

## Appendix B: Brief History of Assam

Assam is one of the medium-sized states of the country with an area of 78,500 sq km and a population of 2.66 crore. 'Assam' is the anglicized form of the word 'Asom' which means 'uneven' or 'unparalleled'. According to another interpretation, the word 'Assam' is derived from the word 'Ahom', the Tai Mongoloid race who ruled most of the Brahmaputra valley for over 600 years till the coming of the British in 1826.

Assam's is essentially a river valley civilization. Going back into history, one finds Assam to be an ancient land that figured prominently in international trade even before the birth of Jesus Christ. Chang Kien, a Chinese explorer, had traced his country's trade with Assam as far back as in 100 BC. According to the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, Himalayan malabathrum and silk from Assam had reached Egypt and Rome in pre-Christian times. Assam also figured prominently in Ptolemy's geography (2nd Century AD).

Human footprints in this land have been traced back to the early Stone Age. The earliest footprints were those of Austric aborigines who were followed by the pre-Dravidians. When opened, the eastern migration routes witnessed the arrival in quick succession of several Mongoloid groups of people who came to populate the land almost totally by the time of the Vedas. Most of the present tribal groups of the North-Eastern region are offsprings of those Mongoloids, whom the vedas referred to as the Kiratas.

Absence of sufficient archaeological materials has made exploration of Assam's past a difficult task. However, from the two epics and other ancient literature, we know that the ancient name of Assam was Pragjyotisha, with present-day Guwahati being known as Pragjyotishpura, the city of Eastern Lights. Pragjyotisha, subsequently known as Kamrupa, had then covered a much larger territory, at times extending as far as the border of Nepal. The Kalika Purana and Vishnu Purana have confirmed that the extent of Kamrupa's territory was about 450 miles in all directions from the Kamakhya temple, located atop the Neelachal hills in Guwahati.

The ancient kingdom of Kamrupa comprised roughly the Brahmaputra Valley, Bhutan, Rungpore and Coochbehar. While the northern and eastern limits of the kingdom were the Himalayas and the Patkai ranges, its western limits were defined by Karatoya river, which rises in the extreme north-west of Jalpaiguri (in present-day West Bengal). This river separated Bengal from Kamrupa. This western limit has been defined in the 'Yogini-tantra'.

The Ramayana and Mahabharata as also Kalidasa's Raghuvansa made pointed reference of this region as Kamrupa-Pragjyotisha. King Bhagadutta, son of the Pragjyotisha-Kamrupa King Naraka, fought at the head of a large army of Kiratas in the battle of Kurukshetra on the side of the Kauravas, while Ghatotkacha, son of Bhima by the queen of the ancient Hirimba (Kachari) kingdom in Assam showed great prowess in that battle on the side of the Pandavas.

It is commonly accepted that the earliest rulers of Pragjyotisha belonged to the Danava dynasty, the most important of the line being Mahiranga Danava. The most popular and colourful figure in the legends of this body of tradition is King Narakasura, founder of the Bhauma Naraka line, whose birth is ascribed to the union of Vasumati (Mother Earth) with Vishnu in his Varaha incarnation. Naraka's descendant Bhagadutta finds honourable mention in the Mahabharata. Ancient Kamrupa had many contacts with other Indian kingdoms. Kalhana's Raja-tarangini mentions of the marriage of Kamrupa princess Amritaprabha to Meghavahana, the king of Kashmir. She was his chief queen and a prominent figure in Kashmir history.

Hiuen Tsang, the famous Chinese traveller, gives a detailed account of Assam of the seventh century, when King Bhaskaravaman enhanced the power and prestige of Kamrupa to an extent never achieved before. Bhaskaravarman was a close friend and ally of Emperor Harshavardhana and his kingdom covered almost the whole of eastern India and enjoyed great prosperity.

The Varmans were followed by the rulers of the Salastambha dynasty who held power till the end of the 10th century AD. Among the important kings of this dynasty were Harshadeva or Shri Harsha, who even assumed the title of Maharajadhiraja Parameswara Paramabhattacharya. The most powerful and prominent monarch of this dynasty, however, was Vanamala Varmadeva, whose kingdom extended far and wide and included present-day North Bengal.

Then came the Pala dynasty, set up by Brahmapala, which flourished till the beginning of the 12th century. Another important ruler of this region after the Pala kings was Prithu, who had successfully resisted the first Muslim invasion of Kamarupa, led by Mohammed Ibn Bakhtiyar and completely annihilated the Muslim forces. A second Muslim onslaught however was successful and Prithu was overthrown in 1228.

Around the same time, the Ahoms, a Tai-Mongoloid group, migrated to Assam from around present-day Yunnan Province of China. Siu-ka-pha was the first Ahom king in Assam. The Ahoms were given stiff resistance by the Kacharis who dominated eastern Assam. But slowly and steadily, through a policy of conciliation and assimilation and military might, the Ahoms consolidated and expanded their position in the Brahmaputra valley.

