

in people from other parts of the country—from Orissa and Bihar and from as far as Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

These people ultimately settled down in the State, and successive generations not only intermingled among themselves but also assimilated much of the Assamese culture to develop a life style of their own. Some of them left the tea estates and found other occupations. Today, with their attractive dances (*Jhumur*) and songs, and their close rapport with the tea plant, they have a distinct culture of their own and are called Bagania.

#### CENSUS FIGURES

The 1991 Census puts the population of Assam at 2,24,14,322 with a **sex ratio** of 896 females per 1,000 males and a **growth rate** of +53.26 per cent in the two decades from 1971 to 1991. There are 16 Scheduled Castes and 23 Scheduled Tribes constituting 7.40 and 12.82 per cent respectively of the State's population.

#### THE ASSAMESE

What we call the Assamese people of today is in fact the result of assimilation and integration of people of different racial stocks who migrated to Assam down the ages. The Assamese population can be divided into two broad groups: the **non-tribal people** who constitute the majority and the **tribals**.

#### THE NON-TRIBALS

The entire non-tribal population of the State can be said to be concentrated in the Brahmaputra and the Barak Valleys. Constituting the majority in the State and the dominant populace in almost all the urban areas, their lifestyle is considerably modern and closer to what is dubbed the "mainstream" of the nation. They are the people who speak the Assamese language. In terms of religion, the Hindus who are a majority among the non-tribals are divided into castes and sub-castes along the same lines as in the rest of the country though caste barriers are not as pronounced here. Thus we have the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas, and the Vaishyas and the Sudras. We have to however

bear in mind that a majority of the non-tribal population of today, were tribals of yesterdays, who underwent the transformation by adopting Hinduism and its way of life gradually rising in status in the Hindu caste system in a process which is termed by anthropologists as Sanskritization. The Ahoms themselves were absorbed into their Hinduized or Hindu Assamese-speaking subjects towards the end of their long reign.

The non-tribals can again be divided on the basis of religion amongst whom the Muslims constitute the second largest group followed by the Christians, Sikhs and the Buddhists.

#### EXQUISITE AND EXOTIC TRIBAL PEOPLE

The tribals on their part have been divided into the hill tribes and the plain tribes according to geography of their location. A majority of the tribals practise what has been dubbed *tribal religion* is very close to animism but with ingredients of Hinduism. A considerable part of the tribal population has also adopted Christianity and on the rare occasion, Islam.

Each of its 23 different tribes exhibits distinct and exquisite ways of life. There are tribes like the **Bodo Kacharis, Karbis and Lalungs** which are purely patriarchal, and the **Khasis, Jaintias and Garos** which are strictly matriarchal. Then there are the **Dimasas** who while having a patriarchal system of family structure also have a system of almost parallel male and female clans which accords exclusive rights to women.

A number of tribes such as the **Hmars, Rengma Nagas** and **Garos** have a social institution called the Youth Dormitory in which the young males live away from their families and undergo education and training. Dormitories also serve as centres of social work and are in some cases entrusted with the security of the village. The **Zeme Nagas** has dormitories both for males and females.

The term **Assamese** could thus very well be misleading. For when we talk of the Assamese People we do not restrict ourselves to the Assamese-speaking majority but all the tribes, sub-tribes and clans, the various religious groups and the castes and sub-castes which inhabit the land and come together to form a single entity called the **Assamese**.

## LANGUAGE

With a majority of the total population using the tongue, **Assamese** is the major language of the State. Besides English, Assamese was accorded the status of the official language of the Brahmaputra Valley by the Official Language Act of 1960. However, Bengali and English were also simultaneously accorded the status of official language for the Barak Valley and the two Hill Districts by the same Act. The earliest specimen of the Assamese script is to be found in copper plates and inscriptions discovered in different parts of the region.

Scholars opine that the origin of Assamese goes back to the Magadhan-Prakrit script. By all standards it is a composite language into which words of Indo-Aryan and Indo-Chinese origins have made their way. Pre-Aryan and non-Aryan influences are also discernible not only in loan words but also in its grammar, syntax and pronunciation.

