

THE PLAINS TRIBES OF LAKHIMPUR, DIBRUGARH, SIBSAGAR AND NOWGONG



G.C.SHARMA THAKUR

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OF
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AND
NOWGONG**

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PREFACE

It is a great pleasure to meet the demand of the Scholars by reprinting the book "The Plains Tribes of Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar and Nowgong" by G. C. Sharma Thakur.

The book is full of information regarding several plains tribes and lesser known tribes of Assam.

I extend my thanks to the Scholars for their encouragement and assistance

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PREFACE

On the hill tribes of Assam many voluminous books have been written before and after Independence. People both inside and outside Assam, are fairly acquainted with the life and culture of the Hill tribes. But no systematic study has yet been made about the plains tribes. About the Mishings, authors such as the late Sonaram Payeng Kakati and Dr. N. Pegu have written accounts which give some knowledge about this plains tribe to the general readers. Similarly Sri Dambarudhar Deori of Bamrajabari in the district of Sibsagar has published in Assamese, a well documented book entitled 'Deori Sanskriti' in 1964, with the financial assistance of the Education Department, Government of Assam, Shillong, Sri Deori gives a good account of the Deori Chutias. For the rest of the plains tribes of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Nowgong, namely the Sonowal Kacharis, Phakeals, Aitonias, Turungs, Khamyangs, Dowanias, Lalungs, Singphos and Khamtis, no exhaustive study has yet been made. Of course the Assam Sahitya Sabha has done a creditable job by publishing the 'Asamar Janajati' where a sincere effort has been made to acquaint the general readers with the social life of the plains tribes. As this work was published in Assamese, the non-Assamese people have not been benefited much.

To bring the life and culture of the plains tribes to the notice of the general readers both inside and outside Assam, the Tribal Research Institute, Shillong fixed responsibility of collecting and processing the data on the plains tribes on me and since 1964. I was collecting data on the plains tribes of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Nowgong. To write an account of a tribe is a very delicate task especially where less known tribes like the plains tribes are concerned. In the present book efforts have been made to give pen picture of the eleven plains tribes mentioned above and no stone has been left unturned to make the report authentic

and technically accurate. I have endeavoured to present the result of my study in as popular a manner as possible avoiding details which may appear to be boring to the general readers.

In the present study notes on two NEFA tribes namely the Khamtis and Singphos have been included as they have established permanent villages in the district of Lakhimpur. They still maintain their traditional customs and beliefs and live like other tribes in the district.

This field worker would consider his labour amply rewarded if the facts presented here prove to be of some help to the Government authorities and to the anthropologists.

I wish to convey my grateful thanks to Miss M.D. Pugh, Deputy Director, Tribal Research Institute, Shillong, Shri C. D. Tripathy the then Additional Deputy Commissioner, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sri K. Bora, the then Additional Deputy Commissioner, Dibrugarh and Sri R Barua, the present Additional Deputy Commissioner, Dibrugarh, who took keen interest in my field work and without whose ready assistance in conducting my tours it would not have been possible to carry out my assignment successfully. My sincerest gratitude is due to all those who in the course of field work supplied the information and other valuable data regarding the plains tribes.

Dibrugarh
5th February, 1971

G. C. Sharma Thakur

CONTENTS

1. The Mishings (Miris)	1-24
2. The Deori Chutias	25-39
3. The Sonowal Kacharies	40-51
4. The Phakeals	52-73
5. The Khamtis	74-84
6. The Dowanias	85-91
7. The Singphos	92-100
8. The Khamyangs	101-107
9. The Aitonias	108-114
10. The Turungs	115-120
11. The Lalungs	121-134
Bibliography	135-137

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Bibliography	135-137

CHAPTER-I

THE MISHINGS (MIRIS)

INTRODUCTION

The tribe popularly known as Mishings or Plains Miris is found mostly in three districts of Assam namely Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang. This riverine tribe living amidst the Assamese people for the last seven centuries through many changes in the political and socio-religious life of Assam, has been able to keep its own dialect. Those Mishings who have no dialect of their own might have forgotten their dialect as they have mixed with the non-Mishing people since time immemorial or it might so happen because a large number of Non-Mishing people have come to the fold of the Mishings. Such people are found in Golaghat sub-division of Sibsagar district. Although their cultural and religious life have been influenced by that of the neighbouring people during all those periods, it is seen that this tribe still maintains many of its fundamental social customs, traditions and religious beliefs.

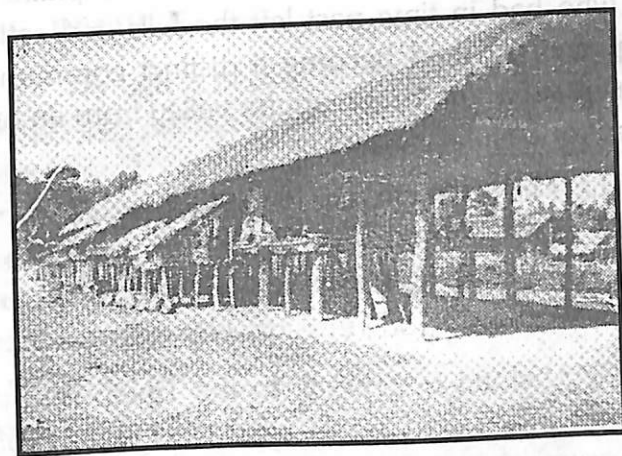
The Mishings or the Miris were originally a hill tribe within the ranges of the Abor, Miri and Mishmi hills in the North East Frontier Agency who came down to the plains before the reign of the Ahom Kings and since then began settling in the riverine areas of the Brahmaputra and Subansiri rivers of Assam. Originally

there was no tribe such as the Miri. The plains tribal people known as Miri or Mishings, now inhabiting the riverine areas of Upper Assam Valley, especially in the districts of Lakhimpur, Sivasagar and Darrang, are blood relations of the tribal people living in the Abor Hills in the North East Frontier Agency. "The History of the Miris is essentially the history of the Mishings of the Minyongs, Pasi-Padams and any other hills tribes, who profess the cult of **Mirui**, worship **Donyi** (Sun) **Polo** (Moon) as their principal deities and call themselves **Ami** or **Tani** meaning man". (The Miris-by Dr. N. Pegu, Page-2). Though there is no recorded historical evidence to show the exact date and causes of the Plains Miris coming down to the Plains of Assam, there is no dearth of folk tales among the Mishings tracing their origin to the Abor hills and the people now living there. "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 Miri is acted as **go-between** of the Abors and the traders of Assam". (History of the North East Frontier of Bengal-by Alexander Mackenzie, Page-33).

Social communication still exists between the Mishings and the Abors, and the Abors call the plains Mishings as **Aying BIRRANG** (Plains Brothers) and the



Mishing Man and woman



A Typical Mishing house

plains Mishings call the Abors **Adi Birrang** (Hills Brothers). It is stated in the Assam Census Report 1881 that the name Miri was given by the Assamese to the people inhabiting the mountains between the Assam Valley and Tibet.

According to the Mishings, the word Miri is the simplified form of **Mieurieui**. When the Mishings came down to the plains their introduction to the inquisitive people of the plains was to make themselves known as persons belonging to the land of **Mieurieus** in the Abor hills. The people of the plains being unable to follow the correct pronunciation simplified it into Miri.

