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KARBI	★ ★ ★ ★
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B. N. BORDOLOI
G. C. SHARMAH THAKUR
M. C. SAIKIA

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PART-I

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TRIBAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE, ASSAM

GUWAHATI

TRIBES OF ASSAM, PART—I, POPULAR SERIES

—A book containing ethnographic write-ups on seven scheduled tribes of Assam covering both plains and hills with sufficient number of plates representing their life and culture.

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PREFACE

Although a good number of literary works on the tribes of Assam have already seen the light of the day, nevertheless, it is still felt that there has been practically no popular consolidated write-ups on the tribes which can be read and understood by common people without having any intimate knowledge about the tribes of Assam.

In one of the Conferences of Directors of the Tribal Research Institutes located in different states of the country, held in New Delhi under the auspices of the erstwhile Ministry of Home Affairs, at present Ministry of Welfare, Govt. of India, it was decided that each of the eleven Tribal Research Institutes in the country should bring out popular series of books containing ethnographic notes on each scheduled tribe preferably within fifteen to twenty printed pages covering the main aspects of their life and culture along with a few photographs. It was felt that such popular series would not only enable the persons with inquisitive minds to know about the basic characteristics of the tribes of each state, their pace of development and their role as an integral part of the greater Indian society, but would also help the administrators, planners, development agencies, scholars and others in many ways. This would ultimately pave the way for national integration through understanding of our unknown or little known neighbours.

With this end in view the Tribal Research Institute, Assam, has taken up the task and the Part I of the Popular Series containing seven tribal communities, five from the plains, namely, Bodo-Kacharis, Deoris, Lalungs (Tiwas), Mishings and Rabhas and two from the hills, namely, Dimasa Kacharis and Karbis is the result of this endeavour.

Authors of this volume are I myself and two of our Faculty Members. While the ethnographic notes on the Dimasa

Kacharis and the Karbis are written by me, Dr. G. C. Sharmah Thakur, Joint Director, has written on the Deoris, Lalungs (Tiwas) and the Mishings and Shri M. C. Saikia, Deputy Director, has written on the Bodo-Kacharis and the Rabhas.

Steps have been initiated to bring out the Part II of the series covering eight tribal communities of Assam which could not be covered in our Part-I of the popular series.

The present publication being a part of the popular series, we have refrained from giving a scholarly treatment to the subject so that more and more readers can have its taste. We will consider our efforts fruitful, if the book serves the purpose for which it is primarily meant.

B. N. BORDOLOI
DIRECTOR
TRIBAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE :
ASSAM, GUWAHATI

Dated Guwahati
the 1st January, 1987.

CONTENTS

THE BORO-KACHARIS :

Introduction—1, Dwellings and livelihood—3, Social life and institutions—5, Religious outlook—7, Festivals—8, Marriage—11, Birth ceremonies—14, Disposal of the dead and death rites—14, Language and literature—15, Trends of change—17.

THE^o DEORIS :

Introduction—22, Setting—23, The people—24, Agriculture—24, Food—25, Community Fishing—25, Family—25, Property and Inheritance—26, Clan system—26, Social Stratification—27, Marriage—28, Religious beliefs and practices—30, Festivals—31, Death and attendant ceremonies—33, Changing attitude—34.

THE DIMASA KACHARIS :

Introduction—36, Racial affinity—36, Terminology—36, Settlements and kingdoms—37, Demographic characteristics—38, Family structure—39, Clans—39, Marriage—39, Birth—40, Death—40, Law of inheritance—40, Village system—41, Nod-rang (Bachelor's dormitory)—42, Religious life—42, Agriculture—43, Livestock—45, Cottage industries—45, Hangsao (Youth association)—46, Archaeological remains—47, Music and dance—47, Festivals—47, Dresses and ornaments—48, Food and drink—49, Conclusion—49.

THE KARBIS :

Introduction—52, Racial affinity, original home and migration—52, History—53, Regional divisions—55, Demographic characteristics—55, Clans—56, Marriage—57, Family structure—57, Village structure—58, Houses—60, Birth and death—60, Religion—61, Economy—62, Native skills—63, Traditional

institutions—64, Village Council, Me—64, Bachelors' dormitory—65, Grain Bank (Kerung Anei)—66, Festivals—67, Dresses—67, Ornaments—68, Dance and Music—68, Food habits—69, Status of women—70, Conclusion—71.

THE LALUNGS (TIWAS)

Introduction—74, Origin of the word Lalung—74, Origin of the word Tiwa—75, Setting—78, Food—79, Agriculture—80, Hunting and Fishing—81, House—81, Dress—83, Ornaments—84, Weaving—85, Arts & Crafts—85, Weapons—85, Stone and metal works—86, Musical instruments—86, Social institutions—86, Property & inheritance—86, Clan organisation—87, Titles—88, Social Stratification—89, Kinship—90, Marriage—91, Religious beliefs—94, Festivals—95, Death and disposal of the dead—96, Changing trend—97.

THE MIRIS (MISHINGS):

Introduction—99, House—105, Economy—106, Hunting and Fishing—107, Food and drink—107, Dress—108, Clan—108, Kinship—109, Family—110, Property and inheritance—110, Social Organisation—111, Marriage—112, Religious beliefs—113, Disposal of the dead—115, Festivals—116, Changing trend—117.

THE RABHAS :

Introduction—119, Dwelling and Livelihood pattern—122, Social life and institutions—124, Religious outlook—127, Festivals—128, Marriage—131, Birth ceremonies—136, Disposal of the dead and death rites—136, Language and literature—137, Trend of change—139.

—x—

THE BORO-KACHARIS

INTRODUCTION :

The Boro-Kacharis of Assam is a branch of the Great Bodo Group of the Indo-Mongoloid family falling within the Assam-Burmese linguistic section. Their identity is not uniform as an ethnic group. Different names are used to designate them. In Bengal and in the lower ranges of the Himalayas coming within the territory of Nepal, they are known as Meches. In upper Assam they are identified as Sonowal and Thengal Kachari, while in the western Assam they are more popularly known as Boro or Boro-Kachari. In the southern districts of North Cachar and Cachar they are designated as Dimasa and Barmans respectively.

The total population of the tribe in Assam is 6, 10, 459 as per 1971 census which accounts for 45.4% of the total State tribal population. The male and female literacy percentages come to 19.75 and 11.06 respectively while the total percentage of literacy stands at 23.51 as recorded in the census under reference. They are now largely concentrated in the Kokrajhar district followed by the northern belt of undivided Kamrup and Darrang districts. They are characteristically Mongoloid in appearance. Fr. M. Harmanns in his 'Indo-Tibetans' said about them in these words "As in the case with the Meche (Mech) so also with the Kachari (Boro), the Mongoloid features are very prominent : the strong cheek bones, slit eyes, a slight growth of hair in the body and scant beard. They are shorter and more stocky than the Indians of the North-East". These observations in broader terms hold good still now but some deviations in the physical features of the Boro-Kacharis have of late been noticed under the impact of socio-cultural assimilation as well as marital alliances.

According to Endle, the origin of the Kachari race is still very largely a matter of conjecture and inference in the absence of anything entitled to be regarded as authentic history. However on the basis of the Mongolian affinities of the Kacharis, he would point out to Tibet and China as the original home of the race ('The Kacharis'—P. 3. 1975 reprint). In this context Dr. Bhuyan observes that there is bound to be diversity of opinion regarding their Pre-Assam habitat as contemplated by some authorities to be in Tibet and China ('Kachari Buranji' (Ed)—P. XIX—1951). Whatever be their Pre-Assam habitat, it has now been established that they are the original autochthones of Assam and the later immigrants than the Aryans. This fact has been corroborated by K. L. Barua in his 'Early History of Kamrupa' wherein he states that after the arrival of the Aryans into the Indian soil, hordes of later Mongolian poured through the north-east corner. These later Mongolians were described to be the Kiratas in the Mahabharata and other Hindu scriptures like 'Kalika Puran' and 'Yoginitantra'. He goes on observing further that during the time of the Mahabharata war or even earlier, the Bodo-tribes constituted the bulk of the population of the Assam Valley, northern and eastern Bengal and the surrounding and intervening Hills (P—14, 1966).

It may further be noted that while Fr. Mathias Hermanns includes the Boros and their allied tribes in the term 'Indo-Tibetans', Dr. S. K. Chatterjee calls them 'Indo-Mongoloid' in his 'Kirata-Jana-Kirti' to connote 'at once their Indian connection and their place within the cultural milieu in which they found themselves as well as their racial affinity' (Dr. Bhatta). According to Rai K. L. Barua, the Kacharis, Koches, Rabhas, Mechas, Mikirs, Lalungs, Garos, Nagas, Kukis and the Chutiyas are the present day representatives of these later Mongolians or the Indo-Mongoloid and the tribe speaking Bodo (Boro) languages seem to have occupied the plains of Assam for very long time. In this connection Sir Edward Gait's observations on

the racial affinity of the tribe which has a great sociological implication and historical value in the context of growth and expansion of early Bodo kingdom may also be referred to. He says—"The Kacharis are believed to be very closely allied to the Koches, and also, so far atleast as language is concerned, to the Chutiyas, Lalungs and Morans of the Brahmaputra valley, and to the Garos and Tipperas of the Southern hills. Having regard to their wide distribution and to the extent of country over which Bodo languages of a very uniform type are still current, it seems not improbable that at one time the major part of Assam and North-East Bengal formed a great Bodo-kingdom, and that some, at least of the Mlech kings mentioned in the old copper-plate inscriptions belonged to the Kachari or some closely allied tribe." (A History of Assam P—300, Reprint 1963).

The greatest contribution of the Indo-Mongoloid people who made a 'reservoir' in Assam is that they brought into N. E. India, the technique of food production by plant cultivation and domestication of animals. They are in all likelihood the first cultivators of rice in India. They introduced for the first time in India the art of rearing silk worm as well spinning and weaving of silk clothes¹.

Dwellings and livelihood pattern :

The mode of living of the Boro-Kacharis in compact villages and putting barriers all around the homestead is a common sight to see. This speaks of their sense of privacy and esthetic beauty in putting up a residential house. Rev. S. Endle on this account gives a vivid description—"One prominent feature in the typical Kachari village can not fail to strike the attention of any casual visitor at first sight. Each house with its granary and other outbuildings is surrounded by a ditch and fence, the latter usually made

1. 'The Indo-Mongoloids and their contributions to the culture and civilization of India'—by Dr. T. C. Sarma, Bulletin of the T. R. I., Assam, Vol-I, No. 1 1983, page-57

of *ekra* reed, jungle grass or split bamboo, etc. The ditch, some three or four feet in depth, surrounds the whole homestead, the earth taken from it being thrown up on the inner side, i. e., that nearest to the dwelling house; and on the earth-works, some two or three feet in height, so thrown up are firmly inserted the reeds or split-bamboo work forming the fence itself, this later often inclining outwards at a very obtuse angle; so that the ditch and fence are not easily surmounted from the outside by the would be intruders" ('The Kacharis', PP. 11-12, reprint 1975). This type of semi-fort like residential complexes have also been adopted specially by the Rabhas of south-Goalpara and this trend of identical constructions must have gone to them from the neighbouring Boro-Kacharis.

Their livelihood pattern is characterised by preponderance of agricultural occupation. In fact it is a way of life. They practise both Ahu and Sali paddy and very much prone to the adoption of improved techniques in production process. Their indigenous devices for preserving seeds and digging dongs and canals are widely acclaimed. Let us peep into this aspect of the Boro-Kacharis through the eyes of Rev. S. Endle whose acquaintance with the life style of the tribe remains undisputed to this day. He says ".....The people are especially skillful in the construction of irrigation canals and earthwork embankments for diverting water from river beds into their rice-fields: and their efforts in this direction are very largely aided by their closely clannish organisation. Whenever the rainfall threatens to be below the average, the village headman with his associated elders fixes on the spot whence water is to be brought from the nearest river to the rice fields. At this spot very rude and primitive shelters of jungle grass, etc. are put up: and here all the manhood strength of the village, each man armed with hoe, dao etc. are compelled to take up their abode until the necessary work has been fully carried out. In this way it will be obvious that the Kacharis have a highly efficient and very inexpensive "Public Works Department" of their own; and vigorous efforts of self-help of this character

would seem to be worthy of high commendation and hearty support ('The Kacharis' PP. 12-13, reprint 1975). Although the observations of Endle are sufficiently old by the measuring rod of time, still they hold good even to day. The techniques of field operation for wet-paddy cultivation are more or less the same all over the Boro-inhabited villages. In this regard they compare nearly with the Oraons of Sarguja. Dr. B. D. Sarma complimenting the Oraons has remarked "The Oraons in Sarguja follow an intricate method of irrigation system (Pat) taking water along contours over long distances even against gravity" ('The Tribal Scene in India'—mimographed, P—52, Tribal Research and Development Institute, Bhopal). Similarly the spirit of mutual help and cooperation as seen by Endle is remaining the same. The setting up of village granaries by the voluntary contribution of one's produce at specified rate, is an instance of this spirit of co-operative living in village units. The youth clubs formed village-wise or area-wise also help the villagers by making available funds created out of collective work or individual contributions. This type of village organisations are numerous specially in the northern belt of undivided Kamrup.

Social life and institutions :

During the early part of this century, the social culture of the Kachari tribe was blessed by such virtues like honesty, truthfulness, straight-forwardness and a general trustworthiness—as witnessed by Endle in his monumental work already referred to (P. 2, 1975). But with the passage of time, things have somewhat changed bringing new complexities unknown or unheard before. The improvement of communication, general mobility and intercourse with the people all around have brought some psychological and attitudinal change of all sections of people. To meet this changing situations of life, necessity has arisen to frame some local laws on the basis of customs and traditions as prevailing in the society. Thus the locally codified customary usages and practices of the Boro societies came to be followed after approval from the

zonal council composed of adjacent villages. These local laws are known as 'Pandulipis' as they are in manuscripts and hardly printed. Since these are not co-ordinated homogeneous sets of laws, they differ in content and application from area to area. However the basic issues pertaining to inheritance of property, succession to office of socio-religious and socio-political nature and liability of atonement on committing unnatural and unsocial offences are more or less identical.

According to these customary laws the line of descent is traced through the father who is the head of the family. All the male members of a family enjoy the copercenary right, unless one goes out of the family during the life-time of his father with the intention of living separately from the bonds of the joint family. The eldest male member assumes the charge of the household on the death of the father and discharges his responsibilities in consultation with his mother. The family debt if any is dischargeable from the income of the family and on the event of dissolution of the joint family, the unmarried brothers get double of the family property than the married brothers. The eldest male member also gets a preferential share in view of his assumption of family liability and other social responsibilities. The Boro-Kachari society prescribes atonement proceedings for purification of misdeeds. The 'Douri' an assistant to the village priest ('Oja') usually conducts the atonement proceedings. He is elected on the general consensus of all the villagers on the basis of his character and ability to guide socio-religious rites. The 'Douri' and the village headman have a distinct place of honour in the estimation of the Boro-Kachari people.

Sri Narzi has spoken about two important institutions in the spheres of customary laws, known as 'Hadengoura' and 'Hachung-Goura'². The former being akin to a judge-

2. Narzi, B., Boro-Kacharir Samaj Aru Sanskriti (Assamese), p-139, Guwahati, 1966.

ship with jurisdiction over twelve adjoining villages and the latter with jurisdiction in each such twelve villages, as the subordinate institution to help the 'Hadengoura'. However, the more common institution in the Boro villages is the village council. The decision of these councils are binding and only men of character and social status generally preside over them. In their social outlook the Boro-Kacharis are more prone to democratic norms. They never practise any differentiation in the matter of establishing social heirarchy. The Gaonbura (village headman) and his assistant the 'Halmazi' (courier of errands) organise village level social works. The 'Douri' (Deuri) beside presiding over other religious rites also guides the atonement proceedings whenever so required. All these social appointments are open to all provided the persons to be selected are capable of discharging public responsibilities. The clan structure of the Boro-Kacharis though essentially remind us about their traditional division of labour yet, in the present day context such divisions are no longer recognised. A clan is known by them as 'Ari'. There are as many as 23 Aries, namely--Swargiari, Basumatary, Mosari, Khanghlari, Doimari, Narzari, Gayari, Mahilari, Ouari, Jojoari, Ishari, Kahari, Sibiugari, Sibiziari/Babaiari, Biug-biugari, Gaujlerari, Fadangari, Samphrangari/Mao-Marari, Ramsari, Kherkatari, Thaletari and Borogaori³.

Religious Outlook :

The religious philosophy of the Boro-Kachari tribe centres round the super power of 'Bathou Barai' or 'Khoria Barai Maharaja' which is analogous to 'Sibrai' or Siva of the Hindu Trinity. The Sizu plant (Euphorbia Splendens) is regarded as representing the 'Bathou'—the supreme deity of adoration. Therefore, every traditional Boro-Kachari household is seen planting a 'sizu' tree along with a sapling of 'jatras' and a 'tulsi' in the northern corner of their cour-

3. 'A brief Introduction of the Bodo-Kacharis of Assam'—by Sri Mohini Mohan Brahma, Kokrajhar, Bulletin of T. R. I., Assam, Vol.-I, No. I 1983, pp-52, 53.

tyard. Next to Bathou, 'Mainao' (also called 'Buli Buri') is worshipped as the goddess of wealth. Besides these two primary deities, the Boro-Kacharis worship many other gods and goddesses comprising Agraug, Khoila, Khaji, Rajkhandra, Rajputhur, Bura ali, Ali Bura, Asu Mainao, Sali Mainao, Bagraja, Basumati and Choudri (Brahma 1983). Some of these deities (better known as 'Madai') are benevolent and some are malevolent. The malevolent deities are regarded as the originator of all ills including natural calamities and for their propitiation sacrifices and offering of rice beer are invariably necessary. The propitiation to benevolent deities like Asu Mainao and Sali Mainao is done for higher yield of crops as well as endowment of prosperity.

But the religious belief of the traditional Boro-Kacharis differ substantially with that of the 'Brahmas' who institute 'Hom-Yojna' before the sacred fire in all socio-religious obligations following the tenets preached by Guru Kalicharan Brahma. This section (i. e. the Brahmas) practise Vedic rites like other Hindus and do not resort to appeasement of gods and goddesses by sacrificing pigs and fowls and also by offering rice-beer. But culturally both the sections do not differ from each other.*

Festivals :

By far the most important occasion of merry-making in the social life of the Boro-Kacharis is the celebration of 'Baisagu' in the month of Baisakh (Mid April). It is also known as 'Bishu' (or 'Bihu' in Assamese). They celebrate two other 'Bihus' known as 'Domashi' (Bhogali Bihu), and 'Katrigacha' (Kangali Bihu) but none of them are so important from the point of view of merriment than the one that comes on the last day of the month of Chaitra. This occasion is most welcomed by each and every Boro-Kachari as it is a spring time festival of the new year. The festival begins with the cow-worship on the last day of the month of Chaitra. On

4. 'The Brahma Movement in Goalpara district'—by M. C. Saikia Guwahati, a seminar paper included in 'Tribal Movements in India'—Vol. I, Edited by K. S. Singh, published by Monohar, 1982

the next day which synchronises with the first day of the month of 'Bohag' of the Assamese almanac, the actual merriment begins with the children of each household reverentially bowing down to their parents and elders. They are then blessed by the elders wishing them health and prosperity for the year that has just started. The supreme diety 'Bathou' is also worshipped on this day by offering him chicken and rice-beer. The programme of merriment like community singing and dancing continues till the seventh day of the month since the day of beginning.

In the Baishagu dance there is no bar either of age or of sex to join in their respective groups. The traditional musical instruments that are used in this dance festival are 'Kham' (Madal), 'Jotha' (Manjari), 'Khawbang' (Tal), 'Gogona' 'Siphuri' (Flute), etc. etc. During the currency of the Baishagu festival the Boro-Kacharis observe certain taboos, which include prohibition of entry into the household granary, disposal of any property by way of sale, husking paddy or rice, etc. It is also customary at the close of the Baishagu festival to offer community prayer at a particular place of the village called 'Garjasali' which is intended to get themselves immunized from the possible acts of omissions and commissions during the days of merriment in the 'Baishagu'. In the northern belt of old Kamrup and Darrang a special festival is instituted after about a month since Baishagu which is known as 'Fushihaba' or 'Putuli Haba'—a symbolic folk marriage of Siva with Parvati in the form of Raona-Raoni. The ritualistic part of this festival unfolds the legendary saga of their history.

The institution of 'Kherai'—a religious annual community festival of the tribe is another occasion when the entire atmosphere is agog with much enthusiasm and festive fervour. To some it is a national festival of the community. It is intended to propitiate "Bathow" or 'Sibrai'—the chief deity of adoration of the Boro-Kacharis along with 'Mainao' (the Goddess of harvests) and host of other Gods and Goddesses. 'Bathow' according to them represents the five basic elements called 'Panchabhut' (viz—earth, air, water, ether and fire) out of which has emerged the human body and for that matter the

entire universe) and the propitiation to this deity is, therefore, held to be on this basic philosophical idea.

The propitiatory rituals begin with different dance recitals along with singing of ballads in tune with the traditional musical instruments like 'Kham' (Madal), 'Jotha' (Taka) and 'Siphung' (Banhi).⁶ The 'Doudini' or Deodhani who acts as the link man is believed to be the embodiment of the supreme power for the time being and capable of communicating oracles through his lips as per desire or as may come to the people taking part in the act of propitiation. In a Kherai, as much as twenty dance recitals are instituted befitting the temperament of individual deities, through which the ethnic and cultural identity of the tribe manifest fully. At the fag end of the ritualistic programme, a community prayer is offered soliciting pelf, power and health. It is also customary on this occasion to pay community homage to the patrilineal forefathers. In fact the word 'Kherai' literally means propitiation to the patrilineal forefathers as indicated by Sri Brahma Daimari.⁶ The Boro-Kacharis believe that if anybody expresses any desires on this auspicious moment, it usually gets fulfilment. The usual time for holding the Kherai festival is the month of Kartic (Oct.—Nov.) when plantation is over but the seedlings are still in the process of growing. It is believed that propitiation to 'Mainao' the goddess of harvests at this time will be amply blessed by a profuse yield. The community Kherai of Dhekiajuli area (Sonitpur district), Bijni (Kokrajhar district), Goreswar

5. 'বড়ো কছাৰী সমাজৰ জন জীৱনৰ গীত' (পৃঃ ৬২)
[The songs of folk life of the Boro-Kachari Society by Sri Chakiram Thakuria (in Assamese), P. 62]

6. 'দাক্ষিণাত্যৰ কথা কলি নৃত্য আৰু বড়োৰ খেবাই নৃত্যৰ এটি তুলনামূলক আলোচনা' (পৃঃ ২৯)
[A comparative study of the Kathakali dance of the South and Kherai dance of the Boro-Kacharis by Sri Girindra Brahma Daimari (in Assamese), P. 29.]

Both the above two articles were published in the Souvenir of the All Assam Tribal Sangha, 20th Session, 1977, Guwahati.

(Kamrup district), Madhya Baska and Salbari (Barpeta district) and Barama area of Nalbari district is widely known for depicting the cultural heritage of the tribe in their true perspectives.

In creating a festive mood of much gaiety and merriment, the 'Bagrumba' dance has a special attraction for the Boro-Kachari girls. This is an occasion when only girls can take part. It is instituted just after completion of the plantation work presumably to assuage the pains of hard labour involved in it. The girls make their graceful debut in natural surroundings by wearing traditional costumes specially woven by themselves for the purpose which bear testimony to their inherent skill in textile workmanship and artistic manoeuvre of colour and shade.

Marriage :

The Boro-Kachari Society has been found to be strictly following the rule of clan exogamy in their marital relationship till the recent past. But the rigidity is gradually on the way to dilution. This observation has been based on our field experience as well as from a recent case study made in a Boro-Kachari village (i.e. 'Dolpara' near Goreswar under Rangiya Sub-division of Kamrup district). The author in this context remarks— "The Boro-Kacharis constitute a patrilineal group comprising a number of certain exogamous clans. Though choice of marriage partner within the same clan is prohibited according to clan rule, the marriage among the Boro-Kacharis is found to be held within the same clan also. It is revealed from investigation that in the village Dolpara, a man belonging to the Basumatari clan marries a woman who belongs to the same clan though it did not happen previously. It can be said that due to Sanskritisation or in other words due to impact of Hinduism (Vaishnavism) and contact with the plains population, they have a tendency to merge with the Hindu social fold." Marriage among the traditional Boro-Kacharis is like

7. 'Marital and pre-marital Sex Relations of the Boro-Kacharis in the context of Sanskritisation in Dolpara'—by Kishore Kumar Sarma, in Bulletin of the Cultural Research Institute, Govt. of West Bengal, Vol. III: Number 3-14, pp.79-80, 1979.

a civil contract unlike the status of a sacrament in other Hindu marriage alliances. The usual practice of contacting a marriage is by negotiation ('Hathachuni'). But marriage by servitude ('Chawdang-Jagarnay') and widow remarriage ('Dhoka') do often take place. In a marriage by servitude, the groom is to render physical labour usually for a period of one year but the period may be extended depending on the degree of satisfaction of the would-be father-in-law. In recent years, the general tendency prevailing in the Boro-Kachari society is not to encourage this type of marriage. According to the customary rule of the Luki-Bekeli area, now in force, the man entertaining a would-be son-in-law, must give by will 1/8th of his property in the name of his daughter. In the widow remarriage, the widower must cut off his all patrilineal relationship and induct himself to the 'ari' (clan) of the widow. There is another type of marriage known as 'Khar-Chanai'. Here the girl goes voluntarily to a man with the intention of putting up with him as husband and wife and when this unceremonious union is sanctified subsequently in a marriage it is known as 'Kharchanai marriage' (Narri, 1966).

The Boro-Kachari society is primarily monogamous. There is no bar in contacting a junior levirate marriage i. e. the younger brother marrying the wife of his elder brother on the event of his (elder brother's) death. But in no case senior levirate marriage can take place. Again marriage under junior sorrorate system can take place but not senior sorrorate marriage, i. e. on the event of death of one's wife, the elder sister of the deceased wife (if not married till then) can not be taken as a wife. Similarly no cross-cousin marriage (MBD/FSD) is allowed in the Boro-Kachari society. The practice of parallel cousin marriage is however, not obsolete altogether. It may be mentioned here that as there is no class or clan distinction among the Boro-Kachari society, the question of judging social status of the would-be partners never arises. In other words hypergamy has no place in the Boro-Kachari society.

The idea of procuring a bride either by servitude or by elopement has in recent years come to be regarded as contemptuous.

Therefore, negotiation marriage ('Hathachuni') has become the normal social custom. The system of demanding bride-price is still prevalent but in the higher echelon of the society, it is practically non-existent. There is however a system under which the co-villagers of the bride may prefer a claim to a certain amount called 'Malsa'. This amount when realised is deposited in the village fund to be spent for social purposes. But this amount is liable to be called back by the family of the groom, should the girl on the event of her becoming a widow, prefer to go back to her father's home for ever, leaving all claims on her husband's property. This counter demand on the 'Malsa' is known as 'Khalari-Gothaiyanay' (Narzi, 1966).

It is however to be noted that there are fundamental ritualistic differences in solemnising a marriage between the two sections of the tribe—the traditional Boro-Kacharis and the followers of Brahmanism. While the traditionalists resort to 'Hatha Chuni' system, the Brahmas take recourse to Vedic rites and perform 'Hom-Yojna' ceremony before the sacred fire. Like the rest of the other Hindu communities a Brahma groom himself sets out in accompaniment with a party for the bride's house for performing the actual marriage rites, but in the traditional system of marriage, the groom instead of going to the bride's house, sends only a little party to fetch the girl ceremoniously to perform the rituals at the groom's house. When the bride accompanied by her kith and kin and the party arrives in a most joyous mood, she is received at the gate amidst a benedictory ovation and then taken inside. Soon after this, a grand feast is thrown out in honour of the bride and the bridal party by killing a pig and it is customary that a portion of this pork should be kept separately for the next meal of the bridal party to be taken at the bride's house on return. As soon as the feast is over, the members of the bridal party beg leave. Then the groom party starts a general cleaning operation of the house to hold the 'Hatha-Chuni'—the most important function of the day in a most serene atmosphere. (The word 'Hatha-Chuni' literally means distribution of rice by the bride with a wooden ladle). Immediately after the cleaning of the entire household the bride is asked to make a symbolic cooking and

then to offer a little amount of food so cooked to the household deities. Amidst citation of invocatory prayer by the village 'Douri', the bride makes the offering first to Mahadeva and then Mother Kamakhya. The bride is then asked to touch the rice pot kept normally in a corner of the kitchen which she does with her left hand. At this moment the bride is administered an oath of fidelity to her new home. Then both the groom and the bride are given some sermons of married life by one from amongst the elderly persons or by the village 'Douri'. This being over, the bride herself is to distribute the residue of the feast at least once first to her husband and then to the invited guests. This distribution marks the culmination of the 'Hatha-Chuni' marriage. On the eighth day of the marriage the groom is to visit the father-in-law's house with his bride and also wherever possible with his friends. This visit of the groom to his father-in-law's house is a part of the marriage ceremony and until it is done, a 'Hatha-Chuni' marriage is not treated as complete.

Birth Ceremonies :

In regard to births, the traditional Boro-Kacharis have no sacramentary rites to perform unlike the orthodox Hindus. However the family makes an offering to the household deities by sacrificing a cock or a hen in the occasion. It is also a prevailing custom among the Boro-Kacharis to entertain the midwives in a feast within a reasonable time who attend the mother during her confinement. In case the baby is not surviving, the mother can discharge her obligation by simply entertaining them with rice-beer and fried chickens.

Disposal of the dead and death rites :

The Boro-Kacharis practise both cremation and burial. But cremation has come to be the normal practice in these days. In some interior villages, the practice of throwing the corpse in open fields is still in vogue though to a very lesser extent. The underlying belief in this type of disposal is that when a corpse is devoured by wild jackals and vultures in open fields, the dead is likely to attain salvation from possible deeds of omissions

and commissions done during his or her life time. It may be mentioned here that the Boro-Kacharis believe that human beings cannot escape destiny and destiny is guided by one's own action ('Karma'). They also believe in transmigration of the soul. The soul of the dead persons may enter into any body according to the 'Karma' done in the previous birth (Brahma, 1981).

It is customary for the members attending a funeral procession to take bath on their return home and drink 'santijal' (sanctified water) followed by mastication of a little amount of 'sokota' (a bitter tasting dried leafy substance) ostensibly to carry the idea that from that day onwards the relationship with the dead is finally severed. This is immediately followed by rice-beer drinking in honour of the dead.

On the tenth day from the day on which death occurs, the first phase of the funeral rites begins, which is termed as 'Dasa' nr 'Dahar', but the final sradha ceremony is held either on the 12th or on the 13th day or long thereafter, depending on the pecuniary condition of the household. But so long the final ceremony is deferred, till then the person responsible for holding the ceremony is to lead a very restricted life and he is supposed to practise all the social taboos connected with deaths as are required to be observed by the Boro-Kacharis.

Language and literature :

As per Robert Shafer's classifications,⁸ the Boro (Bodo) language belongs to the western branch of Barish section under Baric division of the Sino-Tibetan family. Grierson in his 'Linguistic Survey of India'⁹ describes the Boro or the Boro-Kacharis as a member of the Boro (Bodo) sub-section under the Assam Burma Group of the Tibeto-Burman Branch of Sino-Tibetan or Tibeto-Chinese speech family. On the basis of these two authorities Dr. P. C. Bhatta in one of his articles

8. Shafer, R : Classification of the Sino-Tibetan Languages Word, Vol-II, No. 1, 1955.

9. Grierson; G. A. : Edited : The Linguistic Survey of India, Vol-III, Part-II, 1903, pp. 1-17

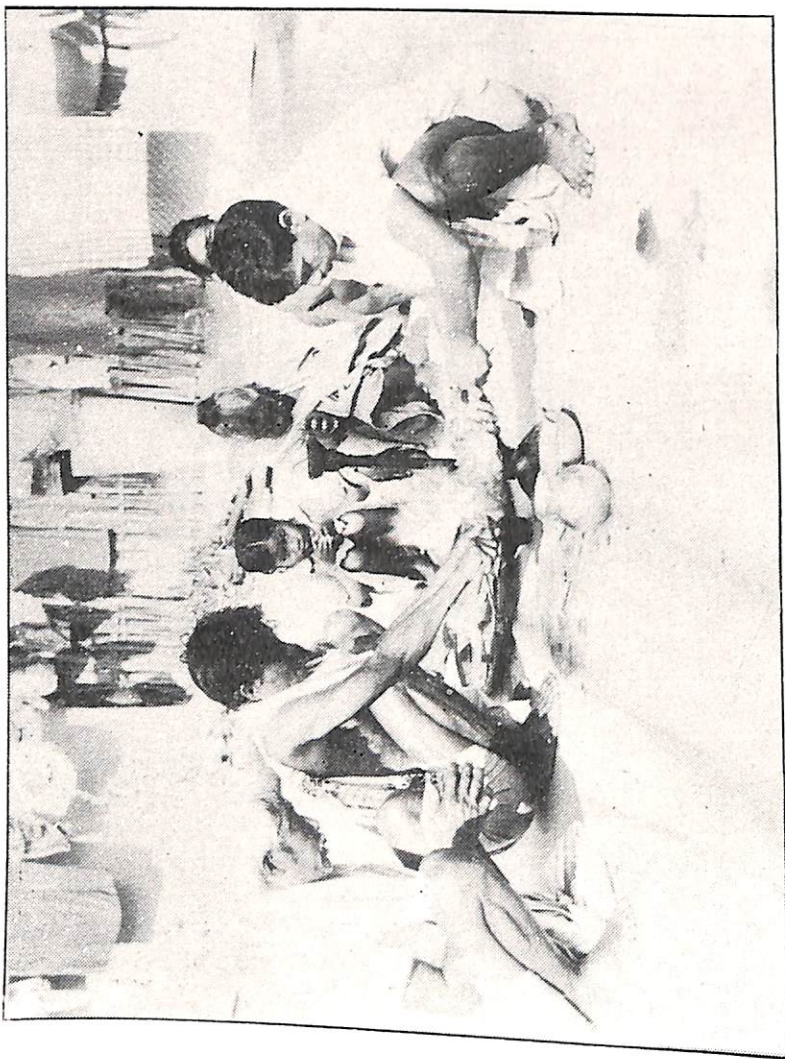
'A few elements of the Indo-Mongoloid Boro Culture' says— 'the Boro language of Assam has atleast four clear cut dialectal areas with sufficient number of dialectal variations ; these may be called north-western, south-western, north-central and southern dialect areas with phonological, morphological and glossarial differences'. The Boro speech areas in Assam extends intermittingly from the western border of Goalpara district to the eastern boundary of Dibrugarh district. The total Bodo speakers in Assam account for 5,09,006 as per 1971 census and besides Assam where majority of the Bodo speaking people live, the Bodo speech area includes Tripura, the Garo Hills of Meghalaya and certain other parts on the north-east India¹⁰. In this context it may be mentioned here that although the Boro language has no script of its own, it has been introduced as medium of instruction in the Primary level in the Boro predominant areas of Kokrajhar District with effect from 1963. Subsequently Boro medium of instruction was introduced first in the Secondary Schools of Kokrajhar with effect from September 1968. It has now gone upto degree level. Davanagari script is now being used for the Boro language with effect from April, 1975. The Boro language has since been declared as an associate official language by an Ordinance issued on 28th December, 1984.

Till the mid-nineteenth century, the Boro-literature was composed mainly of oral literature such as folk songs, folk tales, ballads, proverbs etc. The written literature emerged first in the wake of the Brahma movement among the Boro-Kacharis. The reformatory writings in connection with the spread of Brahma cult did the spade work for the development of Boro literature. The pioneering works of Promod Brahma, Ishan Mushahari, Satis Basumatary, Rupnath Brahma, Moda Ram Brahma, Ananda Chandra Brahma and Bishnu Charan Basumatary shall always be remembered in this connection.

10. Mukherjees, Dr. D. P. & S. K. : 'Contemporary Cultural and Political Movements Among the Bodos of Assam' —Seminar Paper included in 'Tribal Movements in India' Vol.I, (p. 235), Edited by K. S. Singh and published by Monohar, 1982.