Speeches of the **Tibeto-Burman**, **Austro-Asiatic** and **Tibeto-Chinese** families abound among the tribal population. The widest variety of language found in the tribal population can, however, be attributed to the Tibeto-Burman family. The Bodo language group with its **Kachari**, **Lalung**, **Rabha**, **Moran** and even **Chutia** variations, in turn dominate the Tibeto-Burman family.

Other recognized Indian languages spoken in the State include **Bengali**, **Hindi** and **Oriya**. **Oriya**, **Mundari**, **Santhal**, **Tamil** and **Telegu** are mostly spoken by the tea garden labourers.

## CLIMATE

Pleasant sub-alpine climate prevails in the hills. The plains however experience tropical climate making them uncomfortably humid especially during the rainy seasons. Winter sets in from around the end of the month of October and lasts till the end of February. The temperature drops to a minimum of 6° to 8° Celcius, the nights and early mornings are foggy, and rain is scanty. Summer arrives in the middle of May accompanied by high humidity and rainfall. The temperature reaches a maximum of 35° to 38° Celcius. The frequent rains however serve to push the mercury down. The monsoons blow full blast during the month of June. Thunderstorms known as **Bordoichilla** are a frequent occurrence during the afternoons. Spring

and Autumn with moderate temperatures and modest rainfall are the best seasons.

Assam falls in a zone prone to earthquakes. Though mild tremors are familiar to the region, high-intensity earthquakes are rather infrequent. However, they do occur as in 1869 when the bank of the Barak sank by 15 ft in 1897, and again in 1950 when a large part of the State was ravaged by an earthquake of unprecedented intensity

#### ART AND HANDICRAFT

**Handloom Weaving** is a way of life in Assam. The number of looms in the State stands at around eight lakh, which works out to around 16 per cent of the looms in the entire country. More than thirty thousand looms operate exclusively in silk. Cotton, *muga*, *paat* (mulberry silk) and *endi* are the basic raw materials for hand-woven fabrics in Assam. Sualkuchi is the biggest centre of silk production and weaving in the State. There are more than 3,000 weavers in and around the township. Sualkuchi is known as the Manchester of Assam.

*Muga* silk has a natural golden colour and rare sheen that becomes more lustrous with every wash. *Eri* is a warm silk suitable for the winter. The designs used in Assam are mostly stylised symbols of animals, human figures, creepers, flowers, birds, channels, cross borders and the galaxy. Each ethnic group of the State has its own distinctive design and style. Assamese weavers produce beautiful designs on the borders of traditional garments such as the *mekhela-chaddar* and *riha* and on the *gamosa* (towel). The *Laichangphi*, produced traditionally by the weavers of Cachar district, is a popular quilt sought after because of its warmth and softness. The tribals make beautiful shawls.

**Jewellery** has been a tradition in Assam. Gold was available in many of the rivers flowing down from the Himalayas. In fact, a particular tribe of people, the Sonowal Kacharis, was engaged only in gold washing in these rivers. The Assamese jewellers (*sonaris*) make exquisite lockets (*doog-doogi*, *bana*, *jon-biri*, *dhol-biri*), earrings (*thuriya*, *loka-paro*, *keru*), bracelets (*gaam-kharu*), necklaces (*gal-pata*), etc.

**Cane and Bamboo** being quite common all over are used to make a variety of products. Cane furniture of Assam is much sought after both in the national and international markets. Bamboo is used

mostly to make domestic products such as *chalani* (sieve), *kula* (winnowing pan), *khorahi* (small basket), etc. The fancy bamboo *japi* (hat) with its colourful design and motif is worn by the Assamese peasant while working in the field.

**The Tradition of Painting** in Assam can be traced back to several centuries in the past. The gifts presented to Hiuen Tsang and Harshavardhana by Kumar Bhaskara, the King of Kamrupa, included a number of paintings and painted objects, some done on exclusive Assam silk. Assamese literature of the medieval period abounds in references to *chitrakars* and *patuas* who were expert painters. Locally available material such as *hebgool* and *haital* were used for painting. Ahom palaces and *sattras* and *naamghars* are replete with brightly coloured paintings depicting various stories and events from history and mythology.

