

ATMAN



OKDISCD

COMMEMORATING THE DIAMOND JUBILEE OF
THE GAUHATI HIGH COURT

MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA



MESSAGE

I am happy to learn that the Gauhati High Court is celebrating its year long Diamond Jubilee celebrations commencing from April 5, 2008.

The judiciary in India has acquitted itself commendably. It has made contributions to our jurisprudence through its wise and time tested interpretations which has earned international acclaim. I am sure that the Gauhati High Court shall continue on this path of excellence in the future also.

On this occasion, I extend my greetings and felicitations to all those associated with the Celebration Committee and wish the event every success.

Pratibha Patil
(Pratibha Devisingh Patil)

New Delhi
February 28, 2008

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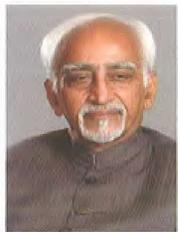
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MESSAGE FROM THE VICE PRESIDENT OF INDIA



**VICE PRESIDENT OF INDIA
NEW DELHI**

MESSAGE

I am happy to know that the Gauhati High Court is celebrating its Diamond Jubilee with a year long programme from 5th April, 2008.

Gauhati High Court has a glorious record of service to the people and has been discharging its responsibilities with commitment since its establishment. In its Diamond Jubilee Year, the High Court can look back with pride and satisfaction at its achievements.

I wish the Gauhati High Court all success in its endeavours.

(M. HAMID ANSARI)

New Delhi
12th March 2008

MESSAGE FROM THE CHIEF JUSTICE OF INDIA



*K. G. Balakrishnan
Chief Justice of India*



*5, Krishna Menon Marg,
New Delhi - 110 011*

MESSAGE

It gives me great pleasure to know that the Gauhati High Court is organizing its Diamond Jubilee this year and has undertaken to publish a Souvenir in this regard.

The Gauhati High Court, in the past five decades, has rendered commendable service to the north-eastern region as well as the nation, by upholding the rule of law and protecting the fundamental rights of the people.

I convey my best wishes to the Gauhati High Court for its Diamond Jubilee celebration.


(K.G. Balakrishnan)

New Delhi
January 15, 2008

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FOREWORD

Nestled among lush green forests, cascading waterfalls, gurgling rivers and mist-laden hills, the Northeast region of India represents a mini-Asia. A culturally diverse and ethnically heterogeneous population happily co-exists with each other as well as with the people of the rest of the country. Established on 5th April, 1948 and encompassing the Northeastern states of Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh, the Gauhati High Court is a unique example of ATMAN. The word ATMAN is an acronym for all the states and the Gauhati High Court represents the soul of these seven states, dispensing justice and serving as a symbol of hope for the aggrieved.

Years have melted into decades, and the Gauhati High Court now stands on the threshold of an important event in its existence: the completion of its diamond jubilee. And to immortalize the occasion, we present ATMAN that attempts to showcase the importance and significance of the areas covered by this hallowed institution. We have compiled a series of articles on various aspects regarding the seven States of the Northeast, which unlike anywhere else in the country has one High Court with seven Benches to administer justice. Eminent writers based in the region have contributed their literary expertise to make ATMAN a timeless collection. ATMAN is an attempt to mirror the eventful journey of the Gauhati High Court. We hope it will be as delightful an experience for you as it has been for us.

Justice Aftab H.Saikia
Justice Hrishikesh Roy
Editors

Guwahati
24th April, 2008.



OUR CONTRIBUTORS



DR. DIPANKAR BANERJEE is a senior Faculty Member of the Dept. Of History, Gauhati University. He has authored four books and is the recipient of an award given by the Assam Convention of USA and Canada for his outstanding efforts in recording and preservation of the history of Assam.



PATRICIA MUKHIM is an activist and columnist. She was conferred the Chameli Devi Jain Award for outstanding women media person in 1996 and the Padmashri in 2000. She was also awarded the FICCI-FLO excellence in journalism award on January 26, 2008).



ARUP KUMAR DUTTA is a full-time author, writing in English. His books have been translated into German, Japanese, Russian, Italian, Czech Hungarian etc. Among his well known books are *The Kaziranga Trail*, *Cha Garam-The Tea Story*, and *The Brahmaputra*. Three have been made into feature films, and two translated into Japanese Braille for blind readers.



MAMANG DAI is a poet and author, and a member of the North East Writers Forum. Her previous books include *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land and River Poems*. A former civil servant, she has tried to bring the region into focus through her latest book *The Legend of Pensam*.



DHRUBA HAZARIKA is a writer and a top bureaucrat with the Assam Government. His novel *A Bowstring Winter* was released by Penguin and has been well received. His passions include sports and creative writing.



MITRA PHUKAN is a novelist and a member of the NEWF. A vocalist in the genre of Hindustani classical music, she also writes fiction and translates books from Assamese to English. Her first novel in English (also the first by a northeastern writer), *The Collector's Wife*, was published by Penguin-Zubaan.



TAYENJAM BIJOYKUMAR SINGH is an electrical engineer by profession. He writes short stories and poems in English and Manipuri, and also reviews plays. He has translated many Manipuri short stories and poems into English, and is also the recipient of the Katha Award for Translation, 2005. He has also won the second prize in the International online Funga Wari (folk tale) Competition, 2007, organized by International Manipuri Progressive Forum, UK.



NITIN GOKHALE is Senior Editor, Defence and Strategic Affairs for NDTV. He has been reporting on India's Northeast for the past quarter century, and has had an occasion to visit these memorials several times. He is currently based in New Delhi.



INDRANI RAIMESHI is a journalist, columnist and writer. She is the Assistant Editor, Features, The Assam Tribune and author of eight books. She won the Kunjabala Devi Award for investigative journalism on women's issues, and has travelled to the U.K., Germany and Belgium as a delegate of the European Union and International Federation of Journalists' Gender Project.



MANOJIT BHUYAN is a practising advocate of the Gauhati High Court. He is passionate about law, literature, martial arts and adventure.

HON'BLE CHIEF JUSTICES AND JUDGES OF THE GAUHATI HIGH COURT APPOINTED AS JUDGE OF THE SUPREME COURT



Justice P.K. Goswami



Justice Baharul Islam



Justice K.N. Saikia



Justice B.L. Hansaria



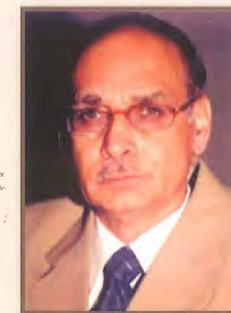
Justice S.N. Phukan



Justice Brijesh Kumar



Justice H.K. Sema



Justice P.P. Naolekar



Justice B. S. Reddy

HON'BLE CHIEF JUSTICES AND JUDGES OF THE GAUHATI HIGH COURT
APPOINTED/TRANSFERRED AS CHIEF JUSTICES OF OTHER HIGH COURTS



Justice D. Pathak
Orissa High Court



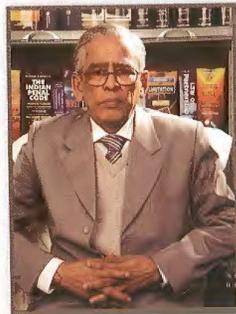
Justice U.L.N. Bhat
Madhya Pradesh High Court



Justice Dr. B.P. Saraf
Jammu & Kashmir High Court



Justice W.A. Shishak
Chattisgarh High Court



Justice S. Barman Roy
Orissa High Court



Justice B.K. Roy
Sikkim High Court



Justice Dr. M.K. Sharma
Delhi High Court



Justice A.K. Patnaik
Madhya Pradesh High Court

FORMER HON'BLE CHIEF JUSTICES OF THE GAUHATI HIGH COURT



Justice R.F. Lodge



Justice T.V. Thadani



Justice Sarjoo Prasad



Justice C.P. Sinha



Justice Holiram Deka



Justice G. Mehrotra



Justice C.S. Row Nayudu



Justice S.K. Dutta



Justice M.C. Pathak



Justice M.S. Swami



Justice C.M. Lodha



Justice K.M. Lahiri



Justice M. Ramakrishna



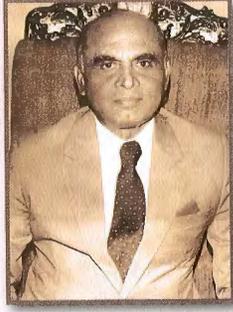
Justice N.C. Jain



Justice R.S. Mongia



Justice T.S. Misra



Justice P.C. Reddy



Justice G.M. Lodha



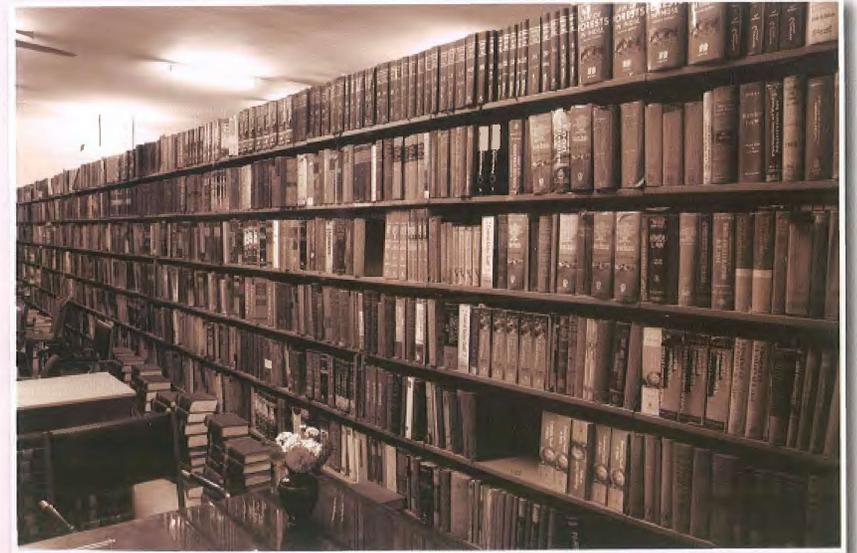
Justice A.S. Raghuvir



Justice R.K. Manisana Singh

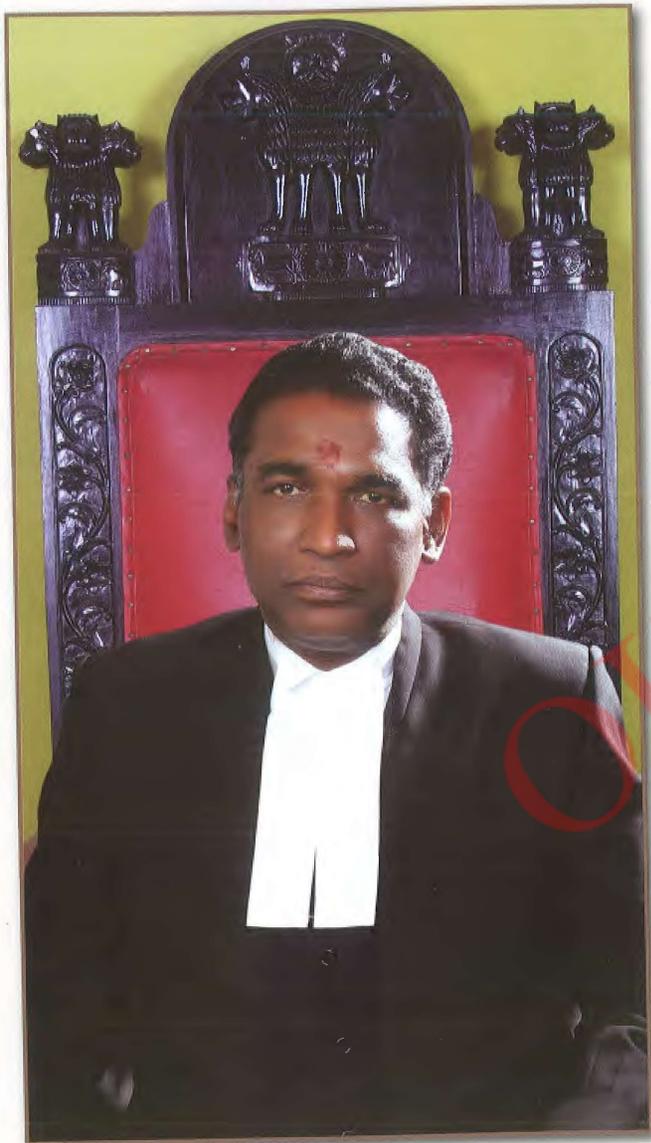


Justice V.K. Khanna

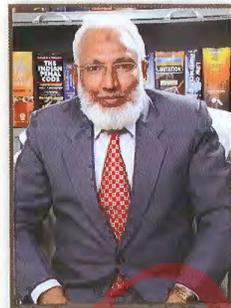


A view of the Judges's library, Gauhati High Court, Principal Seat

HON'BLE THE CHIEF JUSTICE AND PUISNE JUDGES OF
THE GAUHATI HIGH COURT



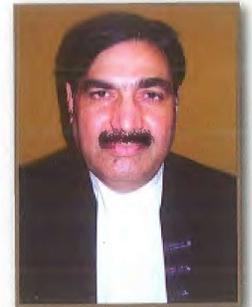
Justice Jasti Chelameswar, Chief Justice



Justice Aftab H. Saikia



Justice Ranjan Gogoi



Justice R.B. Misra



Justice Amitava Roy



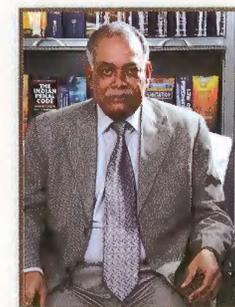
Justice I.A. Ansari



Justice T. Vaiphei



Justice B.K. Sharma



Justice H.N. Sarma



Justice B.P. Katakey



Justice Anima Hazarika



Justice Maibam B.K. Singh



Justice T.N.K. Singh



Justice H. Baruah



Justice A. Potsangbam



Justice P.K. Musahary

FORMER HON'BLE JUDGES OF THE GAUHATI HIGH COURT



Justice Z. Angami



Justice U.B. Saha



Justice K. Meruno



Justice Ram Labhaya



Justice D.M. Sen



Justice B.N. Sarma



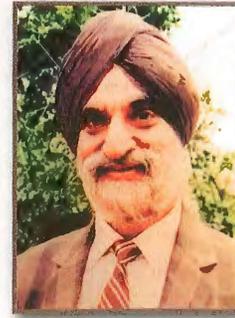
Justice Hrishikesh Roy



Justice B.D. Agarwal



Justice Mutum B.K. Singh



Justice R.S. Bindra



Justice S. Rangarajan



Justice N.I. Singh



Justice S.M. Ali



Justice T.C. Das



Justice T.N. Singh



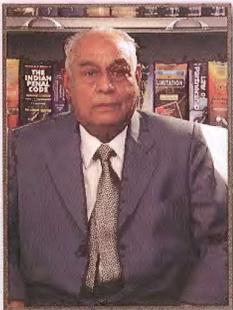
Justice Meera Sarma



Justice D.N. Baruah



Justice N.G. Das



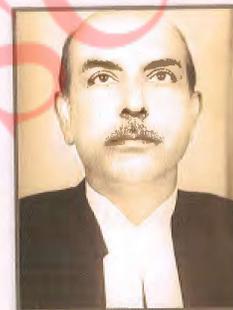
Justice S. Haque



Justice J.M. Srivastava



Justice J. Sangma



Justice J.N. Sarma



Justice P.K. Deb



Justice B.N. Singh Neelam



Justice S.P. Rajkhowa



Justice S.K. Hom Choudhury



Justice Y.I. Singh



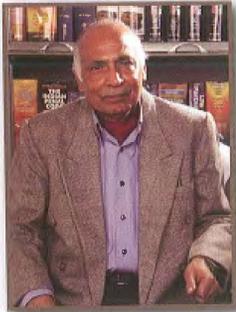
Justice V.D. Gyani



Justice S.L. Saraf



Justice A. Deb



Justice D.N. Choudhury



Justice N.S. Singh



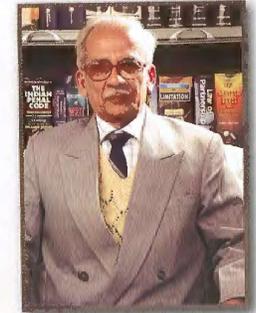
Justice P.K. Sarkar



Justice B.B. Deb



Justice B. Lamare



Justice S.K. Kar



Justice H.K.K. Singh



Justice A.P. Singh



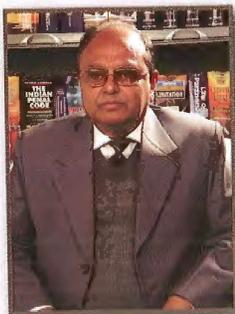
Justice P.C. Phukan



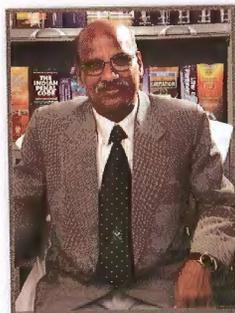
Justice A.P. Subba



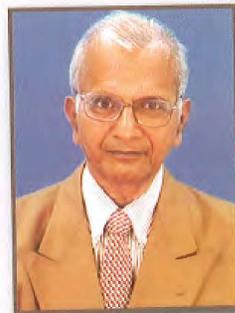
Justice A.B. Pal



Justice D. Biswas



Justice P.G. Agarwal



Justice M.L. Singhal

NOTE The photograph of Hon'ble justice P.K. Ghosh was not available during the time of publication of this volume.