The Mishings should not be confounded with the **Hill Miris**. It has been mentioned in the Assam District Gazetteer 1926 that the hill Miris inhabited the Subansiri valley as far as the plains. They must in no way be confounded with the Miris of the plains of Assam who had in time past left the hills and settled in the plains and had become a distinct community. They migrated to the Brahmaputra valley from an area upstream of the Dihong river.

The Mishings are semi nomadic in character. They are lovers of river side habitation, because of which they have to confront all the evils of natural calamities such as flood, erosion etc. every year.

They belong in general, to the Tibeto-Burman family of the Mongoloid group. Colonel Dalton (1855), then Principal Assistant to the Governor General's Agent in Assam describes them well as being "of the yellow Mongolian type, tall and powerfully framed, but

with a slouching gait and sluggish habits". The beardless cheek and obliquely set eyes of the Mongolian may be traced among the Mishings. "The Mongolian belonged in general to the Tibeto-Burman family of Indo-Chinese group. The Kacharis, the Ravas, the Meches, the Miris, the Lalungs, the Garos, the Nagas, the Kukis etc., are members of the early Mongolian group, that migrated to this country". ("The Red River and the Blue Hill-by Hem Barua, Page 48). From the above references it can be assumed that the original habitat of the Mishings was the Tibeto-Chinese border of the North East Frontier of India and they had migrated to the plains not too long before the British took over the control of Assam. According to the 1961 Census the total Mishing population of Assam is 163453.

THE PEOPLE

Though a people of the Tibeto-Burman origin, the Mishings are not short statured like the neighbouring Dafla tribe. They are tall with well developed body and have charming features characteristic of the Mongoloid type of people. They possess wide chests, broad shoulders and strong muscles. Their lips are thick and noses flat. They wear straight hair and beards and moustaches are practically absent. Outsiders are charmed at their hospitality. They are simple, straight forward and firm. "Their free and frank minds are reflected upon the cups of **Apong** and the delightful laugh with which they welcome their guests readily" (The Miris---by Dr. N. Pegu, P. 48).

MATERIAL CULTURE

VILLAGE

The Mishing villages are always established on the bank of a river. No Mishing village is therefore seen far away from any river and because of this the Mishings have to face the furies of the river every year. Besides they have to lead a nomadic life.

HOUSE

Their houses are built on platforms raised about 5 feet above the ground. Previously the houses were built temporarily because the Mishings had to face the ravages of floods every year. But today this position has been changed to a considerable extent due to the construction of the embankments by the Government. A typical Mishing house is sometimes as much as forty yards in length and contains from thirty to forty persons, living in one great hall without any compartments. The length and breadth of an average house is about 60 feet and 20 feet respectively. The roof is thatched and the walls are made of reeds or bamboos. There may be a separate place in the front portion of the house where guests are entertained. This is a covered portico and forms the main entrance. Access to the portico can be made with the help of

a ladder. 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 certain place is kept apart for them under the **Chang**. A shade is erected for the cattle adjacent to the house. At a few yards from the main house a miniature house is constructed for the fowls. Well-to-do Mishings keep a granary to keep paddies.

The most important feature within a Mishing house is the fireplace **Merum** which is looked upon with much respect. Besides cooking their daily meals, certain offerings are also performed in the fireplace.

MORUNG

The **Morung**, or the bachelors' dormitory, is an important feature in the Mishing village. It is a public hall erected almost in all villages. The **Morung** is constructed on a raised platform 5 to 6 feet above the ground without walls. The posts and the beams are decorated with wood carving of primitive designs. Unlike the Naga **Morung**, the Mishing **Morung** is not a young men's house nor is it a **Gitiora** of the Hos of Kolhan. The Mishing **Morung** serves the purpose for the annual **Porag** and other major festivals. Public gathering such as **Kebang** are also held here. It is also the usual venue where the village **Gams** (Chief)

give judgment in different cases. Since the function of the **Morung** has changed to some degree, the building is not always maintained. Therefore when the occasion arises as for festivals the house is completely renovated. At present in some advanced villages many of the old functions of the **Morung** have been taken over by the **namghar** (congregational prayer hall). This is due to the influence of the Gosains whose pioneer activities in removing the age old backwardness of the Mishings is noteworthy. Generally the **Morung** is constructed in a central place of the village. During festivals the **Morung** is decorated and it becomes the centre of attraction for all the villagers.

AGRICULTURE

Though agriculture is the principal means of support yet among the Mishings it is still mainly at the subsistence level. Ahu cultivation occupies a significant place among the Mishings and this crop is widely grown by all of them. Besides Ahu, they cultivate mustard seeds, sweet potatoes, pulses, cotton, maize, bananas etc. Of late, Sali paddy cultivation is becoming popular with the Mishings. Transplantation and weeding are traditionally the work of women. Threshing is generally done by women with the foot, and sometimes by men with buffaloes.

The Mishings perform some ceremonies connected with agriculture. At the advent of the monsoon and before ploughing the fields, they observe **Ali-Ligang**. In the middle of cultivation in the month of

October, they perform **Sarag Puja** so that the ancestral spirits may protect the flourishing sprouts from pests and other natural calamities. Again after the crops have been harvested, they worship **Dabur**.

The Mishings believe that **Kuber** (Lakshmi) is the goddess of wealth and agriculture and so the first bundle of crops is taken to the stores in her name. Before the family partakes of the new crops, ceremonial offerings to the ancestral spirits are made and the first plate of rice is offered to a dog.

There is no joint ownership of land.

HUNTING AND FISHING

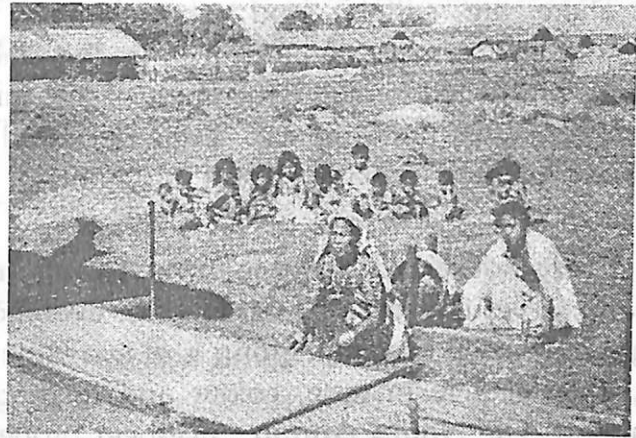
With progress in domestication of animals, hunting and fishing gradually changes from a means of livelihood into a form of entertainment. Hunting is done in order to break the monotony of the tedious and boring process of agricultural undertakings. Apart from casual hunting regular hunting parties are organised during summer. Firearms, bows and arrows and spears are the main hunting weapons. Unlike many Indian tribes (e.g. Birhors) the Mishings do not perform any ceremony during the hunting expedition. Of course they promise an offering to the **Tal Dangaria** when they start for hunting. During hunting the women in the village must not comb their hair. Weaving or preparing rice-beer during the period is strictly prohibited. No animal should be killed or sacrificed during the period. The flesh of the deer or wild pigs killed in hunting are usually distributed

among all the families in the village. The man in whose net the game is caught or the man who kills the animal, receives in addition to his usual share, one knee joint and flesh of one side of the back.