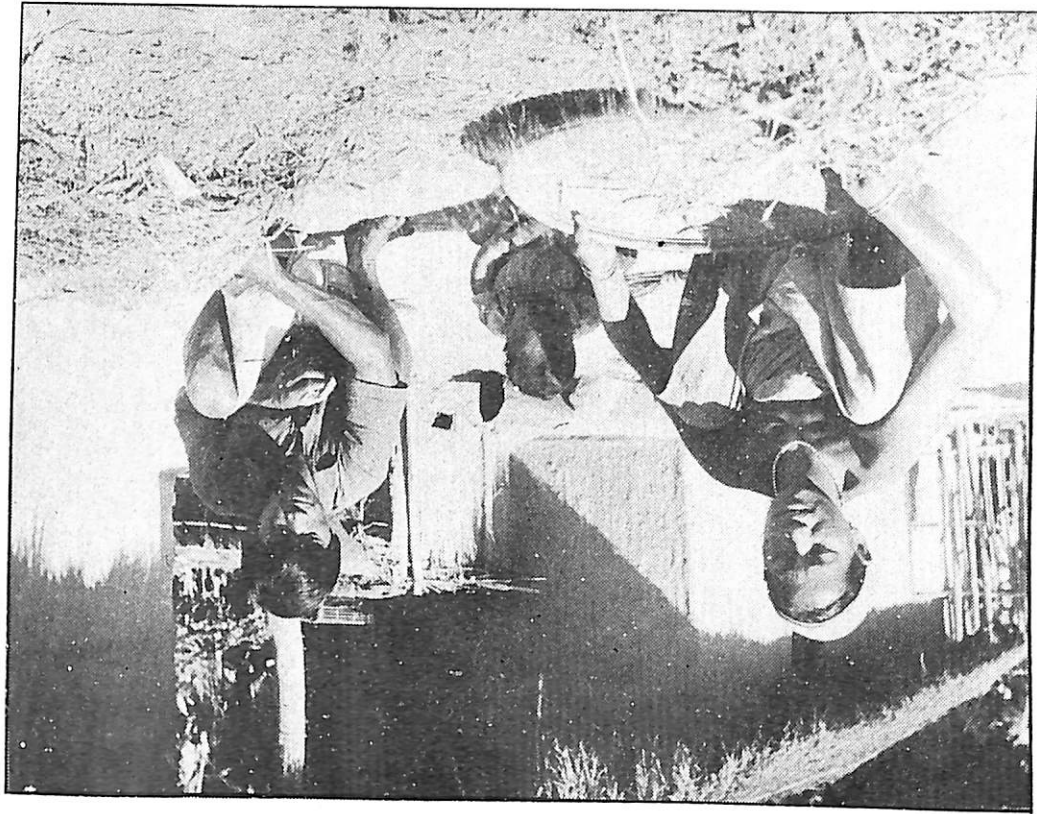
A Bodo girl in her teens



Sacrificing a bird to the deity



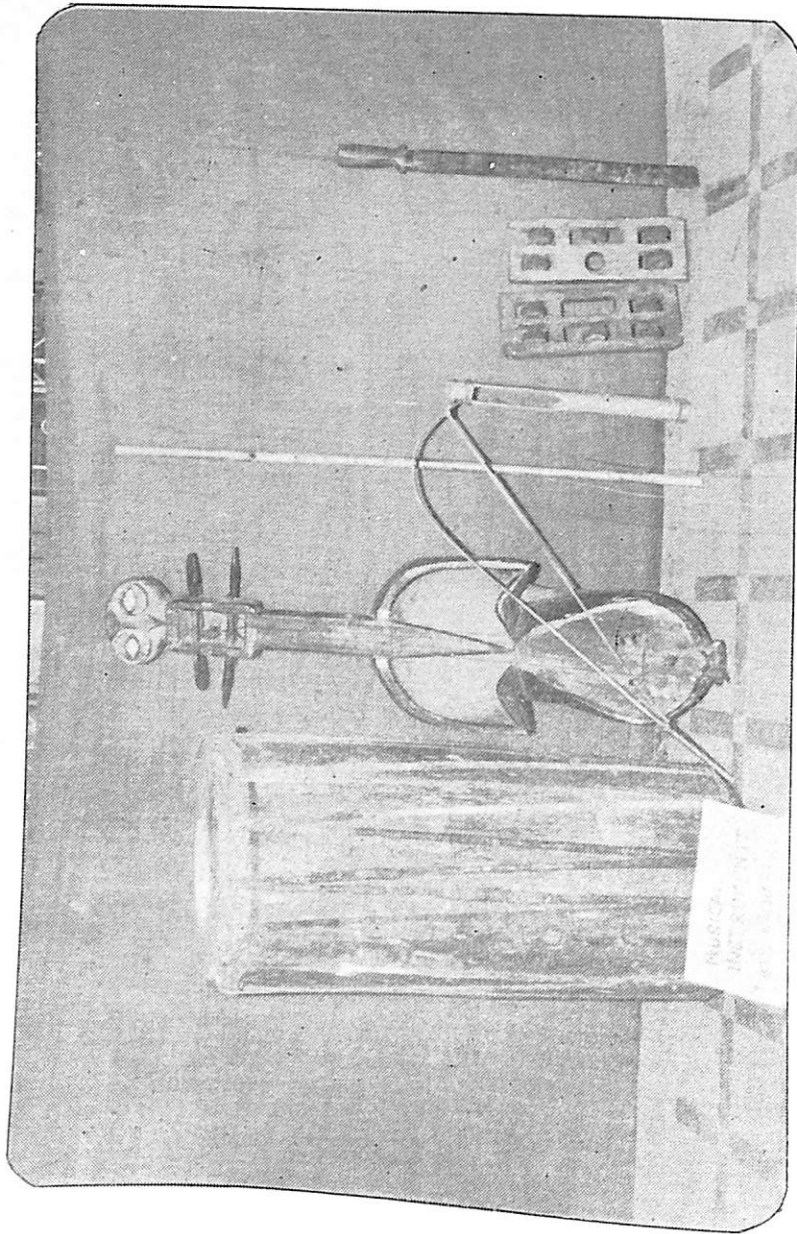
A Bodo mother with her daughter



Post-harvesting activities in a Boro family



Manufacturing of bamboo and cane articles is an integral part of the Boro culture



Musical instruments of the Bodos

The subsequent formation of the 'Bodo Sahitya Sabha' in 1952 is a direct legacy of this literary campaign launched under the Brahma Movement of which Guru Kalicharan Brahma was the main architect. At present the Boro literature has been growing rapidly and the 'Bodo Sahitya Sabha' is making considerable effort in publishing Boro literary work in all fields—short story, fiction, drama, poetry etc. The poetic horizon of Boro literature is widening steadily. It has already encompassed the three poetic dimensions of classicism, romanticism and mysticism. These trends are distinctly visible in the work of Sri Ishan Brahma ('Mounabili' and 'Gauthaibari'), Sri Promod Chandra Brahma ('Habayenani Sukin' and 'Jeuni-Balasayao') and Sitanath Brahma Choudhury ('Simangni Sainai').¹¹ The Boro folk songs have a great bearing on their philosophy of life.

It may be mentioned here that the sources of Boro literature are mostly indigenous—it has hardly borrowed any legendary or mythological episodes of the old Indian scriptures unlike the literary work in other regional languages. Since the trend of standard literary production has already set-in in the Boro language, it is likely to attain maturity very soon with the spread of education and increase in the number of Boro readers.

Trends of Change :

The changing trends in social outlook of the Boro-Kacharis can be visualised with the emergence of the 19th Century. The traditional near-animistic belief that continued to guide the religious philosophy of the Boro-Kacharis began to change by the preachings of Guru Kalicharan Brahma who was inducted to the Brahma faith by Srimat Paramhangsa Sibnarayan Swami of Calcutta. His conversion to the Brahma cult paved the way to bring the larger sections of his followers to the wider fold of the Vedic Sanatan Dharma and it was possible to carry out a social revolution among the Boro-Kacharis residing in and around the district of Goalpara with epicentre at Kazigaon in Dhubri Subdivision (Dhubri subdivision was then comprised

11. Lahari, M, 'Boro Sahityar Bikas' (in Assamese), Souvenir, All Assam Tribal Sangha, 20th session 1977, p-16.

of the present Kokrajhar district as well). In its form and content the Brahma movement was more than a religious upheaval. It was a movement for total change of outlook in all fields—social, religious, political, economic and educational. The dynamic personality of Guru Kalicharan Brahma got sufficient backings from his contemporaries (Saikia, 1982). The roles of this converted section of the Boro-Kacharis have been succinctly summarised in the Article by Dr. D. P. Mukherjee and S. K. Mukherjee included in the publication already referred to (p. 258). They observed “The converted Bodos propagated and tried to spread education and social reforms, such as, changes in marriage customs, stoppage of dowry system, use of liquor and pig rearing. As a result, the ‘Brahmas’ among the Bodos became educationally and culturally more advance than their unconverted brethren and took over the leadership of the socio-political life of the Bodos. For example, the first political elites such as Rupnath Brahma who became a Minister in the Assam Government—were educated Brahmas. It was in 1936 that Sitanath Brahma Choudhury became the first Bodo graduate and later became the first Bodo M. P. in 1952 on the Congress Ticket. His father had served as Hakim (Magistrate) as he could spell his name. The trend of higher education has since grown among the Bodos, mainly through the converted Brahmas.” The higher education so obtained thus created a band of social elite among the Boro-Kacharis who prospered in more rapid strides in all fields. This section of the people in the subsequent years were able to put into motion the political aspiration of the tribal people and ultimately led to the formation of the All Assam Tribal League in 1935 for achieving this purpose. Thus in the later days this sensitiveness to political problems grew stronger with the passage of time.

Apart from the changing trends in socio-religious and socio-political fields, changes have also occurred in recent times in the livelihood pattern and the way of life of the Boro-Kacharis. It is true that agriculture still continues to be the primary source of livelihood of the tribe but it has undergone diversification

replacing in most cases the traditional one-year one-crop pattern that hitherto prevailed till the fifties. In this context their indigenous skill in devising irrigational works has helped them much in carrying out the diversified and improved system of agricultural operations. It has been noticed that compared to other plains tribal people, they are now more prone to the use of chemical fertiliser, pesticides and use of scientific knowledge in agriculture. This has been made possible by the expansion of general and technical education among them. The cultivation of Ahu crop which was not widely practised in the tribal areas till recently, is now grown in a massive scale along with Sali paddy. In fact Ahu paddy cultivation is becoming as good as Sali paddy within the Rangiya Agricultural Sub-division where the Boro-Kachari cultivators predominate. It is also being taken up as a subsidiary to the wet paddy cultivation along with other cash crops like jute, mustard seeds, arecanut and sugarcane. The Boro-Kachari cultivators of Kokrajhar and North Kamrup areas have taken up arecanut cultivation as a commercial proposition and they are now earning quite a lot out of it. Similarly, the Boro-Kacharis of Goreswar area in North Kamrup have taken up the cultivation of coriander (Dhaniya) on a commercial scale. This area is coming to limelight in recent years along with the Kokrajhar district where the Boro-Kacharis predominate in the commercial production of silk and Endi cocoons and finished products from Endi yarn. In fact spinning of Endi yarn and weaving is a household industry and every Boro-Kachari woman is expected to excel in the finer art of handloom craftsmanship. The yellow colour is the favourite choice of the Boro-Kachari women which is distinctly visible in their dress materials specially in their ‘Dokhona’ (an one-piece garment covering from breast to ankles). Other dress materials used during different dance recitals like Bagrumba and Kherai also give testimony to the artistic taste and decor of the tribe as a whole. It is however a fact that in the context of the present day fashion conscious world, considerable amount of changes have taken place in the dress outfits not only of the male section but the female section as well. Similarly, the art of dyeing yarn and

clothes which was a community secret of the tribe is gradually fading out. The same story is also equally applicable to the old ornaments worn by the Boro-Kachari ladies. These old ornaments are now becoming museum specimen and very few ladies prefer to wear them at present.

In the employment market it has been seen that some of the present unemployed Boro-Kachari youths have taken to diversified occupation at their own accord either by availing bank finance or by arranging finance from out of their own resources. The Assam Plains Tribes Development Corporation Ltd is offering impetus to the tribal youths for self employment arranging institutional finance and technical consultancy service. A new venture of Hotel keeping industry has sprung up in the Boro-Kachari inhabited areas of Northern belt of Kokrajhar District. The Boro-Kachari girls have also come up in large numbers to join in the para medical and other technical jobs. Thus a trend of change has already set in and in the process the Boro-Kachari youths having technical or professional skill have been able to secure berths for themselves both in the secondary and tertiary sectors.

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THE DEORIS

Introduction :

The Deoris are one of the four divisions of the Chutiyas. These divisions are Hindu Chutiya, Ahom Chutiya, Borahi and Deori. The last named have been able to maintain their old traditions, religious beliefs and practices in tact inspite of various socio-political trials and tribulations through the decades.

The Chutiyas are believed to have been members of the great Bodo race. Entering Assam through the North Eastern Passes, the Chutiyas established independent principalities in the upper regions of the Brahmaputra. The Ahom records show that when they (Ahoms) entered Assam in 1224 A.D. the Chutiyas were established at Sadiya and were masters of the country westwards as far as the Desang river. Hostilities broke out about the middle of the 14th Century and in 1523 A.D. (according to the Chutiya Chronicle about 1673 A.D.) the Ahoms finally defeated the Chutiyas at Chantam or Chandangiri. "The Chutiya dynasty continued to hold Southern Upper Assam and Sadiya and part of Nagaon where they built a fortified city called Dimapur; but about the middle of the 13th Century of the Christian era they were subjugated by hordes of Shans from the South who, after establishing themselves in Upper Assam, pursued their career of conquest in a westerly direction".¹

Brown² mentions about three divisions of the Chutiyas viz. the Deori Chutiyas, the Hindu Chutiyas and the Ahom

1. Dalton, E.T.—1872, Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal, P. 5
2. Brown, W. B.—1898, An Outline Grammar of the Deori-Chutiya Language spoken in Upper Assam, P. 1

Chutiyas. Endle³ however includes one more i.e. Barahi Chutiyas. About Deoris Dalton⁴ writes, "An isolated colony on the river Dikrang in Lakhimpur calling themselves Deori Chutiya were found who had a peculiar language which they called Chutiya and they were styled Deoris".

The original abode of the Deoris was on the banks of the river Dibong, Tengapani and Patarsal which now fall within the jurisdiction of Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh and Chapakhoa Sub-Division of Dibrugarh district of Assam. Due to constant feuds with the neighbouring populations they had to move westward. Their present habitations are spread in the riverine areas of Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat and Sonitpur districts of Assam. As per 1971 Census their total population was 23080 (1981 census was not held in Assam). The estimated population of the tribe in March 1987 is 37,028.

Setting :

As mentioned earlier the Deoris are a riverine tribe and they are pile dwellers. Houses are constructed facing the river and all the houses are of the similar pattern, although they vary in length according to the size of the family. A typical Deori house can accommodate more than 40 persons. The floor of the house is made of flattened bamboos or timbers and is raised from the ground on wooden posts. With a long passage having a good number of small apartments on one side, a Deori house resembles outwardly that of a Mishing house. The front portion of the house is called 'Misso' which is kept open on three sides and visitors are entertained here. This part of the house is also used as a sleeping apartment for the unmarried youths. A fire place situated in the first room of the house serves for ordinary cooking and during winter it becomes an ideal place for gossiping. The headman of the family sleeps in this room. This is also the place where relatives and respectable persons are entertained. The fireplace kept

3. Endle, R.S.—1911, The Kacharis, P. 1

4. Dalton, E.T.—1872, Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal P. 5.

at the rear room of the house is considered as sacred and out-siders and visitors are not allowed to enter this place.

The people :

The Mongolian characteristics are visible on the Deoris. They are strong built and possess charming features. Outsiders are attracted with their simplicity and hospitality. They are amiable and maintain cordial relation with the non-tribal people of surrounding villages. As they eke out their livelihood by agricultural activities alone and that too in a difficult flood prone area, the Deoris are very labourious. Both men and women engage themselves in agricultural operations. Except for ploughing, cutting trees and jungles, the womenfolk help their men in all other daily activities. Besides taking responsibility for their children, the womenfolk have to weave clothes and cook meals for all the members of the household. Women are treated as partners in the daily life and their position in society is not low. Co-operation among the villagers in all spheres is a salient feature of their daily life. The Dibangia section maintains the traditional language whereas the other two sections viz. Borgonya and Tengapania have almost forgotten their language. They speak Assamese fluently.

Agriculture :

The people are mainly agriculturists and agriculture is the principal means of support for the families. They relish Ahu rice and therefore Ahu paddy is widely grown. Besides, they live in flood affected areas and most of their lands are not suitable for Sali paddy cultivation. Of late due to construction of embankments they have been able to grow Sali paddy. Besides paddy, the Deoris produce mustard seeds, sweet potatoes, pulses, cotton and a few varieties of winter crops. New crops like wheat, lentil, patal etc. are becoming popular among the Deoris and a few families are earning good profits. The Deoris still depend upon the traditional method of cultivation and except a very few families who are adopting modern met-

hod like tractors for ploughing and application of fertilisers and pesticides, majority of the people plough lands with bullocks. Cow dung is used in the fields as manure.

Food :

The staple cereal food of the Deoris is rice. Although some families are producing wheat and the people take sweets made of atta while they visit the towns, yet in their homes they do not take flour or atta. Along with rice they take boiled green vegetables seasoned with chillies and salt. For their meat supply they rear fowls, pigs, ducks and goats. The flesh of other animals are scrupulously avoided. The poultries and pigs are not only reared for household consumption but these constitute as source of income for the womenfolk who use the money for purchasing yarn, clothes, ornaments etc., Fish forms a special delicacy in the Deori menu. Ricebeer ('Suze') is prepared in every household and it is served to all irrespective of age and sex. It is considered as the most valuable item for entertaining guests. Habit of taking tea is not popular among them. The elderly people take red tea without milk and sugar.

Community Fishing :

Community fishing is a common affair among them particularly in the winter season when the water level of the beels and rivers go down. They also catch fish in the rivulets. The usual method followed for catching fish is to make the river bed go dry by removing the water. For this a particular spot is selected and barriers are constructed at both ends of the spot. The water is taken out by a small boat like fishing implement and then fishes are caught. They use similar fishing implements that are used by the fellow Assamese villagers.

Family :

Among the Deoris monogamy is the rule but polygyny is far from extinct. They prefer joint family system. Bes-

ides a father, his wife and children, the same homestead is also occupied by father's brothers or cousins, their wives and children. In other words its members are two or more lineally related kinsfolk. The Dibangias call the joint family as 'Jākaruā Jupā'. The 'Jupā' is a primary social unit consisting a group of people living in a common residence under a single head. The 'Sukiā Jupā' as the name indicates (Sukiā separate) consist of a man, his wife and married children occupying a single residence under the overall governance of father while the 'Jākaruā Jupā' is composed of two or more married brothers with their wives and children, unmarried brothers and sisters, parents and grand parents occupying a residence under a single head. The father is the head of the family and all the members obey his orders. Kinship, social and economic ties hold together the members of the family.

Property and Inheritance :

Properties such as land, livestock, foodstuff, house etc. are held jointly by the family. Personal effects such as ornaments, clothing and cash belong to individuals separately. After the death of a father his sons become the rightful owner of his properties which are equally divided among his sons. In case a man dies without any survivor his property usually goes to the nearest agnatic relations. The wife and daughters are not eligible to share the property.

The Deoris are patrilineal in descent and they count their relationship through the male line. Children take the clan of the father.

Clan System :

There are four broad divisions ('Khel') among the Deoris namely Dibangia, Tengapania, Borgonya and Patargonya each originating from a particular place name. Thus Deoris, who after coming from the hills lived on the banks of the Dibang, Tengapani and Borgang rivers were known as Dibangia, Tengapania and Borgonya respectively.

The Deoris who were living in Patarsal or Patsadia were known as Patargonya. Each of these divisions is composed of a number of exogamous clans called 'Bangshas' (Jākus'). Thus the 'Bangshas' of Dibangia are 'Sundariyā (Bordeori), Pātriya (Saru Deori), Airio (Bharali), Sāriyo (Bora), Chitkāyo (Bhog Randhani), Komtāyo, Lāgāchyo, Kaliyāchukoyo' etc. There are altogether 14 Nos of 'Jākus' among the Dibangias. The Bangshas of Tengapania are 'Machiātikā (Bor Deori), Bikramiyātikā (Saru Deori), Khutiyotikā (Bharali), Sākacharutikā, Pāgimegerātikā, Phāpariyotikā, Chemābariyātikā, etc. The Borgonya division too has clans viz. 'Ikuchāru (Bardeori), Chimuchāru (Saru Deori), Hīzāru (Bharali), Busāru (Balikatia), Lafāru (Bora) and Gosāru'. It may be noted that members of the last clan though mentioned in old records, are no longer traceable. As regards clans of Patargonya, the Deoris are not able to locate those. It is probable that their clans might have merged with the people of Borgonya and Dibangia clans. Although enquiries about 'Khel' is often made and in general discourse people refer to 'Khel', yet clan distinction within a 'Khel' is hardly made except for marriage purposes.

Social Stratification :

In respect of social stratification the Deori society can be broadly divided into two viz secular and religious. In the former category the Gaonbura reigns supreme who is the head in all socio-political activities. He is the nucleus around whom all the village elders gather for smooth running of the day to day affairs of the village. The assembly of village elders can give judgement in the petty disputes brought before it.

For the smooth functioning of their religious activities every village has nine office bearers who have been assigned specific duties. Out of these four important office bearers in the hier archical order are Bor Deori or 'Baderi', Saru Deori or 'Saderi', Bor Bharali and Saru Bharali. Generally Bor Deoris are selected from Bor Deori clans like 'Sundariyā', 'Machiātikā' and 'Ikuchāru' and they command highest regard

from the villagers. A Bor Deori must be free from all sins. His main duty is to offer pujas in the 'Thān'. The Saru Deori assists the Bordeori in the 'Thān' pujas. He is empowered to perform the duty of the Bor Deori in the absence of the latter. The Bharali remains in charge of the puja paraphernalias. The Bora collects dues and other essential articles from the villagers on ritual occasions. All the clans have equal status at least theoretically but in practice the Bor Deori or 'Baderi' gets high status among the office bearers:

Another office bearer called 'Deodhai' plays significant role in the religious life of the people. While dancing along with the beatings of drums he is believed to be possessed by their benign deity and in that mood of transcendental glory he is able to forecast the fortune of the villagers and about the natural calamities that may occur. The 'Deodhai' should be a person without the slightest blemish and while he remains in coma he is considered as a deity in the form of human being.

Marriage :

For a Deori young boy marriage is indispensable. The boys marry within the age of 20-25 years, while marriageable age for girls is 18-22 years. Clan exogamy is strictly followed in case of marriage. Similarly marriage is regulated by moiety which is an exogamous group of related people. If any one violates this social prescription he is punished by the priestly council of the village. Monogamy is the general rule and the second wife is taken after the death of the first wife. Once a girl is married she belongs to her husband's family. The children take their father's clan name. Widows can live as wives with the widowers but in such cases no ceremony is observed.

The system of levirate and sororate are not in vogue among the Deoris. Thus after the death of the husband the younger brother of the deceased does not marry the wife of the elder brother. One does not marry the younger sister of his wife.

The Deoris have broadly four different forms of marriage namely 'Bor Biyā', 'Maju Biyā', 'Bhakat Rupiā' or 'Saru Biyā'

and 'Gandharba'. The Dibangias call these as 'Jonengā Lāhārūbā', 'Bakat Rupiā', 'Chachibāchi' and 'Churubāchi'. Bor Biya is arranged by the parents and it is continued for three days. The next form i.e. 'Maju Biyā' is arranged by the parents of the prospective couple. Expenses on this type of marriage are slightly less than the former one. It is solemnised with moderate pomp and show but the duration is only two days. 'Bakat Rupiā' is also a popular type of marriage without much fun and merry-makings. It is completed in one day and expenditure in such marriages is considerably low. The most widely prevalent type of marriage is 'Gandharba' or marriage by elopement. The Dibangias call this 'Janengā Lāhārūbā'. In this type of marriage, the couple concerned takes the initiative. The boy with the help of his friends takes away his sweet heart on an appointed date. No formal ceremony is performed in such marriages. However, once during the lifetime of the couple a ceremony called 'Suje Laguā' has to be performed. At least three headmen of three major clans have to be invited who are entertained with a feast. Besides these, another type of marriage known as 'Tamolkatā Biya' was prevalent among the Deoris which is not in vogue now-a-days. This type of marriage is solemnised before a girl attains puberty.

The essential items of a Deori marriage constitute dried fish, pork, 'Suze' and betel leaves and nuts.

The 'Pāthoriā' or a mediator plays important role in a Deori marriage. Both the families i.e. families of bride and groom appoint 'Pāthoriās'. On the marriage occasion he wears a special dress and he helps in the settlement of bride price and other details in a marriage. He must be man who is proficient in local folk-lore and other marriage formalities.

Bride Price :

The system of bride price is prevalent among the Deoris. It may be noted that bride price is not a substitute of dowry. The Deoris give dowry as a token of love, money value of which may be many times higher than the bride price. Dowry includes mainly bell-metal utensils, wooden or steel boxes,

garments, arecanuts and betel leaves etc. while bride price paid by the groom includes betel leaves and nuts and cash of Rs. 126.00. The bride price in case of informal marriage i.e. marriage by elopement, may rise upto Rs. 300.00.

Religious Beliefs and Practices :

All the three sections of the Deoris are still maintaining their traditional beliefs and practices. However the influence of Vaisnava Gosains is visible in the Deori villages but the trend towards traditional beliefs is still prominent. The common place of worship among the Borgonya and Tengapania sections is known as 'Thān' while the Dibangias call it 'Midiku'. All the sections worship Lord Siva and Parvati as chief deities. The Dibangias call this supreme diety as 'Kundi Māmā'. 'Kundi' is identified as Lord Siva and 'Māmā' as Parvati of Hindu pantheon. Another name of this chief diety is 'Girā Girāchi'. 'Pisā Demā' or 'Baliā Bāḅḅ' and 'Pisāsi Demā' or 'Kesāikhāti', the son and daughter of 'Girā Girāchi' are two other important deities of the Deories. They also worship 'Gailurung Kundi' as Ganesh and 'Kunwar Kundi' as Kartick. The puja paraphernalias include flower, sacrificial dao, piece of Chandan wood, copper, Argha, bell, trident, conch, basket made of brass, copper utensils, canopy etc. The priestly functionaries include Bor Deori or 'Baderi', Saru Deori or 'Saderi', Bor Bharali, Saru Bharali, 'Kelua', Bora, Barik and Randhani or 'Lādani'. These office bearers are essential in all the 'Thān' pujas and their offices are hereditary.

Besides the major deities, the Deoris have a good number of household deities. They believe that if these deities are worshipped regularly then peace and plenty will prevail upon the households. Sacrifices are offered to these deities. Some of the important household deities are— 'Bakanmāk', 'Miruchi', 'Kin', 'Duā Chitere', 'Burā Dāngariā', 'Morā', 'Chākchik', 'Achirā', 'Chanyān', 'Gharar Deo', 'Yān Terbā', 'Jiomidi', 'Mākchibā' etc. From the names of household deities like 'Burā Dāngariā', 'Gharardeo' etc. the influence of non Deori Hindus may be traced.

Sacrifice of animals and fowls, pigeons forms an important part of the Deori puja. The presence of Bor Deori or 'Ba Deri' is essential in the pujas. Rice beer is not offered to the deities but consumption of rice beer after the puja is not forbidden. Wednesday is the most auspicious day for worship and pujas are performed either on Wednesday or on Sunday.

Some of the Hindu rituals like Durgapuja, Saraswati puja, Janmastami etc. have been incorporated recently into religious structure of the Deoris. As worshippers of Shakti, the Deoris do not feel much difference when they worship Goddess Durga during Durgapuja festival of the Hindus.

Festivals :

The Deoris observe two major festivals during a year viz. Bohag Bihu or 'Bohāgiyo Bisu' and Magh Bihu or 'Māgiyo Bisu'. The term 'Bisu' might have originated from the Chutiya word 'Bisu'. Bi means extreme and 'Su' means rejoicing. The Bohag Bihu is observed on the 'Sangkranti' of 'Chot'. (14th April) while the Magh Bihu is observed on the 'Sangkranti' of 'Puh' (14th January). The Bohag Bihu is the most important one and like other fellow Assamese the Deoris also observe this festival for seven days with un-restricted joy and merry-makings. It may be mentioned that Deori Bihus do not always fall on the Sangkranti day rather these Bihus may be deferred to a day or two as they observe the same from Wednesday. The Deori Bihus must be preceded by a Than puja and evidently the Bihus must start on Wednesday. These festivals have close relation with their agricultural activities. The 'Bohāgiyo Bisu' and 'Māgiyo Bisu' festivals are observed before starting the agricultural operations.

Bihu pujas on the occasion of Bihus have much socio-religious significance and arrangements have to be made ahead of the day of puja. Sacrificing of goat is a must in the Bihu puja. Once in every four years a white buffalo is sacrificed which is considered as a substitute for the traditional human sacrifice.

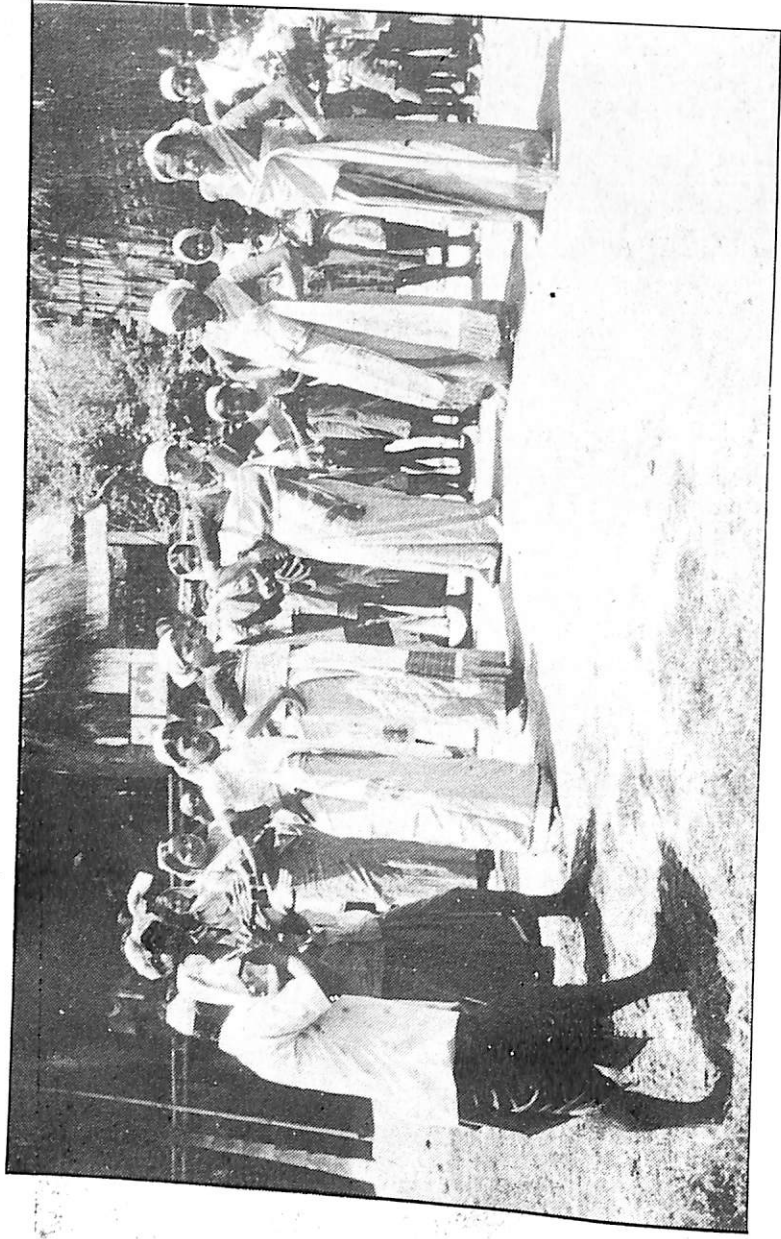
Ceremonial bathing of the cattle takes place in the morning of the day of puja. Cows and buffaloes are taken to a nearby river where they are smeared with a mixture of turmeric and 'matimah', garlanded with black thread inter-woven with 'Tanglati' (an indigenous creeper) and bathed ceremonially by the male villagers. On this day every household observes 'Suwasani Puja'. The headman of each household prays before the household diety in the 'Suwasani' room for the welfare of the family members. Towards noon all the villagers irrespective of age and sex gather at the 'Thān'. They are purified by the sacred water prepared by the office bearers of the 'Thān' in a copper container. The Bor Deori offers prayers inside the 'Thān' and the villagers eagerly await for the 'Prasads'. Sacrificing of goats, ducks, fowls is performed and after the puja all the male villagers partake of the feast, prepared out of rice, vegetables and meat offered to the diety. The womenfolk are prohibited from taking part in such feasts.

During Bihu the elderly villagers visit all the households in the village and they bless the inmates of the households. The members of each household entertain them with 'Suze' and 'Khāji' (a curry prepared out of cane sprouts and flesh of fowls).

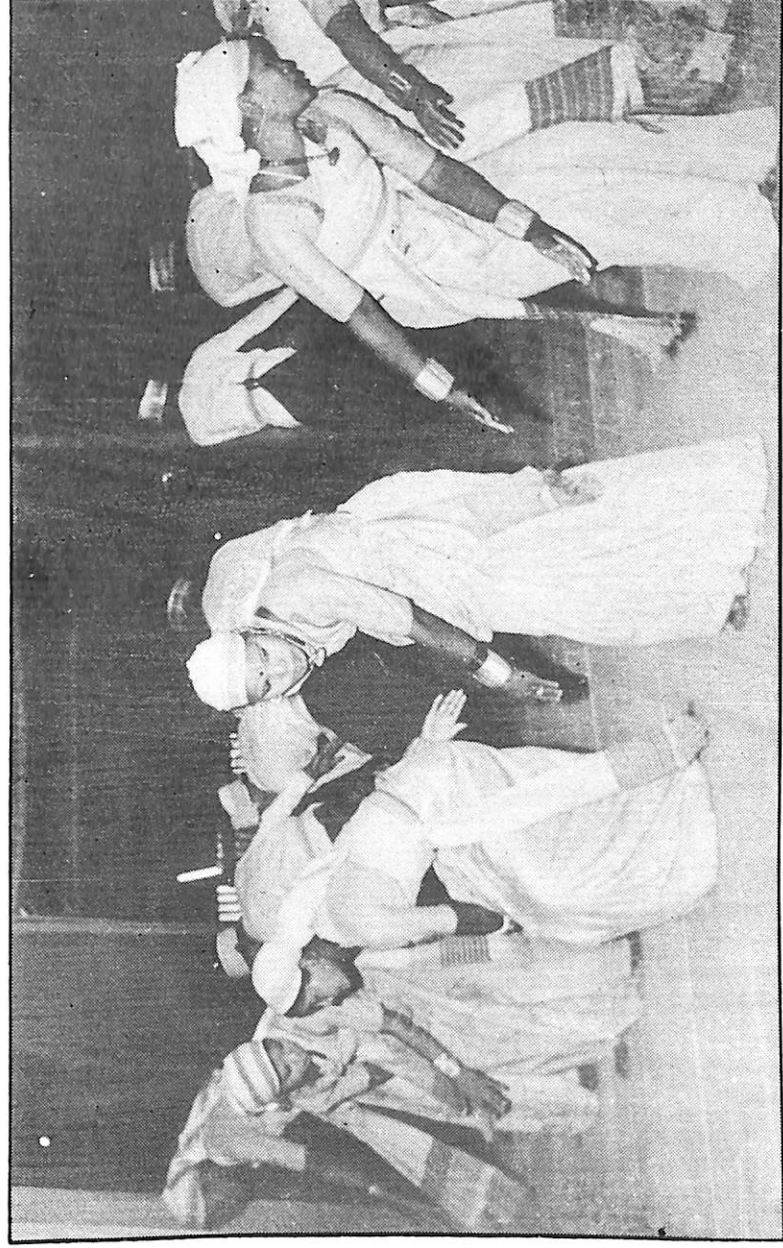
In the meantime the younger sections, both male and female, busy themselves in arranging 'Husari' parties. Separate parties of males and females are arranged. The dancing starts on the 'Thān' and after that the parties visit each household. Bordeori's house should be visited first. The 'Husori' party blesses the members of the household for a prosperous year and in lieu of that the party receives a 'Sarāi' (traditional wooden or brass plate with stand used to honour distinguished guests and also for pujas) containing locally woven 'Bihuwān' (towels), betel leaves and nuts and some cash money. Drums, small cymbals ('Tāl'), 'Takā' (a bamboo musical instrument) etc. are the main musical instruments of the Husari parties. The rhythmic dance accompanies melodious songs.