**Sitalpati** or mats made from the *patidai* or *mohtra* reed is a traditional craft of Cachar.

**Brass and Bell Metal** products of Assam are also famous for their beauty and strength of form and utility. Brass is an important cottage industry with highest concentration in Hajo of Kamrup district. The Sarthebari area of the same district is well known for its bell metal craft. The principal items of brass are the *kalah* (water pot), *sarai* (a platter or tray mounted on a base), *kahi* (dish), *bati* (bowl), *lota* (water pot with a long neck) and *tal* (cymbals). Gold, silver and copper too have formed part of traditional metalcraft in Assam, and the State Museum in Guwahati has a rich collection of items made of these metals. Gold, however, is now used only for ornaments.

**Ivory Products** such as combs, bangles, walking sticks and smoking pipes were made in the district of Barpeta. Their production has, however, been stopped since a ban was imposed on making and selling of ivory products as a conservation measure. Combs made of the horn of oxes are also a speciality.

**Pottery** is practised by two communities of artisans in Assam—the Hira and the Kumar. The Hiras make household articles using the compression method. The Kumars use their potter's wheel to make images for worship and clay dolls and toys. West Assam has long been proficient in the craft of terracotta. Asharkandi, a village in Goalpara district is famous for its graceful clay dolls.

**Woodwork** is an ancient Assamese craft. Exquisite wood carvings are seen mostly on doors, walls, beams, ceilings and the

splendid carved *sinhasans* used in prayer houses. Decorative panels in the royal Ahom palaces of the past and the 600 years old *sattras* or Vaisnavite monasteries are intricately carved in wood.

A special class of people who excelled in wood carving came to be known as *Khanikar*. The painted woodwork of Golaghat is a folk art. Modern day *khanikars* have taken to producing articles of commercial value, including figure of one-horned rhino and replicas of the world-famous Kamakhya temple—two items heading the list of demands from visitors.

*Kuhila Koth* or fibre weaving is a famed handicraft of the Batadrava area of Nagaon district. *Kuhila* is woven on a simple loom-like gadget made of wood and bamboo poles to produce seats, mats and cushions. *Kuhila* craft is also an important cottage industry in the Gauripur area of Dhubri district in Lower Assam. Pith or Indian cork has also been used for toy-making since centuries in Assam. Such toys are chiefly made in the Goalpara region and they include figures of gods, animals and birds.

#### BASIC STATISTICS OF ASSAM

##### 1. Geographical Area

78,438 sq. km. (of this 20% are hilly)

##### 2. Administrative Division

- (a) Districts: 23.
- (b) Blocks: 219.
- (c) Mahakuma Parishad: 43
- (d) Gaon Panchayat: 2,489.
- (e) Total villages: 25,590.

##### 3. Population

(2001 Census Provisional as per Census of India)

- (a) Total: 2,66,38,407.
- (b) Male: 1,37,87,799.
- (c) Female: 1,28,50,608.

- (d) Rural population (1991 census): 1,99,26,527 (88.90%)
- (e) Urban population (1991 census): 24,87,759 (11.10%)
- (f) Decadal growth rate: 53.26 per cent of population (1991-2001)
- (g) Density of population: 340 per sq. km. (India 324 per sq. km.)

#### 4. Literacy Rate

- (a) Total percentage: 64.28 per cent
- (b) Rural percentage: 49.32 per cent (1991 census)

#### Rural Poverty (as per BPL Census 1998)

- (i) Total rural families: 34,12,506
- (ii) Total BPL families in rural areas: 20,28,058—SC: 2,59,316 and ST: 4,28,337
- (iii) Percentage of BPL families in rural areas: 59.43 per cent
- (iv) Geographical distribution of poverty
  1. Highest PC of BPL families in the State: Goalpara (75.25%)
  2. Next Highest: Dhubri (75.03%)
  3. Lowest PC of BPL families in the State: Jorhat (41.00%) and Tinsukia (41.31%)