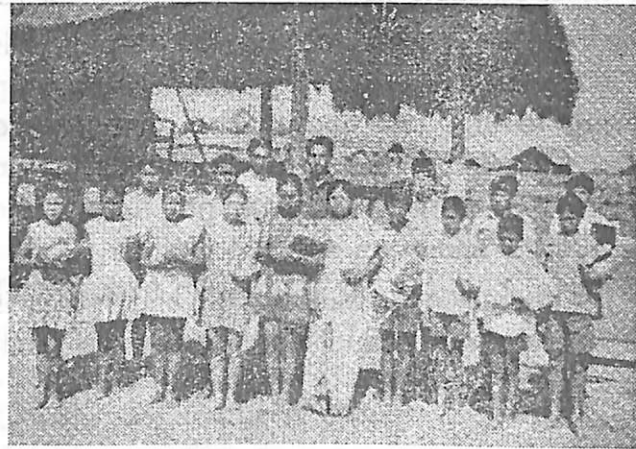
Fish catching is an affair of the winter season. **Zurki, Chaloni, Dirdang** and **Porang** (fishing implements made of split bamboos), **Ei Jamborok** (a crossbow device) are the usual fishing implements. Of late, fishing nets are becoming popular. The **Dibung** is another instrument made of a long bamboo measuring 15/20 feet with a pointed metallic spearhead. The fishing operation is a very interesting scene. Endle in his book 'The Kacharis' describes the fishing operation of the Mishings in the following words. "The whole scene is a very merry one, accompanied with much laughter and pleasing excitement and more particularly as the two parties of the fish catchers approach each other and the fish make frantic effort to escape their doom, the fun becomes fast and furious."

FOOD AND DRINK

Rice is the staple food of the Mishings. Along with rice they take leafy vegetables, edible roots and fish. Meat and fish are not everyday items of food but are occasional delicacies. Their great delicacies are fowl and pork. The preserved fish **Ngo San** has a great demand for entertaining guests. This dried fish they prepare in the hot rays of the sun or over the hearth of a fire placed on a bamboo sieve called



A Mishing woman preparing her loom



Mishing school going boys and girls with a Deori teacher

Perap. Meals are taken twice daily, at midday and in the evening.

There are certain food taboo among the Mishings. If any member of the family dies then taking of meat is prohibited to all the members of that family until the obsequial performances of the deceased are observed. Again if a party is out on hunting, the villagers must not take any meat.

Every household brews its own **Apong** (rice-beer) and serves it as drink and a food for everybody, young or old. "The Mishing **Apong** is of two varieties, which differ slightly in taste, colour and method of preparation. The **Nagin Apong**, rice-beer proper, is whitish in colour and fermented from pure boiled rice but the **Poro Apong** has a dark green colour due to its alkaline base added to the boiled rice. It can be preserved for weeks together." Apong is considered to be the most valuable item for entertaining guests.

The beer is brewed in every house and it is solely the womens' business. Every family should keep some **Apong** to entertain guests. The women who prepare the **Apong** are required to observe certain rules of ceremonial purity. Before the preparation she must take a bath and wear washed clothes.

Taking of milk, egg, mustard oil and spices is not very popular, but gradually greater use of such products is gaining ground

DRESS

Before foreign clothes invaded the Mishing villages, a Mishing woman would remain satisfied with

a wide strip of cloth **Sumpa** worn around the waist, extending down to the knee. Around the breasts they wrapped a narrow strip of cloth called a **Galuk**. A small piece of cloth called **Hura** was the head-dress. There was an extra small piece of cloth worn round the hips which distinguished married women from the unmarried ones.

The males used a long narrow strip of cloth round the waist called **Kaping**.

In recent years due to easy communication and other facilities mill made clothes have penetrated into the furthest corners and traditional clothes are fast disappearing.

CLAN

The Mishings are broadly known by two sections namely **Barogam** and **Dahgam**. But strangely enough such a division is not found amongst the Hill Miris. In the Assam Census Report 1881 we find "The Miris are divided into two mutually exclusive sections, which are respectively known as **Barogam** and **Dahgam**. A third appellation of theirs is **Chutia** which they say was given by the Ahom Kings and which seem to denote, that they were found resident in the **Chutia** dominions at the time of their conquest by the Ahoms." The division is not watertight, and there is no disharmony because of these divisions. These two divisions are divided into a number of clans namely amongst the **Barogam-Doley, Kutum, Kuli, Pait, Patir, Basar, Pasar, Kardong, Misong,**

etc. and amongst the **Dahgam-Moying, Chayang, Taye, Pamegam, Murung, Bori, Paow, Panging, Yein, Panchang, Noro, Koman, Pogag, Bosing, Regon, Saro, Nagate** etc. Knowledge of clans is most important for marriage. It is to be noted that other than for marriage purposes, clan distinction is never taken into account for their day to day life. The clans mentioned above, are again subdivided into several sub-clans or **Opins** bearing identical surnames signifying closest blood relationship. The Mishings use the clan names as titles or surnames. The clans derive their names from 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 riverine people and are oftentimes affected by flood, of late, clan-wise habitation has become impracticable.

They have no totemic clans.

KINSHIP

The kinship system of the Mishings is, broadly speaking, 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, father **Abu**, mother **Nanne** or **Ane**, father's elder brother **Abatta** and so on. The Mishings use the same relationship term **Baboi** for his father's younger brother and mother's sister's husband. Similarly the same term **Nanyin** is used for

father's sister, mother's brother's wife, and husband's mother. There are many kinship terms the use of which indicates "antecedent social function." For example, the term **Aota** is used for fathers's father, mother's father and father-in-law.

The terms of relationship and mutual address used by the Mishings are as follows :-

ENGLISH

MISHING

Father	Abu or Babo
Mother	Ane or Nane
Brother	Biro
Brother (elder)	Aabatta or Babatta
Brother (younger)	Baboi
Husband	Milbong
Wife	Nane
Son	Aao
Daughter	Ome
Father's Father	Tato
Father's mother	Yaio
Father's brother	Baboi
Mother's father	Tato
Mother's mother	Yaio
Father's sister	Nanyin
Mother's brother	Kaki

Mother's sister	Yoyin
Father's brother's wife	Yoyin
Father's sister's husband	Kaki
Mother's brother's wife	Nanyin
Father's brother's son	Aao
Father's brother's daughter	Ome
Son's daughter	Immang
Son's son	Immang
Wife's father	Aato or Tato
Wife's mother	Yayo
Wife's brother (elder)	Magbo
Wife's brother (younger)	Yigo
Wife's sister (elder)	Mamo
Wife's sister (younger)	Yigne
Son-in-law	Magbo
Son's wife	Yameng

The Mishing kinship system has 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 **Babatta** but when he speaks of his father he uses the term **Aabatta**.

FAMILY

Among the Mishings many families live peacefully together in a single house. All the members abide by the orders of the headman of the family. Both men

and women are equally hard working. Besides helping their menfolk in the fields, the women weave clothes, cook meals and collect edible roots and vegetables from the forests. There is mutual cooperation between men and women and women 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 also a private matter. The worship of gods and spirits, however, is done on a communal basis. Marriage, death and festivals are, broadly speaking, communal affairs of the whole village.