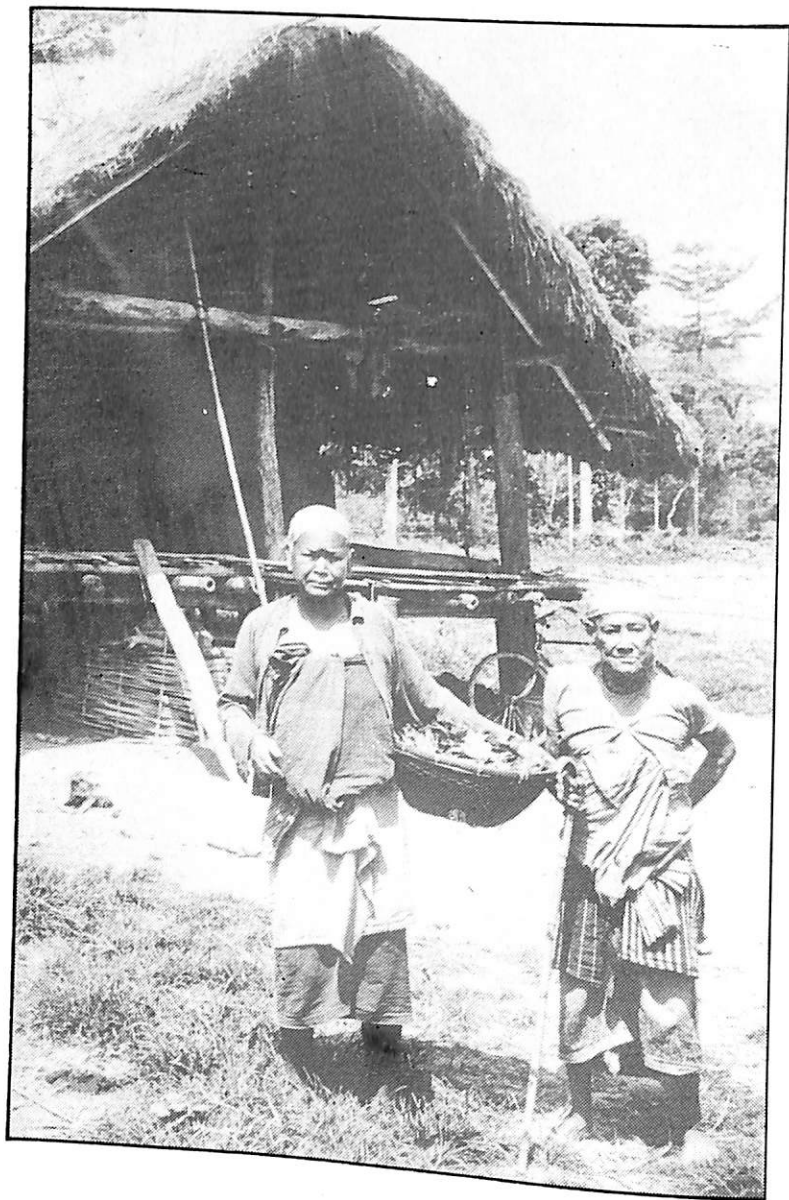
Deori women in their traditional dresses and ornaments



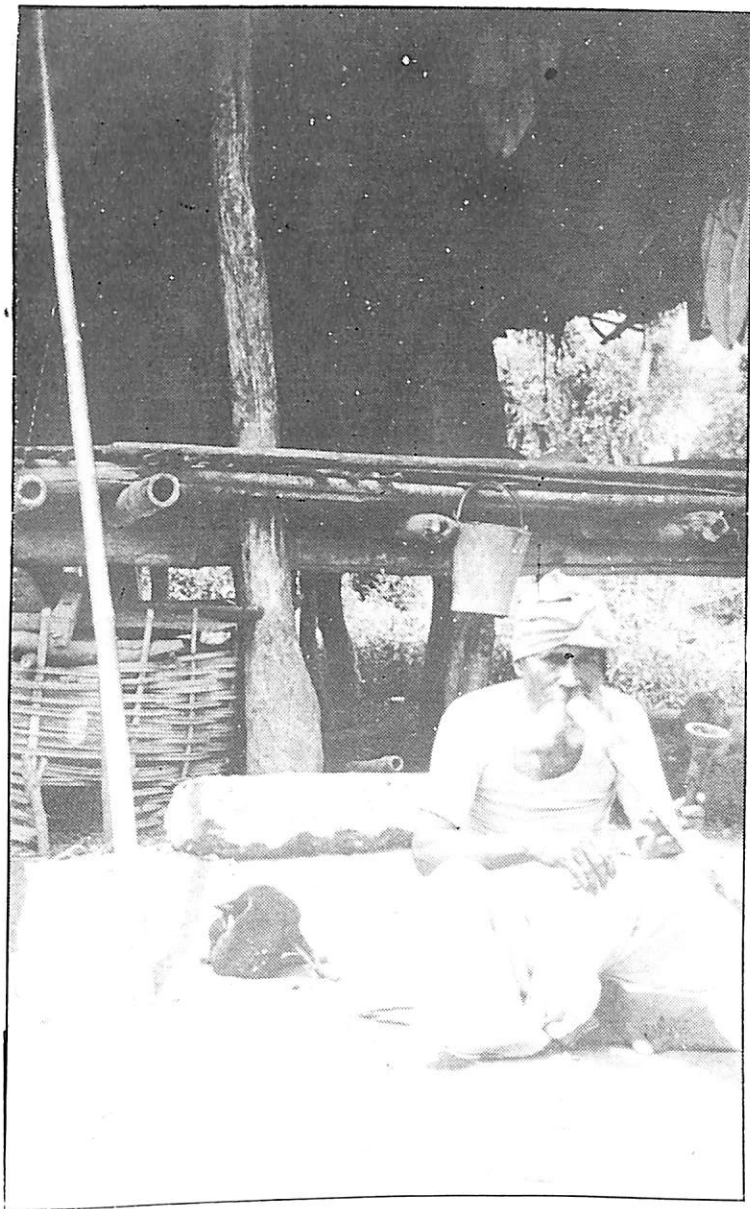
Bihu dance performed by the Deoris



Performance of Deori Bihu, a sequence



Two Deori women in front of their house



An aged Deori smoking in an indigenous tobacco pipe

The male Husori party takes three to four long bamboos which are fixed in the courtyard of the household. Each member of the party takes one small bamboo slice and while singing and dancing, beat the bamboos rhythmically. In this way Bihu dances are performed in each household and on the following Wednesday a puja is held in the 'Thān' as a closing function.

The Deodhani dance forms the most important and essential part of the Bihu puja. The term Deodhani has been derived from Sanskrit word 'Deva' meaning god or diety and 'Dhani' meaning sound i.e. echo. This popular term literally means the echo or utterings of a diety.⁵ Dr. Neog⁶ however gives a different meaning. According to him Deodhani is a holy female dance or god's woman. It is originated from 'Deva' (god) and 'Dhani' (woman).

In the 'Māgiyo Bisu', or Magh Bihu a grand feast is arranged on the 'Sankranti' day i. e. first Wednesday of Magh' in the 'Morongghar' attached to the 'Thān' or 'Midiku'. The Bordeori offers pujas to the deities of the 'Thān' and sacrifice of fowls numbering fourteen is also performed. The women-folk are not allowed to take part in the feast.

Death and Attendant Ceremonies :

Among the Deoris cremation is the rule. The dead bodies of children, pregnant women and epidemic cases are buried. The pyre has seven layers of wood but for the priests the layers of wood are raised to nine. The traditional custom of laying layers of wood in pyres for a man or a woman was seven layers and five layers respectively. The dead bodies are bathed with water and new clothes are wrapped over the bodies. An egg is broken on the forehead of the dead, generally by the eldest son. The corpse is wrapped with a bamboo mat and carried

5. Goswami, M. C. 1960, An Annual Shamanistic Dance (Deodha Nuch) at Kamakhya, Assam, Journal of University of Gauhati Vol. XI, No. 2 Science, P. 46.

6. Neog, M.—A Note on the Etymology of Certain words in connection with Manasa Worship, Ibid, P. 46.

to the cremation ground in a procession by the sons, relatives and co-villagers. Food, rice-beer, fire etc. are carried to the cremation ground. The eldest son offers cooked food and rice-beer to the soul of the dead and puts fire in the pyre. After returning from the cremation ground all are purified in the courtyard of the deceased with holy water prepared by a women of the family by adding cowdung, 'Taluki' and a copper coin.

A ceremony is held on the fourth day. Chicken curry is prepared and selected elderly villagers offer rice beer and chicken curry on the floor and request the soul of the deceased to give up all connection with the inmates of the deceased.

The final purificatory ceremony may be held any time of the year. As it is an expensive affair the villagers observe this ceremony when they can afford. Generally it is held after one year. Pork, rice beer, vegetables, betal leaves and arecanuts etc. are required in large quantities as the feast on this occasion is shared not only by the consanguinal and affinal kins but by all the villagers, irrespective of age and sex.

Changing Attitude :

Due to contact with outside world and due largely to the communication facilities, changes in respect of certain items of material culture are noticed among the Deoris. Although pile dwelling is the prevailing practice, a few Assam type houses on plinth are also seen in Deori villages. C. I. Sheets as roofing materials are used by a few well-to-do sections. China clay cup plates, steel utensils, purdahs, chairs and table etc are found in the well-to-do Deori households. Modern dresses viz. trousers, shirts, saris, blouses, frocks etc are popular among the educated sections. Similarly modern gold and silver ornaments like gold or silver ring, necklace, bracelet etc. are becoming popular. Use of traditional ornaments is very rare. No longer the male persons keep the hair long. Barbars are seen in the Deori village hats and except the priests others cut their hair in the saloons or with the barbars.

Radios and transistors are found in the Deori villages and Deori cultural troops present radio programme and other cultural items in the inter community festive occasions.

Education is fast coming up and the people are conscious to receive modern education and jobs.

Although the people have faith on traditional medicine and magico religious cure of the ailments, yet allopathic medicine has penetrated into the Deori villages. The main constraint for the medical practitioners, however, is that the people approach them when the cases become acute.

It may be mentioned that the changes which are inevitable in an open society like that of the Deoris, however, do not cut into the vitals of the Deori social fabric. The Deoris are still maintaining most of their traditional socio-cultural traits intact, at the same time keeping a window open for incorporating modernism without effecting the core of the culture.

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THE DIMASA KACHARIS

Introduction :

The Dimasa Kacharis constitute an important ethnic group in the autonomous hill districts of Assam. The present abode of the Dimasa Kacharis is confined mainly into the North Cachar Hills District. They are, however, found in small scattered groups in the Karbi Anglong and Cachar Districts also. In Cachar they are known as the 'Barmans'.

Racial Affinity :

The Dimasa Kacharis belong to the Boro group of people which besides the Dimasas includes the Boro-Kacharis, the Meches, the Rabhas, the Lalungs and the Koches of Assam. Linguistically the Dimasas belong to the Tibeto-Burman group. The original home of the people belonging to the Tibeto-Burman race was in Western China near the Yang-te-King and Howang-ho rivers from where hordes of them went down the courses of the Chindwin and the Irrawady and then the Brahmaputra and started settling down in the valleys of these rivers and also in the remote hills adjacent to these valleys. The Dimasa Kacharis inhabiting the present autonomous hills districts and the Bodo-Kacharis inhabiting the plains of Assam refer to the same stock of people although their languages and customs have much differences than likeness. This might have been the result of separation and isolation of these two peoples for centuries together.

Terminology :

The term 'Dimasa' literally means the son of a big river 'Di' means water 'Ma' means big and 'Sa' means son. As the Brahmaputra is the biggest and the longest river in Assam, it may be presumed that the Dimasas consider themselves to be

the decendants of the Brahmaputra. A good number of principal tributaries of the Brahmaputra bear the syllable 'Di' such as Dihong, Dibong, Dibru, Dihing, Dikhou, Disang, Dikrai, Diputa, etc. This signifies the fact that the Dimasas might have lived once on the banks of the rivers prior to their establishment of the Capital at Dimapur now in present Nagaland.

Some scholars are of the opinion that the term 'Dimasa' is derived from Hidimba, a prince whom, Bhim, the second Pandava prince married while he was in exile. The outcome of this wedlock was the birth of their son Ghatotkacha who had left a glorious example of heroism in the battle of Kurukhetra. Another section of the scholars is of the opinion that the Bodasas or Bodos came to be known as Dimasas after they established their capital at Dimapur on the river Dhanshree. In Dimasa the river Dhanshree is called 'Dima'.

The origin of the term 'Kachari' is very difficult to trace and the scholars have expressed divergent views. In fact they have made some guess-works only in regard to the origin of the term 'Kachari'. In all probability the term 'Kachari' was given to the people by outsiders.

Settlements and kingdoms :

The Kacharis do not have any written records and as such their early history can be regarded as a matter of surmise. Their old legends point to the fact that the race after entering Assam through north-east settled in the hills and slopes of the upper course of the Brahmaputra. They gradually moved westward and extended their settlement through central Assam to the Mymensingh district of present Bangladesh. Some scholars believe that during the pre-historic period the capital of the Kachari Kingdom was at Pragjyotishpur (present Guwahati). The Dimasa Kacharis of the North Cachar Hills still believe that they once ruled in Kamrupa, the ancient Assam and their royal family claimed its descent from the kings of ancient Kamrupa. The Dimasas, however, had their capital established at Dimapur (Now in Nagaland) probably during

the later part of the 11th century prior to the advent of the Ahoms in Assam.

At the beginning of the 13th Century when the Ahoms entered Assam, the Kachari Kingdom was extended along the south bank of the Brahmaputra from the Dikhou to the Kalang. The kingdom also included the Dhansiri valley and the tracts which now form the North Cachar Hills district. The Kacharis had a long standing hostility with the Ahoms and as a consequence the Ahoms completely ransacked the Kachari capital Dimapur after defeating them in a fierce battle. Driven out from Dimapur as well as the Dhansiri valley, the Kacharis shifted their capital to Maibong in the North Cachar Hills. But there also they could not reign in peace. In 1706 the Ahom armies captured Maibang and the Kachari king Tamradhaj had to flee to Cachar and to take refuge in Khaspur. In Khaspur again, the Kacharis established their capital. Gobind Chandra was the last Kachari King. He lost northern hilly region of his country to Tularam, a rebel general of great heroism. As Gobind Chandra did not leave any legal heir, his kingdom Cachar was annexed by the British to their territory in 1830 after his death.

Demographic characteristics :

According to 1971 census the total population of the Dimasa Kacharis in Assam was 39,344 out of which 20,713 were males and 18,631 were females. The number of females per 1000 males was 899. 1981 Census could not be conducted in Assam. However the projected approximate population of the Dimasas in 1981 calculated on the basis of average national growth during the decade 1971-81 would be 53,507. Their percentage of literacy, as per 1971 census was 18.84. While the percentage of literacy among the males was 27.36, for the females it was 9.36 only. The very low percentage of literacy clearly indicates that the Dimasas do not give much importance for female education. The Dimasas constitute 18.17 per cent of the total scheduled tribes population of the Autonomous Hill Areas of Assam. They also constitute 2.45% of the total scheduled tribes population of the state of Assam

Hills and Plains combined. Their percentage to state population is 0.27 only.

SOCIAL LIFE

A. Family Structure :

The Dimasas follow the patriarchal system of family structure and as such the father is the head of the family. A Dimasa family generally consists of the head of the family, his wife, unmarried sons and daughters and also his unmarried brothers and sisters. As soon as the unmarried sons, and brothers get married, they will have to live separately. Thus a Dimasa family is unitary in character.

B. Clans :

The most outstanding characteristics of the Dimasas' social life is the existence of female clans almost parallel to male clans. They have 40 (forty) male clans and 42 (forty two) female clans, called Sengphong and Zaluk respectively. Both the clans are exogamous and no marriage can take place between the boys and girls of the same clan however distantly related they might be. Secondly none can marry in his or her father's clan or mother's clan. While the son belongs to the father's clan, the daughters belong to the mother's clan.

C. Marriage :

Marriage by negotiation is the prevailing practice although marriage by capture is also found to be prevalent. The bride price called 'Kalti' varies from Rs. 300.00 to 500.00 depending on the means of the bridegroom and also the quality of the bride. But now-a-days this custom is disfavoured by the literate sections of the Dimasa society.

The marriage takes place in the bride's house on the date fixed earlier and is consummated there. The bride's family has to make some arrangement for accommodation of the newly married couple for a few days in the bride's house. After spending a few days in the father-in-law's house, the boy takes his bride to his own village where the couple start living in a newly constructed house.

Monogamy is the prevailing practice among the Dimasas. Divorce can be obtained if the Kunang, the village headman, approves the dissolution of the marriage. Widow remarriage is allowed. Levirate and sororate are practised according to the needs of the occasion.

D. Birth :

The birth of a child is an occasion of rejoice. The mother and the baby are segregated from the family members and other villagers till the navel chord of the newborn falls off. Two elderly women help the woman at the time of delivery. The purifying ceremony of the women takes place on the day of falling off the navel chord. On this day the two midwives are to be entertained with feasts and other presents.

E. Death :

Death in the family is an occasion of mourning for the family members and the relatives. The Dimasas believe life hereafter and as such the performance of the death ceremony for the eternal bliss of the deceased is a must. Dead body is cremated on the bank of a river or a stream. A man is allowed to die inside his house. During the performance of the death ceremony, the villagers and the relatives are to be entertained with a grand feast.

F. Law of Inheritance :

The existence of parallel male and female clans in the Dimasa society has great impact on the law of inheritance. The paternal property which generally consists of real estates, weapons, cash money and the cattle is inherited by sons only at the death of the father. The maternal property which consists of jewellery, clothes and looms with their accessories used by the mother, is inherited by the daughters only and the sons have no claims on these articles. The common property of the household which consists of cooking utensils, brass metal dishes and bowls and other household equipments is shared by the sons and daughters equally.

The daughters have no right to inherit the paternal property even if there is no son in the family and similarly the sons can

never inherit the maternal property even if there is no daughter in the family. In such cases the maternal property is inherited by the nearest female relative belonging to the same clan of the deceased woman. In the same way, the paternal property is inherited by nearest male relative of the head of the family belonging to the same clan if the deceased man leaves no male issue.

G. The Village System :

In Dimasa the village system is called Nablai which means a cluster of houses. The entire village with its population is called Raji. As the Dimasas have a tendency to live on the banks of the rivers and streams, every Dimasa village is found to be situated on the hill slope with a river or a stream running by.

The houses have timber superstructure, mud-plastered bamboo walls and thatched roofs. The houses are artistically designed and are built on two rows facing each other and leaving sufficient space in between. The houses are built on ground. In order to protect the houses from constantly blowing strong winds, protective bamboo walls, usually almost equal to the heights of the roof tops are erected all round the houses. Each village has thirty to forty houses. Erection of protective fencing all round the village boundary with two gates—one at the top and the other at the bottom—is a common practice.

H. Village leaders and village administration :

Kunang, the traditional headman of the Dimasa village, still wields considerable authority in the village affairs though his authority is threatened by the Gaonbura, the village headman appointed by the Government. In the discharge of his duties Kunang is assisted by an assistant headman called Dilo. The Kunang assisted by Dilo and the other village elders settles disputes and quarrels, tries cases of thefts, incests, elopments, etc. and the judgements delivered are binding on the concerned parties. Inter village disputes are settled by the Kunangs and village elders of several villages. When women are involved, the elderly women of the village are also invited to participate

in the trial. It may also be mentioned that no community function in the village can be performed without the approval of the Kunang.

I. Nodrang (Bachelor's dormitory) :

The Dimasa have bachelor's dormitory for unmarried young boys and it is called Nodrang in their dialect. They, of course, do not have any dormitory for unmarried girls. The Nodrang is constructed generally in an accessible place of the village. It is rather a big hall without any partition.

A huge piece of wood is kept in front of Nodrang. The unmarried young boys sleep inside Nodrang at night. Protection of the village from outside attack and also from the attack of wild animals, learning of dance and music, accommodation of guests not belonging to the Dimasa community, learning of traditional arts and crafts are the primary purposes of the institution of Nodrang. But the functional aspects of Nodrang have almost lost their significance as the institution itself is at a dying stage. At present the bare Nodrangs in dilapidated conditions withstanding wear and tear of time only remind the Dimasas of their glorious past.

Religious life :

The religion, at present followed by the Dimasa Kacharis, is rather a mixture of their traditional religion and Hinduism. Six benevolent ancestral gods, namely, Sibrai, Doo Rajo, Naikhu Raja, Waa Raja, Ganyung Braiyung and Hamiadao, who are called 'Madai' are still worshipped by the Dimasas with great reverence. Of course, Sibrai (Hindu Siva) occupies the highest place and his name is to be uttered first in every worship. They believe that their disease, calamities and sufferings are caused by evil spirits and for withdrawal of their evil influence they are to be properly appeased. Even before opening up of new Jhum sites, the evil spirits are to be worshipped so that they might not create any troubles in future by way of scanty rainfall, pest-infection, etc. and allow the people to reap a good harvest.

Formerly the entire Dimasa Kingdom was divided into 12 (twelve) divisions on the basis of the abodes of gods and deities. Each division was called Daikho and there is still a Dimasa Priest called Zonthai in each Daikho. Over these 12 Zonthais there is a head priest called Gisia who with the help of 12 Zonthais performs the main puja for the well-being of all the Dimasas. At the death of a Zonthai his successor is selected by the Gisia on the recommendation of the people of the concerned Daikho. It may further be mentioned that the priests are selected only from the male clan Hojaisa which is a priestly clan. The Kunang, traditional headman, also plays a very important role in the religious life of Dimasas. He is to worship the clan deity of the village which is the ancestral god of the Semphong (male clan) who had first established the village. The clan deity (village deity) is to be propitiated with a worship every year without fail.

At present pigs, fowls and buffaloes are only sacrificed in worshipping different gods, goddesses and deities in accordance with the demand of the occasion. But during the reign of the Kachari Kings there was even human sacrifice ; at least one human was sacrificed in a year.

The Dimas King Krishna Chandra and his brother Gobind Chandra formally accepted Hinduism in the year 1790 at Kashpur. But the process of Hinduisation had taken place much earlier. This is evident from the numerous temples and archeological remains found in their former capitals at Dimapur and Maibong. Anyway the Dimasas, by and large, had adopted Hinduism. Nevertheless and Hindu Dimasas still maintain their old religious beliefs and customs and perform the traditional religious rites till today. But the most outstanding factor in the field of religion is the fact that all attempts on the part of Christian Missionaries to convert them into Christianity have proved to be futile.

ECONOMIC LIFE

A. Agriculture :

Agriculture is the principal occupation and main source of livelihood of the Dimas Kacharis. The Dimasas living in the

North Cachar Hills practise shifting cultivation commonly known as Jhum. They also practise wet-land cultivation subject to availability of low lying land.

The Dimasas living in the plains portions practise wet-land cultivation only.

Jhum sites by different families are selected during the months of October and November. Peeling off the barks of some trees or the fixation of a crossed bamboo post in a particular hill slope indicates that the site has already been selected by a particular family. Jungles at the Jhum sites are felled early in the month of February. The jungles thus felled are burnt to ashes after about a month when they dry up completely. Just before the onset of the monsoon seeds are broadcast on the ashes, (Sometimes lands are also hoed prior to broadcasting of seeds). In the jhum men and women work equally from the morning till sunset. After raising crops for two to three years, plots are left for growth of vegetation and new plots are again chosen and prepared for jhum. They raise mixed crops in their jhums. Besides paddy (principal crop) they cultivate maize, sesame, cotton, chilly, pumpkins, gourd, ginger, brinjal, castor, etc. They also cultivate mustard to a limited extent. Many Dimasa families cultivate pineapples and oranges by terracing the gentle hill slopes. Due to the crude and primitive methods of cultivation, attack of pests, scanty or heavy rainfall, Jhum cycles of shorter duration, lesser fertility of soil due to barrenness of the hill slopes and many other factors, the yield is naturally not only uneconomic but quite low also.

But, however, this is one side of the coin only. The frequent demonstrations organised by the Development Block Officials and officials from the Agriculture Department have greatly helped the Dimasas to adopt new and improved methods of cultivation. Cultivation of high yielding varieties of paddy, maize, Japanese methods of wet-paddy cultivation, terracing cultivation of cash crops like coffee and rubber, planting of plants and grafts of fruit bearing trees, use of chemical fertilizers, and compost manure, use of pesticide and improved

agriculture tools and implements, etc. are now a common sight in any Dimasa village.

B. Livestock :

The Dimasas are in the habit of rearing buffaloes, pigs, goats, fowls and ducks and not cows. Each family is in the possession of 5 to 12 buffaloes and majority of them are she-buffaloes. But surprisingly enough they neither drink milk nor the commercial aspect of milking the she-buffaloes has been exploited by them. The buffaloes are reared only for business purpose in the sense that young calves are sold to the traders hailing from the Cachar District. But the buffaloes are never tended. They are let loose in the nearby jungles and fields. As a consequence standing crops of their own are very often destroyed by the buffaloes. Pigs, goats and birds are reared mainly for domestic consumption and for sacrificing to the deities.

Cottage industries :

Weaving is an important cottage industry among the Dimasas. In fact every Dimasa girl and woman is an expert weaver. A Dimasa woman without the knowledge of weaving can not be thought of. A girl without the know-how of weaving can hardly be given in marriage.

Most of the domestic requirement of cloths are met from the family looms. The cloths woven by them are of highly artistic designs. Marriageable girls weave their own bridal apparels by themselves. Even colours used by them for dyeing yarns are prepared from raw indigo and wild herbs. The women are expert spinners also.

Rearing of Endi is another important cottage industry of the Dimasas. Endi silk is spun and Endi cloths are woven at home. Cloths found surplus to the requirement of family use are sold locally. These cloths are also woven with very nice artistic designs. The prices of Endi scarfs vary from Rs. 200/- to Rs. 500/- at present

Manufacturing of bamboo and cane goods is also one of the major cottage industries of the Dimasas. Different types of cane and bamboo baskets, bamboo mats some with artistic

designs, fishing traps and other household equipments of day-to-day use in the family are manufactured by the people themselves at their leisure. Products are primarily meant for domestic use. It is very interesting to note that a highly artically designed bamboo mat costs Rs. 500/- to Rs. 700/- and even at such a high price the artisan may not be willing to part with his product.

Although in the past the Dimasas had carpenters, blacksmiths and goldsmiths among themselves, now-a-days except carpentary artisans practising the other trades are practically nil among the Dimasas.

D. Hangsao (Youth association) :

The Dimasas have a very interesting economic institution called Hangsao based on the principles of co-operation and mutual help. It is confined to the youths of the villages. The members of Hangsao complete the unfinished works in the Jhums and in wet-land paddy fields of each family of the village on a contract basis against a very nominal charge. The payment is to be made by the families to the Hangsao only after the harvest. The amount thus collected is spent by the youths at the celebration of the Busu festival. Thus this institution has helped the families, especially the poor ones, to a considerable extent.

Dimasa economy which is primarily dependent on agriculture is at the subsistence level only and the economic conditions of the people are far from satisfactory. Coming into contact with the so-called machinery age their wants are multiplying. They now purchase many things hitherto unknown to them. Their percentage of literacy is very low (18.84 as per 1971 Census) and as such adequate number of enterprising educated youths are not simply available to give an impetus to their economy by opening up small-scale industries, resorting to trade and commerce and other avenues of self-employment. From the point of view of employment it may be stated that almost all the educated persons, high school leaving certificate passed and above, are employed in schools, in the N. C. Hills District

Council Office, police and other departments. The need of the hour is, of course, a self-supporting and self-generating economy which may quicken the pace of economic development.

Cultural life

A. Archeological remains :

The Dimasa Kacharis are a culturally rich tribe and they can be rightly proud of their cultural heritage. The remains and relics of the palatial buildings, gateways, ramparts, pillars and numerous temples at Dimapur, Maibang and Khaspur and also at Kasamari pathar show clearly the state of cultural development of the Dimasa Kacharis when they were a ruling tribe. The decorative area of architectural, geometrial and floral ornamentation found in these ralics is simply marvellous. Sculptural designs found in the Dimapur pillars, cloths woven with artistic designs, artistics handicrafts and so on and so forth signify clearly the Dimasas' love for art and artistic designs.

B. Music and Dance :

The Dimasa Kacharis are a gay and colourful tribe. Dance and music play an important role in their day-to-day life. They have only five indigenous musical instruments, namely, Khram (dram) Muri, Muri Wathisa and Suphin (all flute like reed instruments, and Khram-Dubung (a kind of Veena). In every dimasa dance, however, the use of Khram and Muri is indispensable. They have numerous folk-lores and folk tales. The songs are generally not sung during dances.

The youths both boys and girls, perform dances in the accompaniment of Khram and Muri playing from nightfall only to welcome distinguished visitors to their village. This is done to pay their respect to the honoured guests. Dances are also performed during the celebration of community festivals Busu, Rajini Gabra and Harni Gabra. Their dances are lively and the expression of 'Lashya' is visible in every form of dance.

C. Festivals :

The celebration of the socio-religious festivals Rajini Gabra and Harni Gabra is held once annually before the starting of

new cultivation. The former is celebrated during day time only. The Kunang, the traditional headman, propitiates his family diety by closing the village gate on the day of the performance of Rajini Gabra. In the same night the function called Harni Gabra is also celebrated. Here the deity Harni is worshipped for the protection and welfare of the people during the coming year.

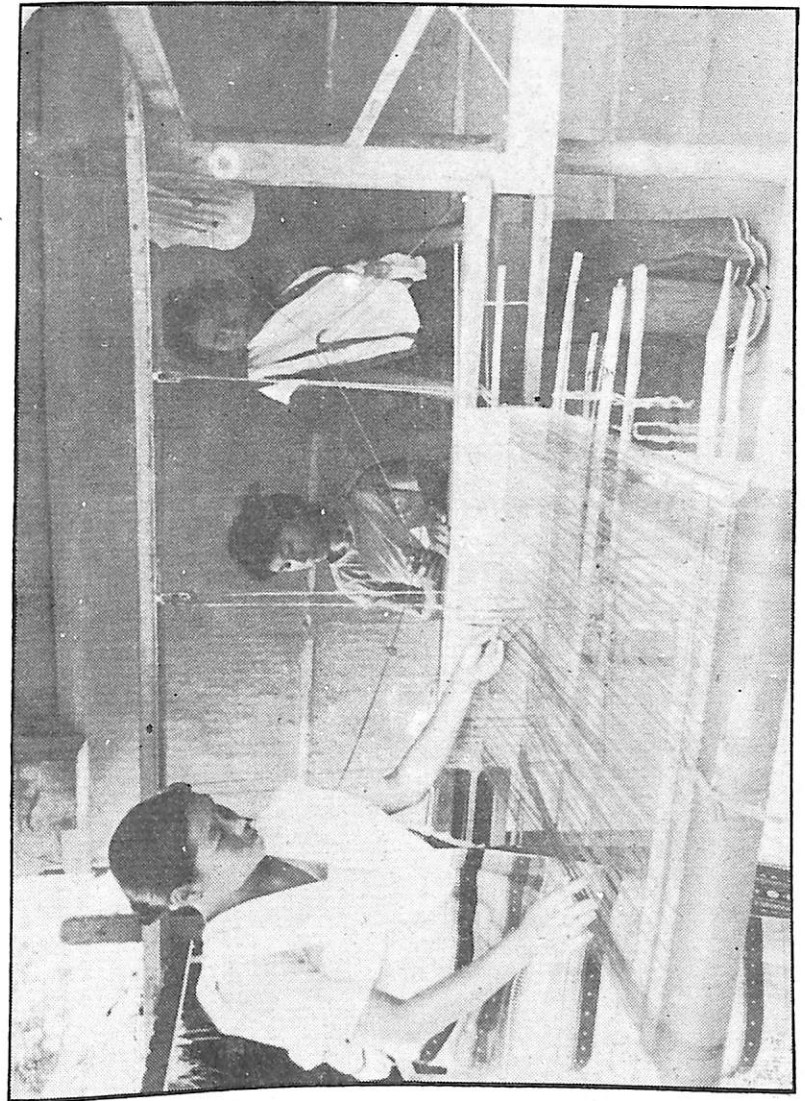
It is very interesting to note that during the performance of Rajini Gabra and Harni Gabra if any outsider enters into the village in spite of seeing the sign of the closing gate, the entire function is considered to be spoilt. The intruder has to bear the total expenses of holding the festivals anew.

But the celebration Busu (Harvesting festival) is the gayest and most important of all. Prior to celebration of Busu a specially decorated and artistically designed gate called Fangsla is erected at the main entrance to the village.

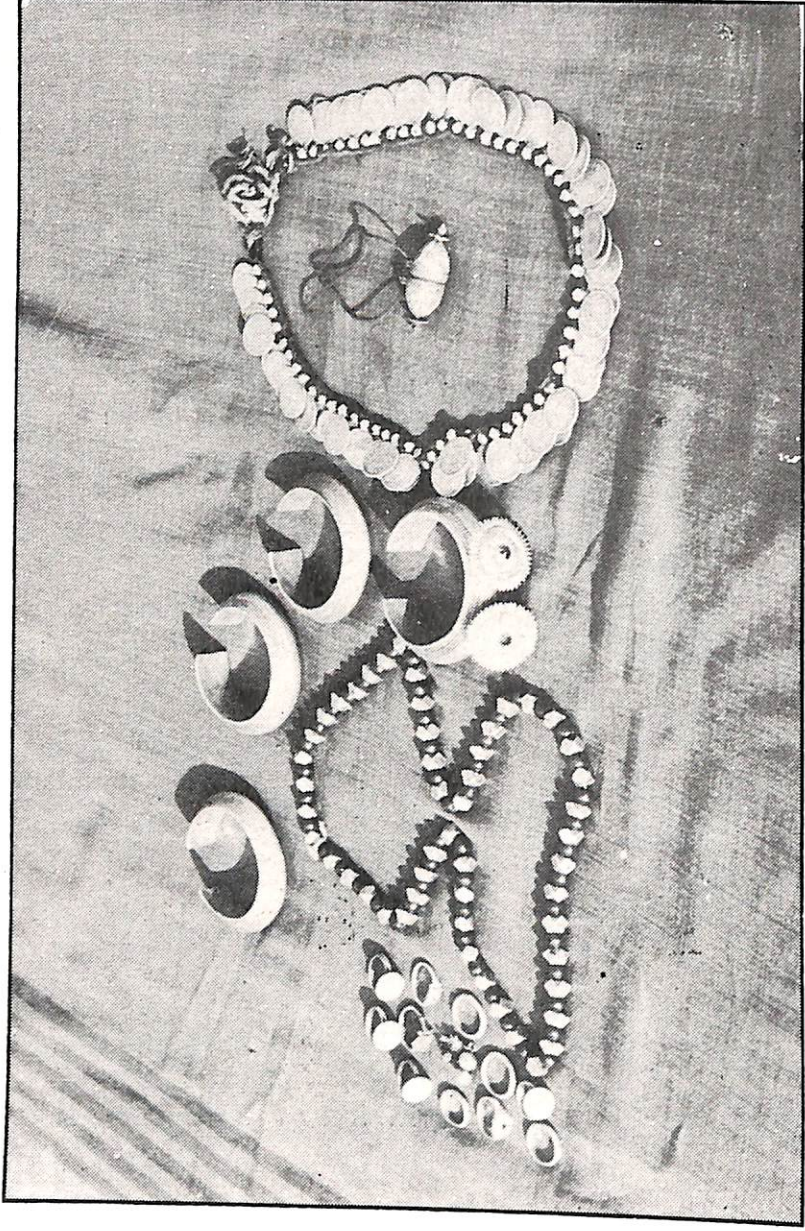
Dresses and ornaments

The Dimasa Kacharis have their traditional dresses and ornaments. For day-to-day use a Dimasa man uses Risa which is generally of deep green colour and about a metre in breadth as 'Dhuti'. Besides a shirt, he also uses an artistically designed scarf called Rinsao. When he goes out of the village he uses a cotton or Endi silk turban which is about 19 metres in length. During Busu dance, of course, the young as well as the old use 'Dhuti' only. In bygone days a Dimasa man used to put on a very long shirt like an overcoat. Now-a-days except rings a Dimasa man does not wear any ornaments. In the past, of course, they put on silver earrings called Kharih and silver armlets called Youcher. Even now-a-days some old men in the interior areas use these ornaments.

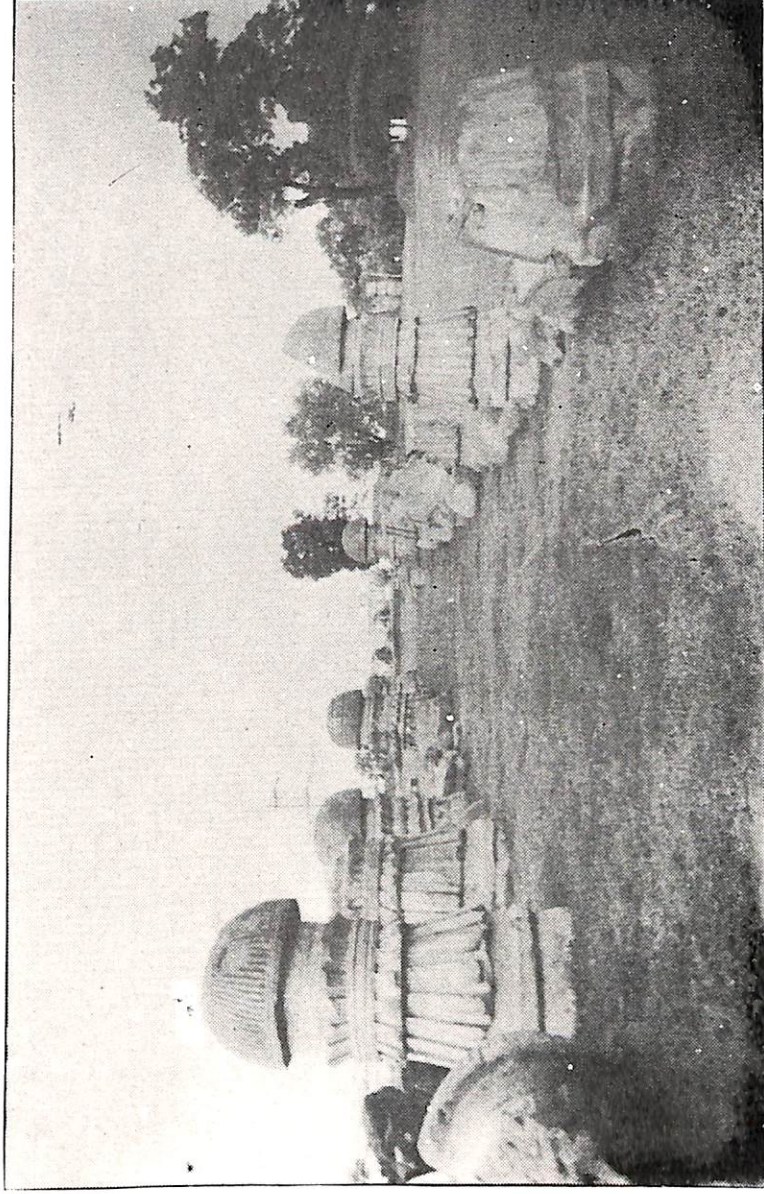
A Dimasa woman puts on a skirt called Rigu made of cotton or Endi-silk. It may be white or coloured. An artistically designed scarf called Rijamphai is used by them to cover the upper part of the body. Another kind of very highly decorative scarf called Rikhaosa is used by the young girls in dancing. It is not meant for day-to-day use.