REGISTRARS OF THE GAUHATI HIGH COURT, PRICIPAL SEAT



STANDING (L to R) Sri M. Sarma, Dy. Registrar (A/C); Sri. N. P. Jashi, Asst. Registrar (P); Sri P.K. Saikia (LRO); Sri M. Dey, Jt. Registrar cum Secy to HCJ; Sri R. Barman, Asstt. Registrar (Admn.); Sri J.C. Deka, Asst. Registrar (J); Smt. D. Bora, Asst. Registrar (I & E); Smt. B. Deka, Asst. Registrar (Estt.); Sri P.C. Das, Dy. Registrar (G&C)
SITTING (L to R) Sri K.K. Barman, Dy. Registrar (Apptt); Sri H. Chakraborty, Dy. Registrar (Admn.); Sri I. Hussain, Dy. Registrar (B); Sri N.K. Bora, Registrar (Vigilence); Sri C.R. Sarma, Registrar General; Sri H.K. Sarma, Registrar (Admn.); Smti R.K. Phukan, Registrar (Judl); Sri Y.K. Chandak, Dy. Registrar (Judl)

SUPERINTENDENTS OF THE GAUHATI HIGH COURT, PRICIPAL SEAT



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SITTING (L to R) Sri A.C. Borpatragohain; Sri N.G. Das; Smt. S. Sinha; Smt. N. Das; Smt. L. Hazarika; Smt. B.M. Giri; Smt. A. Goswami; Sri C.S. Baishya
Not in the picture: Sri H. Deka; Sri D.C. Sarma; Sri R. Rohman; Smt. M. Goswami; Sri P.G. Bhagawati; Smt. M. Rajbonshi.

COURT MASTERS OF THE GAUHATI HIGH COURT, PRICIPAL SEAT



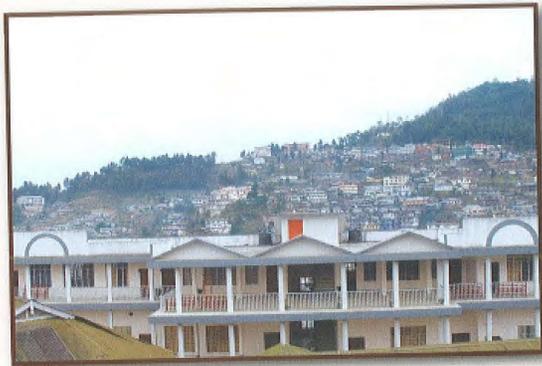
BOTTOM ROW (L to R) Sri P. Sarma, Sri J. Ekka, Sri M.H. Saikia, Smt. B. Talukdar, Sri B. Sarma, Sri B. Balshya
MIDDLE ROW (L to R) Sri S. Das, Sri I.M. Baruah, Sri. S.P. Dey, Sri D. Dutta, Sri S. Konwar
TOP ROW (L to R) Sri B.D. Nath, Sri S.C. Choudhury, Sri U. Boro, Sri D.K. Das, Sri N. Baishya
Not in picture Sri B.N. THakuria, Sri M. Rohman, Sri A. Rohman, Sri P.C. Das

THE PRIVATE SECRETARIES OF HON'BLE JUDGES OF GAUHATI HIGH COURT, PRINCIPAL SEAT



BOTTOM ROW (L to R) Sri. T.D. Roy; Miss Shivani Gautam; Mrs. M.D. Bhuyan; Mrs. J.R. Choudhury; Sri. S.A. Roy
MIDDLE ROW (L to R) Sri N. Dutta; Sri, H.N. Paul; Sri M. Katoki, Sri P.P. Upadhyay; Sri S. Das; Sri A.C. Sarma
TOP ROW (L to R) Sri M. Sarma; Sri K. Bora; Sri J. Nandi; Sri M.K. Kalita; Sri U. Singh; Sri M. Barman; Sri A. Das

GAUHATI HIGH COURT PERMANENT BENCH AT KOHIMA, NAGALAND



Court building, Kohima Bench, Nagaland

The Kohima Circuit Bench of the Gauhati High Court was inaugurated by Hon'ble Mr. Justice M.C. Pathak on 1st January 1972 with one Deputy Registrar, ten Ministerial staff and 13 Grade IV staff. Now, with the upgradation into a Permanent Bench on 10th February 1990 and gradual increase of the work load, the strength of staff was increased to 76 headed by a Registrar.

The Kohima Permanent Bench of the Gauhati High Court was inaugurated by Hon'ble Mr. Justice Sabya Sachi Mukherjee, the then Chief Justice of India on 10th February 1990 with strength of two Hon'ble Judges.

Regular Benches are constituted at Kohima with the stationed Hon'ble Judges as well as other Judges of the Gauhati High Court from time to time.

The first Division Bench at Kohima was presided over by Hon'ble Mr. Justice M.C. Pathak and Hon'ble B.N. Sarma. In the first ten years of the Kohima Bench, the total number of cases instituted was 248 which went up to 702 till declaration of Permanent Bench in 1990. Now, with the confirmation of Circuit Bench into a Permanent Bench, the momentum of institution of cases has been accelerated to around 900 to 1000 in a year.

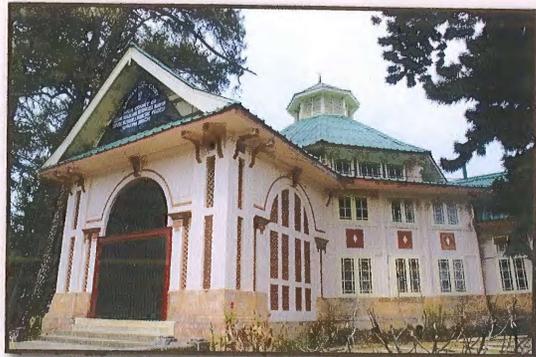
GAZETTED STAFF, KOHIMA BENCH



STANDING (L to R) Mr. N. Hieme, Asstt. Registrar (Judl- I); K. Adani Loli Asstt. Registrar (Admn. & Prot.); Chibosao Lotha Dy. Registrar (Admn. & Prot.); Mr E.L. Watty, Supdt (Estt); Mr. Lichio Dy. Registrar (Judl); Mr. K. Temsutoshi Supdt. (Judl-1)

SITTING (L to R) Mrs. Medovinue, Supdt. Jud- II; Mrs. Kshesheli Chishi, M. Kikon Registrar, Jt. Registrar; Mrs. K. Kaini Librarian cum R.O.

GAUHATI HIGH COURT PERMANENT BENCH AT SHILLONG, MEGHALAYA



Court building, Shillong Bench, Meghalaya

The Shillong Bench of the Gauhati High Court was established on 4th September 1974. At that point of time, there were only few staff at the Shillong Registry. In the year 1975, some posts were created by the Govt. of Meghalaya increasing the staff strength up to 33 and the pendency of single Bench matters around 100. Initially the Court was not sitting regularly till the establishment of Permanent Bench at Shillong on 4th February 1995, which was inaugurated by Hon'ble Mr.

Justice A.M. Ahmadi, the then Chief Justice of Gauhati High Court and other dignitaries.

The total number of cases pending at Shillong Bench is around 1600 at present out of which 78 cases are Division Bench matters. The total number of officers and staff are 78 at present including contingent employees.

The new High Court Building is under construction at Hermitage Compound, Shillong. Hopefully, the Shillong Bench is likely to be shifted there by the year 2008.



New Court building under construction, Shillong Bench, Meghalaya

GAZETTED STAFF, SHILLONG BENCH



STANDING (R to L) Smti. M. Rynjah, Sr. Grade Translator; Shri. Milan K. Sangma, Court Officer; Smti. Marlene D. Khongmen, P.S to Hon'ble Judge; Shri. Satyajit Dev, P.S. to Hon'ble Judge; Smti. Daphira Rynjah, P.S. to Hon'ble Judge; Shri. Abhijit Sarkar, Asstt. Registrar (Protocol); Smti. M. Kharkongor, Superintendent

SITTING (R to L) Smti. O. Nongkhaw, Deputy Registrar; Smti. A. Synrem, Registrar; Smti. L. Sylem, Asstt. Registrar

GAUHATI HIGH COURT PERMANENT BENCH AT IMPHAL, MANIPUR



Court building, Imphal Bench, Manipur

The Imphal Bench of the Gauhati High Court was established on 21st January under the Northeastern Areas (Re-organisation) Act, 1971, on abolition of the then Judicial Commissioner Court.

The Imphal Bench became a Permanent Bench by a Presidential Order dated 17.01.1992 with effect from 21st January 1992 in exercise of the powers conferred by sub-section (2) of section 31 of the Northeastern Areas (Re-organisation) Act, 1971, but was formally inaugurated on 14th March 1992 by Hon'ble Justice M.H. Kania, the then Chief Justice of India in pres-

ence of His Excellency the Governor of Manipur Shri Chintamani Panigrahi, Hon'ble Mr. Justice U.L. Bhatt, the then Chief Justice of Gauhati High Court and other dignitaries.

The Imphal Bench was initially located in the building next to the Imphal Treasury Office where the present M- Sector (Tactical Head Quarter) is housed. Later, it was shifted to the present site in the North A.O.C. (formerly Hotel Manipur Building) complex on lease from the Imphal Municipal Council as arranged by the Government of Manipur, with effect from 20th April 1980.

GAZETTED STAFF, IMPHAL BENCH



(L to R) Smt. L. Randhoni Devi, L.R.O.; Shri N. Priyokumar Singh, A.R.- II; Shri Salam Imocha, MJS, Dy Registrar (Judl); Shri Ng. M. Phazang, MJS, Registrar; Shri N. Rojit Singh, Dy. Registrar (Admn & Prol.); Shri M.C. Tiken, A.R. - I; Shri Ph. Japan Singh, A.R.-III.

GAUHATI HIGH COURT PERMANENT BENCH AT AGARTALA, TRIPURA



Court building, Agartala Bench, Tripura

It was A.W.B. Power, (1871-74) a British officer appointed in Tripura who was the first political agent and the key person who ushered in the tradition of judicial system in Tripura. In 1873-74, Khas Appeal Adalat (royal court of appeal) was set up for the administration of both civil and criminal justice.

There were seventeen courts of Justice in the State exercising both civil and criminal jurisdiction, with the High Court of judicature of Tripura since 1943, at the head of judiciary. The system continued even after independence of India in 1947 and continued up to 15th October 1949 when Maharani Kanchan Prabha Devi as the Regent of the minor king, Kirit Bikram

Manikya Kishore Bahadur signed a merger agreement with the Union of India.

Initially a union territory, Tripura was declared a full fledged state from 21-01-1972 after which the Judicial Commissioners Court was abolished and the authority was entrusted to the Assam and Nagaland High Court which was the common High Court of the Northeast states.

Since having a common High Court, Agartala had a Bench of the said High Court wherein Circuit Benches were held periodically. It was declared as the permanent Bench by presidential declaration made on 14th May 1992 with approved strength of three permanent Judges.

GAZETTED STAFF, AGARTALA BENCH



STANDING (L to R) Smt. S. Datta, Private Secretary; Smt. S. Kuri, Sr. Grade Translator; Smt. A. Dey, Assistant Registrar; Smt. R. Saha, Superintendent; Shri S. Bhardhan, Superintendent; Shri S. Chakraborty, Superintendent; Shri P. Saha, Superintendent; Shri N. Debnath, Court Officer; Shri R. M. Balshya, Superintendent; Shri S. B. Saha, Superintendent; Shri N. Sarma, Superintendent

SITTING (L to R) Shri R. S. Bhattacharjee, Assistant Registrar; Shri S. Rakshit, Private Secretary; Shri M. Dey, Deputy Registrar; Shri B. P. Karmakar, Deputy Registrar; Shri S. Paul, Registrar; Shri N. S. Sengupta, Sr. Librarian-cum-Research Officer; Shri S. Bhattacharjee, Deputy Registrar; Shri J. K. Roy, Assistant Registrar; Shri A. Debnath, Assistant Registrar

GAUHATI HIGH COURT PERMANENT BENCH AT AIZAWL, MIZORAM



Court building, Aizawl Bench, Mizoram

The Government of India and the erstwhile Mizo National Front (MNF) had signed a Peace Accord in the year 1986 wherein, amongst other points of agreement, a separate high court for the state of Mizoram was envisaged. Accordingly, the President of India vide his order dated 21-06-1990, notified the establishment of a Permanent Bench of the Gauhati High Court at Aizawl.

On 5th July, 1990, the Aizawl Permanent Bench of the Gauhati High Court was established and inaugurated by the Hon'ble Chief Justice, Sabya Sachi Mukherjee along with dignitaries His Excellency Sri Swaraj Kausal, Governor of Mizoram, Mr. Justice A. Raghuvir, Hon'ble Chief Justice of Gauhati High Court, Mr. Lal Thanhawla, Hon'ble Chief Minister of Mizoram, and Dr. H. Thansanga, Hon'ble Minister of Law, Govt. of Mizoram.

The Registry of the Aizawl Bench of the Gauhati High Court is at present manned by 10 officers including 65 staff members headed by Sri R. Thanga, Registrar. The Registry is presently situated at Government Complex, about 5 kms, from the main city center with two numbers of courtrooms, three numbers of Hon'ble Judges bungalows/guest houses, administrative buildings, menial quarters etc. The Government of Mizoram is presently earnestly taking steps to allot separate land for the purpose of setting up of the High Court.

The Aizawl Bench of the Gauhati High Court was initially constituted with about 85 cases transferred from the Principal Seat of the Gauhati High Court. The total number of cases so far instituted in the Aizawl Bench of the Gauhati High Court is about 4800 wherein at present, there are 325 cases pending for disposal.

GAZETTED STAFF, AIZAWL BENCH



(L to R) Smti C. Lalsangliani, Librarian; Smt. Lalcrossthangi, Supt (Judl); Shri Lalhuamlana, Asst. Registrar (Judl); Shri Ganesh Pradhan, Dept. Registrar; Shri R. Thanga, Registrar; Shri Lalthanmawia, Asst. Registrar (Admn); Smt Margaret Lalrinsangi, Stenographer Grade -I; Shri M.C. Kailiana, Supt. (Amdn)

GAUHATI HIGH COURT PERMANENT BENCH AT ITANAGAR, ARUNACHAL PRADESH



Court building, Itanagar Bench, Arunachal Pradesh

The Itanagar Permanent Bench of the Gauhati High Court came into being with the promulgation of Gauhati High Court (Establishment of a Permanent Bench at Itanagar) Order 2000, by the President of India. It was signed on July 18, 2000, and was inaugurated on 12th August 2000, by the then Chief Justice of India Hon'ble Mr. Justice A.S. Anand in presence of His Excellency Shri Arvind Dave, the then Governor of Arunachal Pradesh, Hon'ble Mr. Justice S.N. Phukan, Judge, Supreme Court of India, Hon'ble Mr. Justice Brijesh Kumar, the then Hon'ble Chief Justice of Gauhati High Court, Shri Mukut Mithi, the then Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh and Shri Eken Riba, the then Law Minister of Arunachal Pradesh and a host of dignitaries in Naharlagun, one of the twin capitals of Arunachal Pradesh.

Naharlagun is located 18 kms from Baderde-wa and Itanagar is located 12 kms from Naharlagun. Itanagar stands at an altitude of about 1700 ft. above sea level, between 93 E longitude and 27 E latitude. It was built three decades ago.

Hon'ble Mr. Justice, Judge, Gauhati High Court presided over the first sitting of the Court in the Itanagar Permanent Bench on 14th August 2000 in Court No.1. The Bench started functioning with the transfer of 114 numbers of cases of Arunachal Pradesh instituted at the Principal Seat at Guwahati. At present, there are 482 cases pending in the Itanagar Permanent Bench.

The Judiciary in the State of Arunachal Pradesh was separated from the Executive vide Govt. Notification No. JUD-44/2004 (Vol. No. I) dated 17th December 2007, initially dividing the State into two District and Session divisions viz, (i) West- comprising of the district of Tawang, West Kameng, East Kameng, Papumpare, Lower Subansiri, Upper Subansiri, Kurung Kumey and West Siang with head quarters at Yupia in Papumpare district and (ii) East- comprising of districts of East Siang, Upper Siang, Dibang Valley, Lower Dibang Valley, Anjaw, Lohit, Changlang and Tirap with head quarters at Tezu in Lohit district.

GAZETTED STAFF, ITANAGAR BENCH



(L to R) Shri S. Nag [Supdt. (J)], Shri K. Apey [Supdt. (A)], Shri N.C. Das [AR (J)], Shri P.B. Dutta [Dy. Registrar] and Shri S. Dey (PS)

Eventful Sixty Years



The Gauhati High Court, without any parallel, is a single institution exercising jurisdiction over seven Northeastern States of India, namely, Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. It administers justice in an area having enormous variations. Geographically, it is an assortment of hills and valleys. Ethnically, it is an extraordinary mosaic. The legal and judicial scenario is diverse. Divergent and assorted laws govern the people of the region. The indigenous inhabitants of the hill areas are primarily adapted to the conciliatory process rather than the adversary system. Some of the customary practices for settlement of disputes practiced in this region are not only expeditious and lasting, but also far more efficacious.

9th September, 1947 is a historic day. It was on this date that the Assam Legislative Assembly adopted a resolution that a High

Court be established for the Province of Assam. Earlier, the High court of Judicature in Calcutta at Fort William had exercised jurisdiction over Assam. Another significant date is 1st march, 1948 when the Governor General of India promulgated the Assam High Court Order, 1948 in exercise of power under subsection (1) of Section 229 of the Government of India Act, 1935, as adopted by the Indian Provincial Constitution (Amendment) Order, 1948. As a sequel, and in terms of Article 3 of the Assam High Court Order, 1948, a Court of Record named as the High Court of Assam was established with effect from 5th April, 1948 for the then Province of Assam. A new era, a new chapter in the judicial administration was thus born.

