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THE RED RIVER
AND
THE BLUE HILL
Or
The State of Assam



Hem Barua

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PREFACE

There are a good many people today who want to know about the State of Assam, and its many aspects ; generally they get baffled as there are no such books to meet their needs and quest for knowledge of this distant land. There are a few biggish scholarly volumes no doubt, written with great pain and care ; but they are so big and thick that they do not mouth well in the case of lay readers, whose leisure is limited and interests are very many. There are smaller volumes also. They are, often, lean and flimsy and do not get beyond the limits of pamphlets ; as such, they do not feed the appetite of the average readers as much as one wishes. The commonplace reader does not like to be overfed nor does he like to be underfed. This view has guided me all along in my attempt to prepare this book for students and lay readers. If I have succeeded in it, that won't be my credit alone. If I have not, I tender my apology to all my readers. There is nothing scholarly or out of the way about this book. Not the shadow of it. What I have done in this book is to collect cherryblossoms and chrysanthemums from different gardens and stick them in a pot.

The book is called *THE RED RIVER AND THE BLUE HILL*. Why I have called it so, is given in the body of the book. This picturesque title to a country, criss-crossed with rivers and mountains, was suggested to me by an Army Officer during the last World War. He was tall and straight. He came to this country, like many others, to fight the Japanese. I do not know if this Army Officer is dead or alive. But I know that here was a man whose mind sparkled at the sight of nature and her many beauties. I acknowledge my indebtedness to this unknown soldier and artist.

I must thank my publishers Messers Lawyer's Book Stall, Gauhati, Assam, and its robust proprietor Mr. B. N. Dutt-Barooa, and also my friend Sri P. C. Bharali for his loving guidance. I thank all those who helped me with their valuable suggestions and with books, pictures and pamphlets.

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Hem Barua

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CHAPTER I

Yea, in my mind these mountains rise.

Walter de la Mare

INTRODUCTORY

What is and where is Assam? These are some of the questions that arise in inquisitive minds outside; it is more so in this period of our country's history. To many, Assam is no more than a land of mountains and malaria, earthquakes and floods and the *Kamakhya* temple. To others, it is a green woodland where slothful serpents, insidious tigers, wild elephants and stealthy leopards peep and peer with menacing eyes and claws. Assam, to most people, is mentally a distant horizon like Bolivia or Peru, less known and more fancied.

The history of Assam proper is the history of the Brahmaputra Valley *plus* the hills that dot and surround it. The hills and the plains of this great valley, though the hills were isolated from the plains as "Excluded areas" under the British rule, possess an age-old tradition of common contact and history. The District of Cachar and the Lushai Hills are the two southern-most adjuncts of the State of Assam.

The District of Cachar was incorporated into it in 1832. It was in 1826 that independent Assam passed into the hands of the British from those of the Ahoms under the stress of repeated Burmese invasions of incredible atrocities.

The State of Assam, as it is on the map, bears the appearance of a hawk nestling quietly on a mountain edge; it looks as though its beak protrudes towards the *Patkoi* ranges. It is these mountain ranges that separate Assam from Upper Burma and

its hills. The pass across the *Patkoi* range has a historical significance for the country ; it can be described as the *Khyber* of the east. It is historically important in the sense that it is the recognised pass through which the Ahoms, a great Mongol race of the Hukwang Valley, migrated into Assam in the 13th century. They built an empire here. They succeeded in changing the colour and complex of the country to a distinguishable extent. It is the *Patkoi* pass that was used by the invading Burmans ; they used it for their invasion of Assam at the beginning of the 19th century : all the times the invasion was repeated, the *Patkoi*s served as the gateway. It was through this pass that the genial current of *Thai* culture flowed into the valley in the 13th century ; it was through this pass again that the red river of blood flowed in the wake of the Burmese invasions ; these invasions dyed the Brahmaputra plains and the minds of men with an unforgettable hue.

Assam presents a panoramic view ; it presents a landscape of deep ravines, of hills and impenetrable forests, and of steppes and slopes. The total area of the State of Assam *plus* the state of Manipur is 62,575 sq. miles ; the population of this area is 80,96,216. If we exclude the state-areas from this total, the area shows itself as 50,167 sq. miles and the population as 73,70,561. Till the first decade of the 20th century, Assam was a land of deep woods, unoccupied tracts of land and great swamps and marshes. With the march of time, the country is undergoing great changes in its texture and composition ; the woods are rapidly vanishing, but the mountain forests are there and the hills and the rivers,—the rivers with their wild courses, and the hills with their tropical nature and primitive population.

The main reason that Assam is little known to the rest of India is perhaps her remoteness from the centre of national life. India is a sub-continent, criss-crossed with mountains and valleys, woven into with different races and

peoples of ethnological affinities. Assam is its easternmost wing separated from the mainland with distant and natural barriers. She is known outside mostly as a land of witchcraft and magic, animism and wild tribes. Here the hills are impenetrable, forests are luxuriant, rivers are numberless and nature is prodigal. Assam is a semi-tropical country ; nature is usually in high tension, particularly in the spring months and in the monsoons.

