Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

I Location and Physical Features of Goalpara District

Goalpara is the westernmost district of Assam in the Brahmaputra valley bounded on the north by the mountainous regions of Bhutan, on the east by the district of Kamrup, on the south by the Garo Hills district of Meghalaya and on the west by the districts of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar in West Bengal and Rangpur in Bangladesh. It lies between latitudes 25°28′ and 26°54′ north, and longitudes 89°42′ and 90°06′ east.

Physically the greater part of Goalpara consists of a level plain, the lower portion of which is intersected by the mighty Brahmaputra. A few outlying spurs of the Meghalaya hills project towards the river from the south and even appear on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. The northern and the western portion of the district is flat but the central portion is much broken up by small ranges of low hills. Near the Brahmaputra much of the country is exposed to flood and is covered by a dense growth of grass and reeds. Further back, the level rises and rice fields take the place of swamps. The Eastern Duars, the foot of the Bhutan Hills, is a country of grassy commons and dark forests. 1

At present the district consists of three sub-divisions, viz. Dhubri, Goalpara and Kokrajhar, the last-named being created in 1957

with the Gossaingaon, Kokrajhar, Bijni and Sidli police stations from the old Dhubri sub-division. The Dhubri sub-division now comprises the police stations of Golokganj, Bilasipara, Dhubri, South Salmara and Mankachar, while under the Goalpara sub-division fall the police stations of Lakhipur, Goalpara, North Salmara and Dudhnai.

II Historical Background

The Goalpara district has never been a separate political entity under its own king, and its history has to be considered in connection with that of various states of which from time to time, it formed a part. In ancient times it was included in the kingdom of Pragjyotisha, mentioned in the Ramayana, the Mahabharata as well as some principal Puranas, which is believed to have comprised large parts of north-east India including most of Assam, North Bengal and even portions of East Bengal (now in Bangladesh). Subsequently, the district formed a part of the kingdom of Kamarupa by which name the Pragjyotisha later came to be known; for, on authority of the Kalikā Purāṇa and the Yogini Tantra, both of which works are devoted to the religious history and geography of medieval Assam, it has been established that the western limit of the old kingdom of Kamarupa was the Karatoya, a river which rises in the extreme north-west of the Jalpaiguri district. According to Gait it comprised roughly, the Brahmaputra

Old Kamarupa was 'divided into four portions, viz. Kāmpith from the Koratoya to the Sankosh, Ratnapith from the Sankosh to the Rupahi, Suvarnapith from the Rupahi to the Bharali and Saumārpith from the Bharali to the Dikrāng. Elsewhere Ratnapith is said to have included the tract between the Karatoya and the Monās, Kāmpith that between the Monās and Silghat on the north bank of the Brahmaputra, and Bhadrapith the corresponding portion of the south bank, while Saumārpith as before the most easterly tract.'


According to K.L. Barua, 'The Kingdom included not only Assam valley, but also parts of northern and eastern Bengal, part of Bhutan, the Khasi and Garo Hills, and the northern portion of the district of Sylhet.'— See Early History of Kamarupa, p.10.

Also see the following:

J. A. Vas: Rungpore District Gazetteer: 'Rungpore was originally included, together with Assam, Manipur, Jaintia, Cachar and part of Mymensingh and Sylhet, in the Kingdom of Kamarupa or Pragjyotish, the Karatoya river forming the boundary between that dominion and Matsya or Bengal' (p.10).

J. F. Grunning: Jalpaiguri District Gazetteer: 'In prehistoric times Jalpaiguri district formed part of the kingdom of Pragjyotish, or as it was afterwards called Kamarupa, which extended as far west as the Karatya river' (p.18).

F. A. Sachse: Mymensingh District Gazetteer: 'At the time of the Mahabharata, Mymensingh formed part of Pragjyotisha which 3,000 years later in Buddhist times was known as Kamrup. The western boundary of Kamrup was the Karatoya river, which still runs out of Nepal parallel to the Atrai through Rungpore and Pabna. So the present bed of the Jamuna and considerable strips of the Rajshahi Division districts (Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Malda, Rungpore, Bogra and Pabna) as well as the northern parganas of Mymensingh must have been included in Kamrup' (p.16).

alignments of the borders of these portions, the Ratnapith division of old Kamarupa included the present district of Goalpara.