PROPERTY AND INHERITANCE

Mishing descent is patrilineal. After the death of a father the property is divided equally among the sons. During the lifetime of a father the sons can demand a partition of the family property provided all the sons have attained a matrimonial status. In the event of such a partition the father will not keep a share for himself, but divide the whole property equally among his sons. He can choose to remain with any of his sons that he likes. Daughters are not entitled to share the father's property. But if a man has no son, his daughter 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.

KEBANG AND BANE KEBANG

Butler's account of the hereditary nature of the village chiefs of the Assam tribes does not hold good in the case of the Mishings. He writes, "The authority or the title of the chief of a village is hereditary. The eldest son, on the death of his father or even before his death, if very infirm, succeeds to the dignity". The Mishings possess a social structure of democratic type in common with their next of kin, the Adis. The **Kebang** which we may very aptly compare with the village panchayat, is supreme in all matters within a village. The elderly men of a village constitute the **Kebang**. Complaints whether social or religious are brought to the notice of the **Kebang** which delivers judgment and punishes the offenders. The **Gam** or of late the **Gaonbura** acts as the Chairman. Punishments depending upon the nature of the offence range from imposition of fine in cash or kind to bodily thrashing.

If controversy arises between two villages, the matter is brought to the notice of the bigger **Kebang** or **Bane Kebang** where members of several villages assemble and take part in the discussion. Women are not allowed to take part in the **Kebang** except on business, i.e. they may be taken in as witnesses or as the accused.

MARRIAGE

With regard to clan the Mishings are endogamous but they are exogamous with regard to sub-clan. Marriage within a sub-clan i.e. families of identical surname cannot be made effective even if the sun rises in the west. Similarly marriage cannot take place between allied groups of families such as Pegu, Patir etc.

As a rule the Mishings are monogamous but polygamy is not unknown as the well-to-do Mishings can marry more than one wife. Only the first wife enjoys the detailed ceremonies of **Midang** and naturally occupies a favourable position among the wives. But the Mishing girls do not prefer to be second wives which they consider to be a misfortune. Residence is patrilocal and after marriage the girl goes to live with her husband's family and the children born of their marriage bear their father's surname.

CROSS-COUSIN MARRIAGE

Cross-cousin marriage is prevalent. One can marry father's sister's daughter or mother's brother's daughter. Other than this no form of cross-cousin marriage is prescribed. Today the Mishings strictly adhere to exogamy. The village elders very greatly resent the breaches of the tribal laws regarding marriage, because any offence is believed to be ominous and is regarded as a cause of all natural calamities or attribute it to incestuous relation or violation of the rules of marital relations.

DIVORCE, LEVIRATE AND SORRORATE

Polyandry is quite unknown. Divorce can be made effective if the parties concerned mutually agree to this. No social ceremony is necessary for divorce. Yet divorce is very rare among the Mishings. Widow marriage is in vogue and generally widowers prefer to marry such women. A Mishing widow does not inherit her husband's property, nor does she go back to her parents. Levirate is allowed i.e. a widow can live as the wife of the younger brother of the deceased. Sorrorate as a social system is not adhered to but a man can marry the younger sister of his wife if he so desires. There is no ceremony to solemnize such a marriage. This custom is not favoured by the Mishings of today.

FORMS OF MARRIAGE

Broadly speaking the Mishings have two forms of marriage, one is **Midang** and the other is **Duglalanam**. Both the forms are equally binding. The former is an expensive affair and it is usually planned and arranged by the parents. In a formal marriage the parents of the couple have to spend a large amount of money by way of entertaining the guests. **Pork** and **Apong** are essential items for the marriage feast.

DUGLALANAM

It is the most popular form of marriage among the Mishings. It is usually the outcome of an intrigue

between the boy and the girl and is some times necessitated by the poverty of the parties concerned. The festivals, namely, Ali Ligang and Porag are the nucleus where the young boys and girls develop love at first sight. But if the parents of either the boy or the girl disapprove the idea of the marriage or express inability to bear the expenses of the formal wedding, the boy with the help of his friends, takes away the girl on an appointed date and the bride is received in an unceremonious function. The girl's parents are immediately informed and the girl's father along with a few neighbours starts for the boy's house. The elders of the boy's village receive the girl's father and a meeting is held in the **Angan** (courtyard) where the bride price is fixed. In such cases a higher bride price is demanded (generally Rs. 100.00 or more and rice-beer jars). The total expenditure incurred in this system of marriage is usually less than that for a **Midang** (formal marriage) and seems to be favoured by a considerable bulk of the population. The boy is allowed to pay the bride price in three to four instalments.

BRIDE PRICE

The payment of the bride price is known as **Alig**. In earlier days a mithun or its equivalent of Rs. 100/- or so was charged as bride price. Today the amount has been considerably minimised by the effort of the enthusiastic and educated Mishings. A sincere effort has been made to root out the system, which

has a harmful effect upon the marriageable boys and girls.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Although the Mishings introduce themselves as Hindus, yet the students of tribal study are facing the problem of finding an appropriate nomenclature for the Mishing religion. On the one hand they are the devout followers of Mahapurushia Vaisnav Dharma and on the other they are the worshippers of different gods and goddesses. Worshipping of spirits, sacrificing of fowls and consumption of rice-beer are practised hand in hand with the Vaisnava ideals, according to which worshipping of different gods and goddesses and sacrificing of animal in the name of god, is prohibited. They worship the spirits underlying thunder and lightning **Mukling Teleng**, earth and water **among Asi**, air and fire **Esar Emi**. These spirits have to be kept appeased with occasional offerings called **Taleng Uii** and **Rokpu Done**. There are various other evil spirits such as **Asi uii**, **adi uii**, **Umrang uii** etc. to whom all calamities are attributed. Another important spirit is **Dopum Dorum** who is believed to be a three-headed demon. The **Mibu** or the village expert is the only person who can appease these spirits. Pigs, fowls, plantains, **Apong** etc. are offered in the name of the spirits. The **Mibu** possesses supernatural power and from his early childhood he observes some rules regarding diet and behaviour. He is informed in a dream that his god-given sword **Yoksa** is kept in a particular place in the forest and

one night he goes to that particular forest without any body's knowledge and brings his prized article. Thus he becomes a **Mibu** and from that night he can have direct relation with the spirits.

DABUR UII

One of the important religious performances of the Mishings is the **Dabur Uii**. Women are strictly prohibited from attending this performance. If there is any menstruating woman or girl, she must be removed to another village. Traffic and business transactions with the neighbouring villages are withheld completely. No outsider can enter the village on that day and trespassers are held in temporary confinement, or by retention of their valuables till the performance is over. In the morning the youths of the village go from door to door demanding the dues **Ajeng** for the puja. They collect **Apong**, fowl, pig and rice-beer in a place on the outskirts of the village. Two idols resembling snakes swallowing an egg are prepared from some corn and split bamboo are placed in the altar, facing the sun. Pig and fowls are sacrificed and the **Satola** (village priest) utters prayers, 'Oh Mother Sun, Father Moon, Oh Divine self, be pleased with these offerings and bless us with health and happiness.'