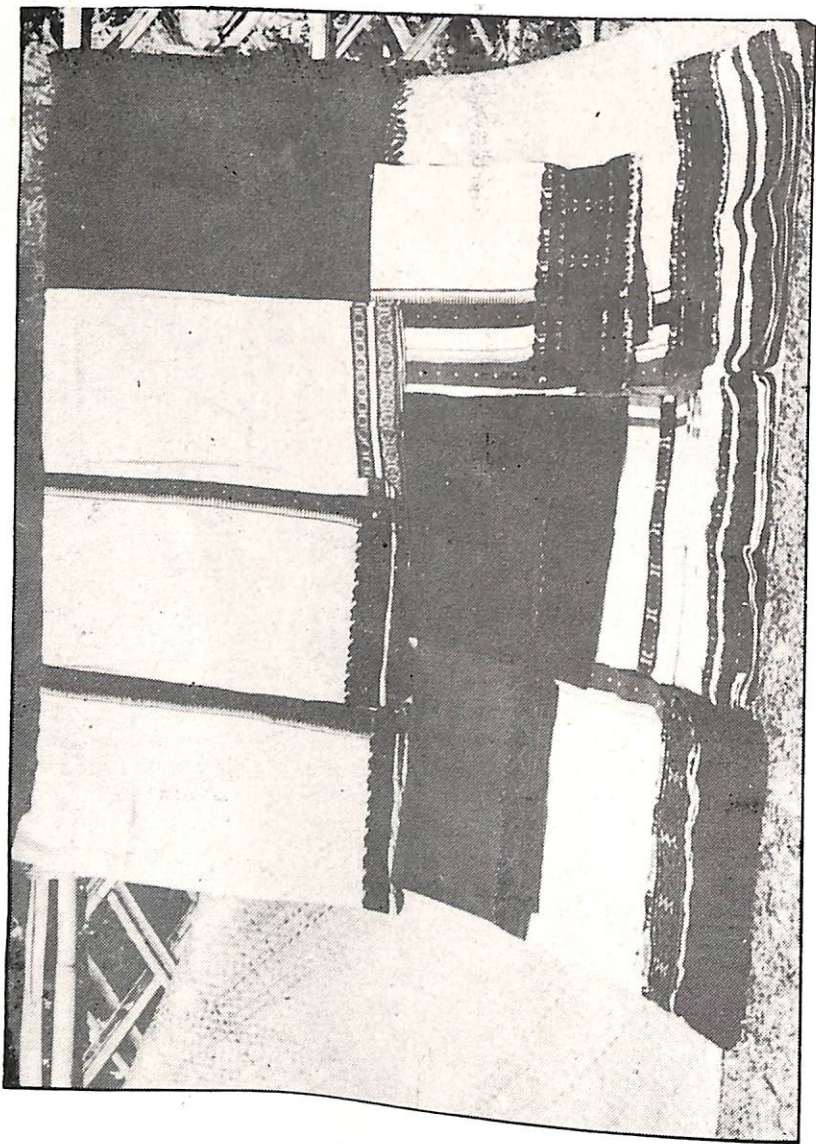
Dimasa women in loom



Traditional Ornaments of the Dimasas



Relics of the Kachari Capital at Dimapur



Traditional cloths of the Dimasas



An old Dimasa woman in her traditional dress and ornaments



Stone inscription in Khaspur, the last capital of the Dimasa Kacharis



Dimasa priests with their traditional musical instruments

The Dimasa women are very fond of ornaments. Among the important ornaments they use are Poal (necklace made of silver pieces and costly sea-shelles, Khamontai (earring made of gold), Chandrawal (necklace made of silver), Rongborsa (Necklace made of silver coins), Khadu (Heavy silver bracelet), Eansidam (nose ring made of silver), Khamonhai (earring made of silver) and Liksim Likjao and Jongsama (all necklaces made of different kinds of beads).

Food and drink :

Rice is the staple food of the Dimasa. Rice from the Bara paddy (a kind sticky rice) is used for tiffin purpose. Vegetables grown in the Jhums as well as in the kitchen gardens and very often wild roots and leaves are procured from the nearby forests to supplement their food. Rice with vegetables, chillies and occasionally with fish and meat are taken thrice daily in the morning, at noon and in the evening. They drink milkless tea twice or thrice daily. The people neither drink milk nor do they milk the she-buffaloes for commercial purpose. The logic behind this is very simple. The milk in the breast of a mother whether human or animal is always meant for the offsprings. To deprive the offsprings of the milk of the mothers' breast is a great sin.

The Dimasas hunt wild animals in the forests with spears bows and arrows and firearms. Deer's meat is a delicacy for them. They eat fowls, pigs, ducks, goats, and sometimes buffaloes meat. They also catch fish in the rivers and streams. Dried fish is another delicacy.

The most favourite beverage of the Dimasas is rice beer which they call Zou. It is brewed at home. Zou is a must for the celebration of all community and religious festivals. Sufficient quantity of Zou is required for daily domestic consumption of the family members and also to entertain guests.

CONCLUSION :

The Dimasa Kacharis are a peace-loving tribe. They become vindictive only when they are provoked. They have thick calves, broad heads, stumpy noses, thick lips, languish

eyes and prominent check-bones. Their complexion is almost dark-tan.

Being cut off from the main stream of national life for generations together culture and traditional customs of the Dimasas have remained more or less unaffected. But this does not mean that changes are not coming to them. Because of the expansion of education and development activities in the different spheres changes are gradually coming to their life and culture. The walls of isolation are crumbling down. The most encouraging factor noticeable among the Dimasas is their capability to adopt to changes leading to betterment of socio-economic conditions. They have gladly availed of the facilities extended for the improvement of agricultural practices including cultivation of coffee and rubber, education, public health, water supply, communication, veterinary and animal husbandry, rearing of Endi, etc. It would not be difficult to bring them to the main stream of national life with proper guidance and motivation.

Leadership from this tribal community is always forthcoming. Among the prominent personalities mention may be made of late Joybhadra Hagjer and late Surath Chandra Daulagopu who were Ministers of Cabinet Rank. The present generation has also produced a number of leaders from this community who have been playing a significant role in the social, economic and political spheres. The Dimasas living within the jurisdiction of North Cachar Hills district have an Autonomous District Council under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. They are now managing their own affairs. This has enabled them to be politically conscious and also to look after their own development and welfare.

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THE KARBIS

1. Introduction :

The Karbis, mentioned as the Mikirs in the Constitution Order, Govt. of India, constitute an important ethnic group in the hill areas of present Assam. However, they never call themselves Mikir but call themselves Karbi and sometimes Arleng which literally means a man. They consider that the term Mikir is given to them by the neighbouring people. In their folk-lore and folk-tales also the term 'Mikir' occurs nowhere. "The name Mikir is that given to the race by the Assamese; its origin is unknown."¹ Although at present they are found to inhabit the Karbi Anglong District, nevertheless, some Karbi inhabited pockets are found in the North Cachar Hills, Kamrup, Pragjyotishpur, Nagaon and Sonitpur Districts also.

2. Racial affinity, original home and migration :

Racially the Karbis belong to the Mongoloid group and linguistically they belong to the Tibeto-Burman group². North-East India, specially Assam, was subjected to successive waves of migration from the Central Asia beginning from several hundred years of B. C. The original home of the various people speaking Tibeto-Burman languages was in western China near the Yang-Tee-Kiang and the Howang-ho rivers and from these places they went down the courses of the Brahmaputra, the Chindwin and the Irrawaddy and entered India and Burma.³ The Karbis, along with others entered Assam from Central Asia in one of the waves of migration,

1. Stack, E and Lyall, C, The Mikirs (Reprint), Guwahati, p-3.
2. Bordoloi, B. N., Chomangkan, the Death Ceremony observed by the Karbis, Guwahati 1982, Preface.
3. Barua, B. K., A Cultural History of Assam (Early Period), Guwahati 1969, p-6.

3. History :

It is very difficult to trace the history of the early settlement of the Karbis bereft of any written documents and other evidence like archaeological remains, etc. Of course, in the old chronicles and Buranjis occasional references here and there were made to the people of this race. But from these references also it is very difficult to trace the chronological events of the Karbis. Their folk-tales and folk-lore are the only sources from which we can have an idea regarding their early history Dr. P. C. Choudhury summarizes this aspect as follows :—"But, for want of old written literature, the origin, antiquity and ancient history of the Karbis are still in dark. We would make a good beginning if a drive be given for the collection of all kinds of their folk-tales and stories, for therein may be found some missing links throwing light on the period of their migration, settlement and their organised socio-economic life and political organisation"¹.

According to Stack and Lyall the original abode of the Karbis was the eastern portion of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills bordering on the Kopili river.² Mr. Jygnoram Gogoi on the other hand, is of the opinion that from their earlier settlement in the hills called Hongpilar in the North-Eastern region, the Karbis came down to the plains and settled in the hills called Lumbejung lying between Dimapur and Diphu³.

Mr. G. C. Medhi assumes that the early habitat of the Karbis was in the hilly region between the Nagaon and Sibsagar (present Jorhat) districts in and around Kajiranga forest. He further says that the very name Kajiranga was

1. Choudhury, P. C., Studies in the History and Culture of the Karbi People, Historical Journal, Diphu Govt. College, 1st Issue, 1974, p-2.
2. Stack, E. and Lyall, C, The Mikirs (Reprint), Guwahati, p-4.
3. Gogoi, J, Mikir, an article in Assamese in Asomor Janajati, Jorhat, 1963, p-118.

derived from Kajir-a rong, meaning the village of the Karbi lady Kajir.¹

In regard to the settlement of the Karbis, N. N. Barua opines that the area between Dimapur and the Kapili river called Hayong was inhabited by the Karbis in course of their earliest migration.²

The folk-lore of the Karbis, however, indicate that during the long past once they used to live on the banks of the rivers the Kalang and the Kapili and the entire Kajiranga area, the famous National Game Sanctuary of Assam, was within their habitation. During the reigns of the Kachari kings they were driven to the hills and some of them entered into Jaintiapur, the erstwhile Jaintia kingdom and lived under the Jaintia suzerainty.³

While a section of the Karbis remained in the Jaintia kingdom, others moved towards north-east by crossing the river Barapani, a tributary of the Kapili and entered into the Rongkhong Ranges. There they established their capital at a place called Soheng. Those who continued to live under the suzerainty of the Jaintia king had to face constant harassment at the hands of the Jaintias and this had compelled them to migrate north ward. A good number of them had entered into the Ahom territory and prayed for protection from the Barphukan at Raha. Thus migration took place at the beginning of the 17th Century⁴. The Karbis who migrated to the Ahom kingdom had to face the Burmese invasion. The Burmese who invaded Assam perpetrated inhumane oppression on the people. The Karbis took refuge in the deep jungles and high hills leaving their hearth and home in the submountane regions. In order to save them-

1. Medhi, G. C. A Brief Account of Migration Route of the Karbis of Assam, Historical Journal, Diphu Govt. College, 1974, p-17.
2. Barua, N. N., Karbi Sanskritir Dhara, an article in Assamese, Weekly Janambhumi, 30th June issue, 1976.
3. Bordoloi, B. N., Chomangkan, the Death ceremony observed by the Karbis, Guwahati, 1982, Preface.
4. Devi L., The Ahom Tribal Relations, 1968, p-148.

selves from the greedy eyes of the Burmese invaders, the young Karbi girls started to use a black line from the forehead to the chin with a view to making them ugly looking.¹ While some of the Karbis migrated to lower Assam, some had crossed the Brahmaputra and settled in the north bank. The British found them to be quite a peaceful people and there had not been any hostility between the British and the Karbis.

The Karbis later on had shifted their capital to Niz Rongkhong from Soheng. Niz Rongkhong, a village situated about 16 kms. south of Hamren, the subdivisional H. Q. of the Hamren Sub-division of the Karbi Anglong District, is the present seat of the traditional Karbi king called Lingdkpo². He is democratically elected and although he is a commoner like the other Karbis, nevertheless, he still exercises his traditional authority in respect of socio-religious matters. Each village under the erstwhile Karbi kingdom was headed by a village headman called Sarbura. Several contiguous Karbi villages constituted one Longri and the administrative officer of a Longri was called Havai. The kingdom had 12 (twelve) such Longris and these Longris were constituted into 4 (four) Artus and each Artu was governed by an officer called Lingdok. And at the apex of the for Lingdoks was the king called Recho or Lingdokpo.

4. Regional divisions :

From the point of view of habitation, the Karbis are divided into three groups, namely, Chinthong, Ronghang and Amri. These groups are otherwise known as Chinthong, Nilip-Ronghang and Amri-Marlong. Those who live in the plains districts are called Dumrali. Fundamentally these groups donot differ each other and they should not be cenfused with clans.

5. Demographic Characteristics :

As per 1961 Census the total population of the Karbis was 1,16, 887 and this had gone upto 1,77, 194 (90355 males and

1. Teron, L. Mikir Janajati, Jorhat, 1961, p-2.
2. The author visited Niz Rongkhong on 8th August '83 and met Lingdokpo and his officials and interviewed them.

86839 females) in 1971 Census. In this connection it may be mentioned that these figures refer to the Karbis inhabited in the two Autonomous Hill Districts, namely, Karbi Anglong and N.C. Hills only. The Karbis are not a Scheduled Tribe in the plains districts of Assam. Hence their population would be much more if we take into account the Karbis living in the plains also.

The Karbis constituted 1.21 per cent of the total population in the state of Assam in 1971 and 11.83% of the total tribal population of the state. Their percentage of literacy as per 1971 Census was 13.18 and level of literacy between the males and the females was 21.09 per cent and 4.95% respectively against the state percentage of 28.72 (37.19% males and 19.27% females). As 1981 Census could not be conducted in Assam the projected approximate population of the Karbis in 1981 would be 2,41,000 calculated on the basis of average national growth during the decade 1971-81. The percentage of literacy among the Karbis must have also gone up along with the state percentage. The Karbi Anglong District Council Authority has been taking some concrete steps for the spread of education specially at the primary stage. Emphasis has also been laid to enable the elderly ones to learn the three 'RS' through Adult Literacy Centres.

6. Clans :

The Karbis have five clans called 'Kur'. These are Terang, Teron, Enghee, Ingti and Timung. Each of the five clans has a number of sub-clans. While Enghee and Timung have 30(thirty) sub clans each, Terang and Teron have 6(six) sub clans each and the remaining clan Ingti has only 4 (four) sub-clans. These clans are completely exagamous and marriage between a boy and a girl belonging to the same clan can never take place since the children of the same clan are considered as brothers and sisters. Violation of this customary law obviously leads to ex-communication of the couple involved. Even in the cremation ground called Tipit or Thiri, area is kept demarcated for each clan. Although all the five clans are socially on an equality. Ingti, being a priestly clan was supposed to have a higher status in former times.

7. Marriage :

It has been stated earlier that in respect of marriage clan exagamy is strictly followed. Since the violation of this customary law leads to ex-communication, which is rather a severe punishment, this marriage taboo is rarely violated.

Although monogamy is the prevailing practice, there is no bar to polygamy and the cases of polygamy are very rare. Widow remarriage is allowed by the Karbi Society and the unmarried younger brother is required to marry the widow of his elder brother. But under no circumstances the elder brother is allowed to marry the widow of his younger brother.

Cross-cousin marriage is a preferential one. Marriage by negotiation and marriage by selection of life partners are prevalent among the Karbis. In case of marriage by negotiation the consent of the girl is a must since a Karbi damsel can not be forcibly married to a boy of her disliking. Marriage by capture is also found to be present to a limited extent and in this case the formal marriage has to be solemnized after the birth of the first child at a convenient date.

Divorce, which is rather rare in the Karbi society, can be obtained through the approval of the village council and the council gives its approval only when it finds that the separation between the husband and wife is absolutely essential.

Like other tribal societies, the Karbis do not have the system of bride price. After marriage the wife continues to use the surname of her father. But the children assume the title of their father

8. Family Structure :

The Karbi follow the patriarchal system of family structure and as such the father is the head of the family and his authority, as such, is undisputed. The line of descent is traced through the male members only. The head of the family, his wife, their children, the unmarried brothers and sisters constitute the family. The brothers start living separately as soon as they get married. A Karbi family, therefore, is a

unitary one. Joint family system is also still prevalent to a very limited extent.

At the death of the father, his sons inherit the moveable as well as immovable properties and not by his daughters. If the father dies without any male issue, his property is inherited by the nearest male relative of his clan. A childless couple can adopt a son which must belong to the clan of his foster father and at his death, the adopted son will inherit the property.

9. Social Life :

A. Village Structure

The settlement pattern of the Karbis is in the form of a village. Each revenue village has a headman called Gaonbura who is appointed by the District Council Authority. But each revenue village has a number of hamlets situated kilometres apart. Each of the such hamlets has also a Gaonbura. It may also be mentioned here that each Karbi village is named after the Gaonbura.

The Karbis, like the other hill tribes, have a tendency to live on the hill tops. But the people generally do not live in compact areas. The villages are not only smaller in size, but scattered too. The villages are, however, located on the margin of the other groups, namely, the Dimasas, Kacharis, Lalungs (Tiwas), Khasis and Jaintias, Rengma Nagas, Kukis and other non-tribals. In the plains portion of the Karbi Anglong District where the Karbi people practise permanent cultivation and where the village headmen are quite strong, the villages are found to be stationary. But in the interior areas of the district where shifting cultivation is practised, shifting of village site is still in the practice. The reasons for continuing such a practice are sometimes economic and sometimes social. The following reasons can be ascribed to this :

- 1) The post of the village headman whether that of the revenue village or of the hamlet is a very much cov-

eted and prestigious one. In the performance of every socio-religious rite or festival, the headman has to be honoured first. Moreover the village or the hamlet is also named after him. In a Karbi village there might be a few aspirants for this coveted post. Whenever an aspirant finds that there is no chance of fulfilling his desire if he continues to stay in the village, he leaves the village along with his followers and establishes a village in the new site where he automatically becomes the Gaonbura.

- II) If the Karbi people living in a particular village think that their village is a haunted place frequented by ghosts or evil spirits, they shift their village to a new site very soon to get rid of the ghosts or the evil spirits.

- III) The Karbis who practice jhumming or shifting cultivation very often shift their villages to new jhum sites which might be 10 to 20 kms. away from the present site.

Because of the smallness of the villages and also the shifting of the village sites it is rather difficult to undertake development works of permanent nature in such villages and even if they are undertaken, the results will be simply wastage of money.

In order to stop this habit of shifting habitats and also to wean away people from shifting cultivation, the Karbi Anglong District Council in the year 1963 established a number of model villages in the low lying hill slopes where each family was provided with a house, land for permanent cultivation, some cash grants to tide over the period in between cultivation and harvest, and other infrastructural facilities like roads, drinking water, schools, etc. But this scheme met with an inglorious death since at the time of formulation as well as implementation stages the cultural factors involved were not taken into account.

B. Houses :

A typical Karbi hut is neither too small nor too big. It is built on a bamboo platform using timber posts for super structure. The platform is several feet high above the ground. For roofing purpose, thatch is used. The walls made of split bamboos are mud-plastered. The house has two varandas—one at the front and the other at the rear. The house is divided into two parts lengthwise. The front part or room with a hearth at the centre is called Kam or guest room while the inner chamber called Kut is used as the living room for the family members. A wooden or bamboo ladder is used as an approach to the front Varanda. Cattle are generally kept under the bamboo platform.

In the plains areas, of course, the traditional housing pattern has more or less been abandoned by the Karbis. Instead of having raised bamboo platforms, the houses are constructed on grounds. Building materials required for construction of the houses, whether traditional or modern, are procured from the nearby forests.

10. Birth and Death :

The birth of a child whether male or female is an occasion for joy in the family in the sense that a person died earlier in the family is supposed to be reborn in the same family. In other words, the Karbis believe in rebirth as human beings and not in the form of animals, birds or other creatures. Hence for a new born child the name giving ceremony where the maternal uncle of the child takes the leading part is the most important one. The maternal uncle taking a very small quantity of rice beer called Horlang in a small container pours it to the mouth of the new born child drop by drop. If the baby is a female one he will utter the names of all the dead females one by one associating a name with each drop. The name that will be associated with the last drop will automatically be the name of the female child. Similar procedures of associating each drop of rice-beer with the names of each dead male in the family are followed in case of name giving

ceremony of a male child and the name associated with the last drop will determine the name of the newly born male baby.

Death in the family, on the other hand, is considered to be the most tragic incident in the family. For the cremation of the deceased the Karbis observe some specific rules and regulations and they believe that the non-observance of them might lead the family to great troubles in near future. The dead body is consigned to flames in the cremation ground called Thiri when all the relatives of the deceased from far and near could have the last glimpse of the mortal remains of the departed one. Although they perform the funeral ceremony at the time of the cremation of the deceased, they also perform the death ceremony called Chomangkan at a later date for the eternal peace of the deceased. The performance of the death ceremony is a must for the Karbis irrespective of social status and economic position. It is the most elaborate and expensive socio-religious ceremony of the Karbis which continues for four days and four nights non-stop. Hence the Karbi society allows the concerned family to perform this ceremony at a sooner or later date according to the convenience of the family without fixing any time limit for its performance.

11. Religion :

From the point of view of religion the Karbis can be regarded as animists. Hinduism in its crude form finds manifestation in their worships of gods, goddesses and deities. They believe in the immortality of the soul, life hereafter and reincarnation. 'Arnam Sansar Recho' or God Almighty is considered to be the creator of this universe. Among the innumerable deities, some are considered to be benevolent and some malevolent. Each disease is associated with a presiding deity. Hemphu and Mukrang are two benevolent household gods. For the appeasement of the deities the Karbis observe many religious rituals throughout the year where the sacrifice of pigs and birds and use of rice beer are indispensable. They also believe in

witchcraft and black magic. A smaller section of the Karbis has embraced Christianity.

12. Economy :

Agriculture is the primary occupation of the Karbis. In the hilly portions they practise shifting cultivation where besides the paddy, the staple food, they also cultivate other crops and vegetables as mixed crops. For shifting cultivation which is commonly known as Jhum in the North-East India, jungles in the hills are cut during January and in March they are burnt to ashes. In mid April when the monsoon-rains start, they sow paddy seeds on the ashes and seeds of other crops including vegetables by making small holes on the top soils. The Jhum fields are required to be protected from wild animals, stray cattle and birds by constant watching till the harvest is completed. For this purpose they erect watch towers on the branches of big trees. After cultivating the Jhum fields on a hill for two years they select another hill for cultivation leaving the former for herbal growth so that it can replenish its lost fertility. However, due to increased pressure of population on land the duration of the Jhum cycle has come down to 5/6 years in recent years.

In the plains portion of the Karbi Anglong District the Karbis have resorted to settled cultivation like the other neighbouring non-tribals. Most of the Karbi families rear cows, goats and birds, specially fowls. Some families are found to have reared buffaloes also. But they hardly use cow-milk or buffalo-milk and the commercial aspect of milking is yet to be exploited. In the interior hill areas the Karbi families instead of rearing the cows by themselves, allow them to be reared by the Nepali Graziers on Adhiar system.

Handloom industry is very much common among all the Karbi families. It is a household industry and a woman without having knowledge of spinning and weaving is unthinkable in the Karbi society. All the Karbi women are

expert weavers and most of the cloths for domestic use are produced in their family looms. In the Jhums they cultivate cotton also. Spinning of yarn from home grown cotton is a common sight in the interior hill areas. Rearing of Endi—a kind of silk worms is also another important cottage industry of the Karbis. They produce End scarfs also in their family looms. Bamboo and cane goods required for their day-to-day domestic use are produced by themselves. There were good carpenters and blacksmiths among them in the past. But now these two trades are fast disappearing from the Karbi society because of the fact that the artisans with their traditional methods of productions have failed to compete with the modern developed methods of production and secondly the new generation has not been paying due attention to these trades.

Thus the Karbis have an economic system in which they produce what they actually need leaving either no surplus or little surplus for sale. Savings which leads to further investment is almost absent and most of the people are poverty-stricken. Their economic condition is, therefore, far from satisfactory and this is further aggravated by the fact that a considerable portion of paddy produced by each family is used for brewing rice-beer which is required for the performance of all social festivals and religious rites, for domestic consumption and for the entertainment of guests as well.

13. Native skills :

The Karbis, like the other tribes, have some traditional skills. These skills are handed over from generation to generation. Some of such skills are enumerated below :

A. So far as the food gathering from the nearby forests is concerned, the Karbi women are very expert. They know quite well the wild roots, plants, leaves and wild fruits which can be used as food and they know the locations in the forests where they are available.

B. For various diseases they use some medicinal plants most of which are found available in the nearby forests. But

the knowledge of these plants and their proper use are confined to the experts only.

C. They are expert in hunting specially the deers and wild pigs. The help of the dogs in such cases is always indispensable. They have traditional expertise in catching wild birds and wild animals including tigers with locally made traps.

D. For the construction of houses, only their traditional skills are used. They do not generally engage any outsiders except the people from their own community in constructing their houses.

E. Their traditional skills in making finer handicrafts are well-known. An article called 'Jambeli Athon' specially required at the performance of the death ceremony (Chomongkan) and other important ceremonies as well, is allowed to be manufactured only by artisans to whom such works are assigned by the traditional king, Lingdokpo. Musical instruments are also produced by the experts of the community.

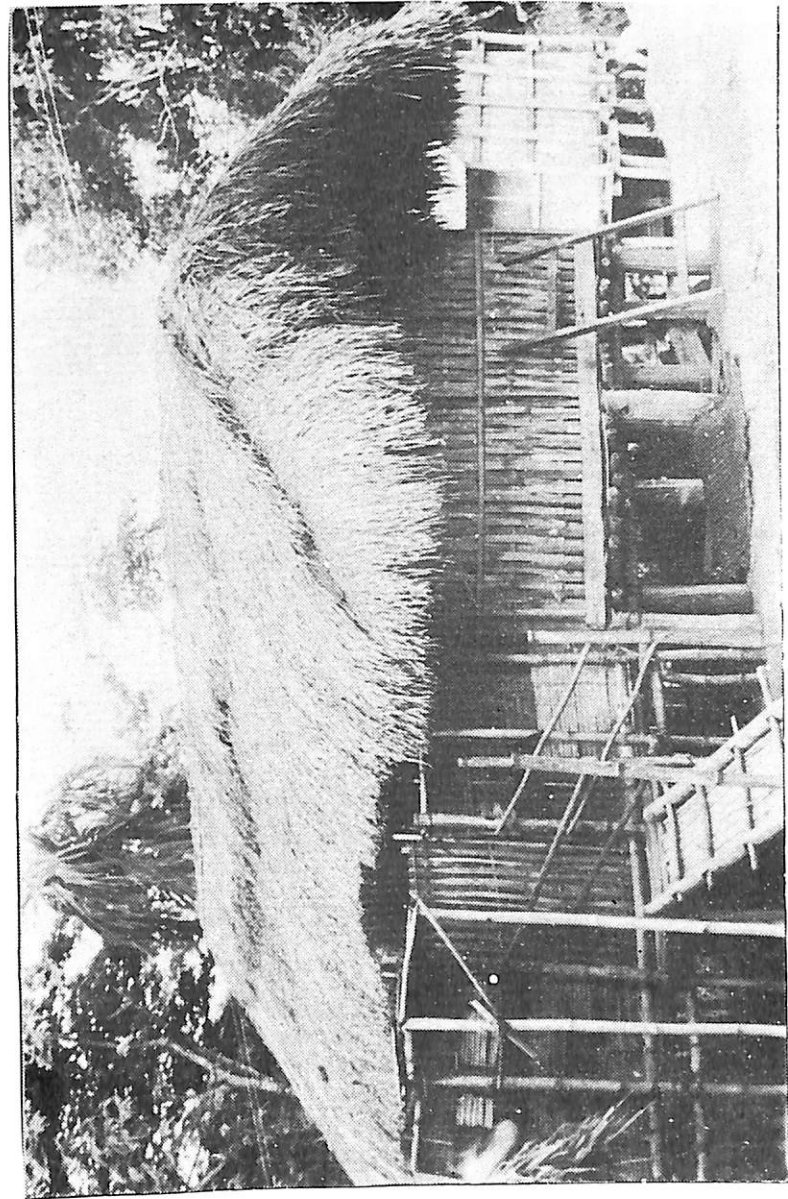
F. There are some elderly people who can forecast weather correctly and precisely.

14. Traditional Institutions :

The Karbis, like the other tribes, have some traditional institutions which have been continuing from time immemorial. While some of the institutions are socio-political in nature, some are of economic character. Some of these institutions have proven outdated in the modern context and some are still continuing withstanding the wear and tear of time. An attempt has been made here to present some of such institutions :

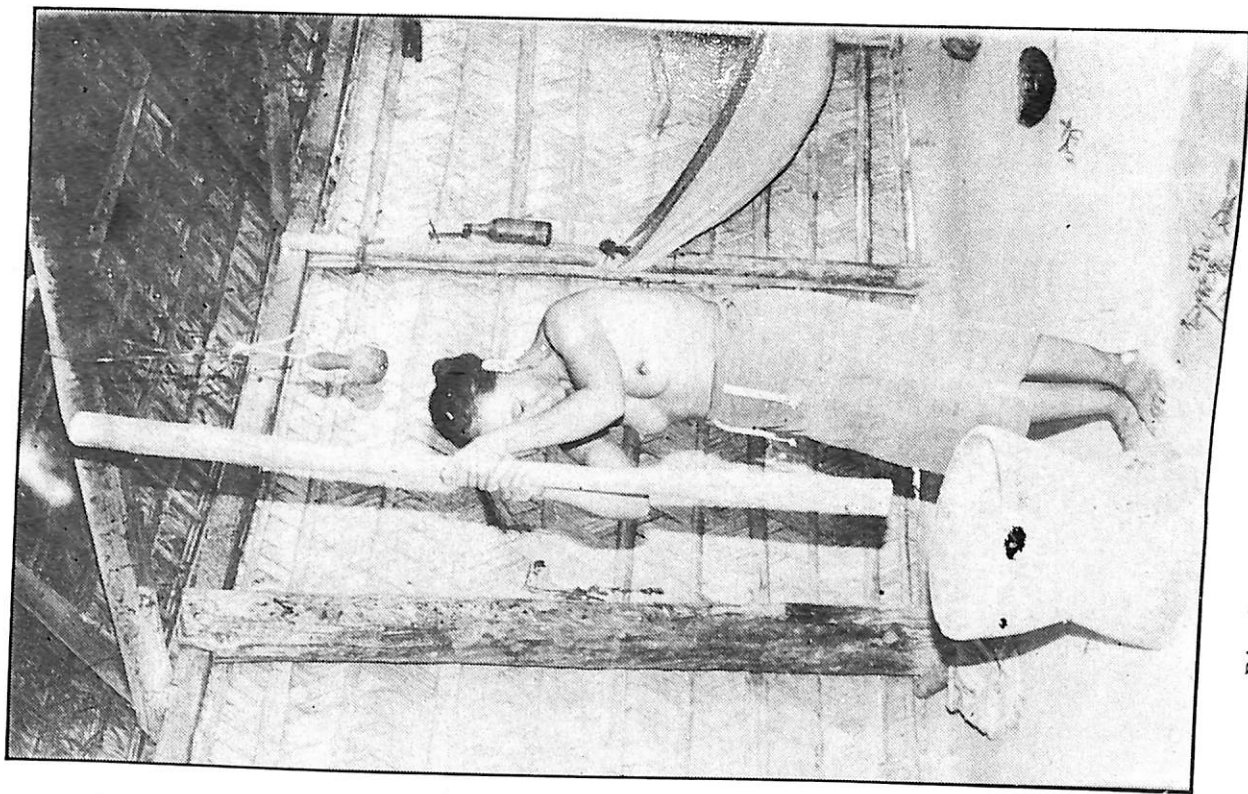
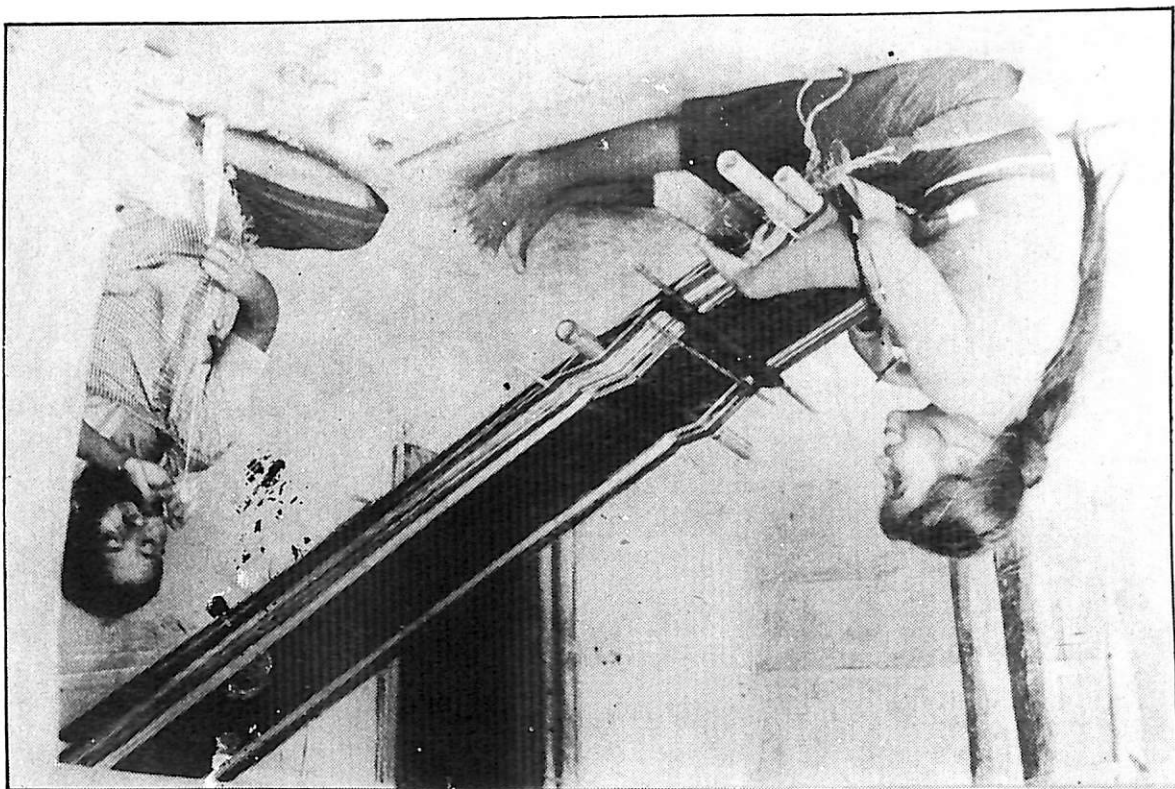
I. The village council, Me :

The traditional village council of the Karbis is called Me and this council is composed of all the elderly male members of the village. The council is presided over by the Gaonburah, the village headman. All the village disputes which are not of very grave or serious nature are settled by it. In addition to this the village council decides if the village is to be shifted



A Traditional Karbi House

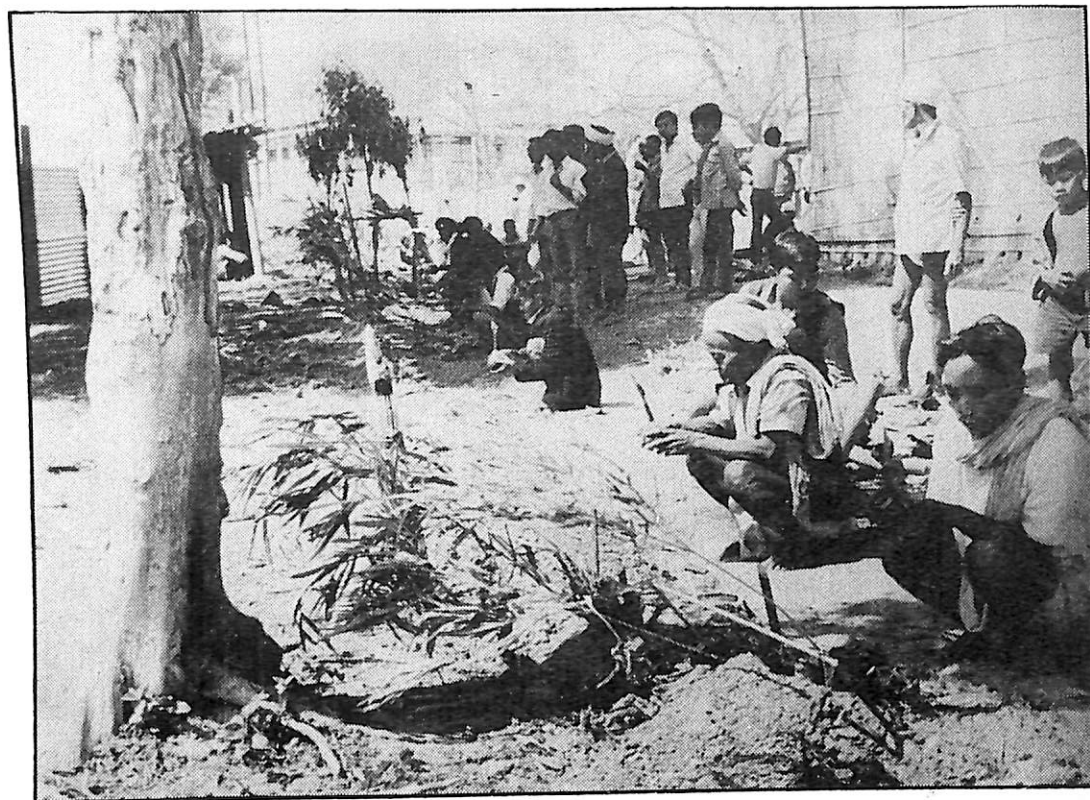
Weaving in traditional loom and spinning of homegrown cotton.



Rice-Pounding in traditional Karbi way



Karbi youths preparing jhum land for cultivation



Rongker festival performed by the Karbis



A Karbi couple in traditional dress and ornaments

to new Jhum sites and it distributes Jhum lands to be cultivated in a particular year to the families of the village. However, the Me has lost its original footing in the present context. Now people prefer to go to the law courts instead of referring the disputes to the village council.

II. Bachelors' Dormitory, Farla (Jirkedam)

The bachelors' dormitory of the Karbis, commonly known as Farla, is also known as Jirkedam. In the plains area of the Karbi Anglong district where there are no bachelors' dormitories, the Risomar or the youth club, serves more or less the same purpose although the functionaries are different.