Bhaskara-Varman (7th century A.D.), unquestionably one of the most remarkable men and rulers of his time, ruled not only over western and northern Assam (the Brahmaputra valley), but in his time Assam's dominion extended over the greater part of Bengal. Undoubtedly, the vast territory included modern Goalpara. But very little is known about the political fortunes of the district in the centuries following Bhaskara's time. But it may be assumed that it formed parts of the kingdoms of the dynasties that ruled Assam since then. According to the tradition of the Mahapurushiyas, it subsequently formed a part of a kingdom called Kamata, whose ruler at the beginning of the fourteenth century was named Durlabh Narayan. In the fifteenth century the district was included in the dominions of the Khyen prince whose capital Kamatapur, now in the Cooch Behar district, was sacked by the Muhammadans.

The district is more definitely connected with the fortunes of the Koch Kingdom that made its appearance after the fall of the Khyens. According to the Koch chronicles, a powerful Koch chief, Hariya, whose name was sanskritised to Haridasa, was elected a sort of suzerain over all the chiefs in the area covered by the whole of the Goalpara district on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra. Haria's son Bishu, who took the name of Biswasinha was the real founder of the Koch Kingdom. He ruled from 1496 to 1533 (1540?) and his territory extended on the east to the Barnadi (which probably included the

2. A sect of the Assam Vaishnava order.
Gauhati region) for, he is known to have revived the Sakta shrine of Kamakhya, near Gauhati. The zenith of the glorious days of Koch rule was reached during the days of Biswasinha's son, Naranarayana, who began his career from 1533 (or 1540) as a ruler and a conqueror, an organiser and a reformer, with the all-out support of his illustrious brother Sukladhwaj. His long and prosperous reign of over 40 years is resplendent with his wars with the Ahoms, his victories over Jaintia, Tripura and Sylhet kings, his rebuilding of the temple of Kamakhya near Gauhati, his patronage of Vaishnava reformers, his temple and road-building activities. 'All this', remarks Dr Chatterji, 'makes him one of the greatest kings of India, a worthy contemporary of Akbar, and a prominent personage among Indo-Mongoloids.'

Ralph Fitch, the English traveller, had visited Naranarayan's kingdom and his account of the country speaks of the institution of hospitals for animals and of the aversion of the people to taking life, as well as of the abundance of cotton and silk cloth and of musk. 'Evidently the neo-Vaishnavism of Sankara-deva of Assam had made great progress among the people — at least among some sections of it.'

About 1580 A.D. the Koch kingdom was divided and the country east of the Sankosh (Koch-Hajo), which included Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang, was surrendered to Raghu Rai, the nephew of Naranarayan, while the territory that lay west of that river (Koch Bihar) was reserved for the son of that prince. Disputes, however, soon broke out between the two families, and Goalpara was conquered by the Muhammadans, who had been called in by Naranarayan's son to his

2. Ibid.
assistance. The aid of the Ahoms was invoked on the other side, and for some time the war between these two powers dragged on with varying results. In 1637, peace was concluded and the Barnadi, which now divides Kamrup and Darrang, was fixed as the boundary between Muhammadan and Ahom territory. In 1658, the Ahoms advanced again, occupied Goalpara, and held it for three years, but were compelled to retreat before Mir Jumla's army. From that time onwards the district formed part of the Muhammadan dominions, till, with the rest of Bengal, it was ceded to the British in 1765. Under the Mughal administration Koch-Hajo was divided into four Sarkars or divisions, viz. Sarkar Bangalbhum, Sarkar Dhekuri, Sarkar Kamrup and Sarkar Dakhinkul. Of these, Sarkar Dhekuri included more or less the whole of the present Goalpara District. During the Mughal-Ahom conflicts

2. N. N. Vasu believes that Dhekeri or Dhekkari is the name of a kingdom which was established by one Dhurta Ghosha of Radha in a part of old Kamarupa comprising the eastern parts of Cooch Behar, Goalpara and parts of the modern Kamrup district. —See Social History of Kamarupa, pp.201-215. This view, however is not corroborated by other scholars.