On 5th of April 1948 the High Court of Assam was inaugurated by Sir Harilal Kania, the then Chief Justice of India, who had graciously attended the ceremony at the invita-

tion of His Excellency the Governor of Assam Sir Akbar Hydari and the Premier of the Province late Gopinath Bardoloi. On the same date, Sir Ronald Francis Lodge was sworn in as the first Chief Justice of the High Court of Assam. In his inaugural speech, the Hon'ble Chief Justice of India said – "The establishment of a High Court in a province marks a great step forward in its evolution. This is clear when functions, duties and status of the High Court are appreciated. As is well known, the law is made by the Legislature. The Executive Government of the land carries on administration of the State. Whether the actions of the Executive are within the limits prescribed by law has to be, determined by someone. The functions of the legislative end with the making of the law. It cannot determine whether the act of the Executive in question is within or without the law. It is the function of the judiciary to determine that it is for this reason

the judicial system of the state is considered very important because on its decision rests the security and liberty of the citizens."

The seat of the High Court of Assam was initially at Shillong but later shifted to the Old Commissioner's Building at Gauhati from 14th August, 1948. Proceedings of the Court based on the Rules relating to practice and procedure of the High Court of Calcutta were followed with necessary modifications as far as it were applicable to all proceedings within the jurisdiction of the High Court of Assam. Subsequently, draft Rules and Orders for practice and procedure of the Courts under its jurisdiction were framed on the lines of the Calcutta High Court. The present premises, which was called the New Building of the High Court, was blessed by Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Hon'ble President of India, who laid the foundation stone on 21st February 1954. Upon completion of construction, Sri Govind Ballabh Pant,



the then Union Home Minister, inaugurated the new Building on 20th February 1957 and thereafter the High Court was shifted to the New Building from the Old Commissioner's Building.

At the time of establishment of the High Court of Assam, the Hill Areas of the then Province of Assam, namely, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram and areas of the present Arunachal Pradesh were all outside the jurisdiction of Calcutta High Court. In such excluded and partially excluded areas, the Governor of Assam exercised the functions of the High Court. In view of Article 4 of the Assam High Court Order, 1948, the power hitherto exercised by the Governor of Assam stood conferred upon the High Court of Assam. When the Constitution of India came into force, under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution, District Council Courts were established in the Tribal Areas and as a result the jurisdiction of the High Court was extended to the Tribal Area vide Assam High Court (Jurisdiction over District Council Courts) Order, 1954.

The nomenclature of the Institution changed with time. The first change came about when the 'High Court of Assam' came to be known as the 'High Court of Assam and Nagaland' following the constitution of the State of Nagaland with effect from 1st December 1963. On re-organization of the Northeastern region by the North Eastern Area (Re-organization) Act, 1971 (Act 81 of 1971), the High Court of Assam and Nagaland was abolished in terms of section 28 of the Act of 1971 and a common High Court came to be established for the five North-eastern States of Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya and Tripura, and the two Union

Territories (Union Territory of Mizoram and the Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh). The High court of Assam and Nagaland was renamed as the Gauhati High Court (The High Court of Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura). Again with the enactment of the State of Mizoram Act, 1986 (Act 34 of 1986) and the State of Arunachal Pradesh Act, 1986 (Act 69 of 1986), Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh attained statehood on 20.2.1987. By the State of Mizoram Act, 1986, from the appointed day i.e. 20.2.1987, a common High Court for the States of Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura and Mizoram called the High Court of Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura and Mizoram came into being. Under the State of Arunachal Pradesh Act, 1986, from the appointed day i.e. 20.2.1987, a common High Court for the State of Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh came into being.

The Principal Seat of the Gauhati High Court (The High Court of Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh) is at Guwahati, Assam. Apart from the Principal Seat, the High Court has 6(six) outlying Benches, namely Kohima Bench for the State of Nagaland (established on 1.12.1972), Imphal Bench for the State of Manipur (established on 24.1.1972), Agartala Bench for the State of Tripura (established on 24.1.1972), Shillong Bench for the State of Meghalaya (established on 4.9.1974), Aizawl Bench for the State of Mizoram (established on 5.7.1990) and Itanagar Bench for the State of Arunachal Pradesh (established on 12.8.2000).

At present, the sanctioned strength of Judges in the Gauhati High Court is 23 in-



Court Number 1

cluding the Chief Justice.

Every institution is a result of evolution and the consolidation of the contributions and relentless efforts of the past. While the untiring efforts of all the Judges, officers and staff over the decades in the making of this unique institution has to be remembered with deep gratitude, certain institutions, again unique by themselves will deserve a special mention.

The Law Research Institute founded on 5th April, 1973 has been continuously engaged in the task of conducting legal research of the laws and customs of the Northeastern region. Efforts have been made to look into the social fabric of the tribal society to ascertain the practices prevailing in different tribes and sub-tribes of the region. Presently, the institute is working under a Director and under the guidance and supervision of the Managing Committee headed by the Hon'ble Chief

Justice.

The North Eastern Judicial Officers' Training Institute (NEJOTT) was established on 28.11.1981, at a time when training of judicial officers was still at an infant stage. The institute has served needs of the time and in its place a full fledged academy is in the offing. Plans to have a mediation and arbitration center are presently at a fairly advanced stage.

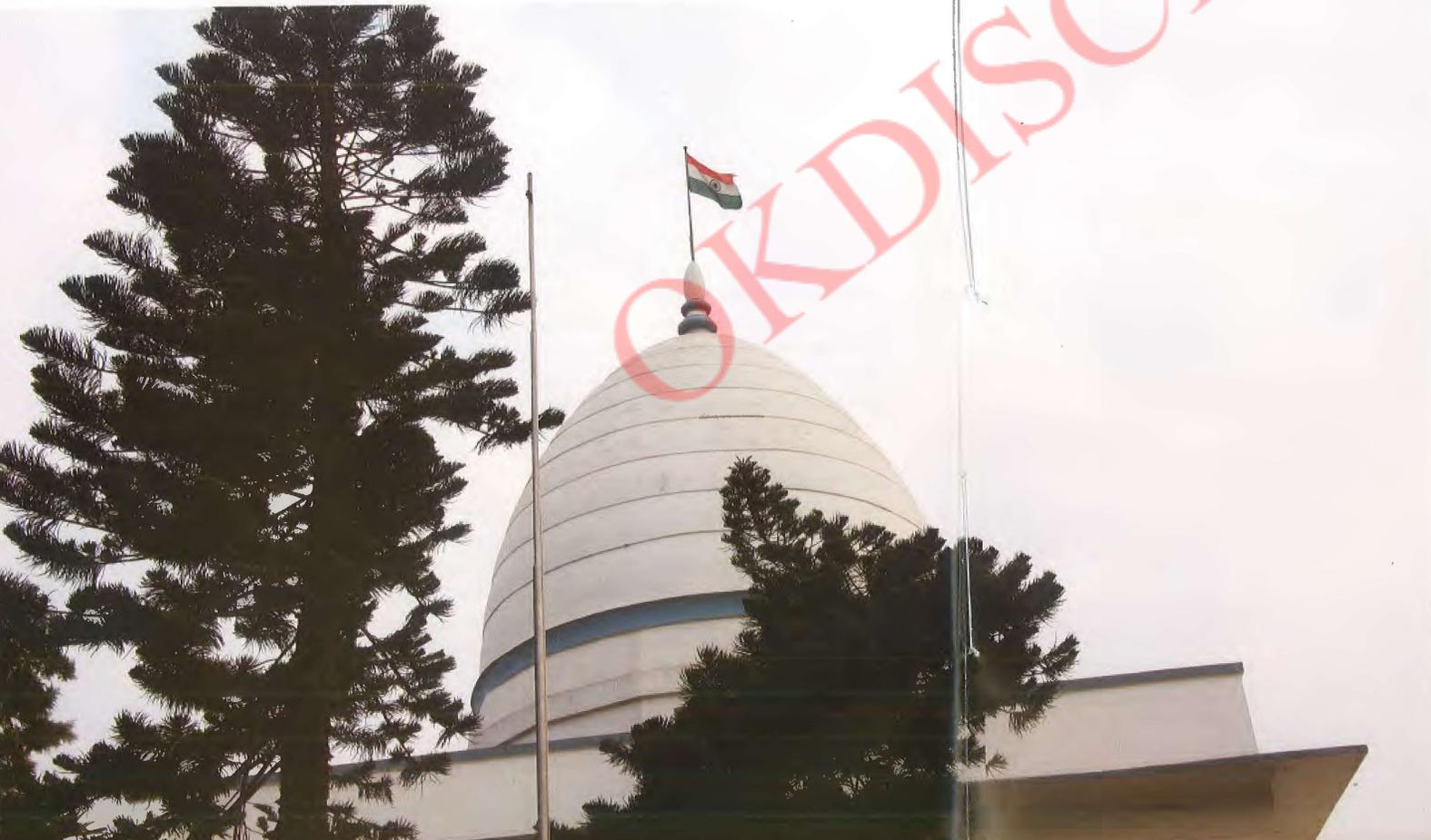
No institution can rest on its past laurels. Complex legal issues of the day having the potential of rapid escalation, both qualitatively and quantitatively, pose fresh challenges that the institution will have to meet in the future. The task undoubtedly is enormous and overwhelming. Expectations too are high. But we are confident that both will be met without compromise and with utmost resolve.



Birth of a High Court Building



Dipankar Banerjee



When the Assam High Court order was notified by the Governor General, Mountbatten of Burma under Section 229 of the Govt. of India Act, it just allowed thirty-four days to make it functional. The notification, published in the Gazette of India Extraordinary on 1 March 1948, specified "..... from the fifth day of April, 1948..... there shall be a High Court for the province of Assam which shall be a Court of Record, and shall consist of a Chief Justice and such other Judges as the Governor General may from time to time, whether before or after the prescribed day, appoint in accordance with Provisions of Sec 220 of the Act."

The notification of establishing the High Court was hailed by the people of Assam as this was the fulfillment of their general aspiration. However, controversy brewed as the notification did not specify its possible location. While the then Assam Government was initially planning to establish it at Shillong, many people and the Gauhati Bar Association demanded that it be located at Guwahati. A number of letters appeared on the subject in *The Assam Tribune*, *The Shillong Times* and some vernacular dailies between April and July, 1948.

Meanwhile the Hon'ble Ronald Francis Lodge BA (Cantab), I.C.S. was appointed the Chief Justice of the Assam High Court and he took the oath of office on 5 April 1948 – the day when the Court was also officially inaugurated. (Mr. Justice Lodge earlier served as the District and Sessions Judge of the Assam Valley District at Gauhati and Sylhet-Cachar. He also served as the Registrar and Judge in Charge of the English Department of Calcutta High Court before joining as



I, Ronald Francis Lodge, having been appointed Chief Justice of the Assam High Court, do solemnly swear that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the Constitution of India as by law established and that I will faithfully perform the duties of my office to the best of my ability, knowledge and judgment.

WITNESSED
The 5th April, 1948.

CHIEF JUSTICE OF ASSAM.

Made and subscribed before me this, the fifth day of April, 1948.

GOVERNOR OF ASSAM.

Chief Justice of the Assam High Court.) The Inaugural function was graced by Sir Akbar Hydari – the Governor of Assam Premier Sri Gopinath Bardoloi and Sri Harilal J. Kania, the Chief Justice of India and a host of invited dignitaries. In his address Sir Hydari said “Everywhere in the world, law, if impartially and faithfully administered, is one of the great binding forces of society.... In this province, which is the cradle of so many communities a common law is one of the uniting forces – and we must nourish this force. With the establishment of the High Court of Assam there is now set up an authority which has the power of function and which I hope, will in fact do so untrammelled by administrative or political considerations.” In his speech Premier Bardoloi assured that the High Court would be totally free from any Governmental control. Speaking on the occasion on behalf of the Bar, Mr. Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, Advocate-General of Assam assured of all cooperation of its members for the administration of justice. Inaugurating the Court, the Chief Justice of India Harilal J. Kania said “The establishment of a High Court in a province marks a great step forward in its evolution.... I am quite sure it is

TOP Mountbatten of Burma, the Governor General of India, signed the notification for establishment of the High Court for the province of Assam on 1 March, 1948.

MIDDLE Justice Ronald Francis Lodge was appointed the first Chief Justice of Assam High Court on 5 April 1948.

BOTTOM Facsimile of the text of the Swearing Oath of Justice Lodge as the first Chief Justice of Assam High Court on 5 April 1948



TOP It was in this building, the High Court started functioning in 1948. This building originally housed the Divisional Commissioner's office.

LEFT Inside view of the old High Court.

recognized that having got a High Court, the responsibility to maintain the high traditions of that name devolves on the Government and people of the province and I feel certain that they will cheerfully bear the same..... I am sure that it will maintain the highest traditions of the judicial system and hope that it

will be an ornament in the administration of the province.”

Though the High Court was officially inaugurated, its final location still remained undecided. The Chief Justice was provided with an office at Shillong but even during the next two months, the matter of its final location was

not settled. On 31 May 1948, the Chief Justice issued a notification to the effect that the High Court would be located at Shillong until further order. But in July the Government took a Cabinet decision that the High Court would be located at Guwahati and the Chief Secretary ordered the Deputy Commissioner, Kamrup to take necessary steps in this regard as the Government decided to make it operational at Guwahati before the first anniversary of Independence day. The Commissioner of Lower Assam briefed him to find out "the best possible building" at Guwahati to house the High Court. He was also briefed that there should be arrangement for at least three bungalows for housing the Chief Justice and the Judges (whose number was not yet declared). On 5 August Justice Lodge notified, with the approval of the Governor Sir Akbar Hydari, that the High Court would start functioning at Guwahati from 14 August, 1948.

For the Kamrup District Administration, it now became a Herculean task. The time at the disposal was only about 40 days (the Cabinet decision to establish it at Guwahati was taken in July) to find out the "best suitable

building" and to furnish it. Guwahati town, in the true sense of the term did not have much suitable building to house the High Court. It was not possible to construct a new building either within such a short time. So the District authorities had to choose one among the existing structures to be used as the High Court. After a detailed survey two buildings were short-listed. One near the Railway Colony parallel to and behind the bungalow of the Cotton College Principal and the other, facing Dighali Pukhuri. The first one was rejected because of its proximity with the Railway Station as the Coolie line was very near to it. The other one, which housed the office of the Divisional Commissioner, was ultimately zeroed down.

This was an Assam type building situated opposite to the Curzon Hall facing Dighali Pukhuri in the East. This building had two big rooms and three ante-rooms. While the big rooms would be used as courts, the ante-rooms might serve as the Judge's office room, Registrar's room and the office. The building had an additional advantage. Just by its side there existed a Red brick structure with 20



LEFT 20 inches thick red brick structure, one of the oldest buildings of Guwahati, adjacent to the old High Court building. This building was used as a temporary prison and the record room.



TOP The name of M/S Ravenscroft Law inscribed on the inside of the wig container.

BOTTOM A type of wig that the judges used to wear
RIGHT The wig container.

inches thick wall which could be used as a temporary jail to keep the criminals under police custody during the Court proceedings and which could also be used as the record room. Now the building of the Divisional Commission was converted into a Court. The two big rooms were converted into court rooms; the Judges chambers, witness boxes, cubicle for the criminals – all were newly built. The contract for renovation and the entire carpentry work was given to Md. Ida Khan, the reputed contractor of yesteryears. The PWD was entrusted to execute patch work, white washing, making the approach road and removing the

debris. An existing bungalow, in the European ward, adjacent to the riverside, which was vacant at that time was now earmarked for converting it into the Chief Justice's residence. PWD was given the additional responsibility of laying the garden in this bungalow. Both the Executive Engineer PWD and Md. Ida Khan were instructed to carry on the entire work within "four weeks" and the order was marked "extremely urgent".

The entire project was executed on war footing. The renovated building, now the High Court of Assam, and the Chief Justice's bungalow was ready by 12 August. A last mo-



The Chief Justice's Bungalow

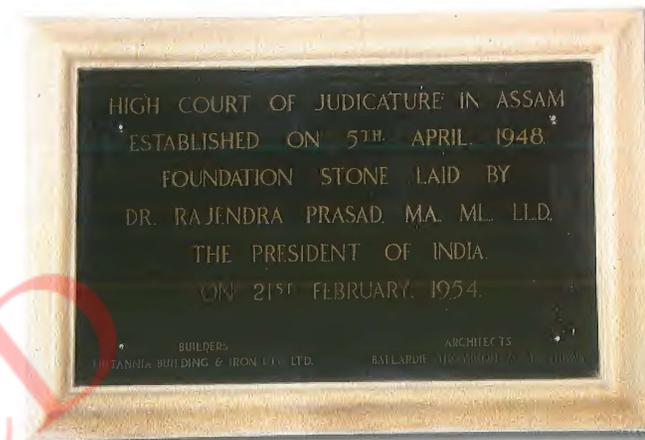
ment addition executed on 13 August (possibly it was forgotten in a hurry) was placing the flag must at the front top of the Assam type building. The Remington typewriter and a cyclostyle machine were procured from Calcutta. The Judge's robes and wigs were supplied by a Company in London.

The High Court of Assam functioned from this building for about a decade. Mr. Justice Lodge, Justice T V Thadani, Justice Ram Labhaya and Justice Sarjoo Prasad adorned the seat of Chief Justice of this Court during the period. However, this building was stop-gap arrangement.

The Government had a plan to construct a new Assam High Court building since its

inception but somehow it did not materialize for quite some time. Justice Sarjoo Prasad, who joined as Chief Justice in 1953 on transfer from Patna High Court was not possibly happy with the Assam type High Court building as it was not befitting to its dignity. He wrote in his reminiscence, "The High Court and its offices were located in a comparatively small tenement..... It was thus a sharp contrast with the grandeur of the High Court building at Patna with its magnificent dome, its marble Hall, its beautiful costumes and stairs." He took up the matter with Sri Bishnu Ram Medhi, the Chief Minister of Assam who assumed him to speed up the matter.

