

Chinese explorer, Chang Kien, who traced his country's trade with Assam during that period. The *Periplus of the Erythrean sea* depicts how Chinese silk from Assam reached Egypt and Rome before the advent of Christianity. Ptolemy's geography also acknowledges the existence of Assam.

The earliest inhabitants of Assam can be safely said to be the Australoids or the pre-Dravidians. It was, however, the Mongoloids who entered the land through the eastern mountainous passes who were to almost overrun the land long before the time of the compilation of the Hindu religious literature known as the **Vedas** around the 10th Century BC. The Vedas called the Mongoloids *Kiratas*, and the present-day tribes of the North-East are all considered to be the descendants of the *Kiratas*. **Pragjyotishpura**—*the City of Eastern Lights*—was deemed to be the capital of the *Kiratas*, and the epics define a land of the *Kiratas* stretching from the foothills of the Himalayas in the north to the Bay of Bengal in the south. The *Kirata* King Narakasura is said to be the founder of Pragjyotishpura. The *Kalika Purana* and the *Vishnu Purana* identifies this land as **Kamarupa** saying that it extended for 450 miles in all directions from the shrine of Kamakhya atop the Nilachal Hills in modern Guwahati. Narakasura's successor, Bhagadatta finds mention in the epic *Mahabharata*, leading a huge *Kirata* army with a large number of elephants in the war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas against the former.

The records of the Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang shed light on the area in the Seventh Century. Pragjyotishpura came to be known as **Kamarupa** in the medieval period. Hiuen Tsang speaks of a powerful and prestigious Kamarupa under King Bhaskaravarman. Kamarupa had perhaps achieved the zenith of its power during the time, for subsequent centuries were witness to repeated onslaughts by aboriginals, which reduced the power of the kingdom and led to its fragmentation.

Between the heydays of the Kamarupa kingdom and the coming of the **Ahoms** in the thirteenth century, the land experienced a spell of turmoil in which no single power could hold sway. Thus, when the Ahoms entered Assam through the eastern hills in 1228, they chanced upon a period in its history when it was at its most susceptible. Among the local tribes, only the **Chutias** and the **Kacharis** could offer a semblance of resistance.

Thereafter, the next six centuries belonged to the Ahoms who founded a powerful dynastic rule with their capital in Sibsagar of Upper Assam. It was after the Ahoms that the land was named *Asom* or its more anglicized version **Assam**. The advent of the Ahoms marked the beginning of a new era in the history of Assam.

The centre of power was thus shifted from Kamarupa in Lower Assam to Upper Assam, and the importance of Lower Assam declined sharply save for an intervening short period in the early sixteenth century when the western limits of the kingdom of the **Koch**, one of the Kirata tribes, increased considerably under their illustrious King Naranarayana.

Meanwhile, the unprecedented rise in power of the Ahoms was taken as a challenge by the **Mughal** emperors in Delhi who sent seventeen military expeditions to shackle the Ahoms, but all in vein. The last of these expeditions resulted in a long-drawn see-saw battle between the Mughals and the Ahoms at **Saraighat**—the present site of the first bridge over the Brahmaputra—near Guwahati, which climaxed in a resounding victory for the Ahom forces under its general **Lachit Barphukan**.

Lachit Barphukan achieved immortal fame and his heroism together with the battle and its many anecdotes—one of which relates the interesting incident of Lachit beheading his own uncle for slight of duty, as an example of his patriotism—are now integral part of the history and folk culture of Assam.

The victory at Saraighat was followed by a spell of treacherous court intrigues that threatened the very existence of the Ahom kingdom until **Rudra Sinha** assumed power and took the Ahom Kingdom from strength to strength. From this zenith however it was a plunge straight down, starting with the uprising of the **Vaisnavite Moamoria Mahantas** in protest against the religious harassment meted out to them at the instigation of the Sakta Ahom queen **Phuleswari**, in the eighties of the eighteenth century. It was during the troubled times of the uprising and many court intrigues and dissension sapping the strength of the Ahom rulers that the **Burmese** invaded Assam through its eastern borders.

It was history repeating itself, and just as the Ahoms themselves had overran the land six centuries before, so also were they themselves humiliated by the Burmese who were to be the rulers of the land till the **British** appeared on the scene in 1826 and forced them to cede Assam by the *Treaty of Yandabu*.

The British soon realized that their latest acquisition was by no means a land of docile inhabitants when within four years of their conquest they had to face a joint resistance by the people of Assam. The bid was abortive but marked the beginning of the confrontation between the nationalists and the imperialist that was to end with the country achieving her independence in 1947.

The years in between, as in rest of the country, witnessed the saga of the **Indian Independence Movement** marked by ungrudging sacrifices and unbreakable determination. Maniram Dewan, Piyoli Phukan and Piyali Barua were hanged in connection with the Sepoy Mutiny. Martyrs like Kanak Lata, Kushal Konwar and Bhogeswari Phukanani gave their lives for the Mahatma's cause. Their sacrifices were not in vain.