Some people want to associate the name Goalpara with Gallitipyaka appearing in a grant given by one Iswara Ghosha Mahamandaliya, great grandson of Dhurta Ghosha.— See Khan Chowdhury Aminatullah Ahmed: Koch Biharer Itihās, pp.19-20. The District Census Handbook (1961) for Goalpara contains the following information (see page IV) which is, however, difficult to be accepted, as it is not supported by adequate evidence: 'During the reign of the Deva Kings of Assam, Goalpara was under the administration of a deputy, named Iswara Ghosha. He was perhaps influenced by the religion of Buddhism, and became too generous to his subjects. He granted a plot of land to a Brahmin of the Gwalitippika(Gallitipyaka?) district. People believe that the present name of Goalpara is perhaps derived from Gwalitippika, which literally means Gwali village, i.e. milkmen's village.'

Dhekeri at one time was a opprobrious term used by the Ahoms while referring to people of Goalpara and Kamrup.— See Gunabhiram Barua: Asam Burañji, p.123.
FOR MONTGOMERY MARTIN EDITION OF THE OFFICIAL SURVEY OF RONGGOPUR

VOL. III EASTERN INDIA

Area 7400 St. Miles
Lat. 25°5' to 15°50' North
Long 93°30' to 95°50' East.

PUBLISHED BY W.H. ALLEN AND CO. LEADEN HALL STREET AUGUST 1ST 1838.
Goalpara formed the easternmost tract where the Mughals had consolidated their position and perhaps from the name of the place where the Nawab of the region had his headquarters, practically the whole of the area covered by the modern district on both sides of the Brahmaputra came to be known as Rangamati. This name of the region continued in the early days of British occupation.\(^1\)

The Mughals had introduced their own settlement and revenue systems in the areas under their occupation. In Goalpara, which was under the Mughals for a sufficiently long stretch of time, the Zemindari system took roots under their aegis and continued till its abolition in 1957. It may be noted that Goalpara is the only district in the Assam valley to have had the system; it had direct and far-reaching effects on the economic and social life of the people of the district and had moulded, at least at certain levels, the cultural life as well.

Goalpara had experienced several changes of jurisdiction since it first came under British rule. The permanently settled portion was originally a part of the district of Rangpur. In 1822 it was formed into a separate district known as North East Rangpur. After the cession of Assam in 1826, Goalpara was annexed to the Assam Valley Division, but in 1827 it was transferred to the newly-created Cooch Behar Commissionership. In the following year it was placed for judicial purposes under the Judicial Commissioner of Assam, and it was finally incorporated in the new province when Assam was created into a separate administration in 1874.\(^2\)

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1. 'From 1765 to 1822 the old Thanas of Goalpara, Dhubri and Karoibari formed a part of the Rangpur district of Bengal, which was known as Rangamatti district.'— See District Census Handbook, Goalpara, 1961, p.i. Martin in his map of 'Ronggopoor' (Rangpur) included almost the whole of the present Goalpara district.— See Eastern India, Vol.III.

the then Eastern Bengal in 1905. In 1912 the whole district was permanently transferred to Assam.¹

The history of the Eastern Duars, a strip lying at the foot of the Bhutan hills, differs in some respects from that of the remainder of the district. On the break-up of the Koch power at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and during the struggles that ensued between the Muhammadans and the Ahoms, the Bhutias succeeded in bringing the territory known as Eastern Duars under their control. Their system of administration seems to have been harsh and arbitrary and they soon came in confrontation with the British authorities. There followed a series of encounters after which the territory was taken over from Bhutan and tagged to Goalpara district in 1864.²

