

Baptists in Assam

*A Century of
Missionary Service*

1836-1936

By

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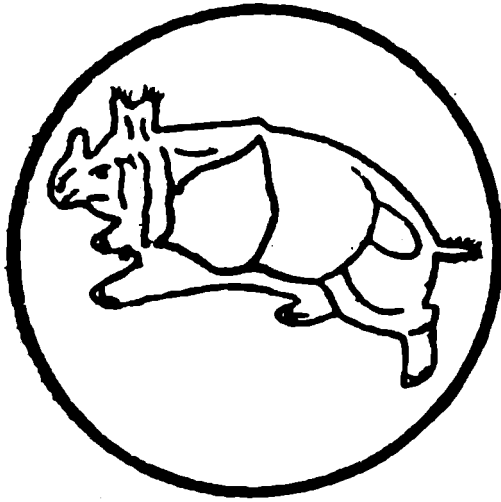
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CHAPTER I

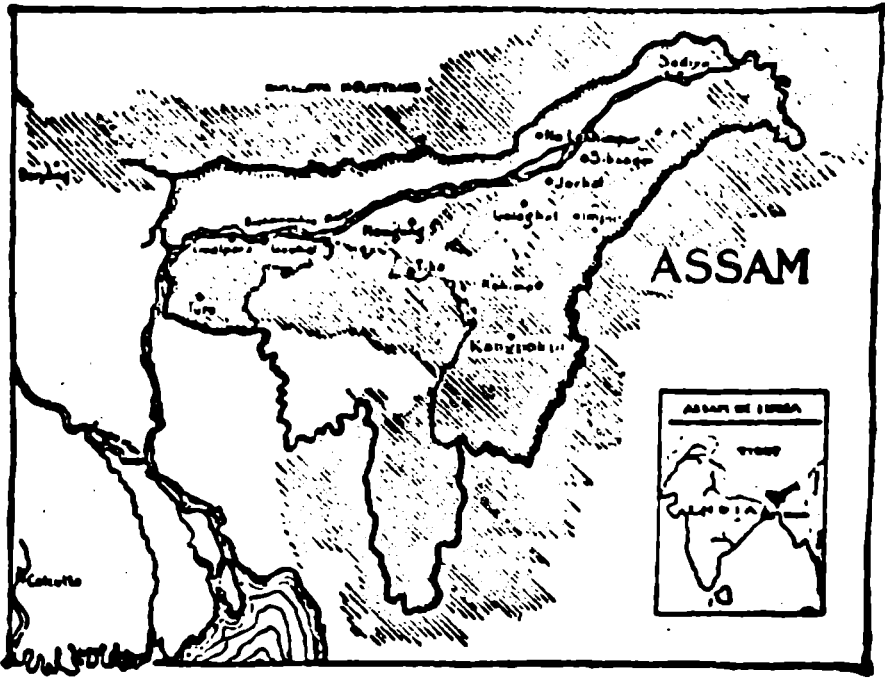
ARVA. FLUMINA. MONTES

The ordinary tourist traveling north from Calcutta is usually attracted by the snow-capped mountains of the Himalayas, and the great summer resort of Bengal, Darjeeling. He forgets to look to his right as he travels, not realizing that he is passing one of the most favored portions of this earth and, in many respects, one of the most important regions of the Indian Empire. Assam has been considered one of the backward provinces; but since, from a political point of view, it has not caused the British government much trouble, its economic importance has largely been overlooked. This is very interesting; but, it may be asked, what has it to do with a history of the development of Christianity in Assam? Just this: It serves as an introduction to one of the most fascinating stories of Christian history to be found in the East.

Assam is located in the northeast corner of India proper, lying between the twenty-third and twenty-

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eighth degrees of latitude, and between the ninetieth and ninety-sixth degrees of longitude. It covers an area of 67,334 square miles,¹ which is about the size of England, Wales, and one-third of Scotland. The province falls naturally into three well defined divisions: (1) the Brahmaputra Valley to the north; (2) the Surma Valley to the south of the Assam range of



mountains; and (3) the hills on either side of the Brahmaputra Valley. From an atlas point of view, this division is correct, but persons living in the Surma Valley, or in Sylhet, often refer to the Brahmaputra Valley as Assam.