It was then the Shillong Secretariat Staff



The black marble plaque installed during the foundation stone laying ceremony of the new Assam High Court building on 21 February 1945.

began to handle the issue with seriousness. Advertisements floating tenders for construction of the new High Court appeared in *The Statesman*, *The Hindustan Standard* and *The Hindu*. Many companies applied but after careful scrutiny the plan submitted by M/s Ballardie Thompson and Matthews, a reputed architectural firm of Calcutta was accepted. Britannia Building and Iron Co. Ltd., Calcutta were given the responsibility to build it. A plot facing Dighali Pukhuri on its northern side was earmarked for the same. This plot of land was under possession of the European Club. For a long time, the members of the club used this land for different outdoor games - particularly for playing badminton and lawn tennis. Now

the government requisitioned this plot of land and the acquisition compensation was paid to the Secretary of the European Club.

On 21 February 1954 Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the Hon'ble President of India laid the foundation of the new building of the High Court of Judicature in Assam in presence of a distinguished gathering. Among those present included the first lady of India, two sons of the President, Governor Jairam Das Daulatram, Chief Minister Bishnu Ram Medhi, ALA Speaker Sri Kuladhar Chaliha and the members of the Assam Council of Ministers.

In his speech the President expressed the hope that the Assam High Court would become the fountain head of justice and the



The new High Court building.

guardian of people's right and liberties. Chief Justice Sarjoo Prasad observed, "It is interesting to find that the Government have now found it possible to undertake the construction of the building, and we can, with confidence look forward to the realization of our hopes of suitability functioning in a building of our at no distant future."

In fact, Chief Justice Sarjoo Prasad took lot of personal initiative in constructing this building. Not only he expedited its construction but he also gave his inputs to make some alterations in the building plan. He later wrote in his memoirs "As originally conceived, I felt that there were several deficiencies which re-

quired to be rectified and which involved some further outlay. I was, however, happy to find that my suggestions were duly accepted by the Government and the plan was modified." M/S Britannia Building and Iron Co. Ltd. did a commendable job and completed the elegant building within the stipulated period of 30 months.

The building when completed became a treat to the citizens' eye. The architects M/s Ballardie Thomson & Matthews designed it in such a manner which became a fusion of east and the west. In those days architects broadly divided buildings into two broad categories - 'Monumental Scale' and 'Human Scale'.

The plaque in which the words "Bharat Ratna" prefixed Govind Ballav Pant's name. At Pant's instruction, those words were removed but the smudges still remain.



The High Court building was planned in Monumental Scale. The South Asian Gothic structure with an Indo-Aryan punch has been reflected in the design of the Assam High Court. The octagonal open interior ceiling is an Indo-Aryan architectural feature. The Buddhist influence could be noticed in the dome which was inspired by the Sanchi Stupa.

Sri Govinda Ballav Pant, the Union Home Minister inaugurated the new building on its completion on 20 February 1957. Two anecdotes of this inaugural function are worth mentioning. After unveiling the marble plaque, Pant noticed that the title "Bharat Ratna" prefixed his name in the plaque. Mr. Pant immediately ordered for deletion of the same as according to him, display of honorary titles in public place in such a manner was not only inappropriate but also unethical. The

word "Bharat Ratna" was then scrapped, but the smudges still remain. This may be noticed even today if one glances at the marble plaque at the entrance of the High Court, located just below the octagonal structure at the interior top of the building. Chief Justice Sarjoo Prasad remarked in his speech that this High Court was away from the Capital and that was causing delay and inconveniences to conduct the business of the Court. To that, Govind Ballav Pant remarked that it was good for the judiciary that the executive was one hundred kilometers away. Nevertheless, amidst ecstasy of the assembled gathering, the High Court now found a new house of its own and the High Court is functioning in this building since then.



The gender divide



Patricia Mukhim

Gender encompasses the socially constructed roles of women and men. Development is a very wide ranging word having different connotations. This article will restrict the use of the word development to economic, political and social growth brought about by specific programmes and projects. Gender and Development (GAD) is essentially a paradigm of development which ensures equal growth and equal access to opportunities and resources by both women and men. Gender and Development moves away from the 'Women in Development' (WID) module which adds 'women only' components to development programmes. However, it also recognizes that separate components for women must continue to ensure that women's practical and strategic needs are met.

The GAD framework looks at the complex interconnections between women and men rather than focusing on women in isolation. It uses gender analysis to understand the distinct, socially defined roles and tasks

that women and men assume within households and communities, and under the influence of different cultures and traditions. It analyses the gender divisions of labour and throws up the huge disparities between the tasks that women and men do in a day. A preliminary exercise that analyses gender roles will see how much more women are expected to do and how many more hours a day they put in when compared to men. Women are expected to do multi-tasking apart from doing work that induces drudgery such as fetching water, fire wood, transplanting crops etc. Even in urban settings, child care is still the sole responsibility of a woman, despite the fact that women too earn an income outside their homes. Very often it is a problem of mindsets and attitudes. Patriarchy influences the world view of men as much as it does that of women. Hence, women themselves resist change unless they are trained to think out of the box of patriarchy.

Gender is important in policy making because public policies and investments that



A woman mending the fences of her home. She has to balance home and work, and childcare often becomes her singular responsibility.

actively and consciously promote the development of women have economic payoffs in terms of (1) higher economic growth rates (2) improved productivity (3) reduced health and welfare costs (4) low fertility, and low infant and maternal morbidity and mortality rates and (5) increased life expectancy. Increased investment in women produces a healthier, better educated, and literate workforce, and provides a sound human resource foundation on which to build the economy. Planning policies that are gender sensitive requires that planners understand gender and its intricate and complex underpin-

nings. It requires that they themselves are sensitive to gender roles at the family level. Unfortunately, that is not yet the case in India. We are a country steeped in patriarchal values and gender is only a politically correct stance we take at meetings and discussions. This inhibits gender mainstreaming in policy formulation. Thankfully, there are strong women's organizations that actively vet government policies and push in gender interventions wherever those are missing. Only when policies are planned with a gender perspective can we expect gender outcomes at the implementation stage. How-



Working at a loom or a charkha is a common activity for women at home. Although she supplements the family income, she remains an unpaid labourer for most of her life.

ever, even during project implementation there is need to use gender tools to ensure that the gender-focus is not lost.

To measure achievement of gender goals at the end of the project, it is important to identify some measurable indicators for each goal. Indicators can be system related (referring to who actually gets to use and benefit from the programme/project). Or it could be development related (what is the impact of the programme / project on men's and women's lives and how can these be measured).

At the end of the project, the gender outcomes need to be measured. These will differ depending upon what the objectives of the project primarily were. In a livelihood project, the gender outcomes would be (a) whether more women have participated in the programme (b) what skills they have learnt in the course of the programme (c)

what advocacy tools women have imbibed (d) whether women's livelihoods have improved (e) whether women are able to take decisions about how to use their incomes (f) whether additional income has enabled them to have better access to health care or children's education (g) whether women now have more leisure to engage in social activities (h) whether women are able to participate in decision making about their own welfare (i) whether they enjoy reproductive rights and are in a position to decide the size of their families.

Although this country has attempted to bring gender as a cross cutting theme in policy making the results are not visible as yet. Gender disparities abound. Across the country and in India's Northeast, studies show that women still do not have access to livelihood skills training. Health care and education are out of reach of most women.

They are not part of the decision-making processes at the local traditional institutions. Infant and mortality rates especially in Meghalaya are very high (89 per 1000 live births). Many states do not have the figures for maternal mortality rates. Assam's maternal mortality rate is 405 for every 1,00,000. We understand therefore, that gender mainstreaming is crucial. But what is gender mainstreaming? Gender mainstreaming does the following (1) it acknowledges that all development operations have gender impacts and do not automatically affect women and men equally (2) projects that mainstream gender consider women and men's needs first at the country programme level and then at each stage of the project cycle (3) it ensures that women and men participate equally in every aspect both as stakeholder and decision makers.

Sometimes we wonder why policies and programmes in our own state fail. They fail on two accounts. One, policies are articulated without consulting the stakeholders. Two, the planners are part of a large group within the bureaucracy which is gender blind and gender insensitive.

Indeed, gender blindness is the mortal sin that needs to be dealt with seriously. Gender blindness means that the different roles of women and men, different needs, different expectations, different attitudes, different ways of responding to a problem or opportunity are not recognized. Gender blindness means taking men and women as a homogenous entity without recognizing that the gender roles imposed by society naturally restricts women from active participation in development programmes. Women's reproductive roles as well as their caring and nur-

turing roles deprive them of opportunities outside the home. To address this, women need special incentives and an enabling environment facilitated by the State or other development agencies. Gender blindness makes planners oblivious of the fact that the unpaid work of women is actually what enables other members to leave the home and get paid incomes.

Gender blindness can be countered by exposing planners and policy makers at all levels to gender sensitization programmes. This includes both women and men because we have all been nurtured in a society that is gender blind and patriarchal. Gender sensitization is an ongoing process and it must happen in all spheres of human activity.

There is a general belief across the country that women in Northeast India are much more empowered and enjoy greater social mobility and better rights than their counterparts in other states. This is a fallacy that is propounded sometimes by women themselves because they have not understood the deeper meaning of gender discrimination which in most cases is subtle and not measurable. A quick exercise often undertaken to see how much work men and women put in separately per day, or the gender division of labour will tell us that women do many more things in a day than men do. Women are also called to be multi-taskers, meaning that they do many different things at the same time. For instance, while looking after their baby they would also be cooking or washing clothes or tending the kitchen garden.

In Meghalaya's rural setting, it is common to see women breaking boulders while their babies play alongside. This is a burden that



A woman working in a rock quarry with her child. Gender-sensitisation at the grassroots level is the need of the hour as women have special needs.

only women are capable of understanding because while it looks easy on the outside, it can be very traumatizing. Care of the elderly is always a woman's responsibility simply because she does not go out of the house to 'earn' her keep. But because women's work is still 'unpaid' work not quantified in economic terms, even though she does back-breaking work for 16 hours every day she is not a wage earner. Surely the definition of 'work' deserves a larger debate. In Meghalaya which is a matrilineal society and where women are expected to have

a better deal than elsewhere, the status of women is not very different. Other than the fact that the girl-child is a blessing to the family by virtue of women being custodians of lineage and the clan and that ancestral property passes through the youngest daughter, there is no other advantage that women enjoy. Women are excluded from the decision-making process. The grassroots traditional institution does not have space for women to articulate their views. Although women are now part of the general body of the Dorbar Shnong, they are

excluded from executive committees which is the inner circle that takes important decisions. This, and the fact that women also have to play their gender roles within the family and outside, has dissuaded them from taking active part in politics. The percentage of women representatives in the Meghalaya assembly has never been more than 5 per cent at any time.

Although ancestral property passes through the youngest daughter and she is the legal holder of the kind and property, customary practices are such that the woman does not actually control that property. She is bound to consult her maternal uncles/uncles and her brothers and other sisters in the administration of that property after the death of her parents. Ownership without control actually means that women are not empowered to take their own decisions about that property. In Mizoram, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and the tribal areas of Assam, women own no property before or after marriage. If they are divorced, they are completely stripped of everything including their children's custody. These discriminatory practices are still prevalent and any attempt to correct them only makes men more strident about their rights.

Meghalaya has seen curious visitors from across the globe who wonder why so few women take part in politics despite the added advantage of being a matrilineal society. Only a closer study of the society through gender lenses will unfold the true picture. Meghalaya may be matrilineal but the worldview including that of women is patriarchal. Sexual division of labour is as sharp as in patriarchal societies and women understand themselves and their roles from

the lenses of patriarchy. The very fact that women in Meghalaya are not included in the decision-making body at the grass-roots level, namely the Dorbar, reduces them to home makers whose space is carefully mapped out and bounded by a patriarchal order. If women are not used to articulating their voices in traditional, informal bodies, how can they be expected to jump into the legislature? That some have done so despite the constraints is remarkable.

Gender consciousness requires a sensitivity which can only come about from gender training and use of practical examples as demonstrations. For instance when one does a practical exercise on gender division of labour with groups of men and women, men are amazed at the amount of work their wives and daughters do and the multiple tasks they carry out simultaneously when compared to men. Many male members have even said that they wished they were exposed to such workshops early in their lives. Men are as conditioned as women are to live their lives according to a societal framework which is deeply influenced by patriarchal values. Often they cannot be blamed for taking so long to come out of such conditioning.

Things are however, changing and constant engagement between the sexes will hopefully usher in a more gender just society. Gender justice alone can ensure equitable and inclusive growth.

(Figures quoted are taken from basis statistics figures of respective states as given by the Dept. of Economics and Statistics. Other remarks are based on the author's own articles and experiences).



Northeast

An aqueous bond



Arup Kumar Dutta



The affinities shared by the seven sisters of India's Northeast are not always blatant and visible. For instance, the entire region is filled with rivers, big and small, descending from the mountains into the valleys --- a web of veins pumping life-blood into the diverse societies and embracing them in an almost invisible aqueous bond. A look at the map of the area clearly reveals arterial systems flowing one into the other till debouching into the rivers that give the two major valleys their names --- the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys. This intricate network, in the past, not merely linked the seven sisters to one another, but also played a vital role in the social and ethnological evolution of the area.

"In the number of its rivers, Assam may be said to exceed every other country of equal extent," so wrote William Robinson in his Account of Assam (1842). Earlier, in 1838, Montgomery Martin in The History, Antiquities, Topography and Statistics of Eastern India went even further: "As far as my information or my recollection extends, this country exceeds every other in the universe of similar extent, in the number of its rivers, which in general are of a sufficient depth at all seasons to allow commercial communication on the shallow boats of Assam." One must remember that during the British period, undivided Assam incorporated the entire Northeast, and though Manipur and Tripura existed separately, for administrative purposes they were considered integral part of the region. Thus, when British accounts mentioned Assam's prolific number of rivers, they actually meant the Northeast's.

This region is, indeed, crisscrossed with an incredible number of sinuous rivers, streams and rivulets. The Barak is a good example of the interconnectivity afforded by major rivers, linking as it does the states of Manipur, Mizoram and Assam before meandering into Bangladesh. It rises in the Manipur hills near Mao Songsang, flows as the Barak through Manipur state and enters Mizoram where it flows south-west till reaching the so-called

A breathtaking view of the Manas river.

Barak valley in Assam near Lakhimpur. In the mountains, it takes in numerous hill streams such as Gumti, Kagni, Senai Buri, Hari Mangal, Kakrai etc. while in the Assam stretch, it has larger tributaries such as Jiri, Dhaleshwari, Singla, Langai, Sonai and Kathakal. Passing Silchar town and before entering Bangladesh, the river bifurcates into the Surma and Kushi-yara rivers. The Barak-Surma course, 900 km in length, forms extensive lowlands that support a large agrarian population.

The most prominent river in the region, of course, is the mighty Brahmaputra, 2880 km in length, and one of the largest in the world. Even today some people falsely believe that this river starts from the Mansarovar lake in the Himalayas. Its actual source is the great glacier called Chema-Yungdung on the southern flank of the range of Himalayas named Kailash, at an elevation of about 5150 metre just south of Rake Kanggyen Tso Lake. From its source it assumes an eastern direction as the Tsangpo (The Purifier) for 1625 km across the narrow plains of the Tibetan Plateau. One remarkable aspect of this stretch is that for almost 640 km it presents a navigable channel at 3500 meter above sea level and box-like boats ply over the Tsangpo. At its extreme eastern point between the mountainous complex of Gyala Peri (7150 m) and Namcha Barwa (7756 m) it makes a dramatic U-turn and forces its way southward through the eastern extremity of the Himalayas to enter India as the Siang in the Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh.

Lower down, the name changes to Dihang even as the river, through its 200 km run across Arunachal, charges furiously down to the Brahmaputra valley of Assam, becoming navigable only from Pasighat in the plains of East-Siang district. Towards the west of Sadi-

ya at a place called Kobo, two other rivers, the Dibang and the Lohit, join it in a spectacular confluence. Though they are technically tributaries of the Tsangpo-Siang-Dihang, the Dibang and Lohit are major river-systems on their own. The Dibang, which starts from 5333m at the northern edge of Arunachal Pradesh and with its tributaries has a drainage area of 12120 sq. km, would have been deemed a major river in any other part of the world. The Lohit, which is also one of the local names for the Brahmaputra, is even bigger, and was earlier considered to be the main stream instead of the Dihang. Its source is a 6,614 m high peak called Yoko lying in China and it enters India at Rima on the northeastern boundary of Arunachal. Another 120 km later it pours into the famous Brahmakunda or Parasuramkunda near Tezu, and then gradually broadens to 6 km wide in the plains. On its way to the confluence with the Dihang-Dibang it takes on countless tributaries, ones such as the Kundil and Noadihing being extremely big rivers themselves.

Fed by three major river systems and numerous tributaries, the Brahmaputra, as it flows in slightly south-westerly direction for approximately 650 km through the valley that bears its name, swells up into inordinate size in a web of channels interspersed with chaporis or char areas. The latent force generated by the Dihang-Dibang-Lohit combine while descending from such great heights, has to be dissipated in the plains, which explains the oscillating, braided nature of the Brahmaputra's channels. It is as if, having rushed breathlessly down steep inclines, the river has literally let down its hair on reaching flat terrain, to take on an unpredictable shifting course.