III The People

B. C. Allen had observed in 1905: 'Homogeneity is the dominant note in the social system of Goalpara, and a single caste, Rajbansi, forms over one fourth of the total population. The ranks of the Rajbansi are recruited from the aboriginal tribes such as the Mech, Rabha and Kachari, and if they with the Koch, who are also akin, are added, this single group amounts to more than half the total population of the district. More than one fourth of the total population are Muhammadans, and less than a quarter of the whole is thus left for all castes and tribes outside the Rajbansi group. The higher castes, such as the Brahman and Kayastha, are by no means strongly represented. Even the Kalitas who stand for middle-class respectability

in Assam and form so large a proportion of the population of Kamrup, are comparatively few in numbers. The same may be said of the Kewats or Kaibarttas, who rank next after the Kalitas in the estimation of the Assamese.¹

These observations are on the whole correct with certain qualifications and the position is more or less the same today except for the fact that there has been in recent times a fairly heavy influx of people from the west, mostly from eastern Bengal, disturbing to some extent the proportions of the different groups in the population of the district.

The qualifications needed in Allen's observations relate to the use of the terms Mech, Kachari, Rajbansi and Koch. First, Mech and Kachari are not two different 'aboriginal tribes'. The same people, the plains Bodos, are called Kachari in most parts of Assam, including the southern part of Goalpara but are called Mech in the northern parts of Goalpara and in the whole of North Bengal.² Again, although there was a tendency at one time to consider the Koches and Rajbansis as two exclusive groups, it has been established, as we shall presently see, that they are the same people designated by

² 'The Bodo people who live to the west of the present Kamrup district are called Mec by their Hindu neighbours. Those of them who live in and to the east of the district of Kamrup are called Kachāri or Kachāri.' — See B. K. Kakati : Assamese : Its Formation and Development, p.47.

Allen himself was conscious of this position as he says elsewhere in the same work: '... they [the Mech] are believed to be absolutely identical with Kacharis.' — See p.46.
two different names. Thirdly, the view that Rajbansis or Koches are Hinduised Bodos or Rabhas is not contributed to by all scholars and is strongly resented by many conscious members of the caste.

Now, even if it is true that the ranks of the Rajbansi are recruited from the 'aboriginal tribes' and there are elements in the religious and social life of the Rajbansis that point to some past tribal association, — the tribes are still culturally exclusive groups while the Rajbansis have very much of an open culture. Again, all Hinduised and Assamese speaking tribals do not necessarily turn into Rajbansis. There are in the south a very big number of Assamese speaking semi-Hinduised Rabhas who constitute a distinct group by no means akin to the Rajbansis.

The Bodos — who are called Meches in the North and Kacharis in the south — are spread over all parts of the district on both sides of the Brahmaputra, but the biggest concentration of this tribes is to be found in the Kokrajhar sub-division. We have used here the general term Bodo by which members of the tribe are usually known today.

The Rabhas are another tribe belonging to the great Bodo race, living in the plains of Assam. The heaviest concentration of the Rabhas is in the south bank of the Brahmaputra in the Goalpara district, among whom there are both the Assamese-speaking semi-Hinduised groups and those retaining their aboriginal ways.

1. Of course, by Koch Allen here seems to be referring to the particular Koch group in Goalpara which is a 'small degraded section of the tribe, with whom the Rajbansis will have no concern.' — See Goal.Dist.Gaz., p.51. But Allen was aware that 'the Koch and Rajbansi of Assam are one and the same caste'. — See Ibid., p.52.

2. The Rabhas are divided into several groups, such as the Rangdanis, the Maitoris, the Bitalias, the Dahiris, the Totlas, and the Patis, of which some, particularly the Patis have given up completely their tribal language in favour of the local Assamese and also
There are also a fairly big number of Garos living in the southern parts of the district adjoing the Garo Hills. Another small tribal group, the Hajongs of whom there are greater numbers in Garo Hills district than in Goalpara, have adopted a culture which seems to be influenced by that of Goalpara.

Since the Rajbansis form the bulk of the population of the district, the inclusion of some information about their racial origin and characteristics would seem to be in order.

