CHAPTER III

PHYSIOGRAPHY AND SOCIO-CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF ASSAM
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In this chapter we propose to give a brief account of the physiography and the cultural background of the State of Assam.

Physiography of Assam

The State of Assam is located in the north-eastern part of India. Originally, it was a big state comprising the present three states in the region namely, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram. Historical documents told us that different dynasties ruled Assam for a long period of time. The Ahom Kingdom lasted for about 600 years till the Britishers came to India and annexed Assam in 1826. After independence the State of Assam of the British period continued up to 1963 when the state of Nagaland was first created and separated. Subsequently, in 1972, Meghalaya became a separate state while Mizoram became a union territory and later became a full state. Thus, Assam was much reduced to its present size with a geographical area of 78,523 square kilometres.

The geographical location of the state and the entire North-Eastern region is such that it remains isolated from the rest of the country. In spite of planned development of the state, it could not
reach the all India level. Owing to political, social and economic reasons, the state is far lagging behind the rest of India.

Geographical Features

Natural Divisions

Assam can be divided naturally into two parts in two ways. First, it has been divided into two parts by the Great Brahmaputra river — the North Bank and the South Bank. Secondly, it is divided into Upper Assam and Lower Assam by the Mikir Hills (Karbi-Anglong).

Forest and Fauna

One-third of the geographical area of Assam was covered by forests. But now as a result of increasing economic development and along with other factors, the area under forest has been reduced greatly. When the British entered this region in 1826, Assam came under vigorous exploration. Coal, petroleum and tea were discovered and their exploration had brought about various changes to this region.

Vast forest resources like Sal, Bonsum, Tita-sapa, Teak, Bamboo, various shrubs and medicinal herbs and plants are there in Assam.

The rarest species of tigers, rhino, deers, leopards,
elephants, bears, monkeys, wild birds are found in Assam. There are three wild life sanctuaries in the state namely, Kaziranga, Manas and Orang wild life sanctuaries. These sanctuaries have attracted a large number of tourists both Indian and foreigners who contributed a huge amount towards foreign exchange reserves for our country.

Population

There was no Census in Assam in 1981. However, the projected population figures for 1981 census was 1.9 crores. The latest projected population figure for Assam was 2.42 crores in October 1989. If we look into the population figures of Assam for the previous 80 years from 1901 to 1981, the decadal variation is at the average of 63.1 per cent per decade. Migration to Assam took place in a large scale during the period and was mainly responsible for the abnormal increase of population of Assam. Migration continues and the outsiders occupy and settle down in various char areas where the native Assamese do not like to settle.

It may be seen that out of the total population of 14,625,152 the rural population was 13,303,161 while the urban population was 1,321,991.

1. Char areas refer to the lowlying areas along the Brahma­putra river which are available for dwelling and cultivation during the dry season when the river water recede after the monsoons.
The total number of males and females was 7,582,674 and 7,042,478 respectively.

At present there are 21 districts in the state. During the period from 1971 to 1989, 12 (twelve) districts were created. The district-wise distribution of population of Assam in 1971 for nine district that were in existence.

Table 3.1: District-wise distribution of population of Assam in 1971.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>State/District</th>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>78,523.0</td>
<td>14,625,152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>10,359.0</td>
<td>2,225,103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>9,863.0</td>
<td>2,854,183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>8,775.0</td>
<td>1,736,188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Nowgong</td>
<td>5,561.0</td>
<td>1,680,895</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>12,792.0</td>
<td>2,122,719</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>8,989.0</td>
<td>1,837,389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Mikir Hills</td>
<td>10,332.0</td>
<td>3,79,310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>N.C. Hills</td>
<td>4,890.0</td>
<td>76,047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Cachar</td>
<td>6,962.0</td>
<td>1,713,318</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The literacy rate of the state was 28.72 per cent which is below the national average of 29 per cent according to 1971 Census.

Racial Origin of the People

Assamese comprise the major proportion of the total population of the State. By Assamese we mean the natives of Assam and include Koches, Kalitas and the Brahmins. These various tribes and sub-tribes are currently clamouring for their respective identities and that has created a political problem for Assam.

People of different communities like the Biharis, Bengalis, Marathis, Rajasthanis and Uriyas came and settled down in Assam for business purposes. Even foreigners like the Bangladeshis and Nepalis came and settled in Assam in search of work. Inter-marriage has been taking place between them and the Assamese. As a result the Assamese community has now become broad-based.

Climate

The climate of Assam is very suitable for health. It is not so hot in summer and not so cold in winter. Owing to some environmental changes, particularly the destruction of forests, the climate of the state has changed to a large extent. The monsoons always play an important influence in determining the climatic condition.
Religion

Hinduism is the religion of the majority. Islamic followers also increase due to increase of muslim population. The number of Christians in the state is very insignificant. Christianity has an influence among the hill people of the state. Buddhists are few and far between.

As India follows secularism there has been great tolerance among all people of the state. Intermarriage has been considered as the vital factor that brings tolerance among different communities.

Culture

The cultural heritage of the state is unique. People in general are simple, sociable, hospitable, kind, generous and adjustable.

Inter-caste marriage was not allowed in the past but now-a-days people are trying to adjust themselves with changing modern conditions. Hence, love marriages are taking place in many cases.

The celebration of festivals is part and parcel of the Assamese society. 'Bihu' festival is the unique festival. As the Assamese adopted the Hindu religion, various Hindu festivals like Durga Puja, Diwali, are also observed. Various Puja, 'Nam Kirtan' etc. are performed like Hindus in other parts of the country.
Social changes like urbanisation, spread of other religions, education, modern system of administration etc. have their impact made into various spheres of social life and culture of the state.

Economy

Till now the economy of the state is dominated by agriculture. More than 70% of total population is living in rural area and working in agriculture. The agricultural economy of the state is not developed and has not been run on commercialized pattern.

The important agricultural products of Assam are 'Tea', 'Jute', 'Cotton', 'Paddy'. The state is the major producer of tea which occupies the top position in the list of export items of India.

Among the mineral resources, petroleum and coal are the major mineral resources found in the state and they are major sources of income. Assam is also the largest producer of petroleum but so far only three oil refineries have been set up in the state. The surplus crude has been supplied to other refineries outside the state. But Assam deserves one more oil refinery considering the supply potential of crude.

The regular occurrence of floods have jeopardised
the economy of the state. The state suffers heavily every year because of flood. Flood problem will have to be solved in order to save the economy of the state.

The forest products of the state provide huge development potential for the industrial development of the state. In fact, plywood industries have grown up to a great extent in the state.

In spite of the great economic potential of the state industrialisation has not taken place yet to bring the state at par with the rest of the country in economic growth and development. The geographical location of the state has made transport and communication with the rest of India difficult. The long neglect of the state by the central government is also responsible for the economic underdevelopment of the state. It may be admitted that socio-economic factors are also responsible for low progress and development of the economy of the state.