In the 16th century, the Koch kingdom attained great heights in western Assam and present-day North Bengal. Naranarayan, who is believed to have reigned from 1533-1587 AD, was the greatest among the Koch kings. His brother, General Chilarai, was a great conqueror and led successful expeditions against the Kacharis, Khasis, Garos, Jaintias, Sylhet, Manipur, Tripura, Mymensing, Demoria and the Ahoms. In 1563 AD, Chilarai and Naranarayana entered Gargaon, capital city of the Ahoms, after a military victory. Soon thereafter, they entered into a peace treaty with the Ahoms and returned to Coochbehar.

After Naranarayan and Chilarai, the Koch power declined and the Koch territory slowly came under the control of the Mughals. The Mughals made repeated attempts to conquer Assam but without success. The Ahoms were remarkably successful in resisting the Mughals. However, in 1661, Mirjumla was deputed by Aurangzeb to conquer Assam.

In December 1661, Mirjumla conquered Coochbehar. In March 1662, Mirjumla entered the Ahom capital Gargaon. The Ahom king Jayadhwaj Singha retreated to the hills near Namrup. But Mirjumla's victory was short-lived. The floods, pestilence and relentless harassment from the guerilla attacks of the Ahom soldiers compelled Mirjumla to sign a peace treaty (the Treaty of Ghilajharighat, January, 1663) with the Ahom king. On his way back to Dhaka, Mirjumla died in March 1663. The terms of the treaty between the Mughals and the Ahoms tilted heavily in favour of the Mughals. Chakradhwaj Singha succeeded the Ahom king, Jayadhwaj Singha, in 1663. Being highly sensitive to his prestige and dignity, the new king resolved to free the country from the burden of the heavy indemnity payable annually to the Mughal Emperor. He raised a new army and prepared to attack the Mughals and drive them away from Assam. Lachit Barphukan was placed at the head of the new army.

Guwahati, which came under the Mughals after Mirjumla's success, was won back by Lachit Barphukan in 1667. The Commander of the Mughal garrison in Guwahti, Syed Feroze Khan, was taken prisoner. The battle royal between the Mughal and the Ahoms were fought at Saraighat near Guwahati in 1671. The Mughal army led by Raja Ram Singh of Amber was decisively defeated by Lachit Barphukan in a naval battle. Ram Singh's second-in-command Rashid Khan and many Mughal soldiers died in the battle. Thereafter, the Mughals could never launch any further effective expeditions against the Ahoms. Rather, it was the great Ahom king Rudra Singha (1696-1714) who was about to invade the Mughal empire in 1714 before his premature death.

Slowly, Ahom power also started declining in the second half of the 18th century. There was internal dissensions and civil war. Most important among them was the Moamoria rebellion during the 1770s and 1780s. In 1818, the Burmese invaded Assam and forced the Ahom king to leave the country. Finally, in 1826 the British intervened and drove out the Burmese from Assam. Assam came under British domination after the treaty of Yandaboo between the Burmese and the British company in 1826.

Except for the brief period from 1663 to 1667, after Mirjumla's successful expedition and from 1818 to 1826 during the Burmese incursion, Assam always remained unconquered by any outside power. Disenchantment against the British also started soon after 1826. Piyoli Phukan was hanged in 1830 after his unsuccessful armed rebellion against the British. The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 had its violent manifestation in Assam also. Maniram Dewan and Piyoli Barua, two Assamese nobles, were hanged after the Mutiny was suppressed.

From about 1857 till 1947, Assam had a period of peace and economic regeneration under the British regime. Tea, oil and timber-based industries were set up in Assam during this period. The railway infrastructure was also laid by the British. But the Assamese craving for freedom from foreign domination never subsided. Assam took active part in the freedom struggle. Gopinath Bordoloi, Tarun Ram Phukan, Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, Ambikagiri Roychoudhury, Kuladhar Chaliha and many other prominent freedom fighters from Assam made significant contributions

to the freedom struggle. Gopinath Bordoloi was awarded Bharat Ratna posthumously mainly for his role in the freedom movement and for his contributions to national integration.

Culturally, Assam has been a melting pot. Over the centuries various migrant groups entered Assam from the neighbouring countries including China, Myanmar and South-east Asia. Most of the migrants were Mongoloids. From the West, Aryan influence also entered Assam. Till the advent of the 16th century, Assam was the seat of hardcore Tantrik practices. The Vaishnavite saint Srimanta Sankaradeva (1449-1568) brought in radical transformation in Assamese society. His reforms movement was in a way part of the larger Pan-Indian Bhakti movement. He introduced a monotheistic faith cutting across castes, creed and religion. His first few disciples included Muslims, tribals and lower castes as well as Brahmins. Sankaradeva engineered a complete social, cultural and literary rejuvenation of the Assamese society. His work was carried on by his successors who included, among others, Mahapurusha Madhabdeva, Gopaldeva, Damodardeva and Harideva. The influence of Srimanta Sankaradeva and his successors are the predominant distinctive mark of the composite cultural mosaic of Assam even today.