The river has a mean gradient of only

about 1.5 m per km over a distance of around 650 km between Kobo where the confluence is, and Dhubri where it leaves Assam and enters Bangladesh, the difference in height of the two places being a mere 100 metre! Only at a few places, notably at Silghat, Guwahati and Jogighopa, where it is controlled by rocky banks, does it flow in a single channel. Having almost traversed the entire valley from east to west, it turns southward around the Garo Hills below Dhubri and makes its journey to the sea across Bangladesh.

During its course through the valley the Brahmaputra is fed by no less than 90 tributaries, 57 on its north bank and 33 on its south. The principal north bank tributaries are Jaidhol, Subansiri, Ranganadi, Jia-Bharali, Pagladia, Manas, Sankosh, to name only a few. Major south bank tributaries are Noa-dihing, Buri-dihing, Disang, Dikhou, Bhogdoi, Dhansiri, Kapili, Dudhnoi etc. Some of these are huge rivers and carry more water than most major Indian rivers. The tributaries have their own sub-tributaries which in turn are fed by numerous streams and rivulets. Thus we have the intricate maze of water-bodies spread

Sunset over the Brahmaputra river in Nimatighat, Jorhat.



not merely across the valley but also the hills enclosing it, linking all the seven sisters in one way or another.

The Subansiri, the largest tributary of the Brahmaputra, called the Swarnanadi or 'river of gold' in ancient times because of the gold particles yielded by its sediment, is no less than 520 km long with a basin area of 37000 sq km. It originates to the South of the Po Rom peak (5059 m), which is hardly 30 km away from the Tsangpo – this resulted in an earlier mistaken belief that it was a continuation of the Tsangpo. Till reaching the Brahmaputra in the valley, the Subansiri takes on at least 25 tributaries! Some of these, such as the Chayal Chu, Kamala, Pabha, Dulung,



The Kaliabhumura bridge at Tezpur.

Ghagar, Ranga etc. have dozens of tributaries of their own. The Ghagar, for instance, has a large tributary called Bogi, which itself is fed by only slightly smaller tributaries such as Kakoi, Dhal and Somdiri. Another large tributary on the north-bank is the Jia Bharali, 260 km in length, and having large sub-tributaries which in turn are fed by countless rivulets and streams. Similarly, other north-bank tributaries like the Manas, Bar-nadi and Dhansiri (N) are major rivers with many sub-tributaries of their own.

The south-bank tributaries are relatively smaller, yet big enough to be deemed major rivers. The Buridihing, for example, which rises at the Arunachal-Myanmar border, is around

360 km long and has a basin area of 5457 sq km. It is fed by many tributaries, of which the Tirap is around 154 km and Sessa around 109 km. The Dhansiri (S), considered to be one of the most serpentine rivers of the world, is around 352 km in length and has many tributaries such as Diphu, Deopani, Nambor and Dayang. These are fed by numerous sub-tributaries. For example, the Dayang carries the water of the Rengma, Langtajan, Dairung and Kalyani. The Kalyani itself is fed by rivulets such as Nihang Langchu, Borpong, Janghanri, Rangchali and so on. Another south-bank river, Kopili (297 km), does not fall directly into the Brahmaputra, but into one of its Sutis (channel-meanders), the Kolong.

Since time immemorial, this incredible mosaic of rivers, with the mighty Brahmaputra acting as the primary conduit, has facilitated influx of heterogeneous peoples and colonization of the region, giving the Northeast its present socio-ethnic character. In the primeval past, this fertile region of heavy rainfall was covered by dense jungles having impassable undergrowths of ferns and creepers and swampy stretches of grass and reeds. The difficulty of traversing the land terrain was compounded by wildlife in jungles, as well as snakes and crocodiles. Under such conditions a river was the safest way to travel by, and river-banks the most congenial places to clear, colonise and settle, fulfilling as they did the prime requirements of water, food and relative safety. Occasionally, new arrival of migrants drove out old settlers from advantageous spots in the plains, forcing them to take to the hills. Since even the tributaries and sub-tributaries are navigable for quite some distance, and also offer clear passage through dense verdure, they could be followed by groups who settled in the hills.

Broadly speaking, the Mongoloid elements entered the region through the east, north and to some extent the south, Caucasoid elements entered from the west. In the process the hills and plains of what today is called Northeast India became a melting pot of different ethnic groups which brewed up a cultural identity and ethos not to be encountered anywhere else in the nation. Political barriers do not operate when we talk of social and anthropological evolution and the Northeast must be seen as a geo-ethnic unit sharing common historical and cultural traits. The rivers of the area had a seminal role to play in this evolution, facilitating the process of conflict and assimilation



The Brahmaputra river is known as the Siang in Arunachal Pradesh.

between a continuum of communities so necessary for social formation.

Indeed, it is the rivers of the Northeast which were active agents in the making of the region's history --- political, sociological, religious and cultural. It is the rivers which facilitated commerce, both internal as well as external. It is these watery corridors which helped create a type of culture that is a unique blend of the agrarian and the hydrologic. Whether it is the *paani-tola* ritual in Assamese marriage, the Mulling rite among the Dimasa tribe, the *Abanari* related folk songs of the Mishings, or the *goru-bihu* festival, innumerable examples testify to the impact made by rivers in the culture of different communities. The seminal nature of the contribution of rivers cannot be encapsulated in such a brief article. But the fact remains that through millennia, they have embraced the entire Northeast with its diverse societies in a fraternal though unseen aqueous bond, and will continue to do so in the future.



Contemporary Literary Scenario in the Northeast states



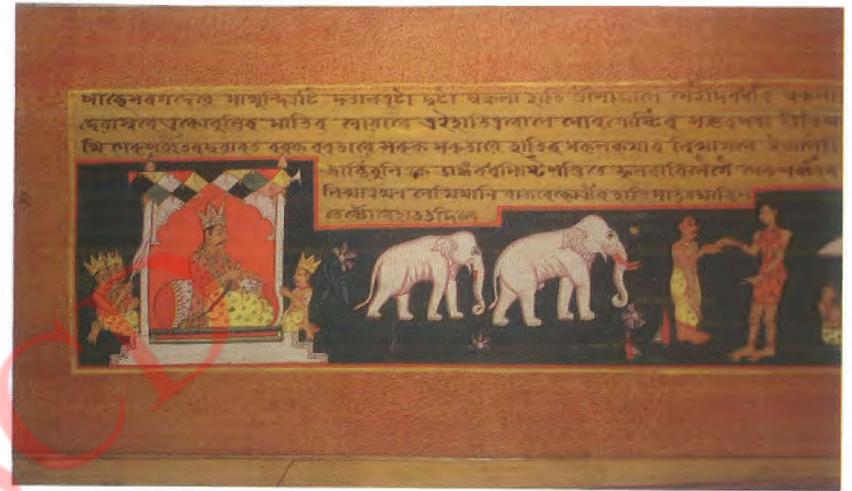
Mamang Dai

The Northeast Region of India (NER) is the broad term given to seven states spread over 255,00 sq kms stretching from Bhutan along the eastern Himalayas to the Patkai Hills in the eastern border, and southwards towards the Bay of Bengal surrounded by an external frontier of 4,500 kms with Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh.

The seven states, dubbed the seven sisters, are connected to the Indian mainland by the narrow 22km wide Siliguri corridor running through West Bengal, and the adjacent state of Sikkim is also counted as one of the Northeastern states. This, in summary, is the briefest of introduction to India's North-east. A closer examination will reveal that the area has a cultural diversity that is more pronounced than in any other part of the country. And the same is true if we begin to unfold the treasure trove that comprises the literature of the region. The earliest literatures here are

those offered by Assam and Manipur, written in Assamese and Meitei-lon of Assam and Manipur respectively. This began with translations of the great Indian epics the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, which in turn gave rise to Assamese writings of songs and plays called *Bargeet* and *Ankiya Nats*, written in a language called Braj'avali which had elements of other Indian vernaculars besides Assamese, while Manipur recorded legends and plays like Numit Kappa, Leithak Leikharol and Panthoibi Khongul dating from the 10th to the 17th centuries.

This sounds simple enough, but when one realizes that the area is home to more than 136 different ethnic groups speaking some 400 different languages and dialects with a literature as wide and varied as the number of ethnic and linguistic communities, a complete presentation of the literature of the region becomes difficult and almost inevitably incomplete. Broadly speaking, the languages



Manuscripts like these can be used to trace back the origins of the cultures and traditions.

in the region maybe divided into two groups: the Indo-Aryan and the Tibeto- Burman. However, the Khasi language belongs to the Mon Khmer family of the Austro-Asiatic and the Kuki-Chin of some parts of Nagaland and Mizoram to the Indo-Chinese group. The bulk of the writings in the languages have not been translated into English or other languages of the country, and this is how the literature of the region has somehow suffered oblivion till recent times:

*Chingda Satpi Engellei, Chinana kenhiba
Ha kallak-ide, Ha Kallak-ide, Ha Kallak-ide..
Translated: Ingenlei (a species of wild ginger
lily), flowering in the hills,
Withering away in vain... It's a pity, it's a pity,*

it's a pity

(Lines from an archaic Manipuri poem)

Apart from the literature of the script languages of Assam, Manipur, Tripura (the recorded history of the Tripura dynasty is the epic *Rajmala*, one of the oldest extant work in Bengali literature), there is another body of literature available here in the folk literature that is an entirely non-script collection, sung or chanted as narrative ballads and epics. Thus, in effect, there are two literatures of the Northeast, the script literature and the oral tradition. A large chunk of the traditional beliefs and customs of the tribes in the states of the region comes to us via the oral tradition and this is a common feature of many of

the communities of Nagaland, Mizoram, the Bodo, Miri, Rabha, Karbi of Assam and the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia of Meghalaya. (Tripura too, has as many as 19 different tribes speaking different languages), while in Sikkim there are the Lepcha, Bhutia and Nepalese communities. Each region has its distinct voice and there are well-known writers in all the languages, (viz: Indira Goswami, Arupa Patangia Kalita, Harekrishna Deka, Anupama Bsmiatary of Assam, James Dokhuma, Dr. L.Khiangte, Biakliana and C.Taumluaia of Mizoram, Nini Lungalung, Easterine Iralu, Temsula Ao of Nagaland, Y.D Thongchi and Lummer Dai of Arunachal Pradesh (writing in Assamese), Chandrakant Mura Singh of Tripura, M.K.Binodini, Saratchand Thiyam, R.K.Bhubonsana of Manipur, just to name a few in the contemporary scene.

There are also many Northeastern writers from all the states writing in English and promoting the literature of the region by a process of double translation drawing from a mother tongue that may be non-script into English. Today, in the context of contemporary literature of the region there is a palpable mingling of the written history and the oral tradition that is now being documented using the Roman script, especially in the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya. In societies where there were no written codes, the oral literature of a region provided illumination and explained the basis for indigenous beliefs. This, in a way, has become the backdrop from which an interpretation of the unwritten past is emerging as the basis for writing the modern history of the states.

To illustrate this point many quotes come to mind. Because I have read and know the

poets writing in English I hope I can quote their words with impunity:

*Because life falls like petals and death comes
when least expected
None remembers the passing of Mainik Raithong
And how he planted his bamboo flute/ for earth
to play music in spring...*

Another poet from Shillong, Kynpham Sing Nongkhyneh wrote:

*"Maybe after all someone has to save your
streams and pine groves / Despite the cold wind,
There are times when I feel determined to liberate
your hills."*

These are not words that we wave to big publishers. They are what we give to each other in our deepest thoughts. They are born out of love and anguish and the greatness of our hope that we will find our true potential and the courage to shape our destiny.

There is another important aspect to be considered when looking at contemporary Northeast literature today. In the last decades, all the states have undergone dramatic changes from a remote, idyllic past into a region that is today referred to a 'a conflict zone'. There is the conflict of identities born of value systems being transformed dramatically, the conflict of political history and the birth of terrorism, the demands for ethnic self-determination, and the conflict prone to changing societies, between the personal and the political, the state and the centre and sometimes between the individual and organized religion. It is a complex and hard edged time and this predicament is reflected in the writing coming out of the Northeast today.

Again, there are two literatures in combination here, with psychological terror and the social difficulties finding words in satire, in impassioned lyrics, and novels of political significance depicting violence and corruption, alongside the beauty of a world once in harmony with nature restored in a peculiar blend of myth and memory in an aesthetic appeal unique to the region.

Mona Zote of Mizoram writes in *Girl, with Black Guitar and Blue Hibiscus*

*The reality of music is a problem / Waiting to be
solved by the black guitar ...
The sad subterranean gong will go on accusing
/ Until it becomes the black guitar and music
becomes*

*A cleft of certain colour waiting for the first
quiver of strings /
Until the gong is quiet and the woman in the
earth goes to sleep.*

Today there are many discussions of what Northeast literature is about, and even about what it should be. Is it about guns and bullets? Is it satirical; should it be the poetry of nature or novels of blood and violence to distinguish it as the writing coming out of the region? What is the kind of writing coming out of the Northeast today? It becomes a difficult thing to answer since these are things that are happening and we are part of that business, and it is unlikely that we stop to analyze the evolution of our culture and history that is actually taking place every moment. It is a personal opinion but for me the answer is: it is about all these things. And in whichever language, whether in vernacular or English or translated, the literature of the Northeast is alive, vivid and heart wrenching. Consider Assam

poet Jiban Noroh's question:

*In which language do we dream? O' Buddha!
In which language do we dream in our night's
slumber
(The Buddha and Other Poems. translated by
Pradip Acharya)*

Fellow poets of other states respond with their different symbols and, moving through this landscape, through images that are before us, there is a band of people struggling with pen and paper to express their feelings and, let's say, wading through gutted entrails slippery with blood and running through the green bamboo crushing earthworms and frogs, living amidst death and resurrection all at the same time. There are politicians and ministers and balladeers and maharanis taking up the pen. There is *Melodies and Guns* written in a prison cell by former militant leader Mithinga Daimary of Assam, translated by Pradip Acharya and Manjit Baruah, as there is *Who the Cap Fits*, (Robert Lyngdoh, former Meghalaya Home minister).

How many times have we braved the heat and slush of a steaming Guwahati in high summer to listen to the readings of fellow poets and writers, and how many times have we looked at the Brahmaputra river, swollen with rain, flowing past the windows of the hall. They say the Northeast is a distant place of open sky, rain, river, and mist. There are images fixed forever that belong to people and places. Scholars tell us that in the history of literature the verse form is older than prose. The early history of many countries proves this as recounted in epics, ballads and heroic poems. Our own traditional literature offers similar proof. People here still



Dancers from Tripura perform the Hajagiri dance. Different tribal cultures from a single state result in variations in the literary scenario of a single state.

believe that different clans possess different "roots" that return to haunt every generation. These roots reveal themselves as the powers of healing, prediction, war and chase, or the root of words, meaning oratory. This seems to tally with what I now read that: 'we are the versicles or words or letters of a magic book, and that incessant book is the only thing in the world: more exactly, it is the world.' (JL Borges)

Viewed in this way the act of writing is a singular process of discovery and an act of faith. No matter what race or nation, no matter whether burned, banned, lost, exiled, it is a belief that there exists, in each one of us, an inviolate space that is each person's secret garden. It is here that the aesthetic fact resides. Without this, life would be unendurable. This is why we continue to struggle with pen and paper. To rediscover a mysterious landscape that reminds us of human endeavour that is equal to a talent for love. After all, our words are so puny, but we pluck them out of hearts and throw them out into the world. Why? It is an expression of love because nothing has

meaning until it is shared and we have only ink and paper to delineate the inexpressible.

It may be that all is not well, that there is a pervasive sense of despair in the Northeast about where we are going, what is the politics of the region, but what matters is that there is a constant stream that is flowing here, that is the writing that tries to give voice to the silent majority, in the record of routine things of daily life, or the things that clutch at our imagination in what Anton Chekov called 'straws of the soul.' This is the story about a society's effort and imagination. There is history in a word. There is a meaning, and this meaning has names, places, a landscape, life and people. Ultimately, to put an encompassing meaning to this writing it may be appropriate to say that the literature of the Northeast is about the language of hope. Here, legends may be portrayed with the intensity of reality and reality is portrayed with the intensity of longing for a vanished past. It is quite simply about the desire to find words that are a reaffirmation of belief. It is the anticipation of a greater reality.

Again, I quote a fellow poet Rajendra Bhandari of Sikkim:

'Hurriedly I peep inside the mirror and find that,

My prehistoric face still nourishes my primeval dreams,

I feel elated that my face still carries some archaeological value.

I scream- O come, excavate here, inside the wrinkles of my face

And you will find that statue of a poem/ ditched thousands of years ago....'



A catalogue of traditional sports and games of the Northeast



Dhruba Hazarika

Little need be said of the valley of Olympia in ancient Greece and of the many-hued games that were held there. All of us who love and enjoy sports know Greece's contribution to the Olympics, held every four years, in no less than thirty-five disciplines. Even further into history, we visualize Roman amphitheatres where slaves and criminals were made to fight with tigers and lions. In Barcelona, Spain, matadors still fight bulls driven into a frenzy by continuous injuries to their bodies by what are known as pica (swords). In Africa, competitors walked the tightrope over burning logs to prove one's nerves before a battle. Each country has its own share of games and sports. And even within a country there remain pastimes and recreations very often unique to a distinct region alone.

In the Northeast of India, where hills and rivers blend into a poetic mosaic, a region

abound in folk-tales and a wide variety of flora and fauna, traditional games and sports have remained a strong social binding force. Unlike ancient Rome, these games comprising mostly fights and contests were neither ghastly nor barbaric.

Let us begin with Assam although what follows was not restricted to Assam alone.