The dormitory is constructed in a central place of the village with locally available construction materials. All the unmarried boys of the village from the age of 10 are the members of the dormitory and they are required to spend the nights at the dormitory. The Farla or Jirkedam has 10 Nos. of office bearers like Kleng Serpo (King), Klengdun (Chief Minister), Suderke the (Commander), Sudersu (Prince designate), Barlanpo (Surveyor), Motan Are and Motan Arbe (Guides), Chengbruk Are and Chengbruk Arbe (Small drum beaters), Than Are and Than Arbe (Convenors) Me Apai (Fire keeper) and Lang Apai (Water keeper).

In the Karbi society, the bachelors' dormitory can be regarded as an institution of social work. It performs all sorts of social services for the village in general and families in particular as and when such occasions arise. The members of the Farla or Jirkedam do not claim any monetary remuneration from the concerned family for the services it has rendered. For the invalids, destitutes and widows and the poorest of the poor in the village the services rendered by this institution can be considered as a boon.

This traditional institution is, however, gradually dying as it fails to withstand the onslaught of rapid changes brought about by development activities including the spread of education. But it is to be noted here that the spirit of offering a helping hand to the needy by the youths of a Karbi village

has not yet been eroded even by the absence of the building of the bachelors' dormitory.

III. The Grain Bank (Kerung Amei) :

The Karbis inhabiting the Karbi Anglong district has a very interesting traditional institution which caters to the needs of the poor families specially during the lean months of the year. It is an economic institution, pure and simple, based on fellow feelings and co-operation. It is the traditionally maintained grain bank called Kerung Amei. Three types of grain banks are found to be prevalent among the Karbis.

In the first type all the families irrespective of their social status have to contribute 5 kgs of paddy after the annual harvest to the grain bank. During the lean month of the next year the poor and needy families are given paddy on loan with the condition that the principal along with 50% interest in kind must be returned after the harvest.

The second type of grain bank is confined to the male youths of the village. An assigned plot of land is cultivated by them and the produce is kept in a granary. During lean months paddy is given on loan to the needy Karbi families to be repaid with 50% interest after the next harvest. The paddy found to be excess of requirement is sold only to the Karbi families at 10% less than the prevailing market price. The sale proceeds are used for the improvement of village library, school building, approach road, etc.

The third type of grain bank is confined to the aged male members of a Karbi village. In this case also like the type II an assigned plot of land is cultivated by all the aged persons of the village and the produce is kept in a store constructed specially for this purpose. This bank serves as the co-operative credit society. Paddy of the bank is sold when the price goes up and the sale proceeds are given to the needy families on loan to be repaid with cent percent interest.

The primary objective of the grain bank is to teach people to help themselves. Secondly the grain banks save the poor

Karbi families from the clutch of the unscrupulous village Mahajans. Thirdly the banks create a feeling of fraternity and brotherhood among the youth and divert their minds towards social works for the betterment of their villages.

Festivals :

Among the festivals observed by the Karbis, mention may be made of the Rangker and Hacha. While the former is a socio-religious one, the latter is a social one.

Rongker is performed at the beginning of the new year by propitiating the different gods and goddesses for the well being of the entire village. The deities are worshipped by all the elderly male people of the villages so that with their blessings the people of the village could be free from diseases, natural calamities during the year and the families could have a good harvest. The women are not allowed to enter into the worship arena.

There is another kind of Rongker performed in a greater scale. This type of Rongker which is performed at the beginning of every 5 years is called Wofong Rongker. This Wofong Rongker is performed for the well-being of all the people of the villages that fall within the jurisdiction of a Mauza (a revenue administrative region consisting of a number of revenue villages). Each revenue village is represented by the village headman and a number of village elders (males only) in the performance of the Wofong Rongker. While the Rongker performed for a village is only of one day's duration, the Wofong Rongker continues for two days.

The Karbis perform another festival called Hacha after the harvest. This is rather a marry-making festival where community eating, singing and dancing to one's heart content are the most striking features of this festival.

Dresses

The Karbis have their traditional dresses which are artistically designed. These dresses are woven at their family looms.

There are separate dresses for men and women. The aged men use an artistically designed shirt called Soinangpo and the shirt used by the young men is called Saihothor. The men use a loin cloth called Rikong. But now-a-days most of the male persons have abandoned its use. Only in the remote interior place Rikong is found to be used specially by married and aged persons. The use of turban called Poho is also fast disappearing.

The Karbi women and girls generally use Pinicamflak, a piece of cloth tied around the waist like a Mekhela. A piece of artistic cloth is used by them to cover the upper part of their body and it is called Jar-ek. A very highly artistic waist band called Wanpo is also used by every woman and girl. The ladies use coloured and striped Endi scarf called Khanjari during winter. During the performance of Chomangkong (death ceremony) young girls use a special Endi scarf called Dokherso. The Karbi women and girls are very fond of their traditional dresses and they have been using them even in the face of a strong competition of modern trends.

Ornaments

In the bygone days a Karbi man used to put on a brass made ear-ring called Narik, silver bracelet called Prinsoroi and heavy silver necklaces called Lekrooa and Lek-Enji. But now a days no male person of this community is found to have used them.

The most beautiful ornament put on by aged Karbi woman is Nothenpi, a pair of very big ear-ring made of silver. It is about two and a half inch in length having a diameter of about half inch. This ear-ring is detachable into two parts. The women and girls use silver bracelets called Rup-Aroir. Besides the necklace made of white beads called Lech-lo-so, the women are also found to have used a kind of necklace made of silver coins and red beads called Lek-Sike.

Dance and Music

Dance and music play an important role in the life of the Karbi society. All Karbi youths, both boys and girls, know

dancing. Various types of dances are performed by the youths during the performance of Chomangkong, the death ceremony and other socio-religious festivals. Hacha Kekan, the dance performed at the harvesting festival is very lively and eye-catching. Their traditional songs whether folk or religious, are generally sung by experts only who are not only well conversant with their meaning but are also endowed with sweet voices. During the performance of the cremation rites and the performance of the death ceremony, only a professional weeper called Uchepi is allowed to sing a melancholy song called Sarhe. They have a Karbi version of the Ramayana, but the most interesting part of this epic is that it is unwritten and it has been handed down from one generation to another orally.

The Karbis have very limited number of musical instruments. A big drum called Cheng is their main musical instrument. It is generally played by a master drummer called Duihudi. They also use small drums called Chengbruk. They have two kinds of flutes, the wooden flute is called Muri and bamboo flute is called Pangse. In some of their dances they use war shield made of rhinoceros's skin called Song and prototype war sword called Nok.

Food Habits

Like the other tribes of Assam, the staple food of the Karbis is rice. Other cereals like Dal are occasionally taken with rice. Vegetables grown in their Jhums, wild roots and tubers and eatable leaves collected from the nearby forests are also taken by them along with rice. Curry prepared with dry fish is their favourite delicacy. Rice is taken twice daily in the morning hours and in the evening. Pork and chicken are also very much liked by them. They catch fish in the nearby rivers, streams and in the marshy lands and collectively hunt wild boars and deer in the forests occasionally. Wheat products like Atta, Maida, Suzi, etc. are still unfamiliar in the remote areas. Those who have become accustomed to the habit of utilising these products as tiffin now-a-days, also do not relish

them. They rather prefer home grown maize in lieu of the wheat products.

The most favourite beverage of the Karbis is rice-beer which is brewed by every family at home. It is a pre-requisite for the celebration of every festival whether social, religious or socio-religious. Similarly it is also required in the observance of all religious rites. Guests are also entertained with rice-beer. Distilled liquor is also consumed by them occasionally.

Blank tea without sugar and milk is taken by them occasionally. They generally do not drink milk and even while taking tea it is not used. But those who are living in the urban, semi-urban and growth centres, are in the habit of drinking tea regularly twice to four times a day with sugar and milk.

Status of Women

Notwithstanding the fact that the Karbis follow the patriarchal system of family structure, the women in the Karbi society have more or less an equal status with men. Even after marriage the bride retains her surname. To denote fairsex 'pi' is used after the surname. In every work of the family whether in cultivation, cutting and clearing jungles for Jhum (shifting) cultivation, collection of food materials and fuel wood from the forests, etc. the women take an equal part with the males. Besides these works, they are required to cook food and to attend to all domestic works. In fact, in a Karbi family a woman works more than a man if we take into account the man-hours devoted by her in works per day. However, there are some taboos in respect of women prevalent even today in the Karbi society.

Firstly a woman is not allowed to attend a village court for any trial. In the community feast the women are not allowed to partake food along with men. They are to partake food separately. In the performance of Rongker, the community worship for the well-being and prosperity of the village, the presence of women is a taboo. Brewing of rice beer required in the family is the primary responsibility of the women.

Conclusion

During the recent years the Karbi society has undergone transformation and changes. The grip of inertia in which this society was found in the past, has now been slackened. In this connection the pioneering leadership was given by Late Khorsing Terang who was not only the first Chief Executive Member of the Karbi Anglong District Council but also the first Member of the Assam Legislative Assembly from the Karbi Community. Among the other leaders mention may be made of Mr. Nihang Rongpher, Mr. Chandra Sing Teron, Mr. Harsing Ingti, Mr. Chatra Sing Teron and Mr. Dhani Ram Rongpi who were not only the Chief Executive Members of the Karbi Anglong District Council, but were the Members of the Assam Cabinet also, Joysing Doloi, Mr. Sai Sai Terang, Mr. Biren Sing Ingti, Central Deputy Minister, Mr. Bidya Sing Engleng, Mr. Sam Sing Hanse, a Cabinet Minister in A. G. P. Government, Mr. Holiram Terang and many others.

From the point of view of folk-lore and folk-yongs the Karbis are very rich. It has been mentioned earlier that they have their own version of the Ramayana called Sabin Alun which has been handed down from generation to generation orally. In the literary field Prof. Rongbong Terang, Mr. Longkam Teron, Mr. Samsing Hanse, Mr. Lunse Timung, Mr. Song Bey, Mrs. Sathi Teronpi and many others have made significant contribution for the development of Karbi literature.

The Karbi women have also been coming up to accept the challenge of transition. Mrs. Banali Khongman, the first Karbi women graduate, had not only headed Assam Public Service Commission but headed later on the Union Public Service Commission too. There are a good number of Karbi women medical graduates. The Karbi girls are coming forward for higher education in greater numbers. In vocational trades like cutting, tailoring, knitting, embroidering, weaving, etc. the numbers of Karbi girls and women have been increasing at a very fast rate. The idea of getting oneself self-dependent has a very favourable impact on them.

The Karbis have now come forward to accept the developmental schemes of different sectors with a view to changing their own destiny. But at the same they are maintaining their culture which distinguishes them as a separate ethnic group. Although there has been some changes in the periphery, the core of the culture is intact.

To wean away the Karbis from Jhum cultivation, the Karbi Anglong District Council have established model villages where the Jhumiya families have been rehabilitated in compact areas by providing homestead and cultivable land and houses and other basic amenities. In recent years the Council has also started several Integrated Jhumiya Development Projects where Jhumiya families are offered scope for permanent cultivation by providing all the basic infrastructural facilities. The introduction of coffee and rubber cultivation by the Assam Cash Crops Development Corporation has also a very favourable impact on the Karbi cultivators, Measurers like these have helped the members of the Karbi society to adapt themselves to the new situations as well as changes for a better socio-economic life.

The Karbis living within the jurisdiction of the Karbi Anglong District have their own District Council which is managed by their own people. In other words, the Karbis have been managing their own affairs and they have a greater say in the planning and development process of their socio-economic life and this will surely enable them to develop themselves according to their own genius.

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THE LALUNGS (TIWAS)

Introductory :

The Lalungs prefer to call themselves as Tiwa. According to Lalung language 'Ti' means water and 'Wa' means superior. Although the Tibet region is believed to be the original homeland of the Lalungs, yet their migration to the plains is shrouded in mystery. As the Lalungs landed on the plains following the course of the river Brahmaputra, they introduced themselves as 'Tiwa' to the inquisitive non 'Tiwas'. The name Lalung, they opine, was given by the non Lalungs.

Origin of the word Lalung :

The Karbis called those people as Lalungs who were living on the south bank of the river Brahmaputra. 'Lā' means water and 'Lung' means rescued. The river Brahmaputra gave shelter to these Bohemian people, hence they were known as Lalungs. It is said that there was a branch of the river Daiyang in the Karbi Anglong called 'Nilalung'. During the reign of Kamata kings, the Lalungs had to leave their original habitat and established villages on the bank of the river 'Nilalung'. In course of time the people living on the banks of the river were known as Lalungs.

Mythical origins of the word Lalung is prevalent among the people. It is believed that Lord Siva, created, a god whose name was 'Lungtā Māhādeo'. 'Lung' means a stream of juice arising out of Lord Siva and 'Lā' means the formation of a living being out of that juice. The union of Lord 'Lunglā' and Jayanti Devi (Goddess Durga) produced three daughters. From the eldest, the Karbis were created while Boro Kacharis and Lalungs had their origins from the second and the youngest daughters respectively.

Another popular legend behind the word Lalung is that originally the Lalungs were ruled by the Demon king Bali who was a faithful devotee of Lord Vishnu. The king wanted that all his subjects should adhere to the royal religion. A section of the Lalungs refused to accept the religion and as a result the king's fury fell heavily upon them. As a punishment for their misbehaviour they were compelled to bear a red imprint ('Lāl') on their forehead and turned out of the country. Later on those bearers of red mark on their forehead came to be known as Lalungs.

Yet another mythological story behind the origin of the word 'Lalung' is prevalent among the Lalungs. Once Lord Mahadeo was heavily intoxicated with rice beer and while he was lying unconscious, a stream of saliva ('Lāl') came out from the mouth of Lord Mahadeo. The Lord created two human beings out of His saliva and they came to be known as Lalungs (human beings created out of Lord's ('Lāl'))

A similar story with some slight variation is also prevalent among the Lalungs. Once upon a time Lord Mahadeo and His consort Parvati were enjoying the scenic beauty of Manas-sarovar lake. The soothing beauty of the lake area enchanted the Lord so much that He soon fell asleep on the bank of the lake. As he woke up He saw five drops of saliva at the place where He was resting. The Lord created five human beings out of the five drops of saliva. As these five human beings were created out of the divine saliva they came to be known as Lalungs. These five 'original Lalungs had the unique privilege of seeing the creator in the form of human being and therefore the Lalungs call Lord Mahadeo as 'Manus Māhādeo'.

Origin of the word 'Tiwa' :

The Lalungs prefer to call themselves as 'Tiwa'. The name Lalung, they opine, was given by the non Lalungs. 'Ti' means water and 'Wa' means superior. As the Lalungs landed on the plains following the course of the river Brahmaputra, they introduced themselves as 'Tiwa' to the inquisitive non 'Tiwas'.

It is quite probable that 'Tiwa' derives its origin to the term 'Tibbatia' meaning people hailing from Tibet. In course of time this 'Tibbatia' might have changed into 'Tiwa'. It is believed that in ancient times the three great divisions of the Bodos namely 'Tipra', 'Tiwa' and 'Dimasa' lived along the banks of a lake near Tibet. In course of time they entered Assam through the north-east passes. The local people could not pronounce 'Tifra' and thus in their tongue 'Tifra' became 'Tipperā'; 'Tiwās' introduced themselves as 'Tiwā Libing' or 'Tiwā Libung'. In course of time the prefix 'Tiwā' was eliminated and in place of 'Libing' or 'Libung', Lalung came to be used. The Dimasa got suffix to its original name and it came to be known as Dimasa Kachari. Traditionally 'Tipperas', Lalungs and Dimasa Kacharis have close affinities. The 'Tipperas' use 'Ti' for water and 'Frā' for father. The Lalungs too, use 'Frā' for father. The Lalungs of Nagaon district address their supreme god as 'Fā Māhādeo'. Again both the Lalungs and the Kacharis worship Lord Siva as their supreme god. The synonyms for rice and water in their respective languages are 'Māi' and 'Di' or 'Ti'.
Migration :

Although there is no clear cut date about the migration of the Lalungs to the plains of Assam, yet it can be assumed that they had migrated to the plains sometime in the middle of the 17th. century A.D. "In 1658 Promota Rai rebelled against his grandfather Jasa Manta Rai, Raja of Jayantia and called on the tributary chief of Gobha to help him. The latter refused and Promota Rai thereupon destroyed four of his villages. He appealed for help to the Kacharis who were preparing to come to his assistance when the local Ahom officials intervened and said that, as the Ahoms were the paramount power it was they whose protection should be sought. The Gobha chief accordingly went with seven hundred men to Jayadhwaj Singha and begged for help. Orders were issued to the Borphukan to establish him in Khagarijan corresponding more or less to modern Nagaon and this was accordingly done."¹

1. Gait, E. A. — A History of Assam, p. 129, 1963 (Reprint)

The process of migration thus started along with this incident and later on batches of Lalungs began to enter the plains of Assam due to various socio-religious as well as political reasons.

Grierson, also did not mention about the date of migration of the Lalungs to Nagaon "How the Lalungs came to their present site or when is not known. They are not mentioned by the Ahom historians nor in the accounts of Koch kingdom. In Nagaon they are said to have a tradition that they came from the Jayantia Hills while some of the Lalungs in the latter district say that their ancestors immigrated thither in the reign of the Jayantia Raja U Mon Gohain. Another account, however says that the Lalungs claim to be the autochthones of the Jayantia hills." A legend goes that Lalungs, originally inhabiting the Jayantia hills moved into the plains of Nagaon district (Khagarijan) because they disliked matri-archal and matrilineal systems and human sacrifice of the Jayantias.

Lyall, mentions that Lalungs were living in the contiguous areas of the Mikirs. "Side by side with the Mikirs dwell in the Mikir Hills, the Rengma Nagas (who are recent immigrants from the eastern side of the Dhansiri) in the Jamuna and Diyaung villages, the Dimasa or Kacharis in the Jayantia Hills and along the Nagaon and Kamrup borders of Lalungs and a few settlement of Kacharis."

The Lalungs belong to the great Bodo race into which tribes like Boro Kachari, Chutiya, Deori, Rabha, Mech, Tipperā, Tiprā, Garo etc. are included. "The Kacharis are believed to be very closely allied to the Koches and also so far at least as language is concerned to the Chutiyas, Lalungs, Morans of the Brahmaputra valley and to the Garos and Tipperas of the southern hills."⁴ Endle in his ethnography on the Kacharis' has claimed the following tribes of Assam within the fold of the great Bodo race.

2. Grierson, G. A.—Linguistic Survey of India, 1967
3. Lyall, C. J.—The Mikirs, P. 3, 1908.
4. Bhuyan, S. K.—Kachari 'Buranji', P. XIV, 1951.

They are Rabha, Mech, Dimal, Koch, Solanimiyas, Mahaliyas, Phulgurias, Saranias, Dimasas, Hojais, Lalungs, Garos and Hajongs.

They are medium statured, strong built and generally white complexioned people which are the characteristic feature of the Mongoloids. They have flat nose, straight hair, wide faces with scanty beards and moustaches.

Setting :

Lalung concentrations are mainly found in the district of Nagaon in Central Assam. They are spread in Kapili, Mayang, Bhurbandha, Kathiatoli and Kampur Development Block areas of Nagaon district and the Nartiang Elaka of Jowai Sub-Division of Jaintia district of Meghalaya. Besides there are a few Lalung villages in Dhemaji areas of Dhemaji Sub-Division of Lakhimpur district, Titabar areas of Jorhat Sub-Division of Jorhat district and Sonapur areas of Guwahati Sub-Division of Kamrup district. While the Lalung villages of Nagaon, Lakhimpur, and Sibsagar districts are established in the plains areas, the Lalung villages of Karbi Anglong district are situated either in the hilly areas or in the foothills. Thus Lalung villages are found in Mukodo, Archon, Silaguri, Krom-Khunji, Khumraikhura, Khraikhokhunji, Khuntuba, Palikhunji, 'Deori' (Rankha Deori), Tharakhunji, Komnasal, Bormani, Amnisa, Chamaguri, Milan-khare, Khork, Muro, Suraimsai, Khonkhangkhunji, Chitemkhare, Sopengkxonokha, Umlartap, Hadao, Umbarman, Khonemkha, Mobai, Sunkum, Umkasi, Pongkrakhunji, Kamhaguri, Kathalaikhunji, Mukaguri, Uthangkunji, Singlangkhunji, Khianbat, Amboda, Ronkhoisa, Punbakhunji, Nartalsa, Morjikhunji, Daborghat and in Kaoliya.

It is to be noted that the topography and ecology of the plains and hills have influenced the Lalungs considerably so much so that certain aspects of socio-cultural life of the hill Lalungs became distinct from that of the plains Lalungs. Thus food habit, dress, pattern of houses, agricultural pattern etc., of the hill Lalungs are different from those of the plains Lalungs.

The Lalung villages of Nagaon and other plains districts are not exclusive areas. They are interspersed with non-Lalung villages. Most of these villages can be approached by a well organised road communication.

As per 1961 Census the total Lalung population was 61315. The figure rose to 95609 in 1971 Census. The estimated population as in March 1987 is 1,62,760. (1981 Census was not held in Assam).

The percentage of literacy among the tribals of Assam as per 1971 census is 26.03 male 34.62% and female 17.16% against the all India figure of 17.63% for male tribal and 4.85% for female tribals. The percentage of literacy among the Lalungs as per 1971 Census is 21.5 (male 31.5% and female 11.26%).

Food :

Rice is the staple food of the Lalungs. Their two major meals consist of rice and vegetables. Meat, fish and eggs are included in their menu. Dal is rarely taken. Fowl and pork are their delicacies. Guests are entertained with chicken or duck's flesh. As pork and chicken are essential items in their socio-religious ceremonies, pigs and fowls are reared by almost all the Lalungs. Milk is not considered as an item of food because milk and ricebeer ('Zu') do not go together. The Lalungs take locally brewed ricebeer in their day to day life. But of late consumption of rice beer is fast disappearing among the plains Lalungs mainly due to economic reason. But rice beer is an essential item in certain religious ceremonies. The educated section of the Lalungs discourage the ricebeer consumption and they take tea as beverage. Now-a-days guests are not entertained with 'Zu' rather betel leaves and nuts and tea with or without sugar or milk are first items of reception of casual guests. Previously, at least till the fifties of this century a visitor to a Lalung village had to taste 'Zu' as the refusal of 'Zu' was considered as disrespect to the host and community. The hill Lalungs, however, still prefer 'Zu' to tea.

Along with rice, boiled vegetables and roots and creepers also are taken.

They use variety of articles for preparation, consumption and storing of food. Big earthen pots are used for carrying and storing of water. Earthen pots are also used for the preparation of 'Zu'. Bell metal utensils are used for taking meals and 'Zu'.

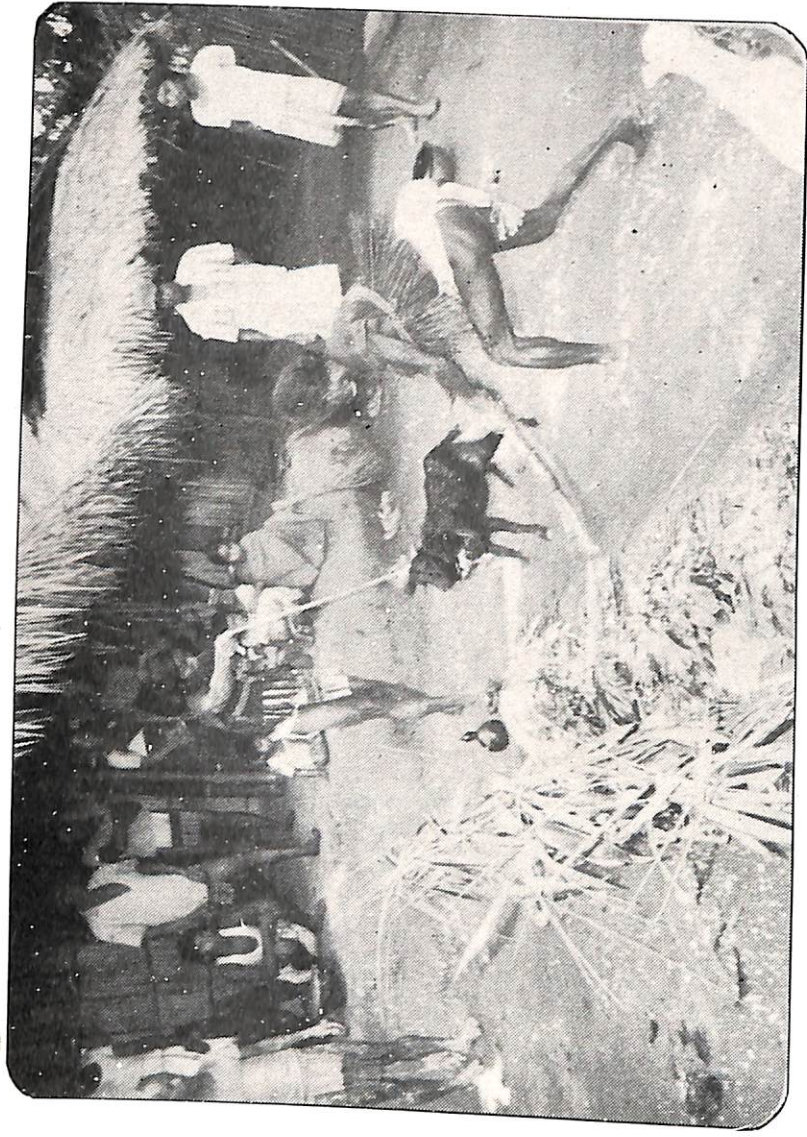
The food habit of the converted Lalungs is different in the sense that they scrupulously avoid 'Zu' and pork. The hill Lalungs have their own delicacies. 'Kharisā' (a mixture prepared out of bamboo shoots) and dried fish are the favourite items of food. 'Kharisā' is used in any kind of preparation. 'Zu' is freely taken by them. The hill Lalungs had a special delicacy of food cooked in bamboo pipes but or late, this is rarely taken.

Agriculture :

Various scholars opine that the ancestors of the Austric people introduced paddy cultivation in Assam. The Kirata influence is noticed in the entire agriculture operations of the plains including the methods of agriculture. It is well known that the tribals on the north eastern region, particularly those living in the hills practised 'Jhum' system of cultivation. Even today 'Jhum' cultivation is practised by the tribals living in the hilly areas of Karbi Anglong district. As mentioned earlier the Lalungs were living in the Jayantia hills for a considerable period of time and they adopted the 'jhum' system while staying in the hills. But coming down to the plain they practised 'Sali' paddy cultivation. 'Hā' in Bodo and Lalung means land and 'Li' means wide. Thus paddy grown in wide land is known as 'Hāli'. Thus 'Hāli' became 'Sali' in due course of time and today Sali paddy is the major crop among the plains Lalungs which they cultivate with all seriousness. The method adopted is settled plough cultivation. 'Ahu' and 'Bao' paddies are also grown in a limited scale. Along with 'Sali', 'Ahu' and 'Bao' paddy, the Lalungs grow some quantities of sesame, 'matimah', mustard, arum, turmeric, ginger, bringel, chillies etc.



A Lalung (Tiwa) woman at the hearth



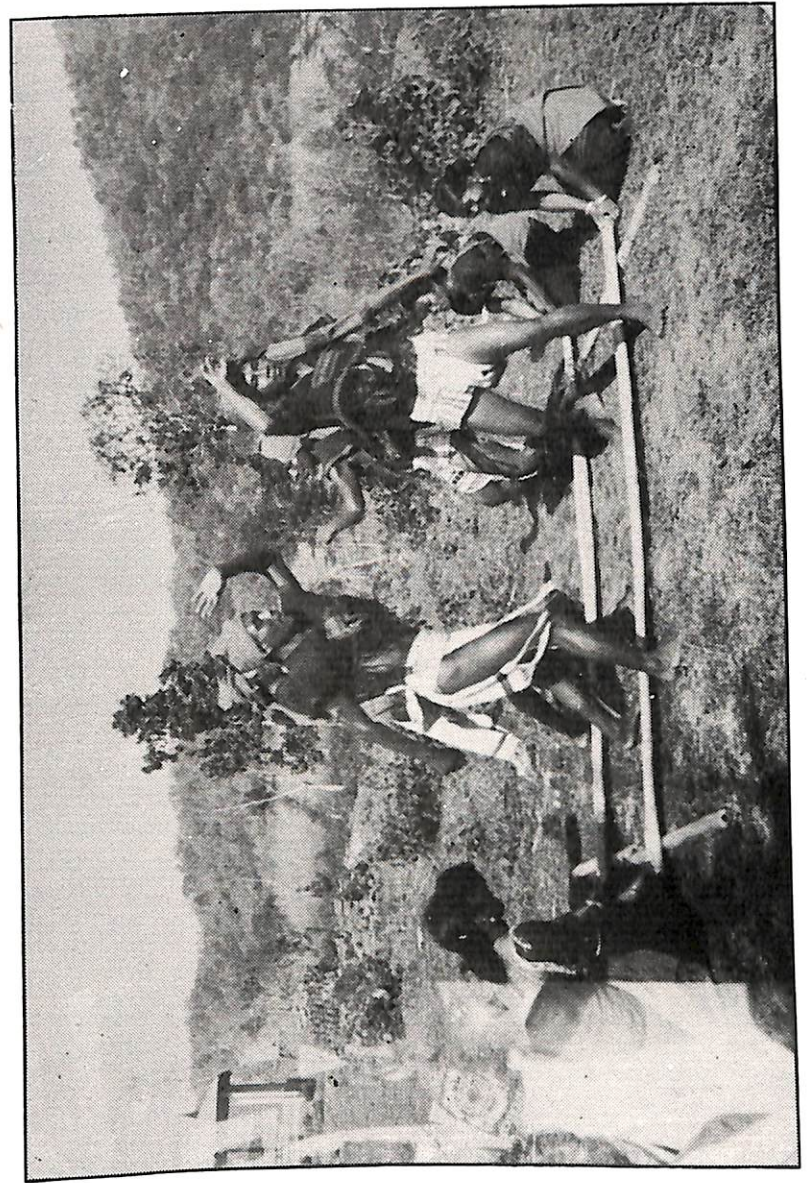
Sacrificing a goat to the deity by the Lalung (Tiwa) priest



Rice pounding in traditional Lalung way



Two Lalung (liwa) women in their traditional dress and ornaments



Bamboo dance performed by the Lalungs (Tiwas)

Certain religious ceremonies like 'Dhānar Muthi Lowā' is observed by the Lalungs in connection with starting of agricultural operations. The 'Barghar' (place of traditional worship) is the venue for such ceremony and the 'Gharburā' (the religious head) presides over the function. Similarly certain socio-religious ceremonies are observed in connection with harvesting of paddy. By the middle of December the crops are harvested. Those families which possess more than 20 Bighas of agricultural land seek the help of the entire village community, a system known as 'Hāuri'. The villagers cut the stalks of paddy along with the rhythmical songs. This is called 'Māi Rāwā'. The community harvesting is always associated with dance and merry-making. The young men carry the paddy bundles by singing 'Māi Misāwā' songs. On the last day of harvesting (or after one month) a feast is arranged where the villagers, who took part in the harvesting, are invited. 'Zu' is a must item for such occasion. This is called 'Narā Sigā Khowā'.

Hunting and Fishing :

Among the Lalungs the community hunting is fast disappearing. However individual hunting is practised by a few. Bow and arrow, dao and fire arms are used for individual hunting.

Fish catching is much more popular and very frequently expedited in the winter season. The people go out for fishing in groups or individually. Fishing in groups on the occasion of the 'Jon Bilā Mela' is a treat to the onlookers. Groups of people go to the beel and construct artificial barrier with mud. Then the entire group of people suddenly jump over the barricaded water and catch the fish with the help of fishing implements like 'Pala' and 'Juluki' etc. During summer season fishing nets are used for individual fish catching in the rivers.

House :

The pattern of a plains Lalung house is almost similar to that of the Boro Kacharis, a predominant plains tribe

of Assam. They construct their houses on plinth. The hill Lalungs construct their houses in traditional pattern on plinths. Thatch is used for roofing. Walls are made of reeds and bamboos. Generally bamboo posts are used in their houses but the well-to-do sections use wooden posts. Of late Assam type houses with C. I. sheet roofing are also seen in plains Lalung villages. The plinth of the cooking house ('Barghar') is raised about 2/3 feet above the ground in order to distinguish it from other apartments or cottages. 'Chorāghar' an out house is constructed a few yards away from the main house where guests are entertained and unmarried young boys sleep at night. Now-a-days in most of the Lalung villages the 'Chorāghar' is replaced by a portico or an additional house near the main house. In between 'Chorāghar' and 'Barghar' there is a 'Mājghar', which is used for sleeping purposes. The 'Mājghar' may have two or three rooms. The 'Barghar' also has two rooms—one meant for the household deity and the other for cooking purposes. Generally the room towards west is used for the household deity. Certain rules are to be maintained while constructing the 'Barghar'. The main post of the 'Barghar' is erected after completion of the construction of the house. Except priestly officials such as 'Gharburā', 'Zelā' and 'Hāri Kunwari', others are not allowed to go near the 'Thunākhotā'. People belonging to 'Mikir' (Karbi), Kachari and Koch only are allowed to enter the 'Barghar'.

The granary is constructed towards east. Those who do not possess granaries a corner of the living room or 'Chorāghar' is used for this purpose. The hill Lalungs prefer to store their paddies in 'Kerehi' (a big container made of barks of trees). Certain taboos are observed in connection with the granary. One must not enter the granary in the month of 'Magh' (January/February).

There is a courtyard in front of a Lalung house. It is encircled by houses with a passage on the eastern and southern direction. In small families the courtyard is in front of the house. It is used for drying paddies, threshing and such other activities.

Whether it is constructing a house or harvesting paddy of any individual member, the Lalungs co-operate with one another. Thus if a villager wants to construct or repair his house, he formally invites the youths of the village dormitory called 'Sāmādi' for the purpose. In lieu of the service the owner of the house has to entertain the youths with 'Zu' and other eatables.

Every clan has its 'Barghar' (place or community worship). It is a hall type room constructed in the campus of a respectable clan member. There is the altar, in one end of the house. Besides the 'Barghar' there is the 'Thān' which, however, is not a family or 'Bansha' affair. The 'Thān' is constructed in an out of the way place which is used during certain religious occasions only. A 'Thān' may be for the entire community e. g. 'Mahadeosāl' or 'Deosāl' (about 1 k.m. east of Jagiroad). Generally C. I. sheets and wooden posts are used in the 'Thāns'.

Of late 'Namghar' (public congregational hall of the rural Assamese people) becomes popular among the plains Lalungs, particularly among the converted Lalungs.

The Lalungs had a proud tradition of well managed dormitory called 'Sāmādi'. This institution was the nucleus for training the youths in the arts and crafts and musical lore of the Lalungs. It also acted as the venue for the village council. Among the plains Lalungs of Nagaon this institution is fast disappearing while the hill Lalungs are still maintaining the traditional character of the 'Sāmādis'. 'Sāmādis' are built on platforms raised about one meter from the ground. It is a big hall without walls on the sides. There is a big fireplace in the centre of the hall with logs of wood all around for sitting purposes. The main post and the beam towards entrance are decorated with motifs. Bones of pigs killed during religious ceremonies are hung from the beam. Drums and flutes used during festivals are kept in the 'Sāmādi'.

Dress :

The plains Lalung women wear dresses similar to those worn by other rural Assamese women. The dress constitutes one 'Mekhelā', one 'Chādar' and one 'Riha'. In

various festive occasions they wear 'Singkhāp Mekhelā', 'Riha', 'Sondiā Kāpor', 'Thenus' (Chadar), 'Seleng', 'Sakathiā' and 'Farke' (blouse). Lalung women are experts in weaving and they weave most of the clothes for both male and female. They also weave 'Mānkāpor' and 'Borkāpor' for special occasions. In festive occasions the ladies wear 'Thongāli' (waist band). The dresses of the menfolk are similar to those of other Assamese menfolk. In the past dhoties woven by the womenfolk were the major item of dresses. Now-a-days only elderly men wear dhotis. 'Nimāi' Solā and 'Thāglā' were the shirts for the menfolk but today these are not in vogue among the plains Lalungs. The young men and boys wear trousers, bush shirts, ganjies etc.

The dresses of the hill Lalungs, however, are different from those of their plains counterpart. A hill Lalung puts on a narrow strip of cloth called 'Lengti' about half a cubit in breadth and six or seven feet in length. Some embroidery works are done with red threads about three inches in breadth, on both ends of the 'Tangāli'. The men of status keep both ends of the 'Tangāli' longer. The male Lalungs wear a shirt prepared locally. In the lower end of the shirt there are specially designed threads called 'Dahi'. Turbans are worn by the elderly Lalungs. The womenfolk use 'Mekhelās' over the breasts which extend a few inches below the knees. A 'Chādar' is also used over the body.

In their daily walk of life the office bearers do not wear any special dress. The Rājās have their traditional dresses which they wear on specific occasions. The dress of the 'Rājā', constitutes a 'Mugā dhoti', a 'Muga Solā', one 'Mugā Phāguri', one cotton 'Chādar', one silver necklace, two 'Gāmkhāru' (bracelets) and two ear rings ('sihā'). Besides these, the 'Raja's dress during festivals includes two 'Lāngkoī' (sword), one 'Aaron', one 'Bisani', one 'Rupar Pātra', one 'Thonā' and one 'Nisān'.