From ancient times, Assam is known far and wide as a land of *tantric* faith, which is a primitive doctrine with a crude spiritual bias. It originated in the cult of blood and sacrificial rituals of the primitive tribes. The *tantric* faith is often described as a product of the vulgarised forms of *Saktaism* and the decadent phases of Buddhism. To put it in a more direct way, decadent Buddhism and the "nocturnal forces" of *Saktaism* coalesced and gave birth to the religion of *tantraism*. The temple of *Kamakhya* was originally the progenitor of this cult and was vitally connected with the growth of its popularity. The origin of this temple is connected with the mythological episode of Siva and Parvati ; this is the place, as mythology points out, where the pudenda of Sakti fell as her body was cut into pieces by Vishnu when Siva carried it in "frantic sorrow" over hills and dales, after her death. The body, it is said, was cut into fifty-one pieces with the *Sudarshan-chakra* of Vishnu. And wherever a piece fell, it sprang into a place of pilgrimage ; this is the mytho-poetic interpretation of the origin of the temple of *Kamakhya*.

According to tradition, the temple was built by the epical Naraka of the Mahabharata age. It is said that the temple suffered demolition ; and it had to be re-built by Nararnarayan, a powerful king of the Koch dynasty, in the year 1565. On the occasion of the re-opening ceremony of the temple, as many as one hundred and forty human beings were sacrificed in the ritual and their heads were presented to

the goddess on a bronze salver. We learn this from Sir E. A. Gait and his *History of Assam*. It is difficult to say if this sacrifice is a fact; but it is a fact that the temple of *Kamakhya* was once the main-spring of *tantric* faith in ancient Kamarupa. The word *Kamakhya* is supposed by linguists like Dr. B. K. Kakoti to be a Sanscritisation of some non-Aryan Austric formations as *Khmoch*, *Komuoch* etc. All these words, Dr. Kakoti points out, connect the place with *somebody's dead body*. It is in a sense the grave-yard temple of Sati, the consort of Siva. It symbolises the primordial urge of the mother.

The advent of Vaishnavism in Assam was about the time of Naranarayan; he re-built, as pointed out elsewhere, the temple of *Kamakhya*. It is a major event in the religious history of the country. This new faith succeeded in pushing *tantrism* into the back eddies; it succeeded in clearing the climate of religion of blood-spots and horrors. Over and above this, it diverted the attention of the people from a creed of blind faith to one of deep devotion and sublime worship.

The hills are the ornaments of Assam as are the stars in a peacock's feather. The Brahmaputra Valley is a long, narrow tract of land with alluvial plains, surrounded and dotted with hills on all sides except on the west. The Dafla, the Miri, the Mishmi and the Abor Hills that lie zig-zag to the north of the great river, are sub-ranges of the Himalayas. These hills are inhabited by a sturdy people of different sub-races and dialects of the Tibeto-Burman sub-section of the racial and ethnological map; they constitute an interesting chapter of history and anthropology, and open great vistas of studies in these branches of knowledge.

The sea-blue hills merge with the blue of the distant skies. It is a common sight of winter in Assam; during the monsoons, they roar and rumble and befog the view with clouds and mists. Outside of it, the peaks glisten under a rich sunlit sky; the

blue of the hills invests the supine plains below with a mystic thrill. It is because of this peculiar blue setting perhaps that the hillock on which the shrine of *Kamakhya* stands is called the *Nilachala* or the "blue mountain". To the south of the Brahmaputra, as to its north, lie different hills: they are the Naga, the Mikir and the Garo Hills, inhabited by peoples of the Tibeto-Burman racial group. The Khasi and Jaintia Hills are inhabited by a people after whom the hills take their name; they belong to the Mon-khmer group of the Austro-Asiatic races. The Brahmaputra that runs through the valley and is locked in the midst of the mountain ranges, is a rapid river; it never creeps like rivers that flow through low-lying plains, as hill pythons do, in sluggish ways. It rushes, and rushes in torrents. It has a good number of tributaries and feeding streams that generally flow out of mountain gorges of roaring waters and great beauty.

The name *Brahmaputra* is an Aryan word: the Ahom called the river *Nam-Dao-phi*. It means "river of the Star-god". The prefix *nam* in the Ahom language like *di* in the Bodo language means water or river. The Brahmaputra is also known as the *Lohitya* in Sanscrit; it means "red river". It is so, perhaps because of the fact that the river takes this colour during the rainy seasons when it cuts through the red soils and embankments. There is also a mythological interpretation given to the origin of this name. It is connected with Parasurama and his sin: it was in this river, it is said, that the great saint washed off his bloody stains and regained his sainthood. And hence the water of it is red. In fact, Assam might be described as the picturesque land of the "Red River" and the "Blue Hill": the *Lohitya* and the *Nilachala*. Both the river *Lohitya* and the hillock *Nilachala*, on which is situated the temple of *Kamakhya*, have left great impress on the national life and culture of Assam.

