INTRODUCTION
The province of Assam lies in the north-east corner of the Republic of India. It covers an area of 53,226 square miles, lying between the twenty-second and twenty-eighth degrees of north latitude and between eighty-nineth and ninety-seventh degree of east longitude. It consists of three natural divisions—the Brahmaputra Valley or Assam proper, the Surma Valley, and the intervening hills known as the Assam Range which form the watershed between the two valleys. The hills project at right angles from the Burmese system and lie almost due east to west. At its western end they are broken up into sharply serrated ridges and deep valleys all alike covered with forests; on the southern face, the hills rise like a level wall abruptly from the plain with occasionally a deep ravine which the rivers cut through the plateau; on the east, the hills are rugged and their sides are also clothed with dense forests. Of the plains, the Surma Valley is a flat plain about one hundred and twenty-five miles long with a breadth of sixty miles. The Brahmaputra Valley is also an alluvial plain about four hundred and fifty miles in length with an average breadth of about fifty miles. The Surma Valley is watered mainly by the river Surma and the Brahmaputra Valley by the Brahmaputra throughout its length and by its tributaries on
the north and the south.

Girted thus almost on all sides by mountain barriers, hitherto, Assam remained practically isolated. Although the river Brahmaputra formed the highway of communication, navigation along the river before the age of steam was always uncertain and at times extremely hazardous for the rapidity of its currents. Some of its tributaries are snow-fed, but most of them particularly those on the south depend on the monsoons for their volume. They are dried up during winter and along with the rains they swell up and overflow their banks. Heavy floods and inundations are, therefore, frequent occurrences in Assam.

Situated at the confluence of several routes, Assam has become 'a museum of races'. Through the mountain passes in the north and north-east, she received various racial elements including Tibeto-Burmans of the Indo-Chinese stock, Alpine-Aryan, Negrito and Austro-Asiatic. Physical features and other aspects of culture definitely indicate that the great bulk of population of both hills and plains consisted of the Tibeto-Burmans of the Indo-Chinese stock. Of these, the first are the Khasis; they are believed to be the isolated remnants of one of the earliest waves of migration from the south Pacific. The second great division includes the hill Kacharis or the
Dimasas, the Bodo or plains Kacharis, the Rabhas, the Garos, the Lalungs, and the eastern sub-Himalayan groups consisting of the Daflas, Miris, Abors and Mishmis. Another group comprises the Lushais (Mizos) who migrated from the south and seem to be connected with the Manipuris; the Nagas, whose extraordinary ferocity differentiates them in some degree from the other hill tribes consist of three main sub-groups inhabiting the western, central and eastern parts of the Naga hills. Of the two valleys, the population in Surma Valley consists mainly of the Bengalees and in the Brahmaputra Valley comprises the Assamese with a few 'lower rungs of the Hindu social ladder'.

The early political history of Assam or Kamarupa is rather obscure and wrapped up with legends. The first mention of the country is found in the Epics, Puranas and religious legends of Gangetic India. The legends connected with the political history begin sometime before Naraka, who established himself in Pragjyotishpur after killing

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* The capital of Naraka and his descendents was Pragjyotishpur, the modern Gauhati. Prag means eastern and jyotisha, a star, astrology. Therefore, the word may be taken to mean the City of Eastern Astrology, wherefrom the Tantrik form of Hinduism originated. But the origin of the name Kamarupa (the modern district of Kamrup) is mythological. Kamdeb, the Indian Cupid was sent by the Gods to make Siva to fall in love again, and thereby break his penance for the death of Sati. Kamdeb succeeded in his mission, but so enraged was Siva that he burnt him to ashes by a fiery glance from the eye in his forehead. Kamdeb eventually recovered his original form and the country where this took place became known as Kamarupa. Vide Gait, E.A.; History of Assam, Pp. 11-15.
Ghataka of the Danava dynasty. From epigraphic records and narrative of Hiuen Tsang we learn that the Varman dynasty established itself in Kamarupa and thirteen kings from Pusyavarman to Bhaskaravarman ruled it from C 100 A.D. to 650 A.D. After the Varmans, the country fell into the hands of the line of Salastambha (650 A.D. - 990 A.D.), probably a collateral branch of the Varmans. They succeeded by a dynasty founded by one Brahmapala and his line ruled upto 1138 A.D. In the twelfth century they were succeeded by a fresh line of kings, namely, the family of Arimatta from 1138 to 1228 A.D. Early in the thirteenth century, the Ahoms, an offshoot of the great Shan stock of south-east Asia, penetrating into south-east corner of the province established a kingdom of their own in the present district of Sibsagar. The policy of expansion which the new comers followed subsequently brought them in collision with the Mughals in the west. The Ahom-Mughal conflict which continued with occasional breaks throughout the seventeenth century ultimately resulted in expulsion of the Mughals and extension of Ahom kingdom as far as the river Manah.