HAWK FIGHTS These were fights featuring hawks or falcons and were in vogue during the reign of the Ahom kings. Specially built *chorai-chongs* or aviaries were maintained for the training of these birds. Hawks trainers were known as Senchuwas and even now various places continue to bear this nomenclature. Hawk fights were considered a royal pastime and as such there existed a well-organized gradation of officers such as Senchowah Baruas over the entire class followed by Senchowah Borahs over a group of twelve.



Hawks are trained for fights by allowing them to prey on domesticated pigeons whose flying abilities are methodically reduced by clipping their wings.

The training of the birds was carried out meticulously. Small-sized fish were kept in small ponds inside the aviaries so that pigeons and a variety of cranes could feed upon them. This ensured their domestication to a good extent. At the same time, the hawks and falcons were trained by manipulating them with ropes tied to their legs to prey upon pigeons whose wings were methodically clipped to regulate their ability to fly away. The sole intention was to make the hawks and the falcons predatory birds yet retaining a degree of domesticity.

On the day of the actual contest, as thousands gathered to witness the aerial fights, the prey-birds (a species of crane) were driv-

en away from the exclusive fish-ponds. Simultaneously, the Senchowas released their fighters. Up in the sky, a battle ensued even as the trainers spread pieces of cloth on the ground to receive the victorious hawk or falcon dropping down with its prey firmly fixed in its beak.

Often, the hawks failed to pounce on their prey and instead flew away despite the training earlier rendered. In such an event, the trainer received punishment, sometimes of a physical nature. On the other hand, the victorious hawks were showered with generous attention that included a hot bath and the choicest of food with the trainer being amply rewarded. This pastime generally lasted from

December to March.

ELEPHANTS FIGHTS During the period of mast or the period when the mating season begins, male elephants, if deprived of their natural instincts, become ferocious. It was generally the custom to confine one such male elephant within a sturdy enclosure and at the same time allowing another elephant to be driven along the exterior sides of these enclosures. Deprived of his natural outlet, the one inside the enclosure was only too ready to fall on anyone for giving vent to his pent-up rage.

Once the gates were opened by means of ropes whose ends were regulated from a distance the two elephants would fall upon one another. Inevitably serious injuries were sustained by the elephants although death did not always feature in these fights. Spectators enjoyed these pachyderm battles from a distance by sitting on lofty *changghar* or in tree tops.

BUFFALO FIGHTS were also held during festive occasions. These fights are extant even today especially during the festival of Bihu. Most of the buffaloes trained for this purpose are kept separately and mock fights are held prelude to the actual day when the fights were held. Together with these fights, in certain cases, there were also tiger-bear fights.

MIX FIGHTS: Assam's history also reveals interesting mixed fights in which a tiger, a bear, a horned boar and an alligator were all placed within a closed area. To provoke the animals into fighting one another an archer would shoot darts on arrows at one or two of the animals. This resulted in the animals falling upon one another with a ferocity that was seen to be believed. None truly came out the winner except for the one who was less wounded.

There were other big fights between animals and birds. Among these were cock fights, raven fights as well as among parrots and mainas, all trained for this specific



Buffalo fighting is still practised even now. In Assam, it can be seen during the Magh Bihu when the buffaloes are set on each other and the spectators bet on them.

purpose. Enclosures and fields were kept earmarked as training grounds for such bird fights and were known as *charamoria*, *pakhi-moria*, etc.

HORSE RACING : Horse racing has been as old as the ancient Mayan, Roman and Greek and Red Indian civilizations. In Assam, race horses were brought in from Siam, Burma, Bhutan and Manipur. The ancient kingdom of Koch was well known for horse racing. Apart from the royal patronage offered to it, the element of betting, as in the other games, was also quite evident in this one too. However, horse racing also involved the carrying of water pots on the heads of the jockeys and required great skill and continuous practice. Other related competitions comprised archers on galloping horses hitting specified targets from a distance with spears and bows and arrows. Steeple chase, or races that involved jumping over ditches or wooden hurdles, was also very much in vogue.

CROSS COUNTRY RACES : This great sport, famous even now, was also very much a part and parcel of the sports culture of Assam during yesteryears. A special feature of this sport during those times was the accompaniment of music played on various musical instruments. Perhaps one can conceive of a military band with their bagpipers playing a tune as sport persons converge during major sporting events in modern times.

Apart from this there were several other sports and games that were extant during those days. A few of them are: short distance runs, fencing, long jump, high jump, repeated somersaults over a fixed distance, climbing bamboo poles made slippery with grease oil, running with one leg tied to one's thigh

with a string or a *gamosa*, and the throwing of heavy weights akin to the modern concept of iron shot putt and disc throws.

BOAT RACING has been organized along with swimming and diving for over hundreds of years. Till today, boat racing forms a major cultural event in the lives of the people in Kamrup during the annual boating race at Sualkuchi, approximately 55 km north of Guwahati. Swimming and diving also featured prominently as a part of a regular social exercise. Besides, personnel of naval forces which then formed a major defense bulwark were inextricably tied up with the rule and regulations associated with these races. These were games which did not border on extreme competitiveness or of such an intensity that led to deaths as in the case of hawk and elephants fights. There were games that were played for fun and frolic, mostly by children, although the elderly populace was no less involved by way of betting on a variety of stakes. A few instances of these kinds of games are egg contests, still prevalent in many places of Assam, in which eggs are smashed against one another, with one breaking in the process even as the other remains intact.

TANG GUTI : Tang guti was also considered a pastime by children. This game involved the hitting of a smaller stick by a longer one and then calculating the exact distance to which the shorter stick had been hit. The longest distance was associated with the winner.

MANIPUR

The people of this small State, like the ancient Greeks and Romans, were warriors and



Players vie for the ball in a game of Horse Polo in Manipur.

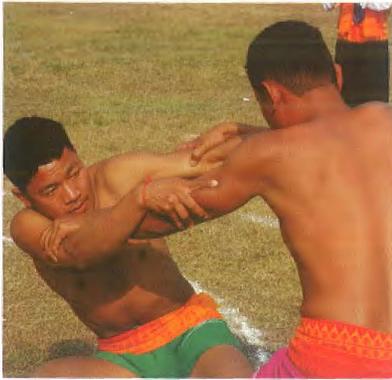
proud of their heroic deeds. They excelled in physical activities resulting in a number of original games that have found berth worldwide.

SAGAL KANGJEI (POLO) or polo is a unique ethnic game of and Manipur is generally acknowledged as its true original home. The Manipuri Purans trace it to a mythological age when it was played by the gods of yore. However, a few eminent historians even trace it back to 3100 B.C.

The game is said to have flourished during the region of King Kyamba (1467-1508) and King Khagemba (1957-1652). King Chandrakirti (1850-1886) was a great pa-

tron of this game and during his tenure the game spread to other countries of the world. The game in its modern form was however played at Silchar where the first polo Club was started.

Participated on either side by seven riders astride horseback, the players hit the ball into a goal much like in football. The stick used for swinging the ball is made of cane comprising a narrow wooden head bent into a slight angle. The ball, about 14 inches in circumference, is made of bamboo root and is usually light. The Manipuris use ponies often not more than 4 ft. 6 inches in height. This ancient game in its ancient form is still played in Manipur.



One wrestler tries to get the better of the other by sheer strength in a game of wrestling.

KHONG KANGJEI (MANIPURI HOCKEY)

This phrase is Manipuri for 'hockey on foot'. This is a game played between two groups with seven players on either side. Each player is equipped with a cane stick measuring 4 ft. in length and molded in the form of a modern hockey stick. The game begins with a throw of a ball in the centre of the field approximately 200 feet x 80 feet yards in size. A player is allowed to carry the ball, made of bamboo root, to any way he chooses. He can even kick the ball but he has to score the goal only by hitting it with his stick. A goal is scored when the ball crosses the goal line fully, there being no goal posts. A player often encounters an opponent in his attempt at carrying or hitting the ball towards the goal.

The encounter may develop into a trial of strength which is indigenously known as Mukna, Manipuri style of wrestling, which again has its own laws and can be termed as

distinctive original game.

Khong Kangjei is a game which requires much physical stamina, speed and ability. Tournaments among panas (administrative units) were conducted under royal patronage. And we often find stories of the game being played before royal audiences. Poet Anganghal of Manipur glorifies the game in this epic *Khamba Thoibi Seireng*. In the olden days players excelling in the game received royal favours and prizes.

YUBEE LAKPEE (MANIPURI RUGBY)

Yubee is Manipuri for coconut and lakpee for snatching. This game is played between two teams, each side consisting of seven players in a field approximately 45.75 x 18.29 meter in area. The game starts with the throwing of an oiled coconut at one end of the field. At the other end of the field is a rectangular space, 4 ½ x 3 metre in area, with the central portion of the goal line as one of its side.

This is called the box area. The players attempt to carry the coconut into the box and cross the goal line even as the opponents form a strong mobile barricade. Beyond the goal line sat the Ningthou (King) during earlier days, and to whom the coconut is finally dedicated. In order to score a goal, a player carrying the coconut has to enter into the box area not from the sides but from the front of the box and cross the goal line. It has several similarities to the modern game of rugby.

MUKNA (MANIPURI WRESTLING)

It is an indigenous Manipuri game which has been in vogue from the very dawn of the Manipuri society. Wrestling matches were

played between two male wrestlers through sheer physical force. Participants generally wore head-gear made out of cloth while wrestling. Generally, athletes of the same, or approximately the same, physical build-up and weight are made opponents. The game contains a religious aspect and is generally played on the last day of *Lai haraoba* (worship of a sylvan goddess) a ceremonial function felicitating the deity. In the olden days these game received sufficient royal patronage.

KANG (AN INDOOR GAME)

It is a game played on a mud floor or large out-houses and consists of hitting targets fixed on the floor with hard and smooth oblong shaped flat instruments known as *Kang*. This game goes back to very ancient times and there is mention of it in the epic legend of Khamba and Thoibi. Played strictly during the period between the Manipuri New Year's Day and the Rath Jatra Festival, the common belief is that this game has other effects on the minds of the people and if played beyond the said period, evil consequences may follow. The ruling deity of the game is said to be "Panthoibi" the Manipuri counterpart of the Goddess Durga. The game consists of seven partners on either side or by mixed gender partners on each side.

SARIT_SARAK AND THANG-TA (UNARMED AND ARMED COMBATS OF MANIPUR)

Legend has it that Lainingthou Pakhangba, the dragon king, ordained king Mungyamba to kill the demon Moydana from Bhagi (Modern China) with a spear, *Khangsunaha* and a sword, *Thang Khoubomba*,

gifted to the king.

Leikoi khow is believed to have been practiced by Lainingthou Sanamahi to test the stability of the earth he created. This in itself proves the indigenous character of these arts. "Khow" displays how one handles a spear on the field. This was performed by champions of the traditional four districts of Ahallup, Naharup, Khabam and Laipham as a part of the ritual of *Mera Ukaikappa* in presence of the king. The entire gamut comprises nine different forms of martial arts

ARUNACHAL PRADESH

Arunachal Pradesh bears a special significance for abundance of indigenous games. Most of the traditional games from this state games on a pristine innocence not generally found in the others. A notable few are shown below -

THE SNAKE GAME (TABU HARRAM PEYA)

It is a unique game. The players do their best to resemble a snake and silently squirm their way out from some mysterious corner, wriggle around the open field, and just as silently disappear again.

HOG'S RUB (DOL BUCCA, TARUK HIMA GENAM, A TAMME IMU)

J. H. Hutton, the historian, places it on the border between games and athletics. One boy goes down on all fours and two others of more or less equal weight, lie on their backs, one on each side of him and placing their legs over his back, catch hold of each others' feet with their hands. The first boy raises himself and moves about with bent back with the other two hanging across it like panniers on

a donkey.

THE ROPE HOP (JIPU CHHAHVAT)

It can be played by a number of players. A cloth rope held at each end is swung by two players, in pendulum fashion. The other players with hands and feet on the ground, leap across the swinging rope each time it touches the ground.

THE PARROT WALK (VAKIH KHOWOM)

A single bamboo pole is laid on the ground. With hands folded or tied behind one's the back, the players walk the length of the pole one at a time. Should a player lose his balance, he is declared 'out'.

PIERCING THE BALL (PARA ABKI)

The ball used is a roundish root of *para*, a kind of creeper found in the forest. The root is taken to the top of a hill, while the rest of the players wait at the bottom. When all ready, the root is rolled down the hill and as it nears the base the players try to pierce the ball with their arrows.

THE SEED PLAY (TOH MALIM)

It is a game that ensures excellent practice at accurate aiming. The players consist of two teams. The first team "owns" the seeds and the second team "shoots" them. Ghila seeds are used both as 'strikers' and as targets, and are placed in a horizontal line at a distance of five to six feet apart. Each of the seeds has a guardian who replaces his allotted seed each time it is struck out of position. The marksmen stand at a distance of 20 feet from the seeds and then take turns one at a time, to displace all the seeds, one after another, from their position on the horizontal line.

THE PIG HUNT (SERE LASADU)

The players divide into groups. One group consists of the "hunters" and the other consists of the "pigs". The pigs are given time to scatter and then the hunters chase them, but the "pigs" do not give in easily, and instead fight back. An exciting game ensues as the "pigs" pretend to bite the hunters. The game ends when all the "pigs" are caught and triumphantly carried off by the hunters.

Some other noteworthy games are wrestling, skipping, tug-of-war, archery, long and high jump, hide and seek etc.

MEGHALAYA

TEER is a game, played with passion, in Meghalaya. It is a betting game and comprises archers on the one hand, and, on the other, persons who place their bets on the results, much like in horse-racing.

A group of archers take aim at a target, called a skum, made of bamboo slats tied into a bundle and approximately four feet in height. Within 180 seconds the archers shoot their allotted quota of arrows at the target placed at a distance of approximately a hundred and fifty feet. If, out of a total of a thousand arrows, eight hundred and fifty implant themselves into the skum, the designated number for the shoot for the day is fifty. In other words, only the last two digits are taken into account.

One can bet against any number from double zero to 99. For instance, in this example, for the number 50, if one places rupees one thousand; in return one receives two thousand, that is double the stakes. Both as a pastime and as a sport, teer has become a part of the ethno-social identity of the Khasis.



Arrows are being counted after a session of Teer, a local sport from Meghalaya.

Although the various games elaborated above have been shown again individual states a good number of them are not confined to a specified geographical area alone. For instance, wrestling, martial arts are not just unique to Manipur but are also very much a part of the ethnic fabric of Nagaland and Mizoram and Assam.

(This is not an original work by this writer. Most of the information compiled has been gleaned from various

sources. Special acknowledgements are humbly offered to (1) the souvenir committee which brought out a special souvenir in 1988 during the 2nd North-East Indigenous Games held at Sibsagar (2) Sri Rana Khan, President Sibsagar Sports Association and (3) Sri Bhupen Choudhury, Asstt. Director, Sports & Youth Welfare, Government of Assam and to (4) Subhash Basumatary, Director i/c Sports Authority of India, Guwahati centre.)



On a high note



Mitra Phukan

One of the defining features of the region that we talk about as the Northeast of India is the fact of its geographical location. Lying as it does between the great landmass of the rest of the Indian subcontinent to its West, and the Far East, it is a place that has, through history, been at civilizational crossroads. The great river systems of the valley of Assam have facilitated the entry of influences from a once-undivided Bengal, and through it, from the rest of India. On the other hand, the paths and passes across dense jungles and high mountains have brought in influences from Tibet, China, Myanmar, and further a field, from Thailand, Indo-China and even beyond.

The region itself has, till recent times, been remote, and difficult to access from the rest of India. As a result, change has been slow to come here, especially cultural changes. The great historical migrations have brought in the cultures of the places of the migrating people, but these have, till recent years, been relatively untouched by the influences of contemporary

times. This is especially true in areas such as language and music. The latter, especially, comes with the migrating peoples as a memory, and nostalgia. The traditional music is cherished through generations, though parallel music systems grow over time as well.

The interesting thing about the music of the Northeast region is its heterogeneity. Each state has a wealth of diverse musical traditions, which co-exist in happy harmony with newer kinds of music. It is well known that the Northeast, with its multiplicity of tribes and cultures, is an anthropologist's delight. It is also, in fact, an ethno-musicians paradise.

This is a region where music, whether devotional, work-related (folk) or purely recreational, plays a very important part in the day-to-day lives of the people of the seven sister states here. Almost all rural homes, however humble, have a musical instrument, whether a *dotara* or flute. It is very common to see, in a middle class urban abode, a harmonium or *tanpura* in the valleys, or a keyboard and guitar in the hills. The popularity of Western compositions, too, is strongly felt, especially in the

hill states. For decades, pop and rock bands have flourished here, and made their presence felt in both the numerous clubs that dot the region, (including tea and oil clubs) and also

on the larger stage of the metro cities of the country. The Bob Dylan Memorial concert held every year in Shillong is a lively reminder of this. No wonder international groups such



A traditional folk singer strums a tune about nature in the serene confines of the Sacred Groves. Photo: Pixel Media

as the Scorpions make this town one of their stops when performing in India. Besides, classical Western music too, flourishes, with pianists and vocalists trained in highly regarded music institutes in the West greatly enriching the musical scene back in their homes. This richness in the sphere of Western music is a fusion of the inherent musicality of the people with the influence of the Church, and missionary education, which has opened windows to the West.

There are also people like Debojit and Amit Paul from this region, who have performed wonderfully on national television music contests, bringing glory to their various states. Hindustani classical music is studied with fervour, too, and Begum Parween Sultana of Assam is a wonderful product of the classical tradition. Besides, there is the iconic Dr Bhupen Hazarika who straddles the musical world like a colossus, and also young Zubeen Garg, who, too, is making waves in the music scene, on a very impressive scale. And how can we forget the melodic masterpieces of Sachin Dev Burman and the vibrant music of his son, Rahul? All these musicians, and more, have brought the heritage of their home states to enrich the musical culture of the nation.