The rhinoceros which is placed at the beginning of this chapter represents the Coat of Arms of Assam, although it is not very well known even to those who call themselves inhabitants of the Province. It is a pity that there is no motto attached, as a very good one was suggested, namely, *Arva, Flumina, Montes,*² — culti-

ARVA, FLUMINA, MONTES

vated plains, rivers, and mountains. This is a most appropriate description of Assam, as there is scarcely a valley to be found that is more fertile than Assam. The majestic Brahmaputra River, or "Son of Brahma", bisects the entire valley from Sadiya to the Ganges. It carries the melting snows of the Himalayas two thousand miles to the ocean, making a channel from one to three miles in width. A legend among the inhabitants is that the circular basin, called Brahmakund, or "Brahma's well", in the extreme northeast of Assam, is its sacred source. It is fed on the north by six tributaries* getting most of their water from the melting snows of the Himalayas; on the south it is fed by eight rivers** that carry the torrential summer rains from the hills lying between Burma and Assam. These tributary rivers, as well as the Brahmaputra itself, occasionally overflow their banks and deposit in the valley a silt which makes the soil extremely rich and fruitful. Some one has called this portion of the Province a "pocket of gold". According to records, Assam never has known a famine. The current of the Brahmaputra is rapid. The descent for the four hundred and fifty miles from Sadiya to Dhubri is over three hundred feet. Its banks are unreliable, and people dwelling along-side the river often are forced to move back as much as a mile in order to avoid being carried away with the falling banks.

Beside the great agricultural wealth in Assam, there are also mineral resources of no mean proportions. Oil has been discovered and wells producing petroleum are continually being drilled. Large coal mines are also being opened up; and Assam produces practically

* Dibong, Dihong, Subansiri, Boroli, Bornadi, and the Manas.
** Dibong, Disang, Disoi, Dhansiri, Kallang, Kulsi, Krishni, and the Jinjiram.

UP THE BRAHMAPUTRA

boatmen were ignorant, not to say indifferent. They had procured three Bengali boats, one for each family and one as a floating kitchen and storehouse, each vessel being "some five or six feet in width, and twenty or thirty feet in length".¹⁰ A canopy of split bamboos and palm leaves, built over the center afforded the travelers shelter at night and during the day protection from the burning tropical sun. "These boats were manned by a manji or captain, with six or eight men under him, who walked in a foot-path along the bank of the river, pulling the boat after them by means of ropes."¹¹ Where there was no path, these men would push the boats by means of poles.* Sometimes their craft would be whirled about by the current and headed down stream; again it would be dashed and torn by wind and rain. Sometimes the travelers were forced to halt, due to shallow water, and were compelled to transfer all their goods into small dugouts. On January 18, 1836, or nearly two months later, Brown wrote from below Gauhati, "We should have been up much farther, had it not been for shallow water in passing from the Hoogy to the Ganges . . ."¹²

For seventeen long weeks they were pushed and pulled through dense jungles and unknown country, isolated entirely from all civilization and European contact. At the beginning of the journey they were occasionally visited by British officials,¹³ but as they proceeded up the valley these visits ceased. The hardships of such a journey must be left to the imagination of the reader. Suffice it to say, that had the missionaries turned from the prospects before them and sought some less exposed and more promising field, the act might

* The boatman securing the lower end of his pole in the river bottom propelled the boat forward by holding the pole and walking toward the rear of the boat.

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have been considered the natural dictate of prudence. "But there is a martyr spirit which transcends mere self-seeking prudence; its laws and allegiance being those of another kingdom."

On March 23, 1836, the Browns arrived in Sadiya. The station was more or less in turmoil. The Khamtis had made several raids; but the missionaries were welcomed by the officials in the station; and the bungalow of Captain Charlton, who had gone to Calcutta for treatment of wounds he had received in one of the encounters with the Khamtis, was put at the disposal of the missionaries.¹⁴