The Hindu scriptures hold that the river Brahmaputra rises in the sacred pool of Brahmakunda in the easternmost point of the State. It is a religious sanctuary and is situated about fifty miles east of Sadiya, the headquarters station of the Mishmi Hills District. In fact, the main source of the river lies still unexplored ; it is obscure. Of course it is lately shown as identical with the Tsanghpo, the great river of Tibet. This river rises in the west of Tibet near the source of the Sutlej and the Indus, and ultimately joins the Brahmaputra at a lower point near Sadiya and forms into one stream. The Brahmaputra is fed with the drainage of the Himalayas on the north and that of the different Assam ranges on the south. During the monsoons the river presents a grand spectacle with its width and intensity, and dominates the whole panorama. In a sense, so far as rendering the valley fertile, and harvest rich and copius, the river can be compared with the Father Nile of Egypt. The Brahmaputra is bounded on either side, so far its eastern source is concerned, with stretches of summer rice and mustard cultivations, and wild ferns.

The Brahmaputra has two river islets in it : one is as small as the other is big. The bigger one is Majuli in the District of Sibsagar and the other one is Umananda, opposite the City of Gauhati. The island of Majuli lies at the conjunction of the parent river with the river Subansiri, noted for its gold dusts and the trade that once grew round it. Its area is 485 sq. miles. It is a principal place of pilgrimage for the Vaishnavites of Assam : there are several old Vaishnavite colleges or holy sees in it. Of these, Auniati, Dakhinpat, Goramura, Kamalabari are supreme. In this island also dwell the Miris, a Tibeto-Burman tribal population of indigenous habitation ; they generally build their villages in riverain tracts. Umananda, with its rocky bed, is in the true sense of the term, a hillock situated in the river. It has a temple of Siva in it. In the monsoons, the waters dash against it

and produce a continuous roaring murmur ; it dashes and breaks and proves perhaps the futility of onslaughts on rocks. Both the islands in their own way add to the grand view of the river.

Across the Brahmaputra, stretching to the foot of the hills, one's eye is feasted with the "pomp of cultivated nature". The betel-nut trees and the leaves clustering on to them, coconut-groves, bamboos and palms, all together weave a picture of health and plenty. And lost in the little groves of these leafy palms and feathery bamboos and ferns, are the small thatch-cottages of the villagers ; these put together, form the Assamese village. The *namghar* or the village congregational prayer-hall constitutes the key-stone of this organisation. The population in the countryside is of varying intensity ; at places it is thoroughly dense, and at others, it is considerably sparse. The pressure of population per sq. mile here is 146.7. The reason for this separateness is not far to seek ; the internecine feuds and strife under the Ahom rule which led ultimately to three successive Burmese invasions, destroyed a considerable bulk of the country's population. *Kalazar*, which is an acute form of malarial poisoning and a dreadful scourge, is no less responsible for the loss of population. Once prosperous villages with coconut and mango-groves and other valuable fruit-trees, the relics of which only exist now, are today the abodes of wild animals. Often the whole population was swept out and the contours of human existence lost, because of diseases and natural calamities. Floods are a regular feature in Assam together with earthquakes that often come in between.

Assam is a wild animals' paradise ; it is, in a sense, nature's Whipsnade. In the Government games reserves, wild animals are being preserved with great care. A good number of wild elephants inhabit the lower ranges of the hills in the submontane areas. Rhinoceroses abound in the valley of the great river ; they are saved from complete extinction by the

Government policy of protection. The Kaziranga Game Reserves in the District of Sibsagar, is the principal game sanctuary. Other animals that roam in the forests and hill-tracts of Assam are the tigers, leopards, bears, wild boars, buffaloes and bisons. The hill tribes, like the Abors, the Dafias, the Mishmis, the Nagas, very often than not, domesticate the wild bison or hill-oxen for food and sacrifice. The art of elephant-catching developed to such a height here that a whole treatise on the subject called the *Hastivid�amaharnava* (*Art of Elephantology*) was written in Assamese by Sukumar Barkath in 1734. This is an illustrated treatise. Domestication of wild elephants is an Austro-Asiatic technique. It developed with this great people.

The richest flora of Assam is found in the plateaus of the hills ; the Khasi Hills are particularly rich in this. The downs undulate and roll along these hills and the pines, straight as young women, dot them. To add to this, there are various kinds of orchids, balsams, rhododendrons, azalias, wild roses, that weave a carpet of light and colour, red, blue and mauve all through. A wild orchid known as the *Kapauphul*, a flower of delicate colour and beauty that generally appears in April, is a darling blossom of the village beauties ; the *Bhatauphul* or the parrot-flower, a kind of balsam, is another. These are epiphytic growth ; they are found on the stems or branches of living trees. Orchids are found in the plains as much as on the loftiest hills of Assam. They grow on the height of the 10,000 ft.-Mt. Jephoo in the Naga hills, as in the Nambor forest of the Sibsagar District. The *Kapauphul* is honey-scented. It is *Aerides Odoratum*, as horticulturists point out.

Assam is noted for certain timber of rare variety ; the *Sal* tree of lower Assam is rightly compared to the oak in its timber and grace. In Upper Assam, it has its counterparts in *Sonaru*, *Segoon*, *Ajar*, *Nahar*, and *Bula*. *Bula*, found abund-