribe.

In Canto IV of the *Raghu Vansa* it is narrated that Raghu <sup>Raghu's</sup> crossed the Lohit, *i. e.*, the Brahmaputra, and defeated <sup>victory over</sup> the king of Pragjyotisha, who gave him a number of <sup>king of</sup> Pragjyotisha elephants as tribute.

According to the *Jogini Tantra* a Sudra named Debesvar <sup>Other</sup> was ruling in Kamarupa at the commencement of the *Sak* <sup>traditional</sup> era. Mention is also made of Nara Sankar or Nagakhya <sup>kings.</sup> who flourished towards the end of the fourth century at Pratapgarh in Bishnath, where the ruins of a fort attributed to him are still in existence, and of four kings, Mimang Gajang, Sribang and Mrigang, who ruled for two hundred years at Lohityapur.

A Kshatriya named Dharma Pal, it is said, came from the west and founded a kingdom. He made his capital west of Gauhati and attracted thither a number of Brahmans and other high-caste Hindus from Upper India. The sage Kendu Kulai is said to have lived in his reign. He was succeeded in turn by Padma Narayan Chandra, Narayan and others, ending with Ram Chandra, whose capital was at Ratnapur in the Majuli. This place is mentioned in the old legends as the capital of various kings, amongst others of Kusaranya

\*Veda Press, Calcutta, 1891

son, of Harabinda, who is said in the *Dipka Chand* to have ruled over Gaur, Kamarupa and Jaintia ; it is reputed to have been washed away owing to a change in the course of the Brahmaputra river.

### Arimatta

Ram Chandra had a beautiful wife who was raped by the Brahmaputra river and gave birth to a son named Arimatta.\* This prince founded a kingdom further west and defeated many other chiefs. At last he came into conflict with Ram Chandra and killed him, not knowing till afterwards of his relationship with him. According to other accounts he accidentally shot his father with an arrow which he had discharged at a deer. In any case, the sin of patricide is generally attributed to him, and many stories are told of his vain efforts to atone for the sin which he had unwittingly committed.

It is certain where Arimatta ruled, but most accounts place his kingdom in Lower Assam. His capital is said to have been at the Baidargarh, near Betna in Kamrup, where a high embankment forming a square, each side of which is about four miles long, is still in existence. He was attacked by a king named Phengua, of the house of Kamatapur, who advanced with an army of Meches and Koches, armed with bows and arrows, and threw up an embankment ten miles west of the Baidargarh ; this embankment is in the Dhumdhuma Mauza and is still known as Phenguagarh. Phengua was at first defeated. He then engaged in an intrigue with Arimatta's wife Ratnamala, and with her aid spoilt the bow-strings of his soldiers, defeated and slew him and took possession of his capital. He put Ratnamala to death, saying that, as she had been unfaithful to her late husband, she would probably be false also to him, if he were to fulfil his promise and marry her. Arimatta's son Ratna

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\*The traditions vary as to the name and lineage of the king whose wife gave birth to Arimatta and it is useless trying to reconcile them. One version is given in the text. Another is that he was of the Nagakhya line, and another that he was the descendant of three kings named Mayurdhvaj, Tamradhvaj and Pra'appuriya who ruled in succession at Ratnapur ; the wife of the last mentioned was Harmati, the daughter of Hirabinda, who was descended from Iarabatta, king of Saumar. Others, again, identify him with Mrigang, who has already been mentioned.

Singh continued the war, and eventually overcame Phengua Raja and killed him. He afterwards lost his kingdom, owing, it is said, to the curse of a Brahman, with whose wife he had carried on an intrigue,

In the Sahari Mauza in Nowgong are the remains of an old fort with high embankments known as the Jongalgarh. This alleged to have been the capital of Jongal Balahu, another son of Arimatta, who was defeated by the Kacharis and drowned himself in the Kallang river.

Many legends cluster round Arimatta, but it would serve no useful purpose to discuss them further, as it is quite impossible to unravel the truth from the various conflicting stories that are current amongst the people. The Rajas of Rani and Dimarua both claim to be descended from him, as well as from Narak and Bhagadatta.

We may conclude our notice of the legendary period **Shakkal** by a story called from Muhammadan sources. In the introduction to **Firishta's history\*** it is related that **Kidar Brahman**, a powerful king of Northern India, was overthrown by **Shakkal and Shangaldib**, who came from Koch, that is to say, from the tract east of the **Karatoya**, or **Kamarupa**. He first conquered, it is said, **Bang**, or the country east of the **Bhagirathi**, and **Bihar**, and then collected an enormous army and vanquished **Kidar** in several hardfought battles. He founded the city of **Gaur** or **Lakhnauti**, which, it is said, remained the capital of the kings of Bengal for two thousand years.† He was very proud and magnificent, and had a force comprising 4,000 elephants, 100,000 horse and 400,000 foot.