Ornaments :

Scanty ornaments are used by the Lalung women more as a sign of femininity than for enhancing the effectiveness

of the personal appearance of the wearer. Some elderly women wear silver, bead or stone necklaces and ear rings. Formerly the womenfolk wore 'Gāmkhāru' (silver / gold bracelets), 'Sipatmani' (necklace), 'Gotakhāru' (bracelet), 'Sen Patia Angathi' (a specially designed ring), but today these are not used by the womenfolk. The menfolk used to wear 'Sihā' (earring made of gold and silver). Decoration which signifies tattooing and marks on the body is, however, conspicuous by its absence among the Lalungs.

Weaving :

The womenfolk are experts in weaving and almost every household possesses one loom. Knowledge of weaving is considered as a qualification for the bride and the women feel ashamed of if they do not know the art of weaving. They also know the methods and ingredients of indigenous dye making.

Arts & Crafts :

The Lalungs can express their artistic tendencies in their textile designs. Both floral and geometrical designs are popular among them. They are also experts in bamboo and cane works. Cane baskets of various designs are widely used by the womenfolk. Bamboo and cane products like 'Japā' (a suitcase), 'perā' (a big suitcase), 'Petari' (a small suitcase), 'Sarāi' Batā (wooden plates with stand) are the specialities of the menfolk. They also make canoes, spinning wheel by cutting wood pieces. In 'Barat' and 'Sagrā Misāwā' festivals the people use varieties of masks made of bamboo slices and clothes. Carvings of animals and birds are seen in the entrance beam of the 'Sāmādi'. Besides, they carve beautiful elephant designs in combs which are used in 'Sagrā Misāwā' festival.

Weapons :

In the olden days the Lalungs might have excelled in blacksmithy. There are enough traces of Lalung blacksmithy in Kamarkuchi, a village near Jagiroad. Cannons and swords were made in this village for the 'Rajas'.

Stone and Metal works :

The Lalung specimens of stone and metal works which are displayed in various places inside the Lalung villages, reveal their past glorious skill. Sonaikuchi, as the name indicates is the village where gold ornaments were made.

Musical Instruments :

The Lalungs are lovers of music and dance. They observe innumerable religious ceremonies throughout the year and various musical instruments are used on these occasions. There are three varieties of 'Khrāms' (drum) viz 'Khrāmbār' (big drum), 'Pisu Khrām' (small drum) and 'Khrām' of general size. Flutes made of bamboos are used along with drums. 'Kāli' (pipe), 'Tandrang' (indigenous violin) 'Thogāri' (a string instrument) are other musical instruments.

Social Institutions :

A Lalung family usually consists of father, mother and their unmarried children. In other words they have a nuclear or primary type of family which is, by and large, a universal human social grouping. The Lalung elementary family has a variable where a further generation of old father, old mother of the existing head of the family live together. In such families the son's wife ungrudgingly carry out the orders of her husband's mother. Such type of family also incorporates the unmarried brothers and sisters of the head of the family i. e. family of orientation.

Property and Inheritance :

The properties of the Lalungs can be broadly divided into two viz. movable and immovable. The former includes agricultural implements, musical instruments, utensils, dress and ornaments, livestock etc. The immovable property includes land, both agricultural and basti and these belong to the family. After the death of the father or even before his death the land is divided equally among his sons. The father may keep one share for his exclusive use, which after his death goes to that son who lives with him and takes care of him till his death. The house goes to that son who lives with his father till his death.

Among the plains Lalungs daughters do not inherit property. But reverse is the case among the matrilineal hill Lalungs. The hill Lalungs allow their daughters to inherit property from their mothers.

Clan Organisation :

The Lalungs are divided into a number of exogamous clans ('Wāli or Kul') namely 'Mācharang, Māchereng, Māgar, Mādur, Lādur Puru, Sāgārā, Māloi, Fāngsong, Pumā, Dāfoi, Mithi, Lamfoi, Sukāi, Khoroi, Aagārā, Chānsārā, Kāsā, Cholong, Muni, Melāng, Kakhor, Dārfoing, Fārpāng, Dāmlong, Amsong, Amsi, Khālār and Loron. Originally they had only twelve clans but later on these main clans have been subdivided into a number of sub-clans called 'Dhan Bangah'. The subclans are :—

Clan	Subclan
1. Mācharang	Māchereng, Māgor
2. Mādur,	Lādur, Puru, Sāgārā
3. Māloi	Fāngsong, Pumbe (Pumā)
4. Dāfor	Mithi, Lomfoi
5. Sukāi	Khārāi
6. Āmfli	Aāgārā, Chānchārā
7. Lāsā	Mithi
8. Chalang	Muni, Melāng
9. Āmsong	Amsi
10. Kākhor	Aagāri
11. Dārnonng	Dāmlong, Kholre
12. Lorom	

It may be noted that the figure twelve has certain socio-political significance among them. Thus we find 'Bārapujia', 'Bārabhuni' etc. "It seems to have been the practice in this part of India for kings to appoint twelve advisers or Governors. Naranarayan had twelve ministers of state, twelve Chiefs or Dolois administered the hilly portion of the Raja of Jaintia's dominions and there were twelve state councillors in Nepal. The number may thus have connected in the minds of the people with all dignitaries ranking next to a Raja and so have come to

be used in a purely conventional sense.”, Probably keeping this in view the Lalungs had established small principalities called ‘Sāto Rajya’ and ‘Pācho Rājya’.

They have a ‘Khutā’ system of social grouping which can also be called extension of a family. Following the genealogy each family of a certain clan forms a social grouping called ‘Bangsha’ or ‘Khutā’. A ‘Khel’ (clan) consists of several such ‘Khutās’. Generally a single ‘Khutā’ does not form a ‘Khel’. In a single village there may be people of one or more than one clan. It may be noted that every family in a village must itself be affiliated to a ‘Khutā’. Whether solemnising a marriage ceremony or observing a death rite, the ‘Khutā’ plays an important role in the family.

A Lalung ‘Khel’ selects a ‘Giyāti’ (priest) to preside over the socio-religious occasions like ‘Karam’ and allied ceremonies. The ‘Zelā’ (an expert in the tribal folklore and religion) plays a major role in a Lalung village and he must be selected by a ‘Khel’.

They also maintain a clan superiority. Thus ‘Bāra Bhuni’, ‘Na Bhuni’, ‘Sāt Bhuni’ divisions are noticed in the Lalung society. Inter ‘Bhuni’ marriages are allowed. The ‘Bāra Bhuni’ clans are mostly found among the Karbis while the Lalungs have ‘Na Bhuni’ and ‘Sāt Bhuni’. The clans belonging to ‘Na Bhuni’ are considered as superior clans. It may, however, be noted that this clan superiority does not create any social imbalance or vertical mobility among the people of various clans. Some Lalung clans are totemic while others trace their origin to certain characteristics of ancestors or natural objects. Every clan has its own deity which is worshipped by the clan members

Titles :

The Lalungs use a number of titles which in earlier days indicated social hierarchy. The Titles commonly found among them are Deo Raja, Deka Raja, Pator, Senapati, Konwar, Bordoloi, Doloi Kakati, Māntā, Deori, Bharali etc.

5. Gait, E. A. —History of Assam, 1963.

Social Stratification :

The Lalung society is a stratified society and there are different office bearers in a village having different socio-religious assignments. But except in socio-religious occasions, the structural difference, is hardly noticed. Among the Lalungs a village does not form the lowest administrative unit. The lowest administrative unit is a ‘Buni’ constituting more than one village. For the smooth running of the ‘Bunis’ there are different office bearers namely ‘Lorok’, ‘Forongāi’, ‘Chāngmāji’, ‘Koroimāji’, ‘Deori’, ‘Hātāri’ and ‘Rāndhani’.

The social organisation of the Lalungs is split into two categories. The first category may be called as secular village organisation which is headed by the Gaonbura and assisted by an official called ‘Bārikā’. To run the affairs of a ‘Sāmādi’ there are four categories of officers namely ‘Chāngdolo’, ‘Chāngmāji’, ‘Hurumā’ and ‘Khurāmul’. There may be two persons each in the latter two categories. The non-secular organisation or religious organisation is run by three office bearers namely ‘Gharburā’, ‘Zelā’ and ‘Hārikunwari’. Besides there is a Deori to preside over the worship at ‘Thān’.

Before the advent of the British, the Lalungs had their own independent ‘Rājās’ whom they called ‘Deo Rājā’. One of the important principalities was Gobha. There were twelve small ‘Rājās’ called ‘Powāli Rājā’ and there existed several ‘Bunis’ under the administrative control of a certain ‘Rājā’. The ‘Rājā’ is assisted by a number of office bearers viz ‘Bordoloi’, ‘Konwar’, ‘Pātra’ ‘Barbarua’ ‘Dhuliā’, ‘Daliā’, ‘Kāliā’ and ‘Pāik’. All these ranks were hereditary.

Today changes in the village structure have taken place in some Lalung villages in Nagaon area. In these villages, besides the Gaonbura, there are ‘Pāthek’, ‘Medhi’, ‘Gāyon’ and ‘Bharāli’ who have been assigned different roles in the socio-religious ceremonies. It may be noted that these office bearers are found in almost all the Vaisnavite Assamese villages and the converted Lalungs have introduced the same in their village structure.

Politically the villages are administered under the Panchayati Raj system.

Kinship :

Kinship forms the basis of social relationship in the homogeneous societies. It plays an important role both in the regulation of behaviour between persons and in the formulation of social and political groups. "The study of kinship helps to measure the social relationship of a particular community. It is the rod on which one leans throughout life."⁶ Lowie calls it "veritable institution in most simple societies, for it is the regulator of behaviour in innumerable situations".⁷ In traditional societies social relations of the individuals are primarily regulated by kinship bond. Radcliffe Brown⁸ therefore says that kinship is an arrangement which enables persons to live together and co-operate with one another in an orderly social life.

Kinship Terminology :

The terms of address and terms of reference prevalent among the Lalungs reveal that the terms of reference are more distinctly applied than the terms of address. Father, mother, elder brother and elder sister are addressed and referred to by distinct kinship terms while son, daughter, younger brother and younger sister are addressed by their personal names. Separate kinship terms are applied for referring them. Uttering of husband's name is taboo. The husband also does not utter the name of wife. They, however, address each other technonymically.

The kinship terminology prevalent among the Lalungs, particularly of the plains, may be termed as descriptive. But the use of certain classificatory kinship terminology cannot be overlooked. Thus 'Māgārā Ayung' is used to address

6. Firth, Raymond—We the Tikopias, 1936, P. 92.
7. Lowie, Robert, H—Social Organisation, 1966, P. 59.
8. Radcliffe Brown, A. R. and Forde, Daryll—African system of Kinship and Marriage, 1950.

father's elder sister as well as mother's elder sister. Similarly 'Mā-Aa-Ayung' denotes father's elder brother as well as mother's elder sister's husband.

It has been observed that Lalung terms of reference are more in number than the terms of address. The villagers do not confine their kinship terms within the limit of actual kin members, rather they are extended to outsiders who may not belong to the community.

Marriage :

Among the Lalungs marriage is the accepted form of union between a man and a woman. Illegal unions especially incestuous relations are very much hated and in no circumstances social recognition is given to such unions. Marriages are solemnised after the attainment of property. Boys usually marry between the ages of 20 to 25 and girls between 16 to 22. Clan exogamy is strictly adhered to. Monogamy is the socially recognised type of marriage although cases of polygyny cannot be ruled out. Preferential marriage including cross cousin marriages are not in vogue. Levirate is not practised while sororate is socially approved. There is no bar for a widow to enter into marriage if she gets a widower. Cases of divorce are few and far between.

Broadly the Lalungs have four forms of marriage. They are :

1. 'Bor Biyā'
2. 'Gobhiā Rakhā'
3. 'Joron Biyā'
4. 'Poluāi Anā'

'Borbiya' :

The well-to-do and educated Lalungs prefer this form of marriage which entails huge expenditure and long drawn formalities. In this type of marriage the guardians of the prospective couple take the initiative. 'Zelas' or go betweens who are experts in the historical and legendary background of the community play important roles in such marriages.

Borbiya continues for three days. Two days before the marriage the groom and the bride are ceremonially bathed in their respective houses. Marriage ritual is observed at the house of the bride on the third day. During the day sumptuous feasts are arranged for the villagers in both the households, 'Zu' and pork from essential items in the marriage feast for the non convert Lalungs. In the evening the groom along with his friends and the 'Zelā' proceeds to the girl's house. The marriage procession is preceded by a 'Garakhīā Bhār' which contains one stack of banana ('Bhim Kal'), one pot of milk, three pots of rice and some betel leaves and nuts. The elderly villagers gather at the girl's house and the bride and groom bow down before them who bless the couple for a happy conjugal life. Towards dawn the couple returns to the groom's house.

'Gobhiā Rakhā' :

At present the Lalungs, particularly of the plains, are patriarchal people but a very thin link of old matriarchal system is traced which is reflected in the 'Gobhiā Rakhā' system of marriage. Generally parents having a lone daughter without any male issue prefer to have a 'Gobhiā'. Not much ritual formalities are observed in such type of marriage. Except the entertainment of the villagers of the girl's side with a small feast no other ceremony is necessary for such marriage.

'Joron Biyā' :

For all practical purposes this is an arranged marriage minus the details of a 'Bor Biyā'. Generally persons of low income groups take resort to this type of marriage. When both the parents of the prospective bride and groom agree to the marriage, a date is fixed for the 'Joron' ceremony. On the appointed date the boy's party consisting of the elderly relatives proceeds to the girl's house with ornaments, dresses and three 'Bhārs' (baskets full of eatables including 'Zu'). The elderly people of girl's village bless the couple for happy conjugal life. After some entertainment the boy's

party returns to the groom's house along with the bride which marks the end of the marriage.

'Poluāi Anā Biyā' :

'Poluāi Anā' or marriage by elopement is widely prevalent among the Lalungs. Traditionally Lalung marriages are held under this system and no social stigma is attached to it. Most of the families try to avoid the irksome procedure of a formal marriage although they have the eagerness to solemnise formal marriages. Another reason may be the less expenditure involved in the 'Poluāi Anā' marriage. Besides love at first sight is one of the major causes for solemnising 'Poluāi Anā' marriage. The boy and the girl decide this course as they are not sure whether their parents will agree to their marriage. The boy takes away his beloved to his residence at night with the help of his friends. Next day two or three relatives of the boy proceed to the girl's house to inform the girl's father about the matter. The parents of the girl generally do not come in the way of the union if this is within acceptable social norm. On the seventh day a small ceremony called 'Sajāti Dekhuā' is observed at the 'Borghar' of the boy's clan. Elderly male relatives and co-villagers are invited and 'Zu' is arranged. A party from the boy's house consisting of two relatives of the boy and the 'Zelā' proceeds to the girl's house. The party holds discussion with the parents of the girl and finalises a date for the couple's visit to the girl's house. On the stipulated date, which generally falls after one week, the couple along with the friends proceed to the girl's house along with a 'Bhār' containing one big rice beer pot, one basketful of 'Pithā' (rice cakes), one big bunch of nuts and five 'Gusis' (one 'Gusi' equals to 20 pieces) of betels. The parents of the girl invite the fellow villagers who are entertained with the eatables from the boy's house. The boy's party, returns after getting a date for the 'Bhār Singā' ceremony which generally takes place after six months or one year. This time two 'Bhārs' are taken to the girl's house by the boy's party. The couple is recognised as formally married by the elderly villagers

of girl's village in a simple ceremony at 'Barghar'. A big feast is arranged for this occasion where rice beer forms an important item.

Among the hill Lalungs 'Gobhiā' is the most popular form of marriage. The rule of clan exogamy is strictly followed even in this type of marriage.

Bride Price :

Among the Lalungs bride price is very nominal which may be Rs. 7.00 or Rs. 9.00. Formerly the bride price in informal marriages ranged from Rs. 107.00 to Rs. 707.00.

Religious Beliefs :

The religion of the Lalungs is based on a belief in some deities. Their religion can be considered as one of the branches of the Hindu religion. Except the Vaisnava converts, the Lalungs are the followers of 'Sākta' religion but their images in the 'Thāns' and puja paraphernalias are not the same as those used by other non-Lalung Saktas. The hill Lalungs worship stone images of deities while their plains counterpart do not instal any image in the altar. Of course the 'Zelā' or 'Tripod' is found in their altars which is a symbol of Lord Siva. The officials entrusted to perform religious ceremonies are 'Loro', 'Deori' and 'Chāngmāji'. The 'Gharburā' not only presides over the pujas held in 'Barghars' he also offers oblations to the ancestors of a 'Khutā'.

Lord Mahadeo is their supreme God. All worships begin with a prayer to Lord Mahadeo.

They worship many deities and 'Barghar', 'Thānghar' and Nāmghar are the places of community worship. Every 'Khutā' or 'Bangsha' has a 'Borghar'. The 'Borghar' has two altars, one for the main deity and the other for ancestors. Pujas are held in the 'Barghars' where 'Gharburā' and 'Hāri Kunwari' play major roles. The 'Barghar' is considered as a very sacred place by the Lalungs. If any member of a 'Khutā' proceeds to a distant place, he offers prayers at the altar of the 'Barghar'

before leaving for the place. Unlike Nāmghar, the 'Barghar' cannot be used for holding any 'Mel' or discussion.

The Lalung deities should be regularly propitiated by offerings and sacrifices. Besides 'Māhādeo', 'Ganesh', 'Parameswar', Badarmāji 'Bāolākong' and 'Kuber' are their benevolent male deities while 'Aai Gosāni', 'Lakhimi', 'Padumi', 'Kālikā', Kāmākhya', 'Saru Aai', 'Bor Aai', 'Aakari', 'Jogatjuri', 'Kāni Andheli' are the important benevolent female deities.

'Thāns' are established for each village or a group of villages. Again the villagers of a particular area may affiliate themselves with 'Thāns' of different areas. Thus the Lalungs of Barapujia were the worshippers of twelve 'Thāns' hence they are known as 'Bārapujia'. Public worships are performed in these 'Thāns' occasionally where the 'Deori' presides. There may be separate 'Thāns' for different deities. Thus 'Thāns' are found in the names of 'Māhādeo', 'Kesāikhāti', 'Bhāgawati', 'Sani', 'Mālthakur' etc. At present considerable changes have taken place in the mode of 'Thān' worship. Sacrifices of animals are rarely resorted to. 'Māh Prasād' (Mug, gram, banana etc) is offered as 'Naibedya' before the deities. This is happening due to the influence of the Mahapurushia Vaisnav cult which is gaining some ground among a certain section of the plains Lalungs. Thus today there are two broad religious divisions viz. the traditionalists and the Vaisnavites. It may be noted that inspite of the religious division, a non Lalung visiting the Lalung villages will hardly be able to locate any rift in their day to day life.

Besides the above mentioned Pujās, the Lalungs observe 'Deo Sewā', 'Kālikā Puja', 'Bhakat Sewā', 'Aai Bhāgawati', 'Jangkang Puja', 'Hogorā Puja', 'Mā lPuja', 'Rāti Sewā', 'Maral Puja' etc. during a year.

Festivals :

The Lalungs have elaborate festivals which are closely linked with worship of different deities. Songs and dance along with rhythmical tunes of 'Khrāmbār', 'Kiringādhol', flute and 'Gamonā' form important part of their festivals.

The important festivals are the Bihu or 'Bisu', 'Barat', 'Sagrā Misāwā', 'Wānsuā' or 'Wānzūā', 'Jon Bilā Melā', etc. 'Lo Ho Lā Hāi' and 'Lāli Hilāli' are two songs sung in different socio-religious occasions.

Death and Disposal of the Dead :

Both cremation and burial are practised. Previously dead bodies of wealthy and respectable persons only were cremated but now-a-days cremation is the general rule. The dead bodies of minors, accident cases, pregnant women, drowned persons, epidemic cases etc. are buried. Dying inside the house is not considered as ominous, rather the Lalungs prefer death inside the house. Every village has a common cremation/burial ground called 'Hāthām'. Formerly all the dead bodies were bathed but now-a-days only the dead bodies of respectable persons are bathed. The corpse is covered with new clothes. The 'Giyāti', both male and female, take all the responsibility of the cremation rites and the male 'Giyāti' applies fire in the pyre.

The hill Lalungs prefer burial which they call 'Sepāt Thowā'.

The Lalungs believe in the existence of evil spirits and therefore take precaution particularly when they return from cremation/burial ground. The persons attending the burial or cremation have to purify themselves by touching fire and purificatory water and taking bath.

During the period of bereavement the family of the deceased has to observe certain taboos. The 'Khel' directs the members of the bereaved family about the use of 'Khārmās (non vegetarian meal). On the 3rd. or 7th. day a small feast is arranged where the 'Zelās are invited. Along with this non vegetarian feast the first part of the purificatory ceremony after death comes to an end. The main death ceremony i.e. 'Karam' is solemnised jointly by a 'Bangsha' and this may be kept pending for five or six years as it is an expensive affair.

Changing Trend :

In respect of habitat the present day Lalungs can be divided into two viz. plains Lalungs and hill Lalungs, the latter being able to preserve the traditional life and culture including the language intact. The plains Lalungs, because of their large scale contact with non Lalungs are losing much of their traditional traits. Almost all the plains Lalungs have forgotten their language. Vaisnavism has penetrated into the religious faith of the plains Lalungs. Thus the food habit and overall living pattern of this section have close affinity with those of non tribals. There is a growing awareness among the younger section to get themselves educated and employed in Government jobs. But economic backwardness and consequent poverty is writ large on them. The educated youths are realising the unwhole some effect of innumerable festivals with feasts and rice-beer and consequent loss of mandays and they are trying to minimise the expenditures on these festive occasions while at the same time preserving the past heritage. Of late a growing consciousness about their glorious heritage is noticed among the plains Lalungs. Political awakening is also noticed among them.

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THE MIRIS (MISHINGS)

Introduction :

The Miris, also known as Mishings, are the second largest group of scheduled tribe (plains) of Assam. They are mainly concentrated in the riverine areas of Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat and Sonitpur districts of Assam. This colourful ethnic group living amidst the fellow Assamese people for many centuries has been able to maintain its traditional socio-cultural traits unimpaired inspite of the changes that have taken place in the socio-political-religious life of Assam.

It is a truism that the Miris, now a plains tribe with a sizable population, were originally a hill tribe within the ranges of the Abor, Miri and Mishmi hills of the erstwhile North East Frontier Agency now Arunachal Pradesh and they came down to the plains before the reign of the Ahom kings and since then began settling in the riverine areas of the Brahmaputra and Subansiri rivers of Assam. When and why the Miris migrated to the plains of Assam are still baffling the minds of researchers and scholars. As the Miris have no authentic written records, it is difficult to ascertain the exact date of their influx into the plains districts. Legends prevalent among them, however, indicate that the first group of the Miris came down to the plains on the eve of the dissolution of the Chutiyā dynasty.

Originally there was no tribe such as Miri. The plains tribal people known as Miri or Mishing now inhabiting the riverine areas of Upper Assam Valley are blood relations of the tribal people living in the Abor hills of Arunachal Pradesh. "The history of the Miris is essentially the history of the Mishings, Minyongs, Pasi Padams and any other hill tribes, who profess the cult of 'Mirui', worship 'Donyi' (Sun), Polo

(99)

(Moon) as their principal deities and call themselves 'Ami' or 'Tāni' meaning man. Although there is no recorded historical evidence to show the exact date and cause of the Miris coming to the plains of Assam, the folk tales prevalent among them indicate their origin to the Abor hills and the people now living there. One such specimen of the folk stories is depicted below.

Moying was a handsome young boy of Minyong clan. There was a very beautiful girl in Damra village whose name was Turi, Turi's father had announced that his daughter would be married only to a wrestler. In those days wrestling was a prevailing custom among the Miris to judge the valour of the contestant youths. Hearing Turi's father's announcement, Moying proceeded towards Damra village. He was a renowned wrestler and could easily defeat his rivals of Damra village. Turi's father was very glad to find such a hero for his daughter and gave his daughter in marriage to Moying. Moying returned to his village with his beautiful wife.

The youths of Damra village wanted to take revenge upon Moying. After some days of the marriage as was the custom, Moying visited his father-in-law's house with his wife. He also carried rice beer ('Āpong') jars and other food items. In the meantime the youths of Damra village arranged a sumptuous feast presumably to welcome the new married couple. A pig was killed. Moying and Turi were also invited to the feast. When Moying came, the youths of Damra village caught hold of him and tying his hands and feet with a rope and packing him in a 'Tom' (a large sized bamboo container) threw him away into a river. Turi could not bear the separation and she also committed suicide.

This most tragic piece of news spread like wild fire everywhere. The villagers of Moying village became furious and they also made a plan to teach the Damra youths a lesson. After some days they arranged a big feast and invited all the villagers of Damra village. The young boys of Damra village scented a rat in the strategy and they allowed only the aged people to go to the feast. The people of Moying's village wel-

1. Pegu, N.—The Miris, P. 2.

comed the guests with 'Apong' and when the guests were fully intoxicated the host villagers locked the doors of the house where the guests were resting. The guests were cut into pieces but one old man miraculously escaped the persecution and spread the genocidal incident in his locality.

In those days Damras were in large numbers where as Moyings were minority people so far as clan members were concerned. The young boys of Damra village were suspecting foul play on the part of the people of Moying village and when they heard the sad news, they informed all the Damra villagers of neighbouring villages who volunteered to help the youths of Damra village. In the meantime the people of Moying village knew about the conspiracy. They held a meeting and decided to flee away enbloc from the village. Thus they came down stream.

Near the Moying village lived Dine Mirem, a popular headman of the area who was respected by all. The people of Moying village asked Dine Mirem's help. Dine Mirem could not bear the total massacre of the Moyings and he allowed them to flee away and himself lay on the road. The Damras marching menacingly found Dine Mirem in that condition and they dared not to proceed and returned to their villages. The Moyings descended from the hills and established a village in the plains. Since then they are permanently residing in the plains.

Even today the Miris nostalgically refer to the hills in their folk songs because the hilly tracks of Arunachal Pradesh (Subansiri district) were once their primitive abode.

'Adi Lokke Kang Kandak
Baggum Sinloode
Okumso Kang Kandak
Brahmaputra Abude
Einolemsine Diuryadeng
Ngke Mennam Oimebui'

(In the hills 'Bagum' woods are beautiful spots and in the plains the Brahmaputra ; but my darling surpasses all these in her beauty).

The Miris and the Abors thus have close relation. "The Abors and the Miris coming no doubt originally from the same habitat are still so alike in all material respects as to warrant us in calling them earlier and late migrations of the same tribe, the Abors as the last comers retaining more of their prestine savagery and hardihood, while the Miris have been to some extent influenced by free association with the plains and the settled habits of civilization. The Miris of the plains are here claimed by the Abors as their dependents and run away slaves and under the Assam Government the Miris acted as go between of the Abors and the traders of Assam."^a

According to late Sonaram Payeng the Miris were oppressed by the Bor Abors by constantly committing theft, loot etc. Being thus disturbed the Miris left their adode in the hills and came to the plains beyond the reach of the Bor Abors. In this migration all the families of the Doley and Pegu left while some families of other clan did not follow them.

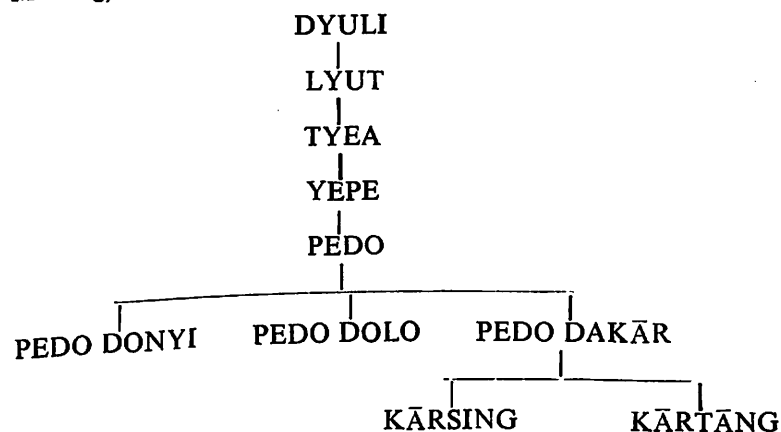
The inter-tribal relationship between the Abors (Adis) and Mishings is still maintained. The Adis call the plains Miris as 'Āying Birrāng' (plains brothers) while the plains Miris call the Adis as 'Ādi Birrāng' (hill brothers). They introduce themselves as descendants of 'Āwātāni', the inheritor of 'Donyi Polo'. They also claim that they descended from the heaven (Regi Regām) in a golden ladder. In the Mishing folksong we find 'Tāniye Donyi Poloke Thāowe Awn Murkong Bangkolog Ngolu Regi Regām Lelek Ailā Gidung Jili Legwem Songkongka Maying Mangkolog Legwem Songkongka.'

Meaning—We are Tanis, the inheritors of Awatani the offsprings of Sun and Moon—We descended to the earth with a golden ladder from heaven. On our way we encountered dangerous waterfalls and hills. We crossed those barriers with bridges of trees.

2. Mackenzie, Alexander 1884—History of the North East Frontier of Bengal, P. 33.

Another legend also tells us about their heavenly genealogy which runs as follows.

Originally there was no living being on this earth. At first a liquid substance appeared from which herbs and various grasses grew. The earth gave birth to Dyuli, Dyuli's son Lyut, Lyut's son Tyea, Tyea's son Yepe and Yepe's son Pedo came to earth in succession. Thus appeared Pedo Donyi (gods and goddesses) Pedo Dolo (birds and reptiles), Pedo Dakār (human beings), Kārsing Kārtāng (Mishing and non Mishing)



B. C. Allen, has given us an account of the Miris in the Assam District Gazetteers. "The Miris or as they style themselves Mishings were originally settled in the hills to the north of Lakhimpur between the Dafla and the Abor territory. They are thought to be members of the Tibeto Burman family and the Chutiya Miris claim kinship with the Chutiyas. According to their own account they descended from the hills with the Chutiyas when first they conquered Lakhimpur and retired again with them into their mountain fastnesses, when they were finally defeated by the Ahoms in the 16th century. On the advent of the British the Miris again began to settle in the plains, a process which has been in steady progress ever since."

3. Allen, B. C.—1906, Assam District Gazetteers, Vol. III, Lakhimpur, Chap IV, P. 118.

Thus the Miris in the past had close linguistic and cultural affinity with the Adis, Pasi Minyongs and Padams in the hills now falling within the jurisdiction of Arunachal Pradesh. The Miris do not like to introduce themselves in the same nomenclature which they allege, was given to them by the non Miris. They say that the term Miri is an incorrect pronunciation of the word 'Mirui'—an ambiguous term denoting the socio-religious functions prevalent among the Adis, Pasi Miyongs, Padams and Galongs of Abor hills as etymologically the word Miri bears out no meaning in Mishing language. Again the term by which the present day Mishings prefer to call themselves has also no etymological affinity with the term 'Mirui' because 'Mi' means 'man' and 'shing' means water/river. Therefore Mishing means the tribe living by the side of water or river. Even today the Mishings are lovers of riverside habitation although they have to confront all the evils arising out of the natural calamities such as flood, erosion etc. every year.

As per 1971 census their population was 259551. The projected population as in March 1987 is 416493 (1981 census was not held in Assam).

They belong to the Tibeto Burman family of the Mongoloid group. Das (1984) has elaborated the characteristic physical features of the Mongoloid. "The Mongoloids are characterised by yellow or yellow brown skin colour and black, stretched or flat wavy and coarse head hair. Their eyes are black or dark brown in colour. The eye slit is oblique and palpebral fissure is narrow. One of the typical characteristics of the Mongoloid is the presence of Mongoloid fold in their eyes. Their face is broad and zygomatic arches are very prominent. Another characteristic feature of them is scanty growth of facial and body hair."

They are medium statured people with appealing features characteristic of the Mongoloid type of people. The Mishings

4. Das, B. M., 1984—Some Aspects of Physical Anthropology of the Tribes of North East India—The Tribes of North East India, (Ed) Sebastian Karotemprel, Calcutta.

are simple and straight forward and visitors are pleased at their hospitality. The surrounding on which the people are living compel them to be strong built. The menfolk cultivate Ahu paddy in marshy, low lying paddy fields putting much strenuous labour. During summer they have a hard time when their villages are submerged by flood water and both male and female ply boats to catch fish, collect firewood and other food items.

House :

As the Mishings are a riverine tribe they have no option but to construct their houses in raised platforms about 5 feet above the ground. A typical Mishing house is sometimes as much as 30/40 meters in length and contains 30/40 persons living in a hall without compartments. The length and breadth of the average house is about 60 feet and 20 feet respectively. The roof is thatched and the walls and doors are made of bamboos. There may be a separate place in the front portion of the house where guests, specially non Mishings, are entertained. This is a covered portico and forms the main entrance. Below this there is an open space without walls and platform and access to the portico can be made with a ladder which is placed in this open space. This open space is also used for processing paddy by the womenfolk. The loom may be kept here also. Generally the looms are placed under the platform of the house. There is only one house for one family and if the members of the family increase, the house is lengthened to accommodate the increased number of persons. Houses are constructed facing the east, south and north but not west. There is no separate accommodation for the pigs but a place may be kept apart under the platform of the house for the pigs. A shade is erected for the cattle adjacent to the house. For the fowls a coop may be constructed near the main house. Majority of the families do not possess a granary and paddies are stored in a corner of the house. Only the well-to-do Mishings maintain a granary to keep paddies. The fireplace, called 'Merām', is considered as an auspicious place. Generally outsiders are not allowed to go near the 'Merām'.

Besides cooking their daily meals, certain offerings are also made in the fireplace. During winter season there may be an additional fire place in the portico.

The 'Morung' or the bachelors' dormitory is an important institution in a Mishing village. It is a public hall constructed in a central place of the village. It may be constructed in a plinth or in a platform. The wooden posts and beams are decorated with wood carving of primitive design. The 'Morung' serves the purpose for the annual 'Porāg' and other major festivals. Public gatherings such as 'Kebang' are held here. It is the venue for the village elders for their assemblies where disputes are settled. Formerly the Bachelors' dormitory served as a training institute for the youths but today that aspect is neglected and naturally the dormitories are not well maintained. During festivals, however, the Morung gets a new look. In some villages the 'Namghar' (public congregational hall) takes away much of the traditional functions of the 'Morung'.

Economy :

Their main occupation is agriculture but it is still mainly at the subsistence level. Agricultural lands are suitable mainly for Ahu paddy cultivation and the people relish Ahu rice. Besides Ahu paddy they produce mustard seeds, sweet potatoes, pulses ('Matimah'), cotton, maize, banana etc as subsidiary crop. Transplantation and weeding are traditionally the work of the womenfolk, while ploughing, threshing and carrying the paddy bundles etc. are done by the menfolk.

The Mishings perform certain religious ceremonies connected with agriculture. A festive religious ceremony called 'Ali-Ai-Ligāng' is observed before sowing the seeds. 'Sarag Pujā' is performed in the middle of cultivation so that the ancestral spirits may protect the crops from pests and other natural calamities. Again 'Dabur Pujā' is observed as a post harvesting socio-religious festival. They worship 'Kuber' whom they believe to be the goddess of wealth and agriculture.

There is no joint ownership of land. Grains are stored in the individual households.

The role of the Mishing women in improving the economic condition of the respective families cannot be under estimated. In fact most of their necessities like yarn, clothes, cosmetics, ornaments etc. are procured from their exclusive earnings which are derived from rearing pigs, poultry etc.

Hunting and Fishing :

Traditionally the Mishings love hunting and fishing but today group hunting is almost extinct while community fishing has lost much of its original character. However individual as well as group fishing is done with much merriment. Similarly individual and occasional group hunting is resorted to particularly during summer. Fire arms, spears, bow and arrows are the main hunting weapons. Fish catching in groups is an affair of the winter season. 'Zurki', 'Chāloni', 'Dirdāng' and 'Porāng' (fishing implements made of split bamboos) and 'Ei Jāmborok' (a cross bow like fishing implement) are commonly used as fishing implements. Of late fishing nets are becoming popular among them. The Mishings use 'Dibung'—a long bamboo about 5/6 meters long with a long metallic spearhead. Formerly they caught fish mainly for household consumption as well as for festive occasions. But today the Mishings catch fish not only for local consumption but also for selling in the market. Traditionally selling of fish was prohibited among the Mishings, but today this tradition is not observed strictly and a liberal attitude towards this is noticed.

Food & Drink :

Rice is the staple food of the Mishings and they relish the Ahu rice which is produced locally. Alongwith the rice they take locally produced vegetables, creepers and edible roots. Meat and fish are taken when available. Fowl and pork are their delicacies. The preserved fish known as 'Ngo Sān' has a great demand for entertaining guests. Formerly they did not take milk, dal, mustard oil and spices purchased from market, but now-a-days these items

have entered the kitchen of the Mishings, particularly of the well-do-do section.

Certain food taboos are prevalent among the Mishings. For example if any member of a family dies, then taking of meat is prohibited for all the members of the family until the purificatory ceremony is observed. Again if a hunting party proceeds for hunting, the villagers must not take any meat till the hunting party returns.

Tea is not very popular among the Mishings and the 'Āpang' (locally brewed rice beer) serves as a drink and a food for everybody young or old, 'Āpang' is considered to be the most prestigious item for entertaining the guests and every family should keep some 'Āpang' to entertain guests. Preparation of rice beer is solely the womens' business. The women, who prepare the 'Āpang' are required to observe certain rules of ceremonial purity.

Dress :

Every Mishing woman is an expert weaver and she weaves clothes not only for herself but for all the members of the family. The dress of the womenfolk include a 'Sumpā' worn around the waist extending down to the knee. Around the breasts they wrap a narrow strip of cloth called 'Gāluk'. A small piece of cloth called 'Hurā' forms the headdress. The married women use a small piece of cloth round the hips distinguishing them from the unmarried ones.

The male persons generally wear modern mill made dresses. But a traditional long narrow piece of cloth called 'Kaping' is used around the waist. On festive and special occasions both the male and female Mishings use various colourful dresses. The ladies wear 'Yāambo', 'RiwiGāseng' and 'Ege' and the males wear 'Miboogāluk' 'Tangāli' and 'Gonroo'.