The **Chinese aggression of 1962** was to pose a real enough threat to the independence of this particular part of the country and was thankfully averted by a strong military response and last-minute political understandings. But what was Assam back in 1947 constituted all the States of the present-day North-East except Manipur and Tripura. However, regional cultural variations were too distinct for the entire land to stay clubbed under a single political administration. Hence, we have the phenomenon of new States being carved out from erstwhile Assam one after the other. It started with the creation of Nagaland in 1963, followed by the separation of Meghalaya and Mizoram in 1971, and ended with the formation of Arunachal Pradesh in 1972. The part that remained as a single entity is the Assam of today.

And cultural identity has always featured prominently in the socio-economic and political scenario of the State. Thus we have the unprecedented **Assam Movement** of the 1980s, which is largely deemed to be an endeavour to preserve the cultural identity of the State endangered by large-scale infiltration of illegal immigrants from across the border from Bangladesh. In recent times, the State has also been rancled by the terrorism propagated by some extremist elements.

AN ECONOMIC PROFILE

Nature has been bountiful in Assam. The State possesses an estimated 320 million tonnes of coal reserves, oil and natural gas reserves

sufficient to sustain current production levels for at least another fifty years, and a vast, though largely untapped potential for power generation. Locationally there are several positive attributes. Guwahati is the communications and transportation hub for much of the North-East. The State's waterways can transport goods cheaply and efficiently. There is an extensive and growing railway network, one that is being converted in substantial part to broad gauge. The State is well placed to service the needs and markets of other States of the North-East. A modicum of incremental investment would allow access to other countries, in particular to the growing economies of South East Asia.

A nascent industrial infrastructure, capable of being built upon, already exists in Assam. There are four oil refineries, several large and medium sector manufacturing industries, including sugar mills, textile spinning units and processing houses, cement plants and fertiliser units. All of this is in addition to the traditional strengths in tea and jute. There is potential to set up industries in the hydrocarbon sector—gas cracker plants, aromatic complexes and downstream and ancillary industries.

Despite this, Assam's economic development is lagging behind that of the rest of the country—and the gap is increasing. At Independence, Assam's per capita income was only marginally less (a difference of 4 percent) than that of the average for the country. In 1998, the average per capita income for the country was over 1.8 times that of Assam. The relative stagnancy in the growth of income is attributable in turn to the inability of each of the component sectors to grow at rates that would allow the State to reach the levels attained by the rest of the country.

Industrial diversification and growth has been constrained by the inadequacy and quality of complementary infrastructure, the geographical isolation of the region, and the lack of well developed markets. There are few traditions of indigenous entrepreneurship, and the tentativeness of private investment from outside the State has necessitated a major, if not always efficient, role for the State.

In the agriculture sector, the overall growth rates since the 1980s has been a little over 2 percent, rates not sufficient to generate surpluses for investment, or create-purchasing power in the rural

sector to provide a market for local industries. Cropping intensities and crop productivities remain low, and crop diversification is, at best, nascent. Fragmentations of holdings, low irrigation coverage and the limited adoption of new technologies and practices are some of the constraining factors. The regular occurrence and increasing intensity of floods is detrimental to the advancement of the sector. Not only do floods wreak annual havoc, but the accompanying uncertainty prevents farmers from taking risks and making investments in land improvement, and in higher cost, albeit high yielding, technologies and practices.

The inability to build on the promise afforded by the horticulture sector is largely attributable to the deficiencies in complementary investments, in storage, rural transportation networks and in market facilities. For the same reasons, fisheries, poultry farming and dairy are yet to acquire the momentum required to raise incomes substantially and sustainably.

There are 848 tea gardens, accounting for about 11 percent of the State's income, producing approximately 400 million kg of tea, including 160 million kg for export suffered setbacks, and consequent economic activity, income and employment are at levels much lower than even a decade ago.

In absolute terms, the number of poor people in the State increased from 7.8 million in 1983 to 9.5 million in 1999-2000. In 1999-2000, 36.09 percent of the State's population continued to live below the poverty line, a figure appreciably above the national average (26.1 percent). Only four States had a higher proportion of their population below the poverty line—Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Rajasthan.

GEOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Assam, known during epic period as Pragjyotisha or the place of eastern astronomy is strategically located and has international border with as many as four countries, namely China, Myanmar, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. It is surrounded on all other sides by predominantly hilly or mountainous tracts—Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh on the north, Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh on the east and Meghalaya Mizoram and Tripura on the south.