This Dabur puja is also observed by individual families. If a family experiences disease or death throughout the year then some 6 or 7 youths of the village strike the **Sang** (house) of the family and the owner of the house throws out a piece of iron to the courtyard and the youths strike this piece of iron times

without number believing that the evil spirit will no longer remain with the family. Then the family promises a feast to the villagers.

Besides this, the Mishings observe **Sarag Puja** in the month of **Chaitra** (April) at an interval of five years. Here also the family offers oblations to the Sun and the Moon for the welfare of the family. Pigs are also sacrificed and the family observes Genna (taboo) for five days i.e. during this period the members of the family never go to other villages and never accept anything from their neighbours.

Annual worshipping of the ancestral spirit (**Urom Posum**) is a common feature of the religion of the Mishings. If the ancestral spirit is worshipped regularly, he brings health and happiness to the family.

Since recently, the Mishings have begun to introduce themselves as the disciples of Sessa, Namati, Jokai, Budhbari and Kowamara satras. The elderly converts always prefer to be called as **Bhakats**. These **Bhakats** have different grades and the seniors are called as **Satola**, **Sadachar** or **Medhi**. Above them there are **Sadhus** who are entitled to collect converts. Every village has a **Namghar** where **Nam Kirtan** is occasionally held.

Besides all these the Mishings perform **Bor Sewa**, the highest form of their worship. It may also be called as **Rati Khowa Sampradai** (the sect of nocturnal enjoyment). It is said that during **Bor Sewa** almighty Siva is worshipped at dead of night, but as a matter of fact nobody except the participants know, what kind of worship is performed in such closed door function.

It is, however, not necessary that their religious life should undergo a transformation. What is needed is an elasticity in their attitude to religious beliefs and prescriptions. As Dr. D. N. Majumdar, an eminent anthropologist of India, writes, "The aboriginal tribes coming in contact with Hinduism or Christianity, with urban people to whom they look up for their economic existence, may not learn much about true Hinduism or Christianity but all the same they know which of their rites and rituals are repugnant to their civilized neighbours and gradually develop an aversion to their indigenous religious code and even become ashamed of their time-old practices-- the result has proved to be disastrous, a decay of religion has set in." (Affairs of a Tribe-by Dr. D.N. Majumdar, Page 269)

FESTIVALS

Though the Mishings profess Hinduism, yet they observe many festivals according to their own tradition and beliefs. Besides observing the three Assamese **Bihus** namely **Bohag Bihu**, **Magh Bihu** and **Kati Bihu** the Mishings observe **Ali-Ai-Ligang** festival on Wednesday in the month of Falgun with much pomp and grandeur. It is a spring dance festival of socio-cultural significance. During this festival they worship the mother earth and spread the Ahu paddy seeds ceremonially. All the villagers irrespective of age and sex join in a community dance known as **Pakso Monam**. This dance sequence is performed, it is believed, to appease the divine power who bestows upon them a rich harvest. The Mishings generally observe five days holiday following the **Ali-Ai-Ligang** when they abstain from all sorts of work.

Porag is another important festival held at the close of the Ahu cultivation. It is a festival of feast and merry making. The **Morung** is either decorated or newly constructed. A **Mibu** is elected who is able to make contacts with the spirits. The function starts with some offerings to the creator, **Chedimelo** and **Donyipolo** (sun and moon) etc. Feast and dance continue day and night for three days.

DEATH AND THE ATTENDANT CEREMONIES

Among the Mishings all the dead bodies are buried irrespective of age, sex and nature of death. Every village has a common burial ground. The grave is called **Ago**. The demise of one who has gained honour is announced by ringing a bell **Lenang**. The dead body is taken out to the courtyard not by the usual door but by a special door made in the back wall. The corpse is bathed and kept in a log coffin called **Rung kung** after being wrapped in **Empoo** (bamboo mat) called **nagadhari** in Assamese.

After the death the Mishings observe a four tier purificatory ceremony namely, **Tilani** on the third day, **Sushi** or **Pyade** on the sixth day, **Mahekia** on thirtieth day and **Daha** after one year or so. The maximum to which the final ceremony **Daha** can be postponed is for a period of three to four years. Two or three families can jointly observe this function.

CHAPTER II THE DEORI CHUTIAS

INTRODUCTION

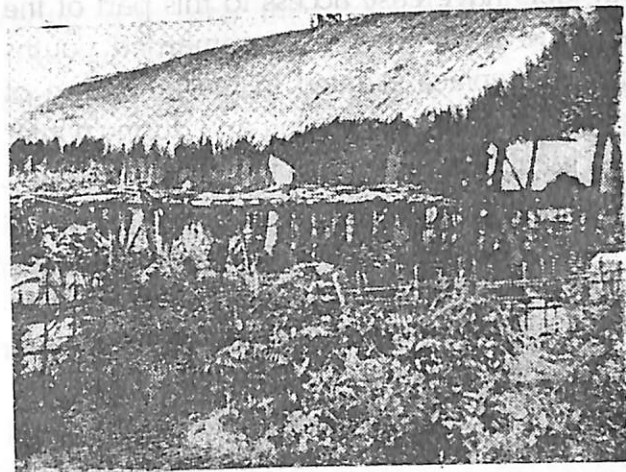
The Chutias are believed to have been members of the great Bodo race. Entering Assam through the North Eastern passes the Chutias established independent communities in the upper regions of the Brahmaputra. The Ahom records show that when they entered Assam in 1224 A.D. the Chutias were established at 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 (or according to Chutia Chronicle about 1673 A.D.) the Ahoms finally defeated the Chutias at Chantam or Chandangiri. "The Chutia dynasty continued to hold Southern Upper Assam and Sadiya and part of Naugaon (Nowgong), where they built a fortified city called Dimapur ; but about the middle of the thirteenth 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" (E. T. Dalton's Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal, Page 5).

There are four divisions among the Chutias, namely, **Hindu Chutia**, **Ahom Chutia**, **Borahi** and **Deori**. The Deori is the main and most important branch of the Chutias who have been keeping the old

traditions and belief inspite of the changes of time and social modes and morals. Their original home was on the banks of the Kundil but due to constant feuds with the tribes, they were compelled to move westward. "The Chutias were the dominant race in Upper Assam when the Ahoms swarmed into the valley. Their Kingdom was overturned by the Ahom chief Chutupha about A.D. 1350 and a great number of the nation were deported and forced to settle in other parts of Assam, but still a great many of the Sadiya and Upper Assam population are Chutia.... 'An isolated colony on the river Dikrang in Lakhimpur, calling themselves Deori Chutia were found, who had a peculiar language which they called Chutia and they were styled Deoris" (Ibid Page 77). Their present habitations are spread in Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang districts. In Lakhimpur district they are mainly found in Sadiya, Khowang, Bordoloni, Dhemaji, and Bihpuria Block areas. Their total population according to the 1961 Census is 13,876.