His downfall is ascribed to **Afrasiyab**, the king of **Turan** or **Scythia**. The original **Afrasiyab** is believed to have conquered Persia about seven countries before the Christian era, but the name, which means "conqueror of Persia," was

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\*Dowson's Elliot's History of India, Vol. VI, page 533

†If this story of the founding of Gaur by an aboriginal tribe of Koch or Garo affinities could be relied upon, it would suggest the query whether the name of Gaur is not in some way connected with Garo. There is another Gaur under the Garo hills in Sylhet.

assumed by others of the family, and the monarch here referred to may have been a subsequent ruler of the same dynasty. However that may be, he appears to have claimed tribute, which Shankal refused to pay. He sent an army of 50,000 Mongols against him, and a fierce battle took place in the mountains of Koch near Ghoraghat. The Mongols were defeated by overwhelming numbers and retreated into the mountains. They entrenched themselves, but were on the point of being annihilated, when Afrasiyab hurried up with reinforcements from his capital Gangdozb, beyond the Himalayas, and utterly defeated Shankal. The latter retreated, first to Lakhnauti and then to the mountains of Tirhut, where he eventually made his submission and was carried off by Afrasiyab.\*

#### Conclusion

The above account of the traditional rulers of Assam does not profess to be at all exhaustive. Religious books and other old writings contain lists of many other kings, but it is impossible to say if they are genuine, and if so, who the kings were and where they reigned ; and to refer to them at length would be a waste of time and space. The dynasties mentioned above are those that are best known, and although a great part of the stories told of them may be fictitious, it is probable that there is nevertheless a basis of actual fact.

There are numerous references to Pal kings, but the names vary greatly in different lists. The reason is that the title Pal was assumed by many different Rajas : Nar Narayan added Bhu Pal after his name, and one of the dynasties brought to light in two recently discovered copper-plates also used the title, though they were in no way related to the wellknown Pal kings of Bengal ; at the present day in that Province the title is a favourite one with low-caste zamindars who wish to hide their humble origin.

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\*According to Maulavi Abdus Salam (translation of the Riazus-Salatin, p. 56). Firdausi in his great epic mentions an Indian Prince, named Shangal, in connection with the adventures of Bahram Gaur, a Persian monarch of the Sassanian dynasty who reigned in the middle of the fourth century.

Some of the legends which have been mentioned suggest that in the distant past the inhabitants of the country we now call Assam attained considerable power and degree of civilization ; and this view is confirmed by the narrative of the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsiang and by the copper-plate inccriptions which will be referred to in the next chapter. This being so, the question will doubtless be asked why so few memorials of their time have come down to us. The reason is that nature has vied with man in destroying them. The Brahmaputra valley is an alluvial country, and the impetuous, snow-fed rivers which debouch from the Himalayas find so little resistance in its friable soil that they are constantly carving out new channels and cutting away their bank's ; consequently no buildings erected in their neighbourhood can be expected to remain for more than a limited time, except at a few points like Gauhati, where rock pierces through the alluvium.

Though occurring at distant intervals, violent earthquakes are, in Assam, quite as great a cause of destruction as fluvial action ; there are few masonry structures which could resist a shock like that of 1897, which not only laid in ruins the towns of Shillong, Gauhati and Sylhet, but also overthrew many of the monoliths, which are so marked a feature of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, and broke down most of the piers of the Sil Sako, an ancient stone bridge, not far from Hajo, which marks the bed of a river that has long since left it and taken another course. A less sudden, but almost equally potent, cause of damage is found in the luxuriant vegetation of the country. The *pipal* ( *ficus religiosa* ) in particular is a great enemy of masonry buildings ; and once a seed of this tree has germinated in the interstices of such a building, its downfall is only question of time. Owing to this cause, many even of the more recent Ahom palaces and temples are already in a state of decay.

Of the damage done by man, it is necessary only to mention the way in which religious zeal led the early

Reason for  
small number  
of monument  
of ancient  
times in  
Assam

Musalman invaders to break down Hindu temples, and the widespread havoc wrought by the Burmese in a spirit of wanton mischief.

The ruins which still survive represent only an inconsiderable fragment of the buildings that were once in existence but more will doubtless come to light when the jungal which now covers so vast an area in Assam comes to be removed to make way for the extension of cultivation.