Inspite of her isolation, diversities in her population, ups and downs of so many dynasties, it would be far from the truth to say that Assam was beyond the pale of Hindu civilization or that she lagged far behind in
culture and education. Epigraphic and literary evidences clearly prove the existence of Gurugrihas and Sanskrit tols patronised by the rulers for the promotion of learning. In these centres, instruction in various branches of studies, including the religious lore, was imparted by competent teachers who were very keen in discharging their duties. The educational institutions which were in existence under the Ahoms were not much different from those in early times. Learning was, of course, confined to the higher classes, specially amongst the Brahmins and the priestly classes. The so-called higher classes of the society were unwilling to impart instructions to the lower classes to whom education was prohibited by the traditional caste system. Ordinarily, the pupils having thirst for knowledge flocked to them, and, occasionally, teachers also invited pupils from different parts of the country; and accordingly, the Brahmin teachers (Gurus) in homely atmosphere of tols, and the priestly classes in the serene atmosphere of temples imparted instructions to their pupils. Usually, education was limited to the perusal of the

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* For details vide Choudhury, P.C.; The Royal Patronage of Sanskrit Learning in Assam; Professor Suryya Kumar Bhuyan Commemoration volume, Pp. 168-179.
The whole range of education consisted in nothing more than a mere smattering of Sanskrit sufficient to enable them to read their religious scriptures and to officiate at the religious ceremonies. As to curriculum and method of teaching,

"there was no fixed hours for reading and attending the tol, and each student reads a different subject and page. The whole course of study being restricted to learning the rules of the Sanskrit grammar and strings of Sanskrit text, common subjects such Arithmetic and Geography are entirely ignored; under such a state of thing and system, the students grew up inordinately conceited and vain of their own learning." 4

Another type of quasi-religious schools where non-Brahmins were also admitted existed in important villages and these trained up the youths in the knowledge of Sanskrit literature and science. Following the neo-Vaisnavite movement in Assam under Sri Sankardeva, the great Vaisnavite reformer of sixteenth century, there developed a new system of educational institution namely the Satras. Like a Christian or Buddhist Monastery, the Satra was a

4. A.S., Coach Behar Commissioner's Office File, 1868-73; No.100, 17 September, 1868, Deputy Inspector of Lower Assam to the Inspector of Schools North-East Division.
religious centre with a school and a library where the teachings of Sri Sankardeva and his principles governing life were imparted to the pupils along with other branches of studies. Gradually, they superseded the other institutions and the entire responsibility of imparting instruction, particularly in the Brahmaputra Valley, came under their domain.

In addition to these religious and quasi-religious institutions, the respectable gentry employed private teachers to instruct their sons and wards at home. The village Kakatis or Scribes were generally selected for this purpose; but a Brahmin was always preferred to instruct the children in a Brahmin family. Since instructors had to be remunerated, this system was confined to those parents who were comparatively in affluent circumstances.

During the period of their occupation, the Muhammadan rulers set up several muktabs in Lower Assam. Instruction imparted to Muslim pupils in these institutions was confined to learning by rote the Koran and other religious books. The muktabs did not teach Urdu, but concentrated on the teaching of Persian which was then the court language of western Assam. These schools had three


classes of teachers, namely, Maulavies, Munshies, Mallas or Meanies; Arabic and Persian scholars were known as the Maulavies; those who knew only Persian were Munshies, while those taught Koran were called Mallas or Meanies.

From the middle of the eighteenth century, the Ahom monarchy was on the decline. While the throne was occupied by a number of weak and worthless rulers, the court became the hot-bed of intrigues and conspiracies. This was followed by political insurrections and repeated invasions of the Burmese. Before long, the invaders occupied Assam and assumed a threatening attitude to the British Government in Bengal. Hence followed the first Angle-Burmese war during which 'plunder, devastation, murder and desecration' was the order of the day. There was wholesale depopulation, industries collapsed, agriculture neglected and trade was at a stand still. No wonder, therefore, during this period of confusion neo-vaishnavite influence was on the wane, sanskrit scholarship was at a low ebb and the indigenous learning was on its last legs. It is beyond our purview to describe in detail the Burmese war which terminated at the treaty of Yandabo, 24 February, 1826. Assam passed under the control of the East India Company and with it we enter upon a new chapter in her history. The system of secular education which the new rulers introduced will be discussed in the subsequent pages.