UNIT 5: CULTURAL CONTACT AND MIGRATION

UNIT STRUCTURE

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5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss about cultural contacts and migration of different groups into Assam
- understand different routes and characteristic features of different groups of people.

5.2 INTRODUCTION

Cultural contacts and migrations are the unavidable parts of any historical process. Geographically, Assam contains fertile river valleys surrounded by mountains and hills. It is accessible from Tibet in the north, accross the Patkai in the Southeast and from Burma accross the Arakan. In the west both the Brahmaputra Valley and the Barak Valley open widely to the Gangetic plains. Thus Assam has been populated via all these accessible points in the past. Now in this unit we are going to discuss about the cultural contacts and migration of people to this Valley in the different historical phases.

5.3 CULTURAL CONTACTS AND MIGRATION

Since very ancient times Assam saw the migration of nearly all the principal human races in different waves and periods of history. The Negritos, the Austroloids, the Mongoloids, and the Alpines, all immigrated to this land in different times and with their mutual inter-fusion the Assamese culture evolved.



LET US KNOW

We cannot definitely ascertain the exact date of their migration. It is generally held that the Mongoloids, called Kiratas in literature poured into India from 2000 B.C. onwards. The Negritos and the Austroloids preceded them by two or three millenniums. Many scholars are of the opinion that a wave of Alpines also came to Assam and it is held that the Kalitas, a caste- Hindu community of Assam are Alpine in origin. The Aryan speakers probably migrated to this area in circa 700 B.C. The modern Assamese are mainly the descendents of three major linguistic groups, namely the Mon-Khmer speaking Australoids, the Tibeto-Burman Mongoloids and Indo-Aryan speakers.

5.3.1 Negritos

The Negrito element forms one of the earliest strains in the population of the hills, particularly among some Nagas. Both ethnography and material culture of the tribes point to the existence of such a strain. The original home of the negroids was Africa. From Africa they entered India via Arabia and the coastland of Baluchistan and Iran and subsequently spread to different parts of India including Assam.

B.S. Guha refers to the census of India (1931) where there were six main races in the population of India namely Negrito, Proto-Austroloid, Mongoloid, Mediterranean, Western Brachycephal and Nordic. Of these first three elements i.e. Negrito, Proto-Austroloid

and Mongoloid are found among the tribal population of India. On the basis of hair forms and certain elements of material culture, some scholars including Hutton, Mills and others have pointed to the existence of a Negrito strain in Assam. According to Mill inhabitants of the mountains of Assam were almost certainly Negritos. S.K. Chatterjee writes 'first we have in pre-historic times the arrival of the Negritos from Africa' traces of them being found as far east as Assam among the Nagas and remnants of them are found in south India among a few wild tribes.

5.3.2 Australoids

Australoids deserves careful consideration in the context of studying ethnic history of Assam. They are characterised by dolichocephalic head, broad nose which is depressed at the root, dark brown skin colour and curly hair. They are also known by different names like pre-Dravidians, Nishada etc. In south India there are some important tribes belonged to Australoid group. They are Chenchus of Hyderabad, Kadars of Cochin, Kurumba and Irulla of Nilgiri, Muthuvan of Travancore etc. The tribes having Australoid affinities are known in South India as Pre-Dravidians.

At one time this ethnic element was not concentrated only in south or middle India but also spread to north and north-east India as well. This is evident from the study of the skeleton remains unearthed from the pre-historic times. The Australoids were primarily hunters and gatherers and knew primitive agriculture. They preferred to live in the hill slopes and forests. They made pottery with the help of hand. Their main tool was stick. With the help of the stick they dug earth and practised primitive agriculture.

We cannot say anything definitely about the language spoken by the Austroloids. According to S.K.Chatterjee 'the speech-family known as Austric was associated with the proto-Austroloids and their descendents.' The Austric speech-family can be divided into two main groups — Austro-Asiatic or Mon-Khmer and Austronasian. In

India the Kol and the Mundas of Central India, Nicobaries of the Nicobar Island and the Khasis of Meghalaya speak the language of Austro-Asiatic. The Khasi-Synteng speaking the Mon-Khmer speech is considered as representatives of the Austro Asiatic. Besides the Khasi Syntengs other tribes of Austro-Asiatic stock are believed to have migrated to Assam.

The Wanchoos of Arunachal use certain Austric word in their dialect. Among the various Bodo tribes also there appear certain Austroloid traits. It is interesting that the Rabhas, Garos and the Mikirs have dolichocephalic head. According to Flatz the entire area of Assam, northern Bengal and possibly a part of Nepal were inhabited in prehistoric times by a contingent of matrilineal Austroloids tribes. Thus the Austroloids appear to have come first to Assam and left behind some genetic endowment. They came before the advent of the Mongoloids who partially or fully absorbed the earliar Austroloids traits.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Fill in the blanks:

Q.1: The original home of the Negrids was.....

Q.2: Australoids preffered to live in the .....an .....

Q.3: .....of Meghalay speak the language of Austro-Asiatic.

Q.4: The tribes of north east are mostly .....

5.3.3 Mongoloids

The tribes of the north east are predominantly Mongoloid. The Mongoloid populations entered into region through various routes in different times. The Mongoloid could be grouped under a broad heading Tibeto-Burman. Generally they have yellow brown skin colour and flat wavy coarse head hair. The face is broad.