According to B. C. Allen 'The Rajbansis of Goalpara are one of the race castes of Assam, and apparently correspond to the Bar Koch of Kamrup. ... ... The Rajbansis or Koches, to use the title by which the tribe is more generally known, are common not only in Assam but in Northern Bengal. They appear to be of mixed lineage. On the west their affinities are with the Dravidian stock, on the east with the Mongolian. The centre of the Koch Power was in Kuch Bihar, and in Goalpara the tribe were in a position to be much affected by the tradition of the ruling race. The Koch Raja and his court were a considerable factor in their lives, and the tribesmen have assumed the honorific title of Rajbansi, or 'men of royal stock'. There seems to be no doubt that the Koch and Rajbansi of Assam are one and the same caste ... '.

Gait admits that the ethnic character of the people has been a matter of controversy. He refers to the views of Brian Hadgson, much of their religious and social beliefs and practices in favour of those of the local Hindus. — See article on the Rabhas by Dr B. M. Das in P. C. Bhattacharya (Ed) Asamar Janajāti, pp.156-167.

Buchanon and others according to which the Koch is akin to the Bodo and also to those of Colonel Dalton who considers them to be Dravidian and Risley who, while admitting an inter-mixture with Mongoloid stock, holds that the Dravidian characteristics predominate. He gives his own conclusions thus: 'There seems, however, to be no doubt that the true Koches were a Mongoloid race very closely allied to the Meches and Garos; and we find that in Jalpaiguri, Koch Bihar and Goalpara, the persons known as "Rajbansis" are either pure Koches, who, though dark, have a distinctly Mongoloid physiognomy or else a mixed breed, in which the Mongoloid element usually preponderates.'

Dr S. K. Chatterji describes the Koches of North Bengal as Western Bodos. In his opinion they (in whom we can include those of Goalpara also) are 'Hinduisised or semi-Hinduisised Bodo who have abandoned their original Tibeto-Burman speech and have adopted the Northern dialect of Bengali (which has a close affinity with Assamese); and when they are a little too conscious of their Hindu religion and culture and retain at the same time some vague memory of the glories of their people, particularly during the days of Viśwa Simha and Naranarayana, they are proud to call themselves Rāj.-bamsīs and to claim to be called Kṣatriyas ...'.

It may be pointed out here that the some Rajbansis wear the sacred thread in support of their claim to be descendants of ancient Kshatriyas. It was, they say, Parasurām's campaign against the Kshatriyas that had compelled their ancestors to take refuge in the

jungles and to abandon the prescribed ways of their race. Thus they became Bhanga Kshatriyas or debased Kshatriyas. The Darrang Raja Vamsavali gives an interesting story about the Kshatriya ancestry of the Koch kings. When Parasurama was massacring the Kshatriyas to avenge a great wrong done by them, twelve Kshatriya princes had 'saved themselves by concealing their identity by adopting Mech manners and customs and by marrying Mech girls.' According to this book, these 12 families were the progenitors of the Koches. Hariya-mandal, the father of Biswa Sinha, who was the founder of the Koch Kingdom, is said to have been the chief of these 12 families. ¹ Whether the story establishes the Kshatriya origin of the Koch kings or not, it at least points to the inter-mixture of their ancestors with Mongoloids.

A very similar story is, however, current about the Kalitas. According to it the Kalitas are Kshatriyas, who, fleeing from the wrath of Parasurama, concealed their castes and their persons in the jungles of Assam, and are thus called Kulalupta. The Kalitas are said to have been the old priestly caste of the Bodo tribe, enjoying considerable power and prestige in this region.² 'One most plausible suggestion about their origin is that they are the remains of an Aryan colony, who settled in Assam at a time when the functional castes were still unknown in Bengal and the word "Kalita" was applied to all Aryans who were not Brahmins.'³ About the Brahmans of Goalpara B. C. Allen says that they 'fall into four classes, Vaidik, Rarhi,