The Buddhist influence has been strong in Arunachal Pradesh. The chants and devotional music of this religion, nurtured in the great monasteries of the State, have formed a beautiful strand in the State's melodic heritage, adding to the wealth of local music already extant in its valleys and mountains. Devotional chants form an important strand of the musical legacy. It is from this vibrant cultural background that the Buddhist monk Geshe Ngawang Tashi Babu has emerged. His album *Tibetan Master Chants* with its

multi-phonetic chants was nominated for the Grammy Awards in the Spiritual Music category in 2006. Of course, there are the traditional songs of Arunachal Pradesh, too, which are often ritualistic in nature, though they can sometimes be celebratory, also. The State has a large number of tribes, each with its strong cultural heritage. Among the songs of the tribes are those accompanying the dances of the Adi people, such as *popir* and *ponung*, the *Hiri Khaning* of the Apatani, and the *Aji Thamu* of the Monpas and so on.

The mingling of different cultures is seen to fine effect in the music of Assam. The rich musical heritage of this State is heard in the huge variety of folk and devotional songs that the state boasts of. Each area, each region has its own cache of folk songs, each different in melodic and rhythmic scheme and structure from the other. Therefore, while the great elephant and river songs of Goalpara in the West bring in a typical ambience, the Bihu songs of Upper Assam, with their characteristic double beat and melodies point to cultures further East where these airs originated. In between are the beautiful folk songs of Kamrup, sung usually with the two-stringed *dotara* and bamboo flute. The songs of the Barak valley have their own uniqueness, too. There are also a variety of other folk songs, chief among them being the *nisukonigeet* (lullabies), *Ainaam*, *Biyanaam*, and so on. The instruments used in the various genres are usually the *dhhol* for percussion, though handclaps too form an important part. There are also unusual instruments such as the *gogona* (Jew's harp), clappers made of bamboo, and *mohor xingor pepa*, a kind of pipe made from the curved horn of a buffalo.

It must be remembered that the region is home to a large number of people from dif-



The Buddhist chants of Arunachal Pradesh form an integral part of their musical influences. Photo: Nibir Hazarika

ferent ethnicities, all of whom proudly guard their musical heritage even today. In Assam, the music of these various peoples, such as the Bodos, the Rabhas, the Misings, the Dimasas, to name a few, are enriched by their own melodic and linguistic inputs. The instruments that are used here are usually created from material that is easily accessed from Nature. Though simple, the melodies on these drums and flutes and simple stringed pieces are attractive and quite often complex.

Religion and music have always been very closely linked in many parts of the world. A large part of the great musical heritage of As-

sam rests proudly on the music of the Satras, those centers of Vaishnavite worship where the devotees praise the Lord through music and dance of a high order. The dance of the Satras, the blanket term for which is Satriya, has already been recognized as a classical dance form of India. The accompanying songs, devotional in nature and luminous with a unique melodic and literary beauty, are known as Bargeets, or great songs (of devotion). They were composed by the founder of the movement, Sri Sri Sankardev, (circa 1449-1568) and his disciples, foremost among them being Sri Sri Madhavdev. Based on spe-



The Wangala festival is celebrated by the Garos. The drums play a major role during the dance and the dancers and musicians wear bright costumes with feathered head-gear.

cific melodic and rhythmic cycles, these *raags* and *taals* are nevertheless different from the Carnatic or Hindustani classical music traditions, even though they have their own strict rules and conventions. The bi-facial *khol* plays a large part in keeping the beat, along with brass cymbals of various sizes, according to the requirements of the song and dance. There are also the numerous other kinds of songs within the rich treasure house of Satriya dramatic and dance traditions, such as *oja pali*, songs from *Bhaona*, and so on.

There are some beautiful songs based on the religious sentiments of the culture that developed after the Muslims settled in this valley. Known as *Jikirs*, many of them were composed by the mendicant-preacher Azan Fakir Peer sahib.

Nestled like a jewel at the edge of the region, Manipur is an extremely culturally rich state. The devotional dance of the State has long been recognized as a classical form in

the country. The accompanying music has remarkable elements drawn from Meitei as well as Vedic culture. There is also the music that has come about as a fusion of the several well-defined ethnic components. Among the many kinds of beautiful traditional songs one hears here are *Khullong Isbei*, *Lai Haroba Isbei*, *Thabal Chongba*, *Nat* music, *Napi Pala*, *Ras Lila* songs, *Gaur Padas*, and so on. Among the traditional instruments are the ancient and very important *Pena*, made of bamboo and a gourd or coconut shell, played with a kind of bow, and the *pung*, a kind of *mridangam* or *khol* used extensively to create complex beats, used especially for Sankirtan music.

Besides being the Abode of the Clouds, Meghalaya is also home to a rich repertoire of music and dance. The Garos, Khasis and Jaintias all have their rich musical heritage, which also form a part of such festivals as Wangala, Nongrem, and Shad Suk Mynsiem. Garo songs celebrate heroic deeds as well as

life events, while Khasis sing of nature, which has given such an abundance of beauty to their state. These are accompanied by a variety of flutes, drums, stringed instruments, and so on.

The traditional music of Mizoram is accompanied by drums made from the hollow trunk of a tree. Brass cymbals, reminiscent of those found in Myanmar, are also important accompaniments. The music is also enriched by a variety of wind and stringed instruments. The vocals deals with hunts, as in *Bawh Hla* and *Hlado*, religious ceremonies, such as *Thiam Hla* and *Dawi Hla*, and of course the beautiful love songs, *Lengzem Zai*, and so on. Today, Mizoram, along with Nagaland and Meghalaya, also boasts of a high quality of church and choir music, with rich vocals raised in melodious harmony.

The traditional music of Nagaland was often group-oriented. As an accompaniment to their rich heritage of folk dances, they also showcased the inherent musicality of the people. *Uniquelu*, traditional music in Nagaland is one of the few in the country that have incorporated harmony. The music of some tribes has as many as eight harmonic paths, embodying a high level of musical sophistication. There are songs for almost every occasion, with the love ditties and marital music being often quite moving.

The state of Tripura is rich in folk music, much of which is a unique blend of the indigenous with newer influences from other parts of the country. The tribal communities each have their own rich repertoire of songs and dances. Rabindranath Tagore had a long and intimate association with the State, and this has enriched the music. Some of the instruments used in their mu-



The Bamboo Flute forms an essential part of the folk music of the Northeast.

sic are the *kham*, the *saumui*, (bamboo flute) cymbals, etc.

Indeed, it is a fact that the large number of tribes found in this region all have their own unique dances, as well as their accompanying songs. In the absence of a written script till recently, songs were used in several of the hill states, especially, as a medium to encapsulate their rich oral tradition. Songs have often been a means of transmitting history and mythology, the melody serving as an aide memoir to the words. The Creation myths of several communities are encapsulated in melody and passed down through generations. Sometimes these melodies are mesmerizing chants, though quite often they are melodically well developed, too.

It is seen, therefore, that this region is a huge, rich storehouse of music, both traditional and contemporary. The musical legacy is only now slowly opening up to the rest of the world, and providing insights into its uniqueness and luminous beauty.



A scene from Ratan Thiyam's play *Wahoudak* (Prologue) which opened the International Theatre Festival in Delhi.



A theatrical collage



Tayenjam Bijoykumar Singh

Over the years, the Northeast has been in the news but for all the wrong reasons. It comes to prominence only when trouble flares up. The mainland media report the trouble with earnest zeal but seldom follow the root cause and try to feel the pulse of the people. For many people of the country living outside the region, the Northeast is still shrouded in mystery.

Nature's beauty abounds in the region. Snow-capped blue mountains, cascading water-falls, crystal-clear meandering streams, evergreen forests, moss-green hills, lush-green vales, etc., a feast for the eyes, all are there for one to behold. Nature has not shied away yet from the destructive powers of humans. Nature still lives with man in harmony. Terraced paddy-fields in the hills and tea gardens in the plains still complement the beauty of nature. Majority of the people outside the Northeast are not aware that the region is also a treasure trove of culture and traditions.

India has a long and rich tradition in theatre. Origin of Indian theatre is closely related

to the ancient rituals and seasonal festivities of the country. *Natya Shastra* (Sanskrit dramaturgy) is the earliest and most elaborate treatise on Indian theatre composed before the 3rd century AD. The traditional account in *Natya Shastra* gives a divine origin to Indian theatre. It shows an intimate relation between the idea of dancing and dramatic representation.

There are many forms of theatre – theatre of narration, theatre of entertainment, folk theatre, modern theatre, etc. The Northeast has a long tradition of folk theatre. If the traditional and ritualistic dance forms are brought under the umbrella of theatre then each village in the region has its own distinctive form of theatre. The numerous ritualistic dance forms like harvest dance, seed-sowing dance, war dance, etc. performed in the villages from time to time according to the season and situation are nothing but a form of folk theatre. Ritualistic dance forms and theatrical performances of the Northeast such as Lion Dance, where masked dancers dance in monasteries of Sikkim and Arunachal; *Oja-pali* and *Ankhiya Nat* created by saint Sankaradeva, the social reformer of

Assam, *Lai-baraoba* dance of Manipur, performed to appease Sylvan deities; War Dance and Seed Sowing Dance of Nagaland; Harvest Dance and Bamboo Dance of Mizoram to name only a few show the rich tradition of theatrical art.

In the beginning, plays were very closely associated with religion. It may be because plays started at places where people gathered in large numbers and the places inadvertently were temples or places of worship. All forms of dramatic literature have some points in common in the sense all try to reach out to people to convey messages, thoughts and ideas. Differences between plays arise from differences

in conditions of performance, in local conventions, in the purpose of theatre within the community, and in cultural history. Of these, the cultural background is the most important, if not the most elusive.

Saint Sankaradeva (circa 1449-1568) in order to spread the message of Vaisnavism created *Ankiya Nat*, a form of religious theatre. *Ankiya* means (one) act and *Nat* means drama. The spotless white costumes of the orchestra and the spectacular effigies of demons and animals characterize these one-act plays. *Ankiya Nats* are staged on Janamasthami, the full moon night on the memorial day of saint Sankaradeva and any other important religious occasions.



Bhaona is a combination of art, music, dance, singing and teachings. It is mainly based on religious scriptures and mythological legends. Photo: UB Photos

Bhaona, a theatrical performance of *Ankiya Nat*, created with the combination of art, music, dance, singing and teachings from religious scriptures still continues to enthrall the spectators. It is performed in village namghars and satra premises. The main objective is to attract the attention of the common people and impart to them the intrinsic knowledge of religious scriptures in an easily digestible form. The present day performances still use the scripts originally written by saint Sankaradeva in medieval Assamese with a sprinkling of Brajvali. Giant effigies of demons and animals are used to highlight the dramatic effect and capture the imagination of the common man. Some of these brightly painted papier mache effigies with bamboo skeletons are often as tall as 15 feet requiring several actors to manipulate them. Animal masks are also worn by the actors. The folk form of Kamrupiya Dhuliya has also been introduced to modern stage in Assam though efforts of people like Ramani Barman. The tradition is kept unbroken till today.

Oja-Pali is another traditional performing art form of Assam. It is usually performed by a group of 4 or 5 men, the leader of whom is called *Oja* and the remaining performers accompanying the leader are called *Pali*. The performers wear long sleeved white gowns and silver jewellery. *Oja-Pali* is distinguished by its style of narrative singing combined with dancing and dramatic interludes. The only instrument played is *Kbuitaal* (palm sized Cymbal). *Oja-Pali* focuses on the stories from the epics and Puranas.

The concept of modern theatre brought by the British made its presence felt in the region more than a century ago. Tezpur can proudly claim to be the birth place of modern Assamese theatre. The Ban Theatre, the first modern

Assamese theatre hall was established in the year 1906 at Tezpur. Naturally many historic modern Assamese dramas of Rupkunwar Jyotiprasad Agarwala (1903-51) and Natyasurya Phani Sarma (1909-70) were first staged here. Lakhidhar Sarma, another theatre personality of Tezpur is known for his famous work *SIRAJ*, the drama with the unity of the Hindus and Muslims as central theme scripted by Natyasurya Phani Sarma.

Building on the legacy of the earlier stalwarts who nurtured a distinctly Assamese Theatre, the credit for pioneering contemporary theatre in Assam would largely be due to the Sangeet Natak Academy awardee Dulal Roy. The journey of exploration in theatre and direction continued with other veterans like Ali Hyder, Rofiquil Hussain, Arun Nath, Sitanath Lahkar. Theatre groups like 'Seagull' of (Baharul Islam and Bhagirathi) Drama. The Passion players (S. D'com Bhuyan) are also producing interesting plays, for last several years. The contributions of theatre activists like Nayan Prasad, Anup Hazarika, Abinash Sarma, Gunakar Devgoswami and young Robijita Gogoi continue to make the theatre scene in Assam a vibrant one and the quality of theatre produced in the state are, comparable to the best in the country.

The most popular Assamese theatre is the mobile theatre which runs on commercial consideration. Achyut Lahkar opened the Nataraj Cine Theatre in 1963. He is largely credited as the pioneer in establishing the roving drama company concept in Assam. He depended heavily on amateur actors and technicians. The initial dramas of the company were based on folklore and mythology. Since its inception the theme, acting standards and production quality of the mobile theatre have undergone a tre-

mendous change. Ratan Lahkar, a veteran producer produced adaptations of classics 'Iliad', 'Cleopatra' and 'Crime and Punishment'. He added another feather in his cap by producing Titanic, a mega production which required building of two stages side by side to depict the illusion of an entire ship broken into two after the collision with iceberg. Dr. Bhabendranath Saikia, a renowned litterateur, has written several screenplays and directed several plays for the travelling play companies of Assam.

TV, cinema and other forms of entertainment have failed to make much inroad in rural areas as mobile theatre has done. It has now become the single largest form of entertainment in rural Assam. There are now nearly 30 full-fledged mobile theatre companies. Braving cold winters, hot summers and wet rainy days, for eight months in a year, between September and April, at least 20 mobile drama companies, tour across the vast state, entertaining the rural mass.

The rituals associated with *Lai-Haraoba*, festival of deities of pre-Hindu era of Manipur inevitably include many episodes like *Tangkbul-Nurabi Loutaba*, which actually are nothing but plays. *Sanjenba*, *Goura Lila*, *Kali Daman*, *Ras Lila*, etc. are some of the religious theatrical performances of Manipur, pertaining to Vaisnavism. *Phagee Lila* (farce) was popular during the reign of Maharaja Chandrakirti (1850-1886). It in turn gave birth to Shumang Lila or courtyard play – *Shumang* meaning courtyard and *Lila* meaning play or performance. *Shumang Lila* is performed by troupes of 10-15 artists either exclusively male or female. Male characters are played by female artists in the case of female *Shumang Lila* troupes. *Nupishabis* or male artistes enacting female roles in male *Shumang Lila* troupes are

feminine par excellence in their looks, bodily gestures and facial expressions. *Shumang Lila* is performed in an open space with the spectators sitting all around. No stage prop except a table and a chair is used. However, of late electronically created special sound effects have been incorporated in the performance of *Shumang Lila*.

Shumang Lilas are generally meant for entertaining and making the people aware of the social values. The theme of *Shumang Lila* is very wide; it can be anything from folk tales to the happenings elsewhere in the world like the aftermath of the attack on the Twin Towers of World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001. *Shumang Lila* is no longer confined to Manipur. Some *Shumang Lila* troupes have toured the country. Some have even taken their shows abroad. Some *Shumang Lila* troupes have taken part in the annual festival of National School of Drama, New Delhi.

Modern Manipuri theatre performed in the proscenium theatre similar to the Western theatrical model was moulded under the enthusiastic patronage of Sir Churuchand Maharaj (1891-1941) and Pravas Milan was performed for the first time in 1902. The initial plays were adaptations from other languages. In 1925 'Narasingh' the first play originally written in Manipuri was staged. Theatre movement developed and expanded rapidly. Many theatrical companies and institutions like Manipur Dramatic Union (MDU) (1930), Arian Theatre (1935), Chitrangada Natya Mandir (1936), Society Theatre (1937), Rupmahal (1942), Cosmopolitan Dramatic Union (1968), the Chorus Repertory Theatre of Ratan Thiyam (1976) etc. were established.

GC Tongbra may be said to be the greatest Manipuri playwright of the twentieth century.

Mahesh Dattani's play *30 days in September*, directed by Satyakee D'Com Bhuyan, was performed at Rabindra Bhawan, Guwahati. Photo: D'com Bhuyan.



He died at the age of eighty-three on June 3, 1996. More than one hundred plays written by him have already been staged. To his credit are nearly one hundred books of plays. He himself had directed a number of plays. His plays clearly reflect the decay and loss of humanity in the society.

Lokendra Arambum, H. Kanhailal and Ratan Thiyam are prominent personalities of Manipuri theatre. Each of them has a distinctive style of presentation – masters in their own rights. Ratan Thiyam with his inimitable style has managed to claim a niche for himself in the International Arena. Among the Indians, he as a dramaturge has won probably the maximum number of honours and awards at both national and international levels. He firmly believes that plays should be based on logic and reason – it should mirror the society; it should be able to analyze the social changes and give comment on it. In other words, plays should point out the wrongs in the society and correct it by putting questions on human intellect. As

a director, Ratan Thiyam strives for perfection. He and his whole troupe will not rest until and unless, every minute details of the play are perfected. Ratan Thiyam's plays have become ever more experimental with his latest trilogy, 'The Manipur Trilogy'.