VILLAGE

A Deori village is usually named after the river which it is situated. For example Gai Deori Gaon, Sissimukh, Chiripani etc. All the houses are of the same pattern, although they vary in length according to the size of the family. A single house can accommodate sixty to one hundred members. Houses are constructed in such a way that the roof of one house should not touch the roof of another. It is believed that if the houses are not constructed according to the prescribed procedure the inmates of the house fall victim to a particular



A typical Deori house

disease called **Hemeju**. The floor of the house is made of flattened bamboos and is raised from the ground on wooden posts. With a long passage, having a considerable number of rooms all on one side, a typical Deori house resembles the house of the Miris. The front portion of the house (**Missa**) is kept open on three sides and outsiders have easy access to this part of the house. This is the place where the unmarried youths sleep at night. A fireplace situated in the first room of the house serves for ordinary cooking and during winter it becomes an ideal place for gossiping. The head man of the family sleeps in this room. This is also the place where guests and respectable persons are entertained. The most important fireplace, where cooking is done, is found at the extreme end of the house.

The people are very laborious. Except for ploughing and the cutting of trees, the womenfolk help their men in all other daily activities. Besides taking responsibility for their children, the women-folk 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, though not high, is not low. Co-operation among the villagers in all spheres is a salient feature of their daily life.

AGRICULTURE

The people are mainly agriculturists and agriculture is the principal means of support for the families. Ahu paddy is profusely grown. Of late, sali paddy cultivation is becoming popular among the people. Besides paddy, the Deoris produce mustard seed, sweet potatoes, pulses, cotton, maize and other winter crops.

The **Jhum** system of cultivation has been totally forgotten by the plains Deoris.

FOOD

The staple cereal food of the people is rice. 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. Fish also forms a special delicacy in the Deori menu. **Suze** (rice-beer) is prepared in every household and is the most favourite drink which can be served to all irrespective of age and sex. It is considered to be the most valuable item with which guests are entertained.

HUNTING AND FISHING

Like all other plains people, the Deoris too do not have any community hunting, as Government have prohibited the killing of animals in the surrounding areas. Another reason may be because of their acceptance of Ahu and Sali paddy cultivation as the sole means of support. However individual hunting is not extinct.

Fishing is a common affair of the winter season. The usual method followed by the Deoris for catching fish is to make the drain bed or stream 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 fishing implements are the same as those of the Assamese people and traps are also used.

FAMILY

Though monogamy is the rule, polygamy is far from extinct. The Deoris prefer joint family system. Besides 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 of the same sex, their wives and children. 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. Properties such as land, livestock, food stuff, house etc. are held jointly by the family. Personal effects such as, ornaments, clothing and cash belong to individuals separately.

The Deoris are patrilineal in descent and count their relationship through the male line. Children take the clan of the father. After the death of a father his sons become the rightful owner of his property which is 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.

CLANS

There are four broad divisions (**Khel**) among the Deoris namely, **Dibangia**, **Tengapaniya**, **Borgoyan**, and **Patorgoyan**-each originating from a particular place name. Thus the Deoris who were living on the banks of the Dibang, Tengapani and Borgang rivers were known as **Dibangia**, **Tengapania** and **Borgonya** respectively. The Deoris who were living in



A Deori couple



Two Deori women

Patsadia were known as **Patorgonya**. Each of these divisions is composed of a number of exogamous clans. (**Banshas**).

(A) **Dibangia** or **Jimcharu-Sundari** (**Bordeori**), **Patriya** (**Saru Deori**), **Airio** (**Bharali**), **Sariyo** (**Bora**), **Chitikayo** (**Bhograndhani**), **Komtaya Chungkrayo**, **Dhupiyaiyo**, **Kumarayo**, **Lagachyo**, and **Kaliyachukoyo**.

(B) **Tengapania-Machiatika** (**Bordeori**), **Bikramiyatika** (**Saru Deori**), **Khutiayatika** (**Bharali**), **Sakocharutika**, **Pagimegeratika**, **Phapariyatika** and **Chema boriyatika**.

(C) **Borgonya** or **Midiya-- Ikucharu** (**Bordeori**), **Chimucharu** (**Saru Deori**), **Hizaru** (**Bharali**), **Busaru** (**Balikatia**), **Lufaru** (**Bora**), and **Gosaru**.

members of the last clan, though mentioned in old records, are no longer traceable.

(D) **Patorgonya**-At present clans of **Patorgonya** division cannot be traced anywhere. They might have amalgamated with the people of **Borgonya** and **Dibongia** clans..

Except for marriage purposes mention of these clans is hardly made.

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

In a village the **Gaonbura** is the head in all the socio-political activities. He is the nucleus around whom all the village elders gather for the smooth running of the village. These elders are empowered to give judgment in case any dispute arises.

For the smooth functioning of their religious activities every village has nine officers out of which four deserve mention. In the hierarchical order they can be placed as **Bor Deori**, **Saru Deori**, **Bor Bharali** and **Saru Bharali**. Generally a **Bor Deori** is selected from the **Bor Deori** or **Bar Deori** clan. Besides them there is another important person in a village called **Deodhari** who can forecast the fortunes of the villagers. These persons should be without the slightest blemish and the villagers treat them with the highest regard.

MARRIAGE

For a **Deori** young boy marriage is indispensable. Marriage in the same clan is prohibited by social law. 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.

Levirate and sororate as social systems are not in vogue among the **Deoris**. Cases of divorce are very rare and womenfolk do not question the superiority of their men.

FORMS OF MARRIAGE

The **Deoris** have three different forms of marriage, namely **Bor Biya**, **Maju Biya** and **Bhakat Rupiya** or **Saru Biya**. **Borbiya** is an expensive affair and it is solemnized with much pomp and ceremony. **Bor Biya** is arranged by the parents and it is continued for three days. The next form of marriage namely **Maju**

Biya is arranged by the parents of the prospective couple. Expenses in this type of marriage are slightly lesser than for the former one. It is solemnised with much pomp and show but the duration is only two days. **Bhakat Rupiya** is also a popular type of marriage without much pomp and grandeur. It is completed in one day and the expenditure in such marriages is considerably low. The most widely prevalent type of marriage is **Gandharba Bibaha**. Here the couple concerned takes the initiative. The boy with the help of friends takes away the girl on an appointed date. No formal ceremony is performed in such marriages. However even in the case of **Gandharba Bibaha**, once during the lifetime of the couple, a ceremony called **Suje Laguna** has to be performed. At least three headmen of the three important clans have to be invited who will be entertained with a feast. Those who are able can arrange a bigger feast. Besides these, another type of marriage was prevalent among the Deoris which is almost forgotten by the Deoris of today. This is called **Tamolkata biya**. This is a symbolical marriage which is solemnised before a girl reaches puberty.

The important items of their marriage feast constitute dried fish, pork, rice-beer, etc. Betel-nut is an inevitable item in a Deori marriage.

In the formal marriages i.e. in **Bor Biya**, four office bearers are selected from among the villagers. They are **Kakati, Pathoriya**, parents of the couple selected for the occasion, and two friends of the couple. On the day of marriage the real parents of couple are prohibited from visiting each others households. The **Pathoriya** plays an important role in the marriages. Both the families will have their **Pathoriyas** who act

as go-betweens. He wears a special dress for the occasion. He must be the man who is proficient in local folklore and other marriage formalities.

BRIDE PRICE

The system of bride price is very much disfavoured by the educated Deoris. The bride price which is in vogue at present is Rs. 100/- or Rs. 126/-. In the case of **Gandharba bibaha** this may increase up to Rs. 200/.