#### Agriculture Statistics (1998-99)—Land Utilisation in Hectares

- (a) Total geographical Area: 78,43,800
- (b) Total cropped Area: 39,88,600
- (c) Cultivable wasteland: 80,194\*
- (d) Area under Forest: 2,35,798
- (e) Land put to Non-agriculture: 10,30,378 uses
- (f) Grazing land: 1,58,480
- (g) Net Area sown: 27,01,053 (35.40% of geographical area)

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\*Excluding Karbi Anglong and N.C. Hills

(h) Area sowed more than once: 12,15,195

### Educational Infrastructure in Assam

Assam State has enough pool of skilled and educated manpower. There is 53 percent literacy rate in the State. Assam has four universities, one Agricultural University, three Medical colleges, four engineering colleges, 23 vocational training institutes and eight polytechnics (Table 1.1). Tea gardens, oil refineries, organised big industries and small-scale industry employs skilled manpower with cheap rate.

**Table 1.1: Educational Institutes**

Type	Nos.
University	5
IIT	1
Engineering College	3
Medical College	3
General College	226
Junior College	76
Agriculture College	2
Law College	9
Veterinary College	2
Higher Secondary School	599
High School	3915
Middle School	8019
Primary School	31888
Pre-primary School	482
Industrial & Technical School	32
Polytechnic	8

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

## PANCHAYATIRAJ SYSTEM

### The System

Panchayati Raj Institutions—the grassroots units of self-government—have been proclaimed as the vehicles of socio-economic transformation in rural India. Effective and meaningful functioning of these bodies would depend on active involvement, contribution and participation of its citizens both male and female. Gandhiji's



dream of every village being a republic and Panchayats having powers has been translated into reality with the introduction of the three-tier Panchayati Raj system to enlist people's participation in rural reconstruction. April 24, 1993 is a landmark day in the history of Panchayati Raj in India as on this day the Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 came into force to provide constitutional status to the Panchayati Raj Institutions.

### **Evolution of Panchayati Raj System in Assam**

The Rural Panchayat Act, 1948: Under this system there were two tiers of Panchayats—Primary Panchayats at village level and Rural Panchayats at Mouza level.

Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1959: Under this Act a three-tier system was introduced which are Gaon Panchayat, Anchalik Panchayat and Mohokuma Parishad.

Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1972: Under this system again a two-tier system was introduced which are Gaon Panchayat and Mohokuma Parishad.

Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1986: Under this Act again a three-tier system is introduced—Gaon Panchayat, Anchalik Panchayat and Mohokuma Parishad.

Assam Panchayat Act, 1994: A three-tier system with Zilla Parishad has been introduced—Gaon Panchayat, Anchalik Panchayat and Zilla Parishad.

### **73rd Amendment Act, 1992**

#### **The Salient Features of the Act are:**

- (a) To provide 3 tier system of Panchayati Raj for all the States having population of over 20 lakh.
- (b) To hold Panchayat Elections regularly every 5 years.
- (c) To provide reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Women (not less than 33%).
- (d) To appoint State Finance Commission to make recommendations as regards the financial powers of the Panchayats.

- (e) To constitute District Planning Committee to prepare draft development plan for the district as a whole.

### **Powers and Responsibilities**

According to the Constitution, Panchayats shall be given powers and authority to function as institutions of self-government. The following powers and responsibilities are to be delegated to Panchayats at the appropriate level :

- (a) Preparation of Plan for economic development and social justice.
- (b) Implementation of schemes for economic development and social justice in relation to 29 subjects given in Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution.
- (c) To levy, collect and appropriate taxes, duties, tolls and fees.

### **Structure of the Panchayati Raj System in Assam**

#### ***Gaon Panchayats***

- (a) President—directly elected by people.
- (b) One Vice President—to be elected from among the members of Gaon Panchayat.
- (c) Ten members—directly elected by people.

#### ***Anchalik Panchayats***

- (a) President—to be elected by the elected members of the Anchalik Panchayats.
- (b) Vice President—to be elected by the elected members of the Anchalik Panchayats.
- (c) Members—
  1. One member from each Gaon Panchayat area to be directly elected by people.
  2. President of the Gaon Panchayats falling within the jurisdiction of the Anchalik Panchayat.
  3. Members of Parliament and Legislative Assembly.