Clan :

The Mishings are broadly known by two sections namely 'Bārogām' and 'Dahgām'. The reason for such division is not traced out in the contemporary Assam history. Late Sonaram Payeng in his writings attributed the fact to the

appointment of 'Gāms' (chiefs). The legend behind this fact runs as follows :

After descending from the hills the Mishings settled in the foothills bordering Assam plains. They were living in two villages, one consisting of 'DahKuri' (Kuri is an unit of twenty) and the other of 'Bārakuri'. In order to administer the village, 'Gāms' or village headmen were appointed according to the number of houses. One 'Gām' from each 'Kuri' or 20 households was selected and in this way ten 'Gāms' were appointed from the first village and twelve 'Gāms' from the next village. All the clans living under the ten 'Gāms' were known as 'DahGām' Clan and the rest were known as 'BāraGām' clan. But this legend of creation of 'Dam Gām' and 'Bāra Gām' clans has been accepted with some reservations because 'Dah Gām' people do not absolutely conform to the mode of living of the 'Bāragam' people. There is slight variation in the dialect of both these sections : some of the social usages of the sections also differ. But whatever the difference these two sections of the Mishings are a reality.

Amongst these two sections of clans, there are many other sub clans namely, amongst the 'Dahgam' ; 'Moying, Chāyāng, Tāye, Pāmegām, Murung, Bori, Pāngging, Yein, Panchang, Noroh, Komān, Pogāg, Pāow, Bosing, Ayan, Padun, Sāro, Nāgāte, Regon, Darik' etc. and amongst 'Bārāgām ; —'Doley, Kutum, Kuli (Kouli), Pāit, Pātir, Bāsār, Pāsār, Kārdong, Misong, Pegu, Kumbāng' etc. knowledge of clan is very important for solemnising marriage ceremony. In their day to day life, however, clan distinction is never taken into account. Marriage must not take place in the same clan. The Mishings use the clan names as titles or surnames. The clans derive their names from some natural objects or from some characteristics of their ancestors. People from a certain clan prefer to live together in a village or a locality exclusively of themselves. But as they are a riverine people and are regularly affected by flood, of late, clanwise habitation has become impracticable.

Kinship :

The kinship system of the Mishings is, by and large, of the kind known as descriptive. The main feature of this system is

the application of those relationship terms which refer to one type of relationship only. For example, for father, they use the term 'Ābu', for mother 'Nāne' or 'Āne', for father's elder brother 'Ābāttā' and so on. The Mishings use the same relationship term 'Bāboi' for father's younger brother and mother's sister's husband. Similarly the same term 'Nānyin' is used for father's sister, mother's wife and husband's mother. They use two terms for a single type of relationship, a term of reference and a term of address. For example, when a Mishing addresses his father he calls him 'Bābāttā' but when he speaks of his father he uses the term 'Āābāttā'.

Family :

Mishing family pattern may be called unique in the sense that two or more primary families live peacefully together in a single platform house. All the members abide by the orders of the headman of the family. There is co-operation among the members and everybody works with his mite for the smooth functioning of the family life. Women play their assigned roles and they are not treated as subordinates. The oldest man in a family and the eldest members in a village are highly regarded. Production of food is the responsibility of the individual family. Similarly the individual family has to arrange for the education of the members of the family. Illness in the family is a private matter. The worship of deities and spirits is done on village basis. Marriage, death rites and many festivals are broadly speaking, community affairs of the whole village.

Property and Inheritance :

The Mishings are patrilineal and the descent is through the male line. After the death of a father the property is divided equally among the sons. The sons can demand a partition of the family property during the life time of a father provided they have attained a matrimonial status. In the event of such a partition the father may not keep a share for himself. He can choose to remain with any of his sons he likes. Daughters are not entitled to share the property. But if a man has no

son, his daughters may share the property, provided they bear the funeral expenses at their father's death. If a man has no son but his son-in-law lives in the father-in-law's house till the latter's death, he may inherit the father-in-law's property. In the absence of children the nearest agnates of the deceased inherit the property.

Social Organisation :

Every village has a 'Kebāng' which can be aptly compared with a village Panchayat. The elderly men of a village constitute the 'Kebāng' which is supreme in all matters within a village. The head of each 'Kebāng' is called a 'Gām' who conducts the proceedings of the 'Kebāng'. The 'Gām' is selected by the members of a 'Kebāng'. Although a 'Gām' may be selected from a particular family for a few generation, the post of 'Gām' is not hereditary. Complaints whether social or religious are brought to the notice of the 'Kebāng' which delivers judgement and punishes the offenders. Of late 'Kebāng's' position has been considerably eroded due to the existence of the Gaon Panchayat. The role of Gaonbura or the Panchayat President has been felt more than that of the 'Gām'. But 'Kebāng' is still a living institution and the people still regard the decision of the 'Kebāng'. It may be noted that due to introduction of Panchayati system, party politics has cut into the vitals of the traditional Mishing corporate social life.

Among the Mishings, Co-operation in socio-religious matters is a salient feature. There is an institution called 'Yāme Mimbir' and the young boys and girls of a village are the members of this institution. This is organised by two officials namely one 'Dekā Borā' and one 'Tiri Borā'. The latter is responsible for organising the young girls. The main aim of this organisation is to perform the activities concerning the development of the village and extend help to the individual families in socio-religious occasions. This organisation acts as a catalytic agent of mutual help and co-operation among the Mishings of a village. All the youths irrespective of status become members of this institution. Of late youth

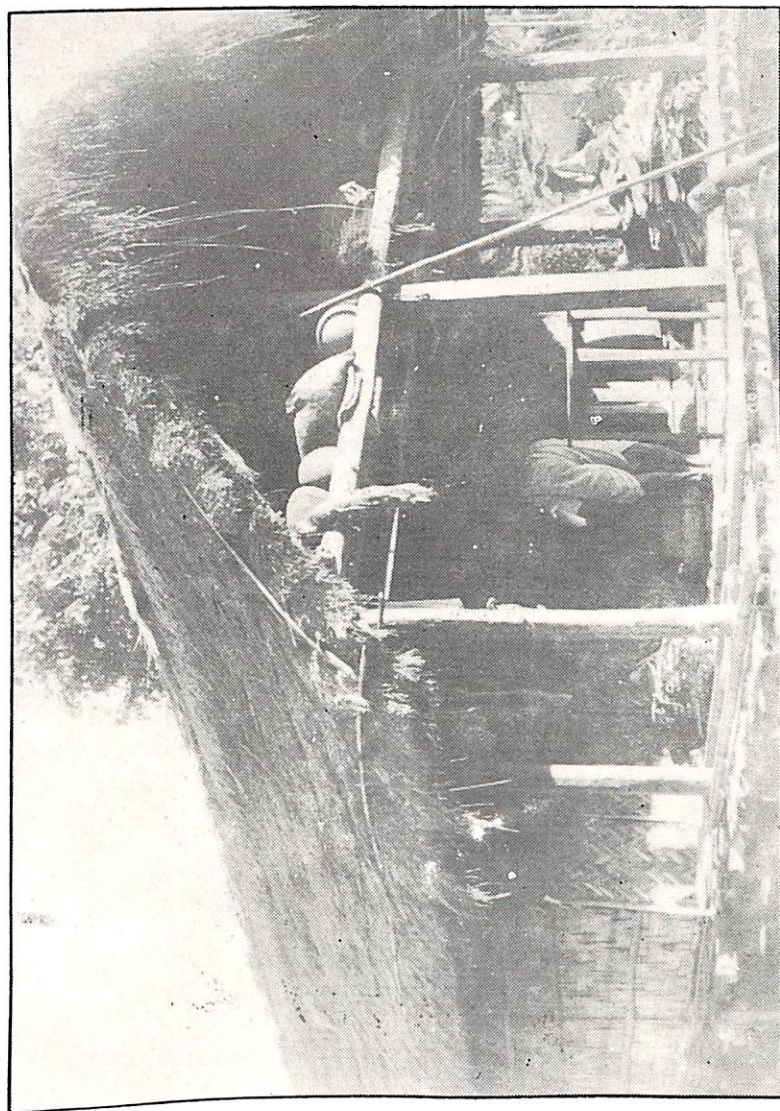
clubs, libraries and such other socio-cultural organisations have taken much of the old traditional activities of the 'Yāme Mimbir' but 'Yāme Mimbir' still survives in most of the villages.

Marriage :

Among the Mishings two forms of marriage are found to be prevalent namely, formal marriage and informal marriage. The former is an expensive affair and it is usually planned and arranged by the parents. In a formal marriage the boy's party always takes the initiative. Boy's parents or his close relatives would send information to the proposed bride's parents expressing the desire for the marriage proposal and as soon as the parents of the girl indicate their consent, the boy's party makes necessary arrangements for the formal proposal. A certain date will be fixed for the purpose and in the stipulated date the boy's party approaches the girl's parents with presents like 'Āpong' and betel leaves and nuts and formally announces the marriage proposal. On this day a date is fixed for the visit of the would be bride groom.

On the date fixed the would be bridegroom is led by his parents or relatives to the girl's house and he would be formally introduced to the parents and other relatives of the girl. Customarily the boy has to stay at the residence of the girl's parents for five days and during this period the boy is required to help the girl's parents in the field. This is called 'Māgbo Ginlink'. After some months or a year the date of marriage is fixed and on this occasion also the boy's parents along with some of the relatives come to the girl's parents with 'Āpong', fish and betel leaves and nuts. All the near relatives of the girl and the village elders are invited for the occasion. Details of the marriage expenses are discussed and items to be brought to the girl's house on the day of marriage are determined. 'Āpong', fish and pig are the major items the bridegroom's party have to carry.

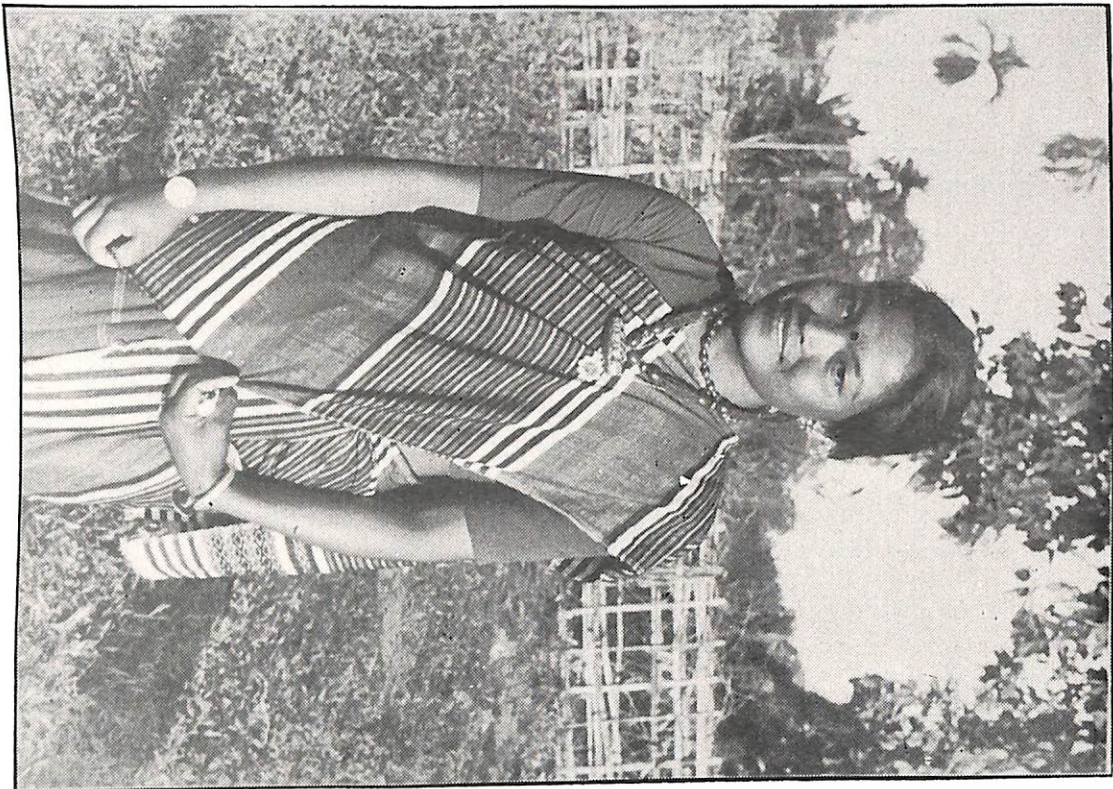
The Mishing marriage continues for two days. On the first day the bridegroom is led to the bride's house and he stays at the bride's house for the night. The ceremony takes



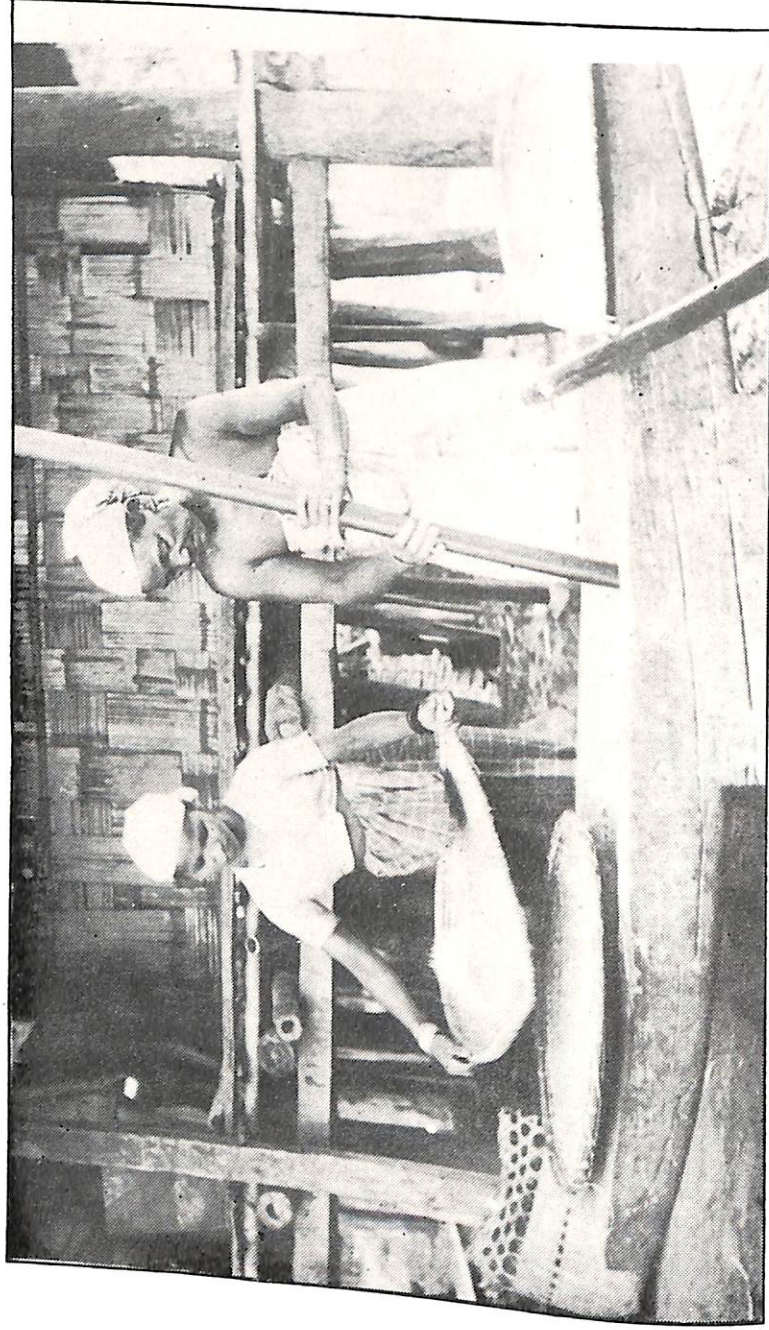
Frontside view of a Mishing House



Performance of Mishing Bihu dance



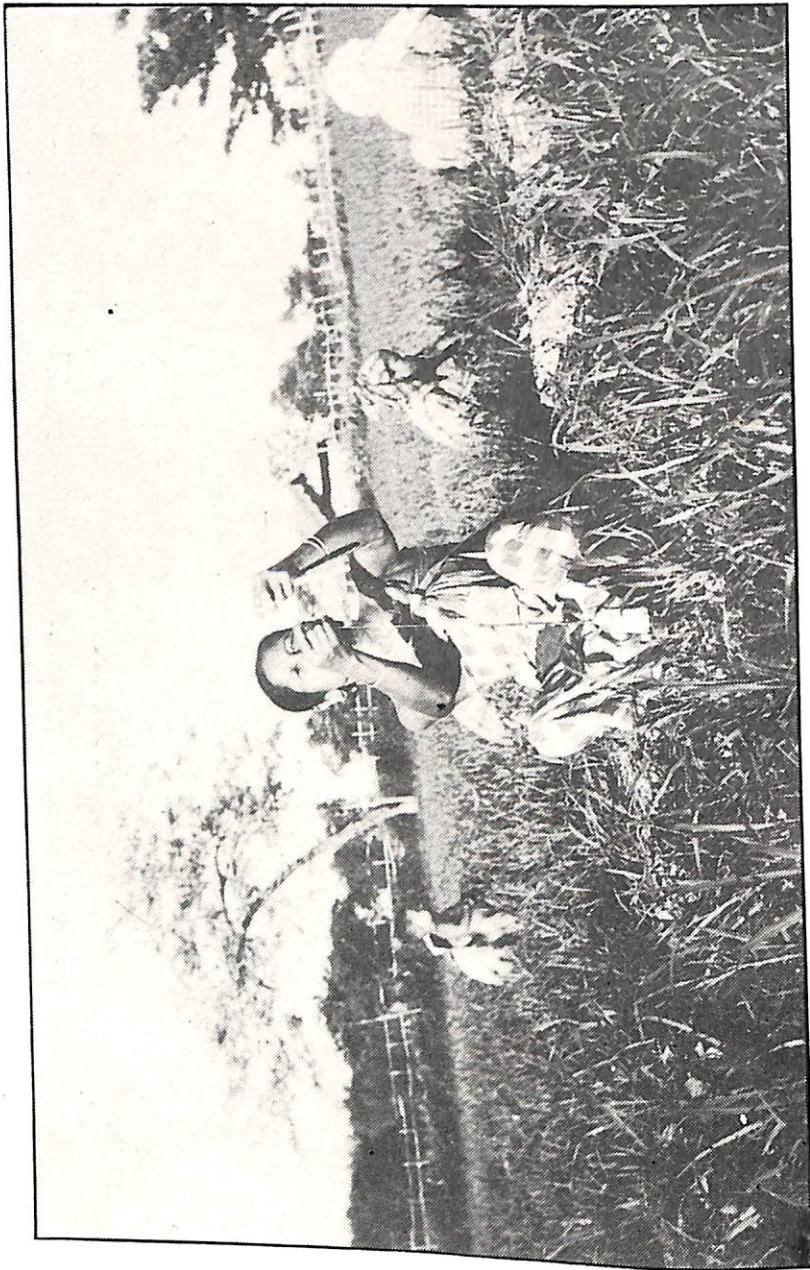
A Mishing girl in her traditional dress and ornaments



Rice-pounding in traditional Mishing way



Rearing of improved variety of pigs has become popular among the Mishings



Mishing women working in the field. Spinning even in the field is a common sight

place on the next day when all the villagers gather in the girl's house where a grand feast is arranged. The elderly persons give advice to the couple and the couple returns to the groom's house. With this the formal marriage comes to an end.

The payment of the bride price is known as 'Ālig'. Formerly a mithun or its equivalent of Rs. 100.00 or so was charged as bride price. Today the amount has been considerably minimised.

'Duglālānām—Besides formal marriage which is beyond the reach of the poor, run away and kidnapping for marriage purpose, are also popular among the Mishings which are socially recognised. In most cases elopement or run away is resorted to mainly due to dissent of either of the party's parents or due to poverty. The boy takes away the girl with the help of his friends on an appointed date and the bride is received in an unceremonious function. The girl's parents are informed on the following day and the father of the girl along with a few co-villagers starts for the boy's house. The elderly people of the boy's village receive the girl's father and a meeting is held where the bride price is fixed. In such cases a higher bride price is demanded (Generally Rs. 100.00 or more and 'Āpang' jars). The total expenditure incurred in this type of marriage is usually less than that of 'Midāng'. The boy is allowed to pay the bride price in instalments.

Kidnapping is also not a rare occurrence amongst the Mishings. Cases of such incidents are decided by the 'Kebāng' concerned. The 'Kebāng' inflicts penalty upon the offender who has to pay the fine in cash to the girl's parents. Sometimes penalty is imposed in kinds also. The amount of such penalty ranges from Rs. 50.00 to Rs. 2000.00 depending upon the whims of the girl's parents.

Religious Beliefs :

The Mishing religion is based on the belief on supernaturalism and animism. They believe that spirits which they

call 'Uie' are the guiding factors of their life and there are spirits everywhere. The spirits if not properly worshipped, cause sickness, misfortune and death. The 'Mibu' or the village expert is the only person who can appease these spirits. Pigs, fowls, 'Āpong' etc, are offered in the name of the spirits. The 'Mibu' possesses super-natural power of finding the cause of illness and offers remedies.

Mishing 'Uies' are of various kinds such as 'Urom Uie', 'Tālang Uie', 'Dabur Uie', 'Gumin Uie' etc. 'Urom Uies' are the spirits of the ancestors who are appeased by sacrificing two or three large pigs and supplying 'Āpong'. It may be mentioned that offerings are not made to the 'Yālos' (souls) of unnatural and premature deaths.

The Mishings worship the spirits underlying thunder and lightning, storm, drought etc. with occasional offerings of fowls, pigs and 'Āpong'. These spirits are called 'Tālang Uies' which are worshipped on individual as well as community basis. 'Dabur Uies' on the other hand are the spirits which cause flood, and other natural calamities and diseases. 'Dabur Uies', if worshipped regularly bring peace and prosperity to the villagers. The individual families, however, perform 'Dabur Uies' at an interval of three to five years. The venue of 'Dabur Uie' is generally the outskirts of a village. Before the onset of the puja some youths chase away the evil spirits from the houses by beating the platform of the houses and other places. Entry to and exit from the village during 'Dabur puja' is strictly prohibited. Similarly all approaches of the village are barred so that the spirits cannot enter the village.

'Gumin Uie' is considered as a benevolent spirit of a family and in fact 'Gumin Uie' is considered as a different form of the departed soul. Thus 'Gumin Uies' are worshipped alongwith pujas meant for other spirits. In some villages 'Gumin Uies' are worshipped at an interval of five years or so.

The Mishing religious rites are performed by a priest called 'Mibu' who is believed to possess super-natural powers.

A 'Mibu' has to observe some rules of diet and behaviour from his early childhood. The post of 'Mibu' is not hereditary neither it is limited to the members of a certain clan. They do not have totemic objects.

Now Mishings prefer to introduce themselves as Hindus and they are followers of the 'Bhakatiā' cult—a doctrine having Mishing and Baisnavism cum Tantricism mingled together. The 'Bhakats' of this cult are generally old persons of both sexes who owe allegiance to the 'Satras' (Baisnava monastery). The 'Bhakats' preside over the religious ceremonies who are assisted by the junior 'Bhakats' called 'Sādhu'. They, however, are not entitled to play active role in certain religious rites like 'Dabur Uie'. The role of the 'Mibu' has been greatly eroded by the 'Bhakats'. It may be mentioned that Mishing 'Bhakatiā Pantha' contains elements of Tantricism because recitation of verses from the 'Kirtana' or 'Bhagawata' and propitiation of the spirits by offering rice beer, meat etc. go together. Today the Mishings worship different Hindu deities. Besides, there are quite a good number of Mishings who are strict believers of Baisnava faith.

Disposal of the dead :

Burial is the prevailing practice among the Mishings. The dead bodies are buried irrespective of age, sex and nature of death. Every village has a common burial ground. The dead body is taken out to the courtyard not by the usual door but by a special door made for the purpose in the rear wall of the house. The corpse is bathed and kept in a log coffin called 'Rung Kung'.

The purification ceremony of the Mishings can be divided into three parts viz. 'Tilani', 'Māhekiā' and 'Dahā'. On the third day after death the Mishings observe 'Tilani'. It is a neat religious ceremony without feast and fun. The persons who attend the burial are invited. 'Māhekiā' is the important purification ceremony observed after a month. A feast is arranged where all the villagers take part. The most important ceremony is 'Dahā' which is held after one year

or so. A sumptuous feast with pork and 'Āpong' is arranged for the villagers. 'Dahā' may be held jointly or individually. If there is any pending cases in the clan then joint 'Dahā' may be observed.

Festivals :

The Mishings observe various festivals during a year according to their traditional pattern. 'Āli-Āi-Ligāng' is their most important festival held every year on the first Wednesday ('Ligāng Lange) of the month of 'Ginmur Polo' (month of Fagun). This spring dance festival is observed to mark the sowing of the seeds, 'Āli' means root, seed, 'Āi' or 'Yāi' means fruit, 'Ligāng' means sow. Thus ceremonial sowing of paddy starts on this day. Dancing and singing is the characteristic feature of this festival. The whole atmosphere is surcharged with music of 'Dum Dum', Pempā', 'Siphung' and 'Gunggāng' played with the rhythmic dances of the girls attired in their best 'Ribigāseng' and 'Ribiyege'. 'Poro Āpong' and dried fish is essential for the feast. The festival continues for five days and during these days dancing and feasting is held on the courtyard of the villagers and in return the host entertains the 'Gumrāk' dancers. The festival is concluded with 'Dapan Tipan' i. e. a community feast. The last day of the festival is called 'Lilen'. During this festival certain taboos in respect of cutting trees, catching fish, ploughing, burning jungles, eating vegetables cooked with oil etc. are observed.

'Porāg' :

Another important festival of the Mishings is 'Porāg'. For the smooth functioning of this festival the 'Mimbir Yāme' i.e. youth organisation of the Mishings make necessary arrangements. They do it in a formal and systematic manner called 'Daglik'. The Morung' is renovated. Large quantities of food and drink are arranged much in advance. The host village invites the villagers from neighbouring Mishing villages who also participate in singing and dancing. A 'Miboo' is appointed who conducts the prayer to 'Chedi

Melo' and 'Donyi Polo' etc. 'Poro Āpong' and pork are essential items for this festival. At least 4/5 pigs are sacrificed and a grand feast is arranged where all the villagers participate. At night the 'Miboo' leads the dancing and for three days the whole village is surcharged with feast and dance. The womenfolk in their traditional dresses take part in the dancing and singing along with the rhythmic beating of drums. The festival comes to an end with a prayer dance known as 'Ponu Nunam'.

'Āmrok' :

In the month of Bhada/Ahin (August/September) the Mishings observe a festival called 'Āmrok'. Every household observes the 'Āmrok' festival where food prepared out of harvested crop is offered to the ancestors. The festival is observed on community basis also. Feast with 'Apin Āpong', pork and chicken is arranged. After the feast the youths perform 'Pākso Monām' dance along with the tune of 'Oi Nitam'. During the festival oblations are offered to the malevolent deities (Uram Kusāg).

Changing Trend :

Although the Mishings are maintaining the traditional cultural pattern including their language, some changes have been noticed in their life and culture which are effecting the core of their culture to some extent. Changes are noticed in respect of religious beliefs and practices as Baisnavism has penetrated into their culture. Due to large scale contact with the non-Mishings, the Mishings are gradually entering into avocations which were till recently non-existent among them. The educated sections are hankering after jobs and today Mishing doctors, engineers, college and university professors, H. E. school teachers, L. P. school teachers, Upper Division/Lower Division Assistants etc. are not negligible.

Modern way of life has attracted them. Due to contact with outside world the old simple unsophisticated way of life becomes a casualty. The middlemen are entering into their lonely fastnesses and very often the real needy persons are not able to receive the gains of welfare schemes.

The Mishing villages are located in far flung riverine areas and one will find medical dispensary or sub-centre in a central place of the villages. The villagers are adopting allopathic treatment but the poorest of the poor are still depending upon the traditional physicians because of poverty. It is observed that the traditional medicine has some plus points and while motivating the poor villagers for modern medicine the traditional system of cure should not be outright rejected. A via media should be found out so that rural medicine and modern drugs can co-exist.

It is also observed that the children of the poor Mishing families are unable to attend classes and drop out figures are not negligible. Lower primary schools have been established in almost all villages and recently Mishing language has been accepted as a medium of teaching in L. P. schools in Mishing dominated areas.

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THE RABHAS

Introduction :

One of the nine Scheduled Tribes in the plains districts of Assam, the Rabhas are widely scattered but mostly concentrated in the undivided districts of Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang. Besides Assam, their distribution spreads over Meghalaya, Bangladesh, Nepal, West Bengal, Manipur etc. As per 1971 Census, they constitute 8.63% of the total plains tribal population of Assam and 0.63% of the total State population. Their rate of literacy is 22.24% according to the same census and rank fourth among the scheduled tribes of Assam Plains.

Divergent views have been expressed by different scholars regarding the ethnic individuality of the tribe, its original place of abode and the relationship with other tribal groups (Dr. Das, 1962). Major Playfair had tried to trace the origin of the tribe as in the Tibetan region wherefrom migration had taken place to Garo Hills area now in Meghalaya and then distributed in Assam plains. He had also found out some linguistic and cultural similarities between the Garos and the Rabhas. Hodson's observations that the Rabhas constituted a major segment of the Bodo linguistic group further testify their affinities with other constituents of the Bodo groups like Garo, Kachari, Mech, Hajong, Koch, etc. who belonged to the Mongoloid stock. According to Lt. Col. Wadel the Rabhas were a branch of the Kacharis and had become almost Hinduised although the process of conversion (to Hinduism) was of lesser intensity than that of the Koches. Dr. Grierson also held the view that the Rabha was a Hindu name of the Kacharis and many of the Rabhas were actually Kacharis. But E.A. Gait on

the other hand identified them as a distinct tribe and said that they were also known as Totlas and Datiyal Kacharis (Census Report (1891)).¹ In this regard Rev. S. Endle seemed to have supported Gait by saying that the Rabhas of Darrang used to call themselves sometimes as Totlas. He also referred to the term 'Datiyal Kachari' signifying this tribe in Darrang District.²

Dr. B. M. Das in one of his works had scientifically established the fact that the Rabhas were more closely allied to the Garos rather than any other tribe of the Bodo Group. Dr. Das further supported the view expressed by E. A. Gait that the Rabhas were ethnically and culturally a distinct tribe. He said ".....it seems probable that Mongoloid people came in successive waves from the north and north-eastern region. They have partly or wholly absorbed the autochthonous Austroloid and later on formed various tribes like the Rabha, the Garo, etc."³

Various writers had shown 5 to 7 endogamous sections of this tribe. Rev. Endle had shown seven 'sub-tribes' of the Rabhas such as 'Rangdaniya', 'Maitoriya', 'Pati', 'Koch', 'Bitliya', 'Dahuriya' and 'Sangha' (Ref. Foot Note 2). Of the seven sub-tribes, the Rangdaniya, Pati and the Maitoriya were described to be the dominant ones. Friend Preira had also found seven 'sub-divisions' among the tribe and he assigned similar places of prominence like Endle to the first three constituents. Gait however had shown five 'sub-groups' such as 'Rangdani', 'Pati', 'Maitory', 'Dahuri' and 'Kachari'. Dr. B. M. Das believed that the Rangdani, Pati and the Maitory used to enjoy superior status compared to other sub-groups like Totla, Dahuri, Bitla, Shangha, Hana etc. According to him the Pati section the most advanced section of the tribe had adopted Hindu customs for all

intents and purpose and due to loss of their mother tongue had taken to speak a patois of the Assamese language. The Maitori section on the other hand as Dr. Das said resembled the Garos in their habit and custom. But they had a status equal to that of the Rangdani and the Pati groups.

In his ethnographic note on the Rabhas incorporated in the Census Report of 1911, J. E. Friend-Pereira had given a very poetic description about the physical features of this tribe in the words that follow: "In general appearance, the Rabhas show all the characteristics of the Mongolian stock: a round face, flat nose, prominent cheek bones, obliquely set eyes, sallow complexion, coarse hair, scanty beard and well-developed lower extremities." The physical characteristics as mentioned above may not be found in the same degree more particularly in regard to the Pati section of the tribe, but the general features described by Friend-Pereira more or less hold good still now so far other sub-groups are concerned.

The Pati section is now more Hinduised and the impact of acculturation is more prominent amongst them. They are quite numerous in the southern bank in the belt stretching from Guwahati to Dudhnoi (Dr. Das, 1962*). Numerically the Rangdaniyas are well represented in western Goalpara (south bank). The Maitories are having relatively lesser numerical strength in Assam than the Rangdaniyas. They are interspersed with the Rangdaniyas but their main concentration is western Meghalaya followed by Pancharatna area of Goalpara. Although both the sections communicate with the same mother tongue the Rangdaniyas appear to be less conservative in outlook than the Maitories. Some other lesser represented sub-groups of the tribe are—Dahuri and Totla in Assam Plains. The Dahuri group is to be seen in north Goalpara and the Totlas in North Kamrup area and in the northern belt of Darrang district particularly around Rowta, Udalguri and Hugrajuli.

* 'Asomar Janajati'—Asom Sahitya Sabha, 1962 (P. 167).

1. Census Report 1891 as reprinted in Census of India, 1961, Vol.—III Assam, Part—V-A, Page—62.
2. Rev. S. Endle—'The Kacharis'—Page 83, Reprint, 1975.
3. 'Ethnic Affinities of the Rabha'—Deptt. of Publication, University of Gauhati, 1960 (Page 117).

Dwellings and Livelihood pattern :

The Rabhas like to live in compact blocks comprising of 50 to 100 families in each block. Usually the dwellings of a Rabha household consist of four houses—one main house, one guest house, one outer house for the adult family members and a fourth one for using as a cook-shed. In addition to these, cow-shed, a granary and a poultry house where possible are also separately constructed. The main house where the head of the family resides, is constructed in the northern side of the courtyard maintaining its length in east-west direction. Facing immediately this, is the 'Batghar' or the guesthouse—the courtyard being in between the two. The other two houses are also constructed usually facing each other. In some Rangdani villages only one living house stretching often from 13 to 15 metres in length is constructed which however is divided into three compartments known as 'Noksrab' 'Tograb' and 'Rosinok' in order from east to west. The first compartment is used as the bed room of the head of the family, the second compartment as the bed room for other family members including guests and the last one is used as the cook-shed.

The site plan adopted and construction materials used by the Rabhas and the Boro-Kacharis are almost identical. Even the semi-fort like constructions with earthen barricades all around are to be seen like the Boro-Kachari households. The villages in and around Chotamatiya in the district of Goalpara testify to this observation. It is however a fact that with the increasing intercourse with town life and improvement of road communication, the basic characteristics of the Rabha houses are in the process of rapid change and constructions in modern style have already made their headway in Rabha villages.

Like the rest of the other Plains tribes, the Rabhas also derive their livelihood mainly from agriculture. They undertake cultivation of both Ahu and Sali along with some amount of pulses, mustard seeds and jute. Those who reside on the bordering areas with Meghalaya resort to shifting

cultivation to a certain extent. The Rabhas though basically agriculturist and practise wet paddy cultivation, yet, the progressive elements in their operational techniques are awfully deficient. Only a small segment of the cultivators have taken to improved methods of cultivation leaving a large majority with their traditional system. This lack of general response to improved cultural practices is partly attributable to marginal land holdings and partly to inherent poverty. The philosophy of easy contentment against the requirement of worldly life appears to be another impediment to the process of their economic growth.

Rice is the staple food of the tribe with an inherent liking for dried and powdered fish, pork and rice-beer. But the traditional likes and dislikes have now tended to disappear under economic pressure brought about by many factors. The consumption of rice-beer is also gradually coming down due to strict enforcement of the excise law which is a healthy sign for the socio-economic growth of the society. It is now brewed in a restricted manner and that too on occasions connected with some socio-religious rites and ceremonies. Further, those members of the Pati Rabhas who got themselves initiated into the Mahapurusiya sect of the Vaishnavite school no longer indulge in pork and rice-beer.

The Rabha women are expert both in spinning and weaving. Normally they prepare their own apparels including those used by the males. The women's dresses consist mainly of 'Rifan', 'Kambung' and 'Khodabang' which are invariably needed for attiring a bride at the time of her marriage. The male dresses consist of 'Pajal' 'Khasne' 'Fali', 'Buksil', 'Passra' etc. etc. Among these male dresses, the 'Passra' or 'Passa' is made out of endi yarn while the rest are made out of fine cotton.

The weaving excellence of the Rabha women is further testified by their intensive knowledge in dying yarn purely by indigenous process. It appears that weaving is not only a secondary source of livelihood to a Rabha woman but a part and parcel of her material culture. The loss of this

culture, it is feared, will tantamount to the loss of her ethnic identity. The 'Bahurangi' songs of the Rabha tribe contain sufficient references as to the competence of the Rabha women in spinning and weaving magical apparels with flower designs that can help in winning civil and criminal cases. In their own terminology these designs are known as 'Mok-damma Ful'.

