

ASSAM DISTRICT GAZETTEERS.

VOLUME VII

Sibsagar.

BY

B. C. ALLEN, C.S.

Allahabad:

PRINTED AT THE PIONEER PRESS

1906.

Price Rs. 3.

CHAPTER I.

PHYSICAL ASPECTS.

Area and boundaries—General aspects—Hills—The Majuli—River system—Geology—Climate—Rainfall—Storms and earthquakes—Fauna.

The district of Sibsagar lies between $25^{\circ} 49'$ and $27^{\circ} 16'$ N. and $93^{\circ} 2'$ and $95^{\circ} 22'$ E., and covers an area of 4,996 square miles. On the north it is bounded by the districts of Darrang and Lakhimpur, on the east by Lakhimpur and hills occupied by tribes of independent Nagas, on the south by these hills and by the Naga Hills district, and on the west by the district of Nowgong. **Area and boundaries.**

Sibsagar falls into three natural divisions. The most populous and important portion is a wide and healthy plain lying between the Naga Hills and the Brahmaputra. North of that river is the Majuli, a great island no less than 485 square miles in area, which is separated from Lakhimpur by the Kherkutia Suti, at one time the main channel of the Brahmaputra, and the Subansiri. On the east, a considerable portion of the Mikir Hills and the upper valley of the Dhansiri have recently been incorporated within the boundaries of the district.

Throughout the whole of its course through Sibsagar, the Brahmaputra is bounded on the south by a belt of flooded land varying from three or four to as much as seven or eight miles in width. The country in this part is covered with high reed jungle, interspersed with **The marshes near the Brahmaputra.**

swamps or *bils* and magnificent stretches of rich fodder grass. There are few Assamese villages in this tract, and there is little cultivation except of summer rice, followed by pulse or mustard. Such inhabitants as there are, are Miris, whose houses are built on piles which raise them well above the level of the floods, or Nepalese graziers, whose buffaloes wander at will over the marshes and sandy *churs*. West of Bokaghat this strip of inundated country is seven or eight miles in breadth, and affords a splendid shelter for every kind of game. There are patches of tree forest in which wild elephants and mithun can shelter from the noonday heat, and stretches of high reeds impenetrable to any but the largest animals. Here and there in this sea of grass are little muddy pools in which the great rhinoceros loves to wallow, surrounded by reeds and grasses from fifteen to twenty feet in height. There are *bils*, or shallow meres, lying in the bottom of basins carpeted with luscious fodder grass, and enclosed by a wall of jungle. Here the wild pig come and burrow for their food, and the wild buffalo wallow in the water or lie beneath the shade of the gigantic reeds. Near the tree jungle there is higher ground, where the grasses cannot grow so rank and the deer can make their home.

**The Sibsa-
gar plain.**

South of this flooded tract and east of the Dhansiri there is a wide plain, on which there is hardly any jungle to be seen. On the lower land the staple crop is transplanted rice, while the higher levels have been planted out with tea. The landscape, as a rule, is one of rural plenty. On every side stretch fields of waving rice,

of native rule the capture of wild elephants was a prerogative of the crown. The Hathighar which connects the Ladoigarh with the hills is said to have been constructed for this purpose, and tradition has it that on one occasion a thousand animals were taken in this gigantic kinedda. The system of *mela shikar* was introduced in the time of Purandar Singh, who levied a royalty of Rs. 10 on every animal captured. Prior to this private individuals were not allowed to hunt at all.*

Elephant hunting was last carried on on an extensive scale in 1903-04, when 82 animals were captured. The district is divided into eight mahals and the right to hunt elephants in each mahal is put up to auction; a royalty of Rs.100 is also paid on each beast caught. Rhinoceros live in the swamps near Kajiranga and are now becoming scarce. They breed slowly, and as the horn is worth more than its weight in silver, and the flesh is prized as food, they present a tempting mark to the native hunter. Herds of wild buffalo are found in the same locality, and wild bulls occasionally serve the tame cows that are kept by the Nepalese on the Brahmaputra *churs*. Bison are generally found in the Mikir Hills, and, in the cold weather, sometimes descend to the jungles at their feet.

Steps have recently been taken to form the wide expanse of jungle near Kajiranga, which covers a total area of about 90 square miles, into a game reserve.† Wild animals cause little loss of human life, but, in 1904, are said to have accounted for nearly one thousand head

* Vide Deputy Commissioner's letter No. 70, dated August 23rd, 1852.

† About half of this reserve is situated in the Nowgong district,

from fever, and, apart from rice, there was very little food. Salt was sold in the camp for Rs.30 a seer, butter for Rs.14 a seer, and opium fetched as much as a gold mohur per tola. The health of the troops at Mathurapur became so bad that it was found necessary to move them to Gargaon. It proved to be impossible to retire even this short distance in good order, and the Muhammadans were compelled to abandon their sick and to leave many of their guns sticking in the mud. At the conclusion of the rains the Musalmans began once more to take the offensive, but Mir Jumla's health had become so bad that he was unable to pursue the campaign with any degree of vigour, and a peace was patched up in January 1663. According to the Muhammadan historians, the Ahom Raja agreed to pay a heavy indemnity, and the country north of the Brahmaputra and west of the Bhareli, with Beltala, Damuria, and the Naga Hills on the south bank of the Brahmaputra, were ceded to the Mughal Emperor. It is, however, doubtful whether these terms were ever carried out. This, at any rate, is certain that only a few years later the Ahoms were once more in possession of Kamrup, and the outposts of the Muhammadans were located not on the Bhareli but at Rangamati in the Goalpara district.

The description of Assam in the latter half of the seventeenth century as given by the Muhammadan invaders is full of interest. The road from Kaliabar to Gargaon is said to have passed through well cultivated land, and on every side there were houses, gardens, and orchards. This description hardly holds good of

Assam as described by the historian of Mir Jumla's invasion.

the road from Kaliabar to Bokaghat at the present day, but the remains of roads and plinths north of Kajiranga show that what is now a howling jungle inhabited by buffaloes and rhinoceros, must in former days have been the site of prosperous villages.

It is also said that the north bank was better cultivated than the south, a statement that still holds good as far as Goalpara and Kamrup, with which the writer was no doubt most intimately acquainted, are concerned. Rich and poor alike built their houses of wood, bamboo, and thatch, and the people generally seem to have led a simple vigorous life.

**Description
of Gargaon.**

The following description of Gargaon is of sufficient interest to warrant reproduction:—

“The town has four gates built of stone and mortar, the distance of each of which from the palace of the Raja is three *kos*. A high and wide *Al*, very strong, has been made for the traffic; and round about the town, instead of fortifications, there are circular bushes of bamboos, about two *kos* in diameter. But the town is not like other towns, the huts of the inhabitants being within the bamboo bushes near the *Al*. Each man has his garden or field before his house, so that one side of the field touches the *Al*, and the other the house. Near the Raja's palace, on both sides of the Dikho river, are large houses. The bazar road is narrow, and is only occupied by *pan*-sellers. Eatables are not sold as in our markets; but each man keeps in his house stores for a year, and no one either sells or buys. The town looks large, being a cluster of several villages.”

**Products of
country.**

Rice was the staple food, but salt was scarce and dear. Salt of an inferior quality was obtained from the salt wells in the coal measures, but the bulk of the people used the *khar pani* that is so commonly distilled from the ashes of the plantain at the present day. Mangoes were plentiful but full of worms, and sugarcane of three