DEATH AND DISPOSAL OF THE DEAD

Except for the dead bodies of children, pregnant woman and epidemic cases, all other dead bodies are cremated. But even in the case of burial a few days after the the burial when the decomposition is complete the bony skeleton is taken out for ceremonial cremation. The person who digs out the skeleton has to purify himself by undergoing some religious rights at the **Than temple**. Dying inside the house is not considered as ominous. Dead bodies are duly honoured and the cremation is performed according to the social status of the person. Thus when a priest dies nine folds of firewood will be heaped over the dead body. Dead bodies of persons below the rank of the priest are honoured with seven folds. Ordinarily five folds are heaped over the dead bodies of other ranks.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

The Deoris still maintain their traditional beliefs and practices. The general well-being of the people is

attributed to different gods and goddesses. Of late, the influence of Vaisnav Gosains is visible in many Deori villages and the Deoris are at a dilemma as to what religious faith to accept. However, the trend towards old beliefs is still prominent.

Their chief deity is the **Gira Girachi**, believed to be **Hara Parbati** according to Hindu belief. **Pisa Dema** or **Balia Baba** and **Pisasi Dema** or **Kesaikhathi**, the son and daughter of **Gira Girachi**, are two other important Deities of the Deoris. The three important divisions of the Deoris worship three different deities mentioned above. Thus **Gira Girachi**, **Pisa Dema** and **Pisasi Dema** are worshipped by **Dibangias**, **Tengapanias** and **Borgoyans** respectively.

Besides these supreme 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. The following are some of the important household deities :

- | | | |
|----------------|-------------------|----------------|
| 1. BakanMak | 5. Bura Dangariya | 9. Chan Yan |
| 2. Miruchi | 6. Mora | 10. Gharar Deo |
| 3. Kin | 7. Chakchik | 11. Yan Terba |
| 4. Dua Chitere | 8. Achira | 12. Jio Midi |
| | | 13. Mak Chiba. |

In the absence of the Deori, the Deodhai can preside over these religious functions.

Every village has a **Than** (place of worship) where pujas are performed. Sacrifice of animals forms an important part of the pujas. The presence of Deori is a must in such pujas. Goats, ducks, pigeons and fowls are sacrificed in the name of a god or a goddess. Rice-

beer is not offered to the deities but it can be taken after the puja is over. Wednesday is the most auspicious day for worship and pujas are performed either on Wednesday or on Sunday.

FESTIVALS

With some minor variations, the Deoris also observe the **Bihu** festivals. The dates of their **Bihu** and that of the Assamese do not synchronise. Every festival must be preceded by a worship in the **Than** and evidently the festival must start after Wednesday. If the Assamese Bihu falls on say Monday then the Deoris observe the same on and from Wednesday. They observe the **Bohag Bihu** as a seven day festival.

BIHU PUJA

Necessary arrangements are made much ahead of the day of the Puja. The **Bora** collects the subscriptions and purchases the paraphernalias. The **Pariya** collects fuel, banana leaves, **Mesangi**, **Tanglati** etc. It is the **Barik** who informs the villagers about the arrangements. Cleaning of the campus and repairing of the **Thanghar** are the responsibilities of all the villagers.

Mustard oil procured from the seeds locally produced in the village can only be used in this puja. Similarly, bananas specially earmarked for this puja should only be used. Sacrificing of goat is a must in this festival. 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 early morning of the day of the puja. Cows and bullocks are taken to a nearby river where they are smeared with a mixture of turmeric and pulses, garlanded with black thread interwoven with **Tanglati** and bathed ceremonially by all the male villagers. After that the youths throw pieces of brinjal and gourds etc. to the cattle. The folk belief behind this activity is that just as the brinjal and gourd increase their numbers in huge quantities the cattle should also increase their numbers year after year. The young boys also smear the mixture of turmeric and pulses on their bodies and take a bath in the river. On this particular day the young boys observe an interesting function. The youths who think they are attaining maturity, bring a new dhoti with them to the river and after the bath the elderly boys wrap the new dhoties on the bodies of the new adults.

SUWASANI PUJA

This is a household worship which is observed in the early morning of the first day of **Bihu**. Every household possesses one **Suwasani room** which is considered as sacred. The headman of each household fastens one cock in the eastern end of the room and one hen in the western end of the room and chants mantras. After the chanting of mantras the legs of the cock and the hen are fastened together. After sometime the knots are loosened and the fowls are let free.

At about 8 or 9 a.m. the villagers irrespective of age and sex gather in the **Thanghar**. They are purified by the sacred water prepared by the office bearers of the **Thanghar** in a copper container. The

Pujari keeps himself busy in offering oblations to the God inside the **Thnghar** and the villagers eagerly await for the **Prasadas**. Sacrifice of goats, pigeons, ducks and fowls forms an important part of this puja. After the puja all the male villagers partake of the feast prepared out of the rice, vegetables and meat offered to the God. The women are prohibited from taking part in such feasts.

During **Bihu** the elderly fellow villagers have to visit all the households in the village to shower blessings on the inmates. The members of each household entertain them with rice-beer and **Khaji** (a curry prepared out of canesprouts and flesh of fowls). It is customary to visit the Bordeori's house first.

HUSORI

In the meantime the younger sections both male and female (including married women) busy themselves in arranging **Husori** parties. Separate parties of males and females are arranged. First the **Husori** dance starts at the **Than** and after that the parties visit each household. They receive money, towels (locally woven **Gamochas**) and betel leaves and nuts from the households. Drums, small cymbals (**Tal**), **Taka** (a musical instrument prepared out of bamboo 2' to 3' in length) etc. are used by the males while only **Taka** and **Tal** are used by the female **Husori** parties. The rhythmic dance accompany the sweet songs. An example of the Deori **Husori** songs called **Aborobo** has been shown below. It is sung just like the Assamese **Husori**.

"Jonore sārathi jonāki paruā,
 Saragar sārathi tarā kinā,
 Amare Sārathi āamāre Gosāni,
 Gādhui kari jāo sewā kina.
 Sadiyāt āse oi sārisāl Gosāni
 Tāloi māni jāo sāge kinā,
 Surjak a sewā sarajak a sewā
 Karo Basumatik Sewā kinā,
 Dālar Kapau mātīle nāmīloi
 Saresati mukali haye kinā,
 Āi saresati devi Pārebati
 Teoloi kari jāo sewa kinā.
 Sanare jakhalā rugar hetāmāri
 Āhe Saresati nāmi kinā,
 Hāh oi māni jāo pārow māni jāo
 Āru māni jāo sāge kinā.
 Pāhorā nāmake sowarāi dijābā,
 Jibhāru bhāugibā āwl kinā."

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 the *malitas* (verses), beat the long bamboos and dance rhythmically. When this **Husori** is completed in each household of the village, the villagers observe another puja on the next **wednesday** in the **Thanghar** as a closing function and thus the most important annual festival of the Deoris comes to an end.

DEODHANI

The **Deodhani** dance forms the most important and essential part of the **Bihu** puja. The man or the

woman who performs this dance, is believed to be directly influenced by a god. During the dance he is considered to be the god in the human form and his utterings are accepted as the words of god. He forecasts about the future of the village and the villagers, in a state of coma. Except the pujari and the oldest persons, no other person in the village can understand the language of the **Deodhani** dancer. The members of a certain selected clan only can perform this dance in the **Thanghar**.