Social life & Institutions :

The basic structure of the Rabha tribe is governed by the ethnologic ideas contained in the 'Pandulipis' or the local customary laws. These 'Pandulipis' have been framed by the consensus of the village people on the basis of customs, usages, traditions and religious beliefs covering such subjects like juridical power of the society, mode of inheritance, succession to office of socio-religious nature, type of marriage and principles of marital relationship and degree of prohibition, the roles of 'Khoum' and 'Baray', the liability for atonement on committing mischiefs and unnatural offences and the procedures governing these atonements, birth and death rites etc. etc. In other words the 'Pandulipis' have sought to synthesise the diversities of customary practices prevalent in different localities although region-wise they may differ in contents and application as they are not co-ordinated homogenous sets of laws. In the Southern belt of the river Brahmaputra covered by the districts of Goalpara and Kamrup, we have come across with two such sets of 'Pandulipis' one is called 'Mespara Purbanchal Rabha Samaj Bidhi' and the other 'Dudhnoi Purbanchal Rabha Samaj Bidhi'. The area of operation of the former extends from Dudhnoi to Lakhimpur in the west and upto the foot hills of Meghalaya while the latter covers areas eastward of Dudhnoi upto the western part of Kamrup. There may be more of such 'Pandulipis' in areas not visited by us. The things barred by these 'Pandulipis' are generally not done by the people

4. Sri Mani Rabha—'Asamiya Sanskritiloi Rabhasakalar Abadan' (in Assamese), Published in the Souvenir of the 'Nikhil Rabha Chatra Santha', 1st session, Boko, 1981.

and the Jamad or the Mandal i.e. the lower level of village units prevail upon its constituent members to abide by the dictum contained in them.

There is reason to believe that the Rabhas were once a matriachal tribe. The belief is based on the prevailing custom of reckoning descent from the female line and the practice of inducting the children of a marriage into the 'Barai' of the mother (i.e. if the father's Barai happens to be 'Rongkho' and mother's 'Charchung', then the children will identify them from the mother's Barai). Further the recognition of the 'Mahari' system under which nearest Maharies may claim the movable and immovable properties in certain circumstances may also be cited as an instance of this. A 'Mahari' consists of all the female members emerging from a 'Barai' also called 'Housug'—an exogamous sept whose permission is invariably to be procured before solemnising a second marriage necessitated by death or childlessness of one's wife.⁵ The prevalence of the type of marriage known as 'Nok-Dhankay' which implies that the groom must come to stay in his father-in-laws house with no option to go back for ever amongst certain sections of the tribe is yet another instance of the traditional social relic. J. E. Friend-Pereira in his ethnographic Notes on the Rabhas (incorporated in the Census Report of 1911) also said—"It is an interesting fact that the Rabhas seem to be in a state of transition from the matriarchal to the patriarchal form of family life. Descent is always traced in the female line and the children of a marriage always belong to the mothers barai That at some remote period of time the Matriarchate was in full vigour appears from the story of Dadan in the sections of traditions and history where Dadan the leader of the people is really the maternal uncle and natural guardian of Toba Rani the Chieftainess or Queen of the tribe."

In the light of the observation made above, we may refer to the system of inheritance, succession, a father's

5. Sri Rajen Rabha—'Rabha Jana Jati' (in Assamese), P. 75.

position in a family and the marital position of a groom etc. etc. to see how far the transition as pointed out by Friend-Preira has taken place. In the first place reference may be made to the customary laws of inheritance obtaining at present which are as follows⁶ :—

(i) All sons are entitled to get equal share of a father's property. A daughter inherits no property unless the father makes arrangement for her share before his death. Of course, if the 'Daidies' (also called 'Bhagi') agree, she may be allotted a share even after the death of her father.

(ii) A widow is not entitled to inherit property of her husband even though she is encumbered with issues. Of course her male children will automatically come to inherit their father's property on attaining majority.

(iii) Till a minor male child attains majority the Daidies only will hold the minor's interest as custodian. The Daidies generally include the paternal uncles of the father's Barai.

It is very heartening to see that each and every member of the Rabha society regards it to be a social obligation to voice collectively for restoring possession of a minor's interest when he attains majority.

(iv) If a widow enters into a fresh marriage alliance, she loses all claim of her former husband's property if enjoyed earlier with the consent of the Daidies.

(v) The customary laws allow adoption and an adopted child may inherit the entire properties of his foster father. In the event of not having even an adopted son the properties will automatically pass on to the Daidies in exclusion to all others.

In regard to succession matters also, a son's claim is socially recognised for his ascendancy to the position of his father either on his death or incapacity. It is further noticed

6. Sri Charu Mohan Rabha—'Rabha Samajat Gadhan Sampattir Adhikar' an article in Assamese appearing in the 'Jana-Siksha'—34th Year, 4th Issue, 1973.

that the social and domestic authority of a father in all religious or ritualistic matters are well-secured—he being subordinate to none.

Further more, the practice of going over to the residence of one's wife for permanent stay consequent on marriage has already been abandoned. In other words the old tendency of uxorilocal mode of residence has been substituted by the virilocal mode of residence. All these basic elements of the social structure strengthen the belief that the Rabha society is primarily patriarchal at present though some traits of matriarchy are still lingering from the hoary past.

Religious Outlook :

Mr. Friend-Pereira in his Ethnographic Notes on the Rabhas (as incorporated in 1911 Census Report) has termed the Rabhas as animists in their religious outlook. That the basis of their religious philosophy is mainly based on animism can not be denied even today, though under the influence of Hinduism a considerable number of the Pati Rabhas have already assimilated with the neighbouring Hindu culture and have begun to take part in all religious festivals like the Durga Puja, Kalipuja, Ganesh Puja, Siva Puja etc. etc. From this point of view, this section of the tribe may be described as the followers of both Saktism and Saivism over and above their adherence to the traditional faith in animism. In very recent years a major breakthrough in the religious philosophy of the tribe has been noticed in the emergence of a newband of followers of the Vaishnavite School of the Mahapurusia Sect. It is seen that members indoctrinating themselves in this faith have already forsaken all their traditional manners and customs and in place of innumerable rituals they now resort to 'Ak-saran Nam Dharma' of the Vaishnavite cult as the sole guiding principle of their socio-religious life.

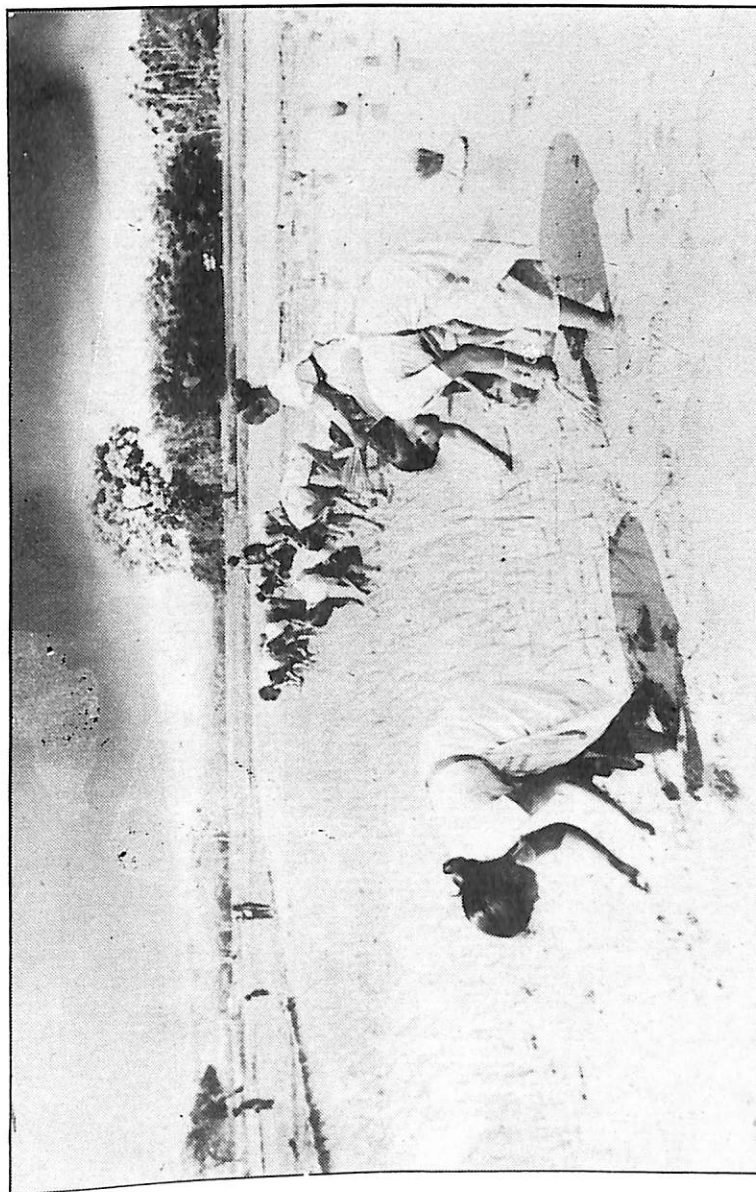
Yet another development in the field of religion has come to notice—the adoption of Christianity by a section of the tribe. This process of conversion to Christianity is distinctly visible in the Loharghat and Rani areas of Kamrup district

and Dudhnoi in Goalpara district. It is seen that those who have embraced Christianity have adopted it for all intents and purpose and hardly revert back to their original faith.

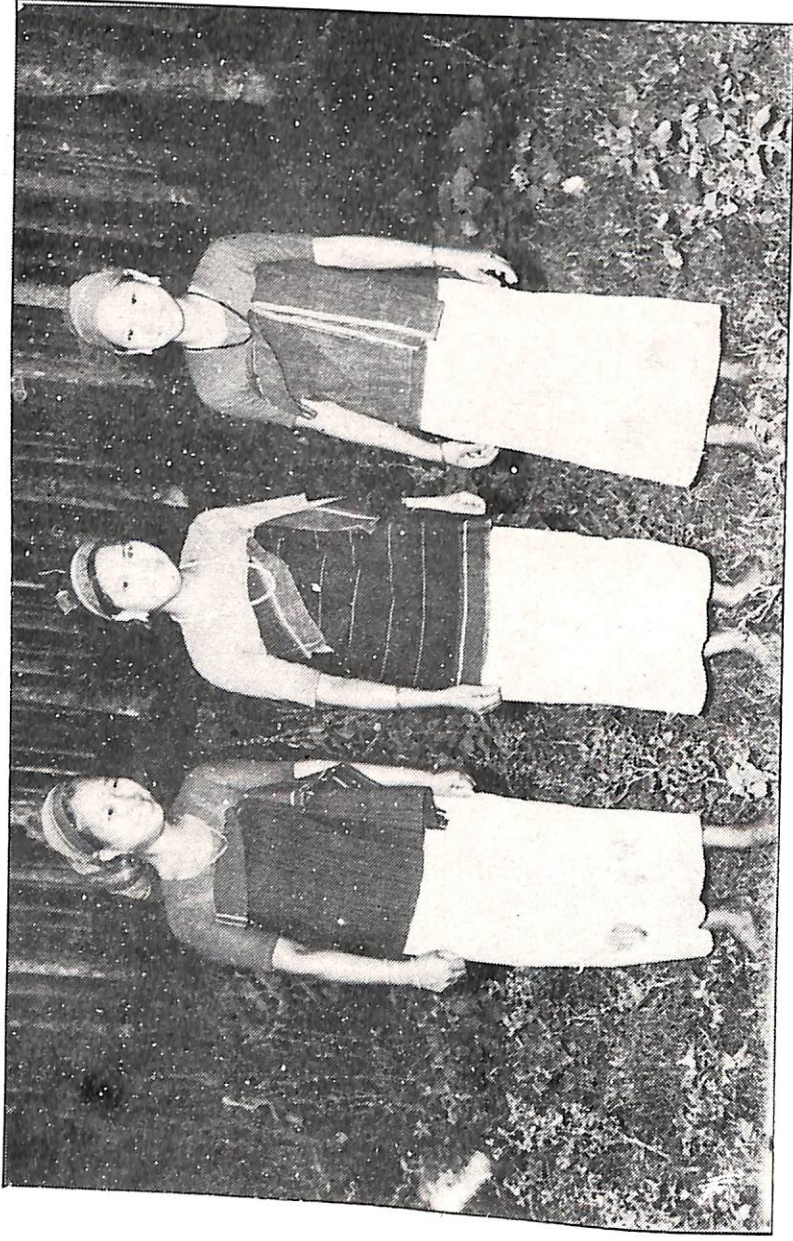
Festivals :

Strictly speaking the Rabha community as a whole does not have any national festival of their own. The different groups celebrate their ritualistic festivals which relate more or less to their own religious concepts and beliefs. Rangali Bihu the spring time festival and Bhogali Bihu the harvesting festival are celebrated only by the Pati group like other villages of the Assam plains. The Rangdani and Maitori groups celebrate 'Baikho' or 'Khoksi' puja festival with the intention of propitiating Baikho the Goddess of Wealth and Prosperity. It is instituted once in a year preferably in the month of Baisakh (mid April to mid May) just before the starting of agricultural operation. It is not that the Pati Rabha, do not propitiate this deity, but they propitiate her along with their 'Langapuja'. Hence the impact of the Baikho festival on the mind and psychology of the Pati Rabhas is not of the same vigour like that of the other groups. In this context it requires to be clarified here that the pomp and grandeur of the Baikho festival are not to be seen now-a-days even in the villages which once used to hold it most magnificently. In most of the villages this festival has been substituted by 'Hachangpuja' which is organised at the specified place called 'Hachang Than'. Almost all the Rangdani villages have now opted for the institution of 'Hachangpuja' though the folk songs known as 'Sathargeet' or 'Khoksigeet' are still sung during this festival by the youths to convey feelings of love and affection to their beloved ones.

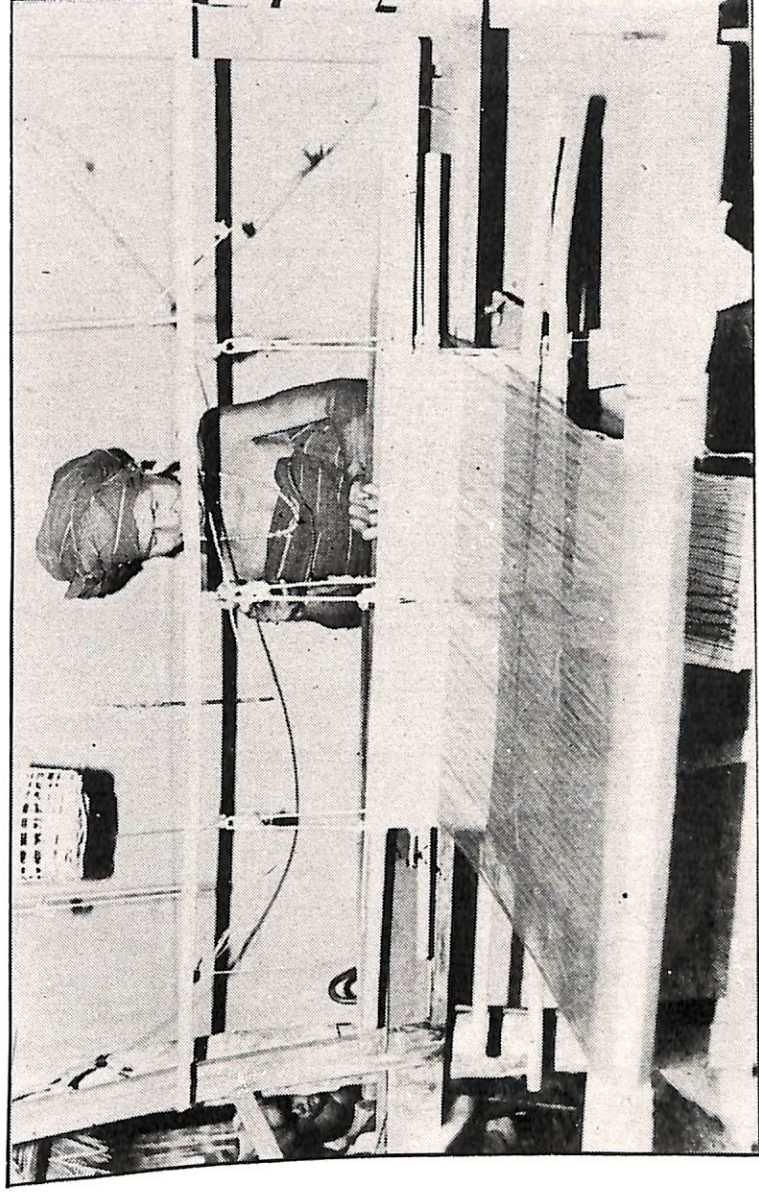
The 'Langapuja' of the Pati Rabhas referred to above, is another important occasion to deserve the status of a festival. The word 'Langa' literally means 'Mahadeva'—one of the Trinity of the Hindu mythology. Therefore in the Langapuja, Mahadeva is the primary deity of propitiation though other deities such as Dhan-Kuber, Thakurani, Dudh-Kumer-Phul Kumer and Goddess 'Baikho' or 'Khoksi' also



Rabha women transplanting paddy



Three Rabha demsels with smiling faces



A Rabha woman in her loom



The Rabhas performing Farkanti dance, a mortuary rite



The Rabhas performing a dance

find place in the altar of worship. The deities are represented with different pieces of fine stones for each of them. Generally the propitiation is done in the month of Baisakh or Jeth (mid April to mid June) either in a forest area or on the bank of a nearby river. 'Langa' is propitiated with two fold objects—to have profuse yield of crop as well as to get rid of all the evil influences that might be looming large over man and animals in the year just beginning. The first deity to receive propitiation is Thakurani followed in order by Dudhkumer-Phulkumer, Langa, Dhankuber and lastly the Goddess Khoksi. Excepting the Dudhkumer-Phulkumer all other deities as listed above are to be propitiated by sacrifices as per prescription. Along with the Pati Rabhas, the Langapuja is instituted by the Rangdanie also. But excepting the 'Langa' which is common to both, the other subordinate deities are different from the Paties. Thus from the propitiation of different deities, the diversity of their conceptual approach on religious thoughts can be perceived to some extent.

Yet another religious festival of the tribe is connected with the propitiation of 'Kechai-Khaiti'—the diety presumed to be the protector of all humanity. Some Pati Rabhas hold this puja simultaneously with the 'Langapuja'. Alternatively this puja is known as 'Dingapuja' simply because a prototype of a 'Dinga' (boat) is made out from the trunk of a plantain tree and all items of offering are put in this boat and carried ultimately to the bank of a river for actual performance of the 'puja'. The symbols of some deities such as Biswakarma, Chandidevi and Mahadeva also find place in this 'Dinga'. It is to be noted that no sacrifice is made in this occasion and all items of offering are in the raw form. However, a duck or a goat is put inside the Dinga and is allowed to float as a symbol of sacrifice. When the Dinga goes on floating, all the members are to move homewards without looking back to it as otherwise this may entail disaster to the families.

It is also believed that the 'Kechai Khaiti' is the only competent deity to keep under control the evil spirits and witches that might be haunting the village. So a drive to scare them

away is organised in this occasion which is appropriately called 'Hawal-Kheda'. Here, the youths of the village go on striking the wall of each and every household under the belief that by that process all the evils could be driven out and sacrificed before the 'Kechai-Khaiti'.

The Pati Rabhas of south-east Goalpara and south-west Kamrup institute 'Marepuja' or 'Maraipuja' to propitiate Goddess 'Monasa' or 'Bishahari' (the queen of serpents). It is regarded as the most important festive occasion of much socio-cultural importance. The propitiation is done through the institution of 'Deodhani' and 'Ozapali' dances accompanied by traditional folk songs based on the legendary quarrel between Monasa and Chando-Sadagar and the fate that befell on Sati-Beula. The 'Maraipuja' is instituted primarily seeking blessings against fell and fatal diseases, natural calamities and also to allay fears from serpents during the year ahead. Though it is a community festival, it is sometimes instituted privately for fulfilment of any particular desire or wish. The fifth lunar day in the dark half of the month of 'Srabana' which is known as 'Nag Panchami' is usually taken to be the most auspicious day for her propitiation. But it is also instituted on some other days as per convenience. Besides 'Monasa' two other deities are also worshipped in this 'puja' in separate altars—they are 'Sitala' and 'Dharma Devta'. For this purpose an improvised rostrum is erected known as 'Moju' where the main characters in the epiclore of Beula and Lakshinder are depicted in addition to other traditional deities. Sometimes the 'Puja' continues for three days when it is called 'Gota Marai' but in some other occasion it is completed within one day when it is known as 'Ful-Marai'. On both the occasions the deity is propitiated by sacrificing either a buffalo or a he-goat.⁹

7. Sri Gautam Rabha—'Maraipuja' included in a compilation entitled 'Dev-Devi aru Rabha Somaj' (in Assamese) p. 71, 1981 published by Rabha Sahitya Gosthi, Bondapara.
8. A comprehensive study on 'Maraipuja' under the name and style of 'Mayawanti Bisahari' by Sri Praneswar Rabha and published by Bisahari Prakasani, Kachadal, Darrangiri has very recently come out with grants-in-aid from Tribal Research Institute, Assam, which may be studied for a fuller account on the subject.

A folk dance known as 'Hanaghora' is yet another occasion of much merriment among the Pati Rabhas living in the south-western part of Kamrup district. With the joining of the Boro-Kacharis and the Garos living in that area, the programme now assumes to be a multi-ethnic one. Although primarily a cultural festival, it has its ritualistic elements as well. The 'Hanaghora' is believed to be the God of fortune for the community, as such before the dance begins, due propitiations are done where the make-shift of a horse with plantain barks finds its place at the altar. This 'horse' is supposed to represent the one used by the companions of 'Mahadeva' during His sojourn after the death of 'Mahasati' at the 'Daksha-Yajna'. The dance programme is simultaneously instituted with the Rangali Bihu festival that commences from mid April onwards every year.

Since 1971, the Rabha tribe has been organising a 'Mela' at the foot of the Dadon hills near Baida village in the subdivision of Goalpara which has come to be known as 'Dadon Mela'. It is instituted every year from eighth to tenth lunation of the light fortnight in the month of Chaitra—the last month of the Assamese almanac. The Mela is organised with the twofold objects of paying obeisance to Sri Sri Risi who is described to be the Creator and Protector of all the lives of the Universe and also to pay homage to the valour and courage of Dadan—the first hero of the Rabha tribe and his able General Marukhetri. People from all over the subdivision particularly from those Rabha villages near about Baida throng over it in a very big way rendering it a great occasion of merriment and an opportunity to come closer to Sri Sri Risi—the common deity of their adoration.

Marriage :

Before detailing the Rabha marriage system it is essential to know some basic customary rules governing the marital relationship amongst the Rabhas. Some of these customary rules are broadly as under :

- (1) No marriage can take place between the same 'Barai'⁹

9. A 'Barai' is alternatively called 'Bar' / 'Housug', which is equivalent to 'Gotra' in Assamese.

(an exogamous sept) or between two Barais included in a 'Hur'.¹⁰ Amongst the Pati and Bitlia Rabhas some laxity in these restrictions do often occur but no deviation has been noticed amongst the Rangdanie and the Maitories.

(ii) A younger brother can marry the widow of his elder brother but on no account the reverse may happen. Similarly one can marry the younger sister of one's wife if contingency so requires but not the elder sister if unmarried still. In other words levirate and sororate at junior levels only may take place.

(iii) Cross-cousin marriage is permissible, but it is limited only to marrying the daughter of one's maternal uncle (either elder or younger to his mother). It may be pointed out here that the present generation has disfavoured the idea of marrying the maternal uncle's daughter on the plea of close affinity of blood as well as for discouraging maternal influence in the family matters that usually tend to grow after the marriage.

(iv) The system of parallel cousin marriage is totally absent but two brothers of a family can marry from the same family provided the elder brother chooses to marry the elder sister.

Since the Pati Rabhas are the most predominant among all other groups, reference here will only be made to the marital rites and ceremonies as practised by them. An important aspect of a Pati Rabha marriage is that in comparison with the Rangdanie and the Maitories, it is solemnised in a very simple way though it requires to pass through several preliminary stages before the actual marriage rites are performed.

In the first stage, a few ladies of the village set out to the house of the prospective bride with the intention of conveying the choice for the girl. This visit is locally known as 'Pan-Tamul

10. A 'Hur' is alternatively called 'Souru' and may better be expressed as 'Mitragotra' a loose unit of two or more Barais the cementing force in them being the eternal-friendship and blessed brotherhood supposedly continuing from the traditional past.

kata'. Since the mind of the bride's party is not yet known, a date is fixed on which the groom party arrives again with a bag of Chira (pounded rice). If this bag is received by the bride's party, the proposal for the marriage is presumed to have been accepted. But this acceptance of the proposal is subject to the general approval of all the nearest relations and elderly people of the village. So a date is again fixed on this very day and accordingly the groom-party consisting of men and women arrive at the bride's house where a similar group of people keep awaiting for them. The occasion is particularly known as 'Gota-Tamul Khuoya' and is most significant part of the entire proceeding. Here the groom party is to offer betel-nuts and leaves with utmost care and according to the norms observable in such an august assembly. This being done, the approval of the village elders is presumed to have been obtained without any reservation and this clears the way for the next step which is known as 'Pan-Cheni' (also called 'Joron'). On this day a sufficiently large groom party accompanied by drummers and musicians arrive at the bride's house laden with bags of pounded rice and banana. Members of both the parties then begin to feed themselves on the betel-nuts and leaves to prepare the ground for talks concerning bride price, other claims on the bride, the clothes of honour required to be presented to the girl's parents etc. etc. If the claims preferred by the bride's side are unequivocally agreed to be met, then as a token of maturity of the marriage proposal, the bride is given her bridal apparels, a ring, a few pieces of bangles etc. etc. along with the vermilion mark on her forehead. The stage appears to be now ready for the marriage except formal payment of the bride-price and this is done on an appointed date—the day being known as 'Malancha'. The village elders again meet on this day and formally receive the items as agreed to be given on the previous occasion.

The actual marriage takes place on an auspicious day ascertained on the verdict of the village priest or as per dictum of the Assamese calendar. The usual practice on this day is to fetch the bride to the groom's house for holding the marriage rites. A mirthful atmosphere is created by the singsongs of

the female processionists and the drummers that accompany them. While going for the bride, large amount of betel-nuts and leaves, pounded rice and banana are to be carried along with them. On arriving there, the first task is to attire the bride with all the bridal items and this being over, the return journey begins—the procession swelling this time with the inclusion of members from the bride's side—more appropriately known as 'Nok-Swamis'. The journey takes place either on foot or by means of a conveyance depending on the distance to be covered.

As soon as the bride arrives, she is made to stand just beneath the entrance gate where the first ritual known as 'Chalani-bati Sarakoya' is performed amidst a cheerful atmosphere. She is then led to the 'Borghar' (main house) along with the female members of her side, while the male members coming with her are accommodated in the temporary pandel erected for the purpose. Here a 'Ghat' (a symbol of divinity) is established in the midst of an altar ('Mandap') where a clayey lamp is kept lighting with mustard oil.

It is customary for both the groom and the bride to take bath before they are brought in front of this altar. After bath both of them are again attired with the prescribed dresses and brought to the pandel where the bride is seated to the right side of the groom and then both of them are tied in a knot ('Lagna-ganthi'). This is most significant as it implies that from now onwards both of them are to march together on the journey of life. Immediately after this, a minor ritual known as 'Dhup-Chaul-Chatioya' takes place where the two female hair-dressers combing the couple's hair are to throw handfuls of husked rice around the shamiana with a view to scare away all the evil influences that might be looming large on them. Then follows 'Usarga' which means that whoever intends to present anything to the couple may do so in this moment. After this, both the bride and the groom are invited to play 'Pasa'—an indigenous game of skill presumably to varify their IQ. This being done, the couple comes to bow down before the entire assemblage so as to receive blessings and good wishes

from each and every one present. The entire assembly then blesses the couple through 'Hariddhani' (i. e. loud expression of good wishes in the name of God). Soon after this, the couple is moved out to the 'Borghar' led by the bride for bowing down in reverence first to the 'Ghor-gosani' (or 'Rantak') and then to the individual family members who command respects by virtue of age or relationship.

The rituals having come to an end all the members present in the occasion are entertained in a big feast (usually non-vegetarian). This feasting continues for the second day also when the 'Nok-Swamies' (bride-party) prepare to return back to their destination (Rabha, 1974).

The above is a sketch of the traditional marriage system amongst the Pati Rabhas but a tendency of late, has been growing among the enlightened section of the community to engage priests of their own community for performing the marriage rites as per Hindu customs instituting sometimes 'Hom-Yajna' before the sacred fire. Where such adaptations have been received, the usual practice here is to go to the bride's house for performing the marriage rites instead of fetching the bride to the groom's house.

It is however to be noted that whatever be the form of marriage, it is customary to propitiate 'Risi-Sore'—the deity of family welfare by sacrificing a cock and a hen before the formal union of the groom and the bride. The performance of this ritual marks the completion of all formalities pertaining to a marriage by negotiation.

If a conjugal life is affected in any way after marriage then separation can be secured by a divorce which is recognised by the Rabha society. The party desiring divorce is to approach the village council for its approval. The village elders on being satisfied with the grounds of divorce may order such an action through a system known as 'Panchira' i. e. the parties standing opposite to each other are to hold a betel-leaf with a view to apportioning it at the signalling of the village council. The party obtaining the major portion of the leaf may enter

first to a subsequent marriage if so desired. Sometimes the village priest or the village elder himself takes the trouble of tearing a betel leaf and thus giving approval to the proposal of seperation. Every village council imposes a levy for conducting such a proceeding of seperation.

Birth Ceremonies :

The Rabhas irrespective of their clannish differentiation propitiate a household deity known as 'Bai-ma-ba' for assuaging labour pains and other complicacies that may come with the birth of a baby. The mother is treated as unclean till the date on which the umbilical cord of the baby falls. On the day of purification, the mother is to give her child a name and on this occasion the lady attending her during confinement is specially invited to bless the new born. On completion of all these rituals the neighbours are entertained including this lady in a grand feast usually by killing a pig. If this feast somehow or other can not be arranged, the mother feels herself not relieved from the social obligation that she owes to her neighbours.

It is however to be noted that ritualistic uniformity in connection with a birth is not to be found in the Rabha society, the same being governed by customary rules which vary from place to place and region to region.

Disposal of the dead and death rites :

In a normal death, the dead body is washed with 'Santi-Jal' (sanctified water) and after that the body is dressed with new garments and kept in an outer house for a night for enabling the distant relatives to arrive for the last rites. It is buried or creamated in the next morning. In an unnatural death caused either by epidemic or suicide, the dead body is however buried and not burnt. It is customary for the whole village not to take any food till the dead body is removed to the cremation ground. After disposal of the corpse, the members attending the cremation come back to the house of the dead and on their way they are required to take bath in the nearest river or in a pond and receive some amount of smoke produced jointly

by burning cotton and dried leaves of jute which is kept ready by other members not attending the cremation ground. This is done to scare away any evil effect that might accompany them while returning from the cremation ground. Then the party arrives at the house occuring death where a preliminary death rite is performed which correspond more or less to the 'Marang Makka' rite of the Rangdannies (Rabha, 1974).

The final death rites are usually done on the seventh day but if it is intended to defer, the date is required to be announced at the cremation ground itself. It is customary not to take fish and meat till the completion of all the death rites. They also practise some other tabbo amongst which milk is not allowed to be taken by the children for a year if the death happens to be of the mother and no banana if death occurs of the father. The practice of offering 'Mysako' (an offering of boiled rice with meat, egg, fish, rice-beer etc.) to the dead is also prevalent amongst the Paties (Rabha, 1974).

The funeral ceremony of the Pati Rabhas is marked by recitation from the Mahabharata and the Ramayana and from other sacred scriptures of the Hindus. It is heartening to note that rice-beer which used to be indulged in heavily in such an occasion till recently has now almost been abandoned at the initiative of the regional councils and this has brought some visible impact on the socio-cultural and socio-economic life of the tribe.

In summing up, it may be said that the funeral ceremony of the Pati Rabhas is less expensive and also shorter in its total spreadovers when compared with the Rangdannies and the Maitories. Therefore, recurrence of deaths within a short spell of time in families other than the Paties, usually bring heavy strain on the household economy.

Language and Literature :

The Rabha language is now confined among the Rangdani and the Maitory groups. The Koch or the Kocha group also speak the same language spoken by the two former groups but

their word structure and phonetics differ slightly.¹¹ Minor groups like the Dahuries, Songhas, Tintekias and the Chapras speak their own dialects and the dialectal variations in between them are quite considerable. Groups like the Paties, Hanas and Totlas and a few other groups have already lost their mother tongues¹². The Paties one of the major groups of the tribe now speak a patois of the Assamese language.

Efforts have recently been made to standardise the language and to impart education at the primary level through mother tongue. The "Bibek Rabha Kraurang Runchume"—a literary organisation for the development of Rabha language has taken up some positive steps towards standardisation process of the language with all available materials with it. The 'Rabha Bhasa Parisad' of Dudhnoi—another literary organisation has also taken up the cause of establishing this language on a scientific footing. With this end in view the Parishad has recently produced Rabha text books including Rabha Grammar upto the primary standard. In their effort to evolve a correct base to Rabha Grammar, the Parishad has studied Rev. A. F. Stephen's Grammatical Forms of the Rabha Words in English (1900 A. D.); G. A. Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India—Vol. III, Part II (1903 A.D.); and those grammatical forms used by the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1909 during the course of publishing 'Jisuni Namkay Markani Saikay Katha'. Over and above these, the grammatical works of local grammarians like Sri Jogendra Bantho and Sri Moni Rabha have also been given sufficient weightage. The 'Rabha Sahitya Gosthi' of Bondapara yet another literary organisation has been supplementing the creative works of the above organisations. Thus the coordinated efforts of these organisations are going on to give the Rabha language an identity of its own.

11. Sri Hareswar Rabha—'Rabha Bhasa Aru Eyar Gathan'—an article in Assamese in the Souvenir of the Nikhil Rabha Chatra Santha, 1st Year Session Boko, 1981.
12. Sri Heremba Rabha—'Rabha Samaj Sanskritir Gabesanar Dhara'—an article in Assamese in the Souvenir of the 'Sodou Asom Tribal Sangha'—20th Session, Guwahati, 1977.

As to literary creations, it may be said that till the attainment of Independence, Rabha literature did not make any headway due to extremely low percentage of literacy and smaller number of educated persons. It was only during the post independence period that some literary work had made their first appearance. In this regard the pioneering effort of the 'Sodou Rabha Kristi Sangha' must be given due credence. The cultural revival brought about by the Kristi Sangha paved the way and in fact became the forerunner of literary work in Rabha language. The local cultural units formed under this Sangha in places like Chotamatiya, Manikganj, Nadiapara, Jerdoba, Duarmari, Bongaon, Chatabari, Baida, Salpara, Naguapara, Dokapara, Borshijhora and Debitola covering the district of Goalpara and Garo Hills (as constituted in the then Assam) were looking for dramatic literature which ultimately led to the production of some such literary books with materials rooted in the indigenous soil itself. The pioneering effort of a few literary bent of persons like Sri Rajen Pam, Sri Sarat Rabha, Ex-MLA (both of Chotamatiya), Sri Rajen Rabha of Dudhnoi and Sri Abinash Rabha of Debitola must be remembered in this context.¹³ Thus on the tails of these creations, other diversified fields of literary work came to be experimented in Rabha language. The Rabha Sahitya Sabha subsequently took up this challenge with much conviction and self exertion.

Trend of Change :

The trend of change occurring to the Rabha society appears to be multi-dimensional in character as we see them through their socio-religious, socio-cultural and socio-economic perspectives. The changing trends gained momentum during the post-independence period than in the earlier years. The adaptation to the Hindu ways of life and assimilation to its culture more particularly by the Pati section of the tribe is a distinct phenomenon of social change noticed during the recent past.

13. Sri Listi Rabha—'Bartaman Rabha Jati' (in Assamese) published in 'Asomor Janajati'—an Assamese Magazine, 1st issue, 1st year, 1975 (Edited by Sri Monoranjan Lahari).

The conversion of a sizeable section of the tribe to Christianity is another phenomenon reacting sharply to the continuation or preservation of old traditional socio-religious rituals or the socio-cultural traits of much ethnic importance. Even what have been left out have undergone curtailment with the passing of times due to various factors including economic ones. 'Farkranti'—the death ceremony of the Rabhas is now very rarely celebrated with its full quota of ritualistic details as was done in the days of yore. The 'Langa Puja' in the Pati villages or the 'Baikho' (alternatively 'Khoksi') puja in the Rangdani villages have lost much of their former glories. The festive fervours in both the occasions appear to be gradually waning. One is now to thank himself if he can hear the melodies of the 'Lakhar Branshi' played by the village cow-boys or the tragic throbs of the 'Baramahee Geet' rendered to tunes by the 'Turuliya Branshi'. The loss of the indigenous technology of manufacturing 'Buburenga'—an intricate musical instrument by the women section of the Rabha society and virtual disappearance of 'Dighalpeti Kham' another musical instrument of much traditional importance remind us about the gradual erosion of the cultural heritage of the tribe. Similarly the Pati villages of South Kamrup no longer attach that much of importance in learning the 'Bahurangee geets' and dances associated with it. This dilution to the traditions of the hoary past thus indicate some aspects of changes occurring in recent years among the community.¹⁴

It is however heartening to note that in the spheres of socio-economic life, the characteristic inertia of the Rabha villages has to an identifiable extent been wiped out by the expansion of education, improvement of communication and social mobility of the people. These improvements have thrown direct impacts on the receptivity of mind and enthusiasm to work in diversified fields. Thus a state of psychological preparedness towards achieving higher education both in the academic and

14. Sri Biren Rabha—'Rabha Kristit Dristipat'—an article in Assamese published in 'Smriti Grantha' of Nikhil Rabha Chatra Santha, 1st yearly session, Boko, 1981.

technical fields is now distinctly noticeable in the Rabha villages. Due to this attitudinal change a large number of educated persons have now emerged out of them and have occupied positions in civil services including Indian Administrative Service. But with regard to activities connected with the tertiary sector, their participation is not so much encouraging. Nevertheless, the young generation now feels more inclined to self employment by resorting to activities associated with trade and commerce and such other ancillary works. People falling under Tribal Sub-Plan areas now get ample opportunities to develop themselves in this sector.

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— x —