1. H. C. Goswami (Ed): Darrang Raja-Vamsavali, see Introduction, p.XIII.
2. It is said that it was Biswa Sinha who discarded the services of the Kalita priests.— See Eastern India, Vol.III, p.414.
Barendra and Kamrupi. The Vaidik Brahmans are descended from men of that caste who migrated from upper India to Bengal about the 11th century A.D., but the Rarhi and Barendra septs here moved in to the district in more recent times. Many of the Kamrupi Brahmans are priests who minister to castes comparatively low in the social scale.¹

According to some accounts the Kayasthas were also once quite prominent in this region and served as important government functionaries. Among them there were many Bhuyans who had their own principalities, sometimes virtually independent and at other times as protectorates of the royal houses. Most of them have since turned into landlords, big and small.²

Scattered over different parts of the district there are people of the Nath community, popularly called Jugi. They are said to have constituted a priestly class, later fallen from grace. Considering that at Jogighopa in the district there are the remains of caves believed to have been the abodes of Nath ascetics and also that myths and legends associated with the Nath cult are popular in some parts of the district, it can be assumed that this community had once occupied a position of importance in the district. Though at present the Jugis elsewhere 'are a low caste whose traditional occupation is weaving and who are looked down upon by their superiors in the social scale ... in Goalpara, they form a comparatively advanced section of the community ...'. In this district they are more generally associated with the production of lime.

Besides there are various other communities like the Nayjdiyals, Doms or Namashudras (fishermen), Bhuimalis (drummers), Hiras and Kumars (potters), Phulmalis (artificial flower makers), Napits (barbers), etc. But none of them are strongly represented in the population of the district.

So far as the local Muslims are concerned it is quite likely that some of them are descendants of the early Muslim hordes, who chose to stay on. But in all probability these outsiders married local girls before settling down here. On the other hand, the ancestors of the bulk of the others would appear to have been early local converts. This is apparent both from their physical features and their manners and customs. It is significant that the local Muslims call themselves deshi (local) and they use the term bhātiyā to designate the 'down river' Muhammadans from East Bengal.

IV Scope of the Work

Since the present district of Goalpara had been practically outside the domain of the Ahoms and since the speech and manners of the people of the district differ, more or less considerably, from those of other parts of Assam, there is a notion among certain sections of people that Goalpara's cultural links with the rest of Assam are feeble. This notion is reflected in B. C. Allen's observation: 'Goalpara, however, never formed part of the Ahom Kingdom and though it is one of the districts of Assam valley, it belongs more to Northern Bengal than to Assam proper.' On the face of it there seems to be nothing wrong with these remarks. But if one wants to go deeper

into the culture of the district, one must deal with it in the broader perspective of the history and culture of both Assam and North Bengal.

The modern name of Assam (as of the Assamese people) is of quite recent origin. It is connected with the Shan invaders who entered the Brahmaputra Valley by way of North Burma in the beginning of the thirteenth century and who were known by the term Ahom. In the following centuries the Ahoms conquered the whole of eastern and central Assam and spread towards the west. They had already overpowered two powerful Hinduised Bodo states, that of the Chutiyas in the extreme east and that of the Dima-sa or Kacharis in the Dhan-siri valley. But in the west they met with stiff resistance from the great Koch tribe. The Koch kings prevented the Ahoms from spreading their powers in western Assam. Out of this struggle, the Ahoms, however, emerged victorious. But by the time of this final triumph, they had both 'lost their nerve as independent peoples'—they had both lost their language, or were fairly advanced on the way to lose it, and merged into a single Aryan Assamese-speaking people in Assam. If the Ahom rulers had acted as a powerful agency in the development of Assamese society and culture in the east, it was the Koches who played a similar role in the west. Moreover, the third force that made the greatest contribution towards the emergence of much of the distinctiveness of Assamese culture, viz. the neo-Vaishnavite movement started by Sankaradeva, had initially taken roots in the Koch territories and then had spread out. Thus Assamese society owes as

much for its distinctive character to the Ahoms in the east as to the Koches in the west. In fact, Assamese culture may be said to be born out of the confluence of two closely flowing streams — the eastern and the western.