Historically, Assam has been a prosperous land. But today, Assam is one of the poorest and the most problem-ridden states of the country. Natural calamities, mainly floods, insurgency, terrorism, ethnic tension, economic backwardness and poverty, massive unemployment, serious financial crisis and many such problems have tormented the state for quite some time. At the time of Independence, Assam was one of the richer states and its per capita income was 4 per cent above the national average. Today, Assam ranks among one of the poorest states of the country and its per capita income is less than 60 per cent of the national average. What is even more disturbing is that the gap between Assam and rest of the country in terms of per capita income has been widening continuously during the last fifty years and if the present trend continues, then by 2020 the per capita income of Assam will be only about 40 per cent of the national average.

Assam and the North-East became the scene of massive war-time activities by the Allied Forces during the later part of the Second World War. The advance of the Japanese Army towards India was halted in the battle of Nagaland and Manipur. This was the turning point of the Second World War in its eastern theatre. That also meant a setback to Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's Indian National Army's bid to liberate India, beginning with its eastern frontiers, from British rule. During the war, Assam became a main supply corridor of the Allied Forces. The Stillwell road (named after General Joseph W. Stillwell) connecting Ledo, the easternmost railhead in Assam, with Kunming in China (Yunan province), covering a distance of 1079 miles, was completed in record time. This road became a vital supply link for the allied forces in China, bypassing mainland Burma (Myanmar) which was then under Japanese occupation. Many air-bases were also built in Assam to facilitate aerial supply. Large-scale troop movements took place through Assam. The Second World War left its marks on the social, economic and political life of Assam. In fact, it were the huge quantities of arms and ammunitions left behind by the Japanese and the Allied Forces with which the first generation underground Naga nationalists

began their militant activities in the 1950s when Nagaland was a district of Assam. This was the beginning of insurgency in the North-East.

But Assam's tale of woes actually began with the Partition of the country. The problem of transport bottleneck and geographical isolation started in 1947. Road and railway transit routes through erstwhile East Bengal were lost. So also the traditional trade relations between Assam and the neighbouring countries were strained. 1947 also meant large-scale migration of refugees from East Pakistan to Assam and the beginning of ethnic conflicts in the state. Then came the great earthquake of 1950, which was one of the 10 biggest earthquakes ever recorded in the world. It changed the topography of the region and the courses of the river Brahmaputra and some of its major tributaries.

The earthquake was followed by severe floods in the mid-1950s bringing untold devastations and miseries in their trail. Next came India's war with China in 1962. Assam and the North-East faced the brunt of the war. It was a big psychological blow to the people of the North-East and it sent a strong signal to prospective investors that Assam is not a safe place for investment. The 1962 war also perhaps changed the perspective of the national policy makers vis-a-vis Assam from development to defence. Soon thereafter the Indo-Pak war of 1965 broke out. Once again Assam had to go through the trauma of the war. The riverine route from Assam to the outside world through the then East Pakistan were sealed as a result of the war. The next severe blow came in 1971 when Assam not only had to suffer the war-time tension and inconveniences of the Bangladesh liberation war but also had to give shelter to millions of refugees from erstwhile East-Pakistan for more than a year.

In 1971, Assam was fragmented once again and Balkanisation of the North-East was taken one step further. Assam had to shift its capital in 1974 from Shillong to Guwahati. Before the administration could settle down in its new environment in a make-shift temporary capital, the Assam agitation began in 1979 and the administration was stressed to its limits. Maintenance of law and order got precedence over everything else. The agitation was over in 1985 after the signing of the Assam Accord. But the respite was short-lived. The rise of the ULFA in the mid-1980s followed by unrest in Bodo areas engulfed the state with militancy, insurgency, terrorism, and associated killings, extortions. Although the state is very rich in natural resources and industrial raw materials, the process of industrialization of the state came to a grinding halt. Not only did the flow of fresh investment stop, there began a process of capital flight from the state.

The situation has been further compounded by involvement of some external forces inimical to India and their attempt to fish in the troubled waters of the North-East. It has now been established that many of the insurgent outfits of the North-East receive arms training and other logistic supports from the near abroad. During the last five years, from 1996 to 2000, 1889 persons were killed in terrorist-related violence, of which 413 were security personnel. In fact, during the last 20 years, the state government has hardly got any respite to take any strong development initiative. It has been completely engaged in fighting, with its back to the wall, the

problems of insurgency and terrorism, ethnic uprising and violent clashes and natural calamities, mainly floods. Apart from the direct cost of fighting terrorism including loss of life and property, the indirect cost in terms of loss of production, employment, investment and a general environment of insecurity and despondency, have been immense. Assam's case of economic degeneration cannot be explained in its entirety by economic logic and theory. It must be seen in its proper historical, cultural, political and geographical perspectives.