Bordering States/Countries

East	Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Myanmar
West	West Bengal, Meghalaya, Bangladesh
North	Arunachal Pradesh, Bhutan
South	Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Tripura
Longitude	89° 42' E to 96° E
Latitude	24° 5' to 28° N
Major Towns	Guwahati, Dhubri, Goalpara, Barpeta, Dibrugarh, North Lakhimpur, Golaghat, Diphu, Tinsukia, Jorhat, Tezpur, Nagaon, Sivasagar, Silchar.
Area (in sq. km)	78,523
Percentage of forest cover (1995-96)	27.41
Languages	Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, English

15,007

DEMOGRAPHY

Population			Literacy %			Density
Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	
26,638,407	13,787,799	12,850,608	64.28	71.93	58.03	340

Source: <http://www.indiainbusiness.nic.in/indian-states/assam/general.htm>

RELIGION

As Assam is a State of many ethnic groups of people, it is also a State of many religions. It represents in full the religious diversity of the country. Besides the major religions, some of the tribes also follow animism, and worship nature in its various manifestations. Worship of trees, mountains and rocks are common among tribes such as the Dimasas of North Cachar Hills in the south.

The Vaisnava revival of the Middle Ages brought to the limelight the great Vaisnavite saint *Srimanta Sankardeva* (1449-1568) who developed and propagated *Eka-sarana-namadharma* (a faith of

allegiance to one God) which was part of the neo-Vaisnavite movement of India and is characterized by absence of the rituals practised by the Saktas and the principle of equality which annulled all caste barriers.

Mahapurush Sri Sri Sankaradeva, as he is known in the State, composed hymns (*borgeet*), dance-dramas (*ankianaat*) and recitals, and with the help of his disciples, set up *sattras* (monasteries) and *namghars* (community prayer halls) for the propagation of the new faith that soon gained large-scale acceptance. Thus, Assam developed its own form of Vaisnavism, which is today the predominant faith among the Hindus. So much so that *borgeets*, *ankianaats* and many other Vaisnavite art forms and social norms are now considered to be integral parts of the Assamese culture.

Saivism, which holds the procreative energy of males in reverence and is related to the worship of God Shiva as well as Saktism are other forms of Hinduism still practised in the State.

The reformation movement of the Muslim saint and missionary Shah Miran, popularly known as Ajan Fakir, deserves special mention in this context. Ajan Fakir came to Assam from the Middle East about two hundred years after Shankardeva and found that the Muslims who had come and settled in the land as early as in the 13th century A.D. were practising a form of Islam somewhat distorted by elements of the local Hindu religion. He set out to reinforce Islamic ideals and religious practices, and composed religious songs (known as *Jikirs* and *Jaris*) in the spoken language much in the same style as the *Borgeets* of Sankardeva. Very soon he gained popularity and gathered a large following, and *Zikirs* and *Jaris* remain unique elements of Islam in Assam.

There are scattered populations of Buddhists, Sikhs and Jains in different parts of the State notable among which are the Buddhists among the Khamti tribes and the Assamese Sikhs of Borkhola in the district of Nagaon.

PEOPLE

You find traces of them all there: the **Australoids** who were perhaps the first to come to the land; the **Mongoloids** who came to the North-East in a series of migrations from the north, north-east and

Assam

south-east; and the Caucasoids who came from the west by the valley formed by the Ganges and the Brahmaputra. Today, the people of the State can be broadly classified as the Non-tribals or Plains People who generally live in the plains and the Tribals who have mainly been living in the hills. However, there is a substantial tribal population in the plains too.

ROOTS

At present, though there is no Australoid population as such in any part of Assam, but recent anthropological researches support that Australoid elements are discernible not only among many tribes but also in certain caste groups of Assam. Most of the ancient Australoid traits were absorbed by the Mongoloids and the Caucasoids in due course of time. It is very difficult to say who came first between the Mongoloid and the Caucasoid but by physical appearance they have both retained their identities as separate groups though it is very difficult, if not impossible to distinguish them on the basis of individuals. The Ahoms who figure so prominently in the history of the State were a Mongoloid people so are the small Buddhist populations of Khamti, Tai Phake, Khamyang, Aiton and Turung in Upper Assam. Among the Assamese castes, the Brahmans and the Kshatriyas find mention in the records of Hiuen Tsang and are considered to be people of Caucasoid origin.

A MEETING GROUND

Since time immemorial, Assam has been the happy meeting ground of people belonging to different ethnic groups, communities and cultural entities. For example, even the Brahmaputra Valley is an area rich with the contribution of such different groups most of whom got assimilated in the composite Assamese identity. To the south, in the Barak valley, Bengali-speaking people along with tribal communities have been making similar contributions to the emergence of a distinct identity of Assam.

Another group that deserves special mention is the tea garden community. During the second half of the nineteenth century, when the British started tea cultivation on a large scale in Assam, they were faced with the problem of dearth of labourers. Hence, they brought