We have already seen that the political fortunes of Goalpara have been substantially different from those of the rest of Assam, particularly the areas that enjoyed practically uninterrupted Ahom rule. But this is true also of western Assam as a whole. In fact, the Ahoms never consolidated themselves even in the areas covered by the modern district of Kamrup and the western part of Darrang, where the Koch kings and sometimes the Muslims had their sway. Thus these regions of western Assam have always had the closest of links not only with Goalpara but also with those regions of North Bengal — particularly Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri and Rangpur adjoining Goalpara — which had earlier formed parts of old Kamarupa and later of the Koch and Muslim territories. These links are not only political but ethnological and cultural as well. Goalpara's links with North Bengal have of course been special not only because of identical political destinies but also because of the identity in their basic populations, constituted mainly by Koches or Rajbansis.

1. In the words of Dr S. K. Chatterji, 'it is quite easy think of North Bengal as much as Assam as having an Indo-mongoloid population from quite early times. Brahman and other western Hindu settlements in North Bengal appear to have been scanty, and it has been mainly during the recent centuries that Brahmans and "Caste Hindus" have felt attracted to North Bengal districts like Jalpaiguri, Dinajpur, Rangpur, and the state of Koch Bihar. The masses of the North Bengal areas are very largely of Bodo origin, or mixed Austric-Dravidian-Mongoloid, where groups of peoples from lower Bengal and Bihar have penetrated among them.' — See S. K. Chatterji: Kirāta-Jana-Kṛti, pp. 60-61.
Thus, starting from western Darrang in the east to Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar and Rangpur in the west, there flows what may be termed as the western stream of Assamese culture. So, if there is substance in the remark that Goalpara belongs more to North Bengal than to Assam proper, it could be remarked with equal, if not greater, justification that North Bengal belongs more to western Assam than to Bengal proper. But since this whole region did not enjoy the benefits of a long, unified and centralised administration, as did eastern and central Assam under the Ahoms, there does not obtain in this area the same kind of uniformity of cultural standards as is found in the eastern parts. As Dr Kakati observes: 'Western Assam was never for a long period under any dominant power. It was the cock-pit of several fighting forces, — the Koches, the Muhammadans, and the Ahoms, and political fortunes passed from one power to another in different times. A steady commanding central influence that gives homogeneity to manners as to speech was never built up by any ruling power in western Assam.'

For the student of culture Goalpara, thus, seems to offer a subject deserving serious attention. It has been the endeavour of the present writer, therefore, to unravel the strands which have gone into the making of this area's cultural pattern. An attempt has been made to study and analyze the lower or folk culture of the people of the district in respect of their religious and magical beliefs and practices, seasonal and agricultural rites and ceremonies, different forms of folk-literature, folk-drama, arts and crafts and so on.

A matter to be noted in this connection is that though the whole district of Goalpara has broadly the same cultural stamp, it has zonal variations, specially between the eastern and the western parts of the district. The eastern parts have a much closer cultural affinity with the districts of Kamrup and Darrang. The western parts, because of the inter-mixture of various cultural streams from the contiguous areas, offer a more challenging field of inquiry and have been given greater attention in this study. Roughly, the eastern zone consists of the areas covered by the Goalpara sub-division while the western zone by those covered by Dhubri and Kokrajhar sub-divisions. The middle portion incorporates cultural elements from both the sides.

As the Bodos and Rabhas account for a sizeable proportion of the population of the district, it has been my concern to include some information about the ingredients of their cultures, although a detailed analysis of these has not been included within the scope of this study.

The study has been mainly based on field-work spreading over several years. In fact, my familiarity with the dialects and traditions of the district began years ago during my high school days which were spent in the town of Goalpara on the south bank of the Brahmaputra. My contacts with and interests in the culture of the district later grew over the years for one reason or another, and their intensification finally led to the urge to undertake the present work.
HUMAN TYPES

The author with Rajbansi men

A Rajbansi youth.

A Rajbansi man with the sacred thread.

A Bodo maiden and a boy.

Left: A Rabha girl

Right: A Muslim girl.