It may not be out of place to mention that people often say the Northeast theatre is not as popular and powerful as the Marathi or the Bengali theatre. Nothing can be more wrong than making such a comparison. Both the Marathi and Bengali theatres exist in big cities where it is easy to get sponsors. Even their flop shows attract more people than any of the successful plays of the Northeast. The theatre groups in big cities can recover the cost of production even with a very bad production. Whereas theatre groups in the Northeast have to work against all odds. They have to manage everything on their own and earn appreciable amount to sustain themselves without others' help. They have managed to come out of the region, tour all over the world and earn the ad-

Lest we forget



Nitin Gokhale

"When you go home, tell them of us and say for your tomorrow we gave our today".

This epithet on the war cemetery at Kohima, capital of Nagaland just about sums up the high regard in which the war dead are held in India's Northeast. Across the seven states, several graves, paying tribute to the war dead came up in the wake of World War II. Initially, the tributes were to the dead of the famous battles of Imphal and Kohima in which Indian, British and soldiers of several allied countries died fighting the advancing Japanese. Construction of graves in India was first thought about in the 1960s after the Commonwealth War Graves Commission decided to extend its charter and include India, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa in its ambit.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission, established by Royal Charter in 1917, is responsible for marking and maintaining the graves of members of the forces of Commonwealth countries who died in the two World

Wars, for building and maintaining memorials to the dead whose graves are unknown and for providing records and registers of these burials and commemorations, totalling 1.7 million and found in most countries through the world.

The Japanese were halted in their tracks at Kohima. The famous battle on the tennis courts of Kohima is now regarded as a crucial turning point in World War II. It was after this battle that the Japanese were forced to retreat all the way to Rangoon, leading subsequently to their defeat and surrender in 1945. The Kohima war cemetery is the biggest of them all with graves for over 1400 soldiers, spread across nearly 10 acres. Then there are a couple of smaller war memorials in Guwahati and in the oil township of Digboi, in memory of allied soldiers who died in World War II. India's Northeast in fact, has a unique distinction of being home to graves of not only victorious allied soldiers but also they are the eternal resting place for Japanese and Chinese soldiers and the brave warriors of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's Indian National Army!

The Japanese soldiers died during their ad-



Gunakar Dev Goswami and Pakiza Begum performing on stage in the play *The Chairs* directed by Dulal Roy. It was one of the plays that was showcased in The International Theatre Festival in Delhi.

miration of the global audience much to the envy of the so called powerful theatres of the country.

Modern form of theatre is rapidly expanding and reaching out to every nook and cranny of the Northeast. Ten plays from the Northeast were staged during the International Theatre Festival held in Delhi from January 6 to 17, 2008- (1) One Arunachali play- Suk Bahadur's *The Legend of Chogyal Norzang*; (2) Two Assamese plays - (i) Dulal Roy's *The Chairs* and (ii) Bidyawati Phukan's *Guti Phulor*; (3) One Garo play - Pabitra Rabha's *A-Chik A-Song*; (4) Five

Manipuri plays - (i) Ratan Thiyam's *Waboudok (Prologue)* (ii) Kshetri Jugindro's *Ghashiram Kotwal*, (iii) L. Kishworjit's *Thouna Phabi Ima*, (iv) S. Thaninleima's *The Final Countdown* and (v) Toijam Shilla's *Amamba Yug*; (5) One Mizo play - Daulat Vaid's *Romeo and Juliet*.

Ratan Thiyam's *Waboudok (Prologue)* opened the International Theatre Festival, which proves beyond doubt that the North East theatre is a dynamic theatre that cannot be easily overlooked.



vance and retreat against the allies. The Chinese died in building the famous Stilwell Road across the mountains leading to Burma from Assam's Ledo town into Burma and thence to the Kunming province of China. So in smaller towns of present day Arunachal Pradesh, like Miao and Jairampur, there are scattered graves for these unknown and unsung soldiers. In fact, these cemeteries have become tourist hotspots, especially for British and Japanese nationals who come all the way to India's Northeast to look at the place where their fathers and grandfathers lived, fought and died. Nagaland gets at least one lakh tourists every year, out of which nearly 90 per cent visit the Kohima war graves memorial.

But Moirang town of Manipur has a special significance in India's history. Although it does not have graves, it certainly has a major

memorial.

It was in this hamlet that the INA flag was hoisted for the first time on Indian soil on April 14, 1944. Moirang, which has a lot of importance in the historical and cultural map of Manipur, today has a INA Memorial, a INA Museum and Netaji Library, with a statue of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose overlooking them. All these structures were established over the years since 1968 after an initiative first taken up by the All India Forward Block, a political party that was established by Netaji.

The INA Memorial is a replica of the original INA War memorial that was established in Singapore but was destroyed by the British and Allied Forces during the World War II. The memorial that stands majestically at Moirang was unveiled by the then prime minister of India, Mrs Indira Gandhi in Sep-



The war memorial at Kohima.



tember 1969. The library has a rich collection of books and other literature pertaining to the Indian National Army as well as to Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, while there are some rare books which supposedly belonged to the great freedom fighter of the country. The INA museum on the other hand, has a very valuable collection of various articles that were used by the soldiers and officers of the Indian National Army. They also include several types of arms and ammunition that the INA had used, as also various other personal belongings of Netaji as well as official belongings of the INA.

In the post-independence era, India fought a bitter winter war in 1962 with China in the Himalayas. Hobbled by poor leadership and planning, Indian soldiers suffered a massive defeat in the Kameng sector of Arunachal Pradesh. For nearly 35 years after that humiliation, there were no memorials, no tribute to the brave Indian soldiers who fought against all odds in 1962. But since the mid-1990s, the Eastern Army Command initiated a laudable effort to commemorate the memory of those unsung heroes. Today, a magnificent memorial built in Buddhist stupa style has come up at Tawang. It bears the names of all those who died fighting the Chinese in this sector. Now

this memorial is a must-see even for tourists visiting Tawang, the district headquarters. If nothing else, the war memorial is a reminder of what went wrong. En route to Tawang from Tezpur, there is a spot which is also a must-stop for all those who travel this road. Its called Jaswantgarh, a tribute to Jaswant Singh Rawat, who had single-handedly held back the rampaging Chinese for 72 hours near the Sela pass. Visitors, civilians and those in uniform, stop every time they pass by to pay tribute. Even at the ball of fire divisional headquarters in Tenga, a museum honours the bravery of the largely ignored martyrs. Details of events leading to the actual conflict are on display too so that future generations of soldiers would know what happened during that fateful month. There are other reminders of 1962 like three old Stuart tanks, recovered in July 2007. They were brought in a futile attempt to turn the tide but were abandoned halfway through the war.

Clearly, war memorials in India's Northeast are a major tourist attraction but at the same time they serve as necessary reminders of significant events in India's and the region's recent history.



Off the beaten track



Indrani Raimedhi

Since time immemorial, India has fascinated the traveller, and the country has held in thrall many a soul who have found in its shores a sense of mystic fulfillment. Its unique paradoxes, the bewildering variety of cultures, customs, languages, the sweep of its magnificent landscape bewilder and sustain the magic of expectations.

Where tourism is concerned, the Northeast is perhaps the least explored in the country. Lack of aggressive marketing, poor connectivity, long years of insurgency and the dearth of necessary infrastructure has led to such a state of affairs. But the positive aspect is that this actually works in our favour because the region is still virgin territory and its unspoilt beauty has much to offer the jaded tourist.

Any foray into the region inevitably starts with Guwahati, having the former name of Pragjyotishpur and now going by the sobri-

quet of the gateway to the Northeast. This city has long lost its sleepy ambience and is today bustling with swanky malls, restaurants, multiplexes and other avenues of leisure. Its surrounding hills provide a spectacular view of the city spread like a crescent along the Brahmaputra river. Some of the old landmarks like the British bungalows and the Dighalipukhuri tank dug by Bhagadatta give it its distinctive character. The State Museum houses rare stone sculptures from the Kamrupa period, priceless coins and other artifacts from a hoary history. For the spiritual minded, the city is a goldmine. On a small promontory on the river, the Sukleswar Janardhan temple has a statue of the Lord Buddha facing the river, a rare coexistence with a Hindu deity found very rarely in India. There is also the Nabagraha temple or the temple of the nine planets and Kamakhya temple, one of the main centers of India's esoteric Tantric cult. This temple holds the spectacular Ambubachi



The Kamakhya Temple located in Guwahati, is one of the most holy spots in India. It is also a major tourist attraction with thousands of visitors every year.

Mela every year. Outside Guwahati, on the north bank at Hajo, is the Hayagriva Mahav temple which is finely decorated with bas reliefs of scenes from the Ramayana. Nearby is Poa Mecca, a mosque on a hill, so called because a pilgrimage to it is believed to be one fourth of a Haj to Mecca. At Sualkuchi, the tourist is also witness to the skill of Assamese weavers who fashion beautiful clothes of Pat Silk, Eri and Muga.

About 144 miles from Guwahati, on the South bank of the Brahmaputra is Kaziranga National Park, the sanctuary of the

one-horned Indian rhinoceros, early morning elephant rides to view the rhinos are very popular. Then there is Manas Wildlife Sanctuary, set in thick jungles bordering Bhutan. Besides sighting rhinos, tigers, gaurs, pigmy hogs and the rare golden langur, Manas is also an angler's paradise where one can be lucky and catch the Mahseer, a local variety of carp.

One can travel further north and revel in the beauty of rolling tea gardens. One discovers oil country in Duliajan. But if one is looking for history, Sibsagar is the place to be.

The famous water tank has the Devi, Shiva and Vishnu temples on its banks. The Rang Ghar is an original oval shaped pavilion from where Kings watched various sports. Charaideo is the fascinating necropolis of the Ahom Kings.

To the south of Assam is Meghalaya or the abode of clouds. Shillong, its capital city, is one of the most picturesque hill stations in India, with stately churches, colonial architecture, water falls and picnic spots on its outskirts. The magical Umiyam lake is an idyll of Nature at its spectacular best. The city has a golf course and polo grounds, as well as its famed Bura Bazar selling every thing from traditional jewellery to fruits. The Ward's lake, Botanical Gardens, Spread Eagle Falls,



LEFT The monoliths near the Sacred Groves located in the Mawphlang forest in Meghalaya. Photo: UB Photos **BOTTOM LEFT** The Umiyam or Barapani lake. Photo: Nibir Hazarika **BOTTOM** Snow capped mountains in Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh. Photo: UB Photos



Beadon Bishop Falls and Elephant Falls are popular pic-nic spots. Thirtyfive miles to the south is Cherrapunjee, the worlds' wettest spot. Another intriguing place is Mawphlung, a barren and windy plateau covered with monoliths.

Tucked away in a corner of the Northeast, Arunachal Pradesh is on a strategic location on the frontier between India and China and it has plenty to offer. At Tawang is India's largest Buddhist Monastery. Near the Indo-Burma border is the Brahmakund lake which is visited by thousands of devout Hindus on Makar Sankranti. Lush forests and crystal clear lakes make this State a veritable Shangri La.

Long years of insurgency has rendered

The Ujjayanta Palace of Tripura, built by Maharaja Bikram, also serves as its Assembly House



Nagaland almost inaccessible to the tourist but the Nagas, with their unique dances, customs and rituals present a treasure trove for the amateur anthropologist. The war cemetery in Kohima is a famous landmark with Commonwealth graves. At Dimapur, one finds the remains of the former capital of the Cachar Hills which was razed by the Ahoms.

Manipur is a former princely state on the Burmese border. The Manipuris excel in such martial arts as the spear dance, sword fight and wrestling, not to speak of riding and polo. The capital Imphal has two war cemeteries, a museum displaying tribal artifacts, Kwairamb Bazar, a womens' market, the Raja's palace, the Royal Polo Grounds and nearby, at Langthabal, the royal summer place.

Another princely State is Tripura. Its capital Agartala houses a palace built by Maharaja Bikram, who helped Tagore to set up Santiniketan. It is now the State Assembly House. The ruined temple of Tripura Sundari is at Uaipur, the ancient capital of this State.

Aizawl, the capital city of Mizoram is a haven of rest and solitude for the weary tourist. Its timber houses, profusion of flowers and pleasant climate is the stuff perfect holidays are made of. From here, one can venture to the Tlawng or Turial valleys. Traditional Mizo textiles are offered for sale at the local markets. Being in the city during traditional festivals like Chapachar kut offers an insight to their unique culture. From Aizawl one can venture to the picturesque Tamdil lake for fishing and boating. The Vantawang waterfalls is a marvel of nature. Another spot that deserves mention is Saiha, the angler's paradise.

All in all, the Northeast provides experiences that a tourist will cherish and remember for years to come. The virgin unspoilt territory offers the best in visual and sensuous delight. With better exposure, upgrading of infrastructure and marketing, this is a destination that is sure to be on any tourists' itinerary.



Autumn Break



Manojit Bhuyan

*"There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,
There is a rapture on the lonely shore,
There is a society, where none intrudes,
By the deep sea, and music in its roar,
I love not Man the less, but Nature more..."*

The evening sky was swollen with snow clouds as the wind kissed my face and I stood mesmerized by the eve's one star; forests on forests hung around us and a soft amethyst stream went voiceless by...

We call it our Pilgrimage. Come October and it is time to discover the imperishably pure nature. Either it is the Scotland of the East or over the lush green forests and plateaus in Arunachal Pradesh or the abode of sage Vyas in Himachal or to Gaumukh, the source of the most venerated river Ganga in Uttarakhand. We are an indomitable lot, a medley of young and not so young lawyers. We are the Lawyers' Adventure Club and part and parcel of Gauhati High Court.

What is this magic, enchantment of Na-

ture that bewitches us to climb hills? What is this grandeur in Nature that lures us to test our endurance? There is no answer save the craving from within to discover Mother Nature and the all-pervading spiritual serenity that the mountains offer. Deadbeat after traversing miles over rugged terrains, streams, valleys and glaciers, the zest in us like the Phoenix, takes us through the next few miles. Weariness is only a state of mind; the body never cringes or surrenders. Lessons that are not in the syllabi in Alma Mater, which is not perceived in routine life, are there in the bosom of nature. Foremost is the discovery of the inner self, the man in you, the strength and frailty in you. The sense of camaraderie, fellow feeling and humaneness is imbibed. Philanthropy is not an overnight phenomenon, but the seeds



The Shivaling peak

are sowed.

It was no mean task to reach Beaskund, the abode of sage Vyas in Himachal Pradesh, in October 2006. Accessible via the hill resort of Manali, it is a steep climb from Dhundi to Bakkarthach and finally over rocks and glaciers to Beaskund. The kund is a coin-shaped reservoir, its depth unknown, fed by streams rushing down from the surrounding mountains. The water is icy and pure. The stillness around soaks in. There is an aura of sacredness generating a deep sense of veneration for the kund. Spiritual stirring apart, the experience of living outdoors in small colourful tents amidst peaks wrapped in clouds and snow, at zero de-

gree temperature, with story tellers weaving tales of the super naturals, made the moments magical.

The yatra to Gaumukh and Tapovan in October 2007 was another soul-searching experience. Gaumukh, the physical source of river Ganga is accessible through another sacred spot called Gangotri. It is here at Gangotri where the Ganga, the stream of life, touched earth for the first time. Huddled in tents pitched under pine trees, with towering mountains on either side and the Ganga in rivulet form meandering by the side, marked the first day's halt at Gangotri. Evening was joy abundant with music, food, gossip doing the



The Gaumukh shrine

rounds by the fireside – all adding to the mystique and excitement of the evening. Morning was crisp and refreshing attended by a host of activities, from dismantling the tents, packing one's belongings to getting ready for the forward march. It was hilarious to be told that a senior member did not have a restful night, as his tent-mate would keep on rolling over in his sleep and collide with him. Lesson One was noted – never pitch tent on slopes. Setting out on foot with walking sticks and backpacks over the misty heights of the majestic Garhwal Himalayas, many kilometers thence was

the next campsite at Chirbasa. It is a vacant lot amidst pine trees and the sparkling blue Ganga (Bhagirathi as is called there) making its auspicious presence felt by its thundering flow downhill. Not to be daunted by the chill and wind outside the tents, we marveled at the splendour and refreshing serenity outside. The rising moon climbing steadily, the starry canopy overhead, the dazzle of the snow-clad mountains, the ominous presence of the unknown, the sense of fear and timidity dwarfed by mountains flung upwards towards the sky, evoked a surrealistic image of the surround-

ings. Morning was not serene as usual, calmness broken by a mischievous member hitting a water bottle against a stone. Lesson Two was noted – not to hoard water and keep it in the open for morning chores, lest it turns to ice. Back on the trail, the next campsite at Bhojbasa could only be traversed through mountains threatening rock falls, over frozen streams bridged by tree branches. The campsite is a valley with a weather station. The peaks called Bhagirathi I, II and III towering in the backdrop. Oxygen is rare and the cold is biting. Sleeping bags, woollen stockings and the vanishing trick into heaps of warm apparels are not enough to keep the chill at bay. Icy feet deter sleep. Lesson Three was noted – to carry hot water bags to warm the feet at night.

The shrine called Gaumukh is carved out of ice. It is the physical source of the holy Ganga. So sanctified is the water that even few

drops are considered sufficient for absolution. Across the shrine and thousand feet aloft is Tapovan, the base of the Shivaling peak. The final climb to Tapovan is virtually on all fours over mounds of stones, made more difficult by the snow cover. The breath-taking view of the Bhagirathi peaks as also the Shivaling peak, shaped like the lingam, is awesome. It provides amazing scenery reinforcing the power of the divine. Fortunate are those who have seen the light green coloured shrine made of ice and the thin stream of water originating from the shrine, which many miles downhill is the mighty and most venerated river Ganga.

Ooh, what it is to mingle with Nature, and feel what I can never express, yet cannot conceal. "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive..."



The Lawyers's adventure club