The original home of these Mongoloid people was the upper

courses of the Yangtse-kiyang and the Hwang-ho in North West China. Probably from 2000 B.C.E. onwards some people of this area migrated towards Assam and hills of Myanmar. The Mongoloid followed the courses of Brahmaputra, Chindwin, Irrawaddy, Salween, Mekong and Menam. They used the mountain passes of Assam and Myanmar through the north east and the south east. Another branch followed the courses of Teesta, Dharla and Sankosh to north Bengal. Some of them occupied the hills of Assam and gradually spread over the whole of the Brahmaputra valley. Most of the tribes and communities of the Brahmaputra valley like Koches, Kacharis, Morans, Chutias, Barahis, Rabhas, Tiwas, and Hasongs are of Indo-Chinese, Tibeto-Burman origin. There was a constant flow of the Tibeto-Burmans of the Indo-Chinese stock to Assam through the mountain passes of the south east. The Ahoms were also members of this family.

5.3.4 Mediterranean Races

After the Austroloid a Mediterranean stock came to India. Their original home was eastern Mediterranean region. So they are called the Mediterranean which is a variety of the Caucasoid. Their head was long and narrow. They had narrow faces and low orbits. At one time they migrated from eastern Mediterranean region to south east Asia through India forming a continuous chain. Among the Indo-Mongoloid we find non-Mongoloid elements which is the contribution of the ancient Mediterranean. It indicates that a very early time Mediterranean people migrated to Assam.

5.3.5 Alpines or Armenoids

During the period of the third to second millennium B.C.E. the Paleo-Alpines entered India through the north western route. The Alpine or Armenoid followed the Mediterranean or came almost at the same time from the west or the north-west. It is not definitely

known at what time the Alpine people entered into Assam. According to K.L.Barua the Alpines made significant contribution to the culture and civilization of eastern India prior to the advent of the Vedic Aryans. According to some scholars the Kalitas of Assam were supposed to have been of Alpine origin and they had early settlements near Sadiya. However other reject this view. The Alpine people are characterized by brachycephalic head with flat occiput, whereas the Kalitas by and large are mesocephalic. However, admixture of the Alpines not can be totally ruled out.

5.3.6 Indo-Aryans

The Aryans speakers were the last to migrate into Assam. It is difficult to ascertain when and how the Aryans entered into Assam. With the advent of the Aryans or the Indo Aryans a new chapter opened in the history of Assam. The newcomers possessed a culture of their own which was different from those of Austroloids and Mediterranean. Their head was bigger and massive. The colour of their skin, eye and hair are not dark, but lighter.

According to S.K.Chatterjee Indo-Aryans arrived at North Bihar by 700 B.C.E. At different time they moved towards eastward. Assam had early contacts with the early Aryans. This is proved by Kalidasa's Raghuvamsam (4th century C.E.), and the 10th century C.E, Kalika Purana etc. The Doobi and Nidhanpur Copper plate inscriptions of Bhaskar Varman record the presence of Indo Aryans in Kamarupa during sixth century B.C.E.



ACTIVITY 3.1

Prepare a list of races that migrated to Assam along with the routes.

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CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Choose the correct Answers:

Q.5: Alpines entered India through north eastern/ north western/ South-eastern route.

.....

Q.6: Indo-Aryans/ Alpines/ Mediterranean races were the last to migrate into Assam.

.....

Q.7: The original home of the mediterranean race was eastern Mediterranean region/ western Mediterranean region/ northern Mediterranean region.

.....



5.4 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have learn about,

- A proper reading of the unit helps you to understand the migration of some principal human races in different waves to this land. We have discussed the migration of the Negritos, the Austroloids, the Mongoloids, the Alpines, and the Aryans etc to this land in different times.
- Though Assam received a large variety of racial elements, the Austric and the Tibeto-Burman elements have made immense contribution. Assam gave shelter to many races at different period.



5.5 FURTHER READING

1) Barpujari, H.K. (2003): *The Comprehensive History of Assam* (Volume-I) Publication Board, Assam, Guwahati

2) Choudhury, P.C.: *The History of Civilization of the People of Assam to the 12th century* C.E.

5.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Africa

Ans to Q No 2: hill slopes, forests

Ans to Q No 3: Khasis

Ans to Q No 4: Mongoloids

Ans to Q No 5: north western

Ans to Q No 6: Indo-Aryans

Ans to Q No 7: eastern Mediterranean

5.7 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Very Short Questions (Answer each and every question within 50 Words)

Q 1: Who were Pre-Dravidians*?*

Q 2: What were the primary professions of Australoids*?*

Q 3: Mention the tribes of Assam belong to Indo-Chinese, Tibeto-Burman origin.

Q 4: The Alpine people were charactrised by .....with ..... (fill in the blank)

B) Short Questions (Answer each and every question within 150 words)

Q 1: Write briefly about the Mongoloid people of Assam.

Q 2: Write short notes on the following:

a) Indo-Aryans

b) Australoids

C) Long Questions (Answer each and every question in between 300-500 words)

Q 1: 'Since very ancient times Assam saw the migration of nearly all the principal human races in different waves and periods of history'- Discuss.

Q 2 : Disscuss the contributions of different races to the Assamese Culture.

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