CHAPTER-III

THE SONOWAL KACHARIS

The Sonowal Kacharis who live mostly in the Brahmaputra valley belong to the Great Bodo group. They nostalgically trace their close relationship with the Burmans of Cachar, Dimasas of North Cachar, Boro Kacharis of Goalpara and Hojais of Nowgong. It is believed that the prefix Sonowal in the name of the tribe came to be used during the reign of the Ahom Kings when the Kacharis in the Brahmaputra valley took to the trade of gold washers.

According to 1961 Census there are altogether 52551 Sonowal Kacharis in the District of Lakhimpur. The total Sonowal Kachari population of Assam is 236936 (1961 Census). They form the second largest plains tribe in the district. In Lakhimpur district they are mainly concentrated in and around Dibrugarh Subdivision including Dhemaji. A few Sonowal Kachari villages are found in North Lakhimpur and Sadiya regions also.

Though designated as plains tribe the Sonowals are so much Hinduised in their customs, beliefs, and living conditions that at a casual glance nobody can point out any difference in the type of their house or the set up of their village from the house or village of other Assamese people. Every village is well equipped with a **Namghar**. Of late with the help of Community

Development Blocks, libraries and community centres have been established in the Sonowal Kachari villages.

THE PEOPLE

About the physical features of the Sonowal Kacharis and their conversion to Hinduism Colonel Dalton writes-- "They are, in comparison with the average run of the people of the plains, their neighbours, a fine athletic race, industrious and thriving, of light olive complexion and rather strongly marked Mongolian features. The majority call themselves **Soronia** that is, purified Kacharis, to indicate that they have adopted the customs of the Hindus and abstain from forbidden food." (Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal, Page 18)

This picture of the Sonowal Kacharis as seen by Colonel Dalton about a hundred years back has undergone vast changes in respect of the socio-cultural life. Today all the Sonowal Kacharis profess Hinduism and the traditional tribal beliefs and practices are fast disappearing. The "Superior physique" has been maintained. Today all the people irrespective of age and sex wear mill-made clothes.

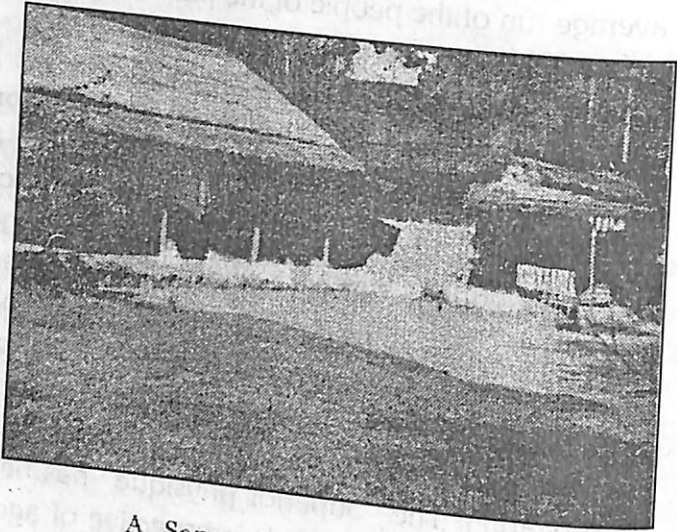
VILLAGE STRUCTURE

The **Gaonbura** or the village headman is the keyman of a village who is entrusted with the village administration. At present his influence has been considerably minimised by the panchayat. But the part played by a Gaonbura in socio-religious functions cannot be underestimated. Besides the Gaonbura, there are other office bearers in a village namely, Barik,

Development blocks, libraries and community centres have been established in the Sonowal Kachari villages.

THE PEOPLE

About the physical features of the Sonowal Kacharis and their conversion to Hinduism Colonel Duff has written: "They are in comparison with the average of other people of the plains, their neighbours of light



A Sonowal Kachari house

VILLAGE STRUCTURE

The Gaonpatis of the village headman is the dominant of a village whose authority with the village administration. At present the influence has been not entirely maintained by the Gaonpati but the part played by the Gaonpati is still significant. The Gaonpati cannot be understood without reference to the Gaonpatis of the other villages.

Patel, Asirbadia Hurs, Gighat, Medhi, Tamul and Randhari. Separate functions have been committed to each office bearer. Thus Bank is in charge of the Namghar and the allied functions held in the Namghar. He also acts as the treasurer of the public funds in some villages separate treasurers are appointed. The Father acts as keeper of the religious scriptures in public or private functions. Only the Asirbadia puts can show pleasure at the end of the religious ceremonies. The Gighat is an expert in all religious functions who imparts the Bank (Gason) propounded by the function of the Asirbadia and the Namghar. The Namghar is the place of the social or religious functions of the village who deliver the lectures before the Namghar. The Namghar is the place of the social or religious functions of the village who deliver the lectures before the Namghar.



An aged Sonowal

the public funds of the village. By contribution is collected to be the greatest form of punishment the village elders can inflict upon any village for a serious crime. Co-operation is the chief feature of the social life of the Sonowal Kacharis. Be it individual or public all the villagers co-operate with each other in their socio-economic activities.

Pathek, Asirbadia Bura, Gitghai, Medhi, Tamuli and Randhani. Separate functions have been earmarked for each office bearer. Thus Barik is incharge of the Namghar and the allied functions held in the Namghar. He also acts as the treasurer of the public funds. In some villages separate treasurers are appointed. The Pathek acts as reader of the religious scriptures in public or private functions. Only the Asirbadia bura can shower blessings at the end of the religious ceremonies. The Gitghai is an expert in Husorigit and other religious songs. The Medhi is regarded to be the chief in all religious functions. The Bayon is a special instructor who imparts training to others in the art of Gayon Bayon. (Gayon Bayon is a religious dance sequence propounded by Mahapurush Sankardeva). Similarly the function of the Tamuli is to supply betelnut to the audience and participants of a religious function. The Randhani or Bilonia is entrusted with cooking and distributing the feast.

The Namghar is also the centre of solving the disputes of the villagers. Complaints regarding anything social or religious are brought before the village elders who deliver judgment and punish the offenders. Punishment depending upon the nature of offence range from imposition of fine in money, which is deposited in the public funds or in kind i.e. ex-communication (Khutimara). Ex-communication is considered to be the severest form of punishment the village elders can inflict upon any villager for a serious crime.

Co-operation is the salient feature of the social life of the Sonowal Kacharis. Be it individual or public all the villagers co-operate with each other in their socio-religious activities.

CULTIVATION

The Sonowal Kacharis are essentially agriculturists and like other Assamese villagers they also produce Sali and Ahu paddy in their fields. The educated among them support their parents by serving under the Government or under private concerns. Mustard seed, pulses, potatoes and other winter crops are produced both for local consumption and for selling in the weekly hats.

DIET

Rice is the staple food of the people. All kinds of vegetables and pulses are included in their daily menu. Their great delicacies are fish, mutton and chicken. Rice-beer is locally prepared and taken by all irrespective of age and sex. They use it in certain pujas also.

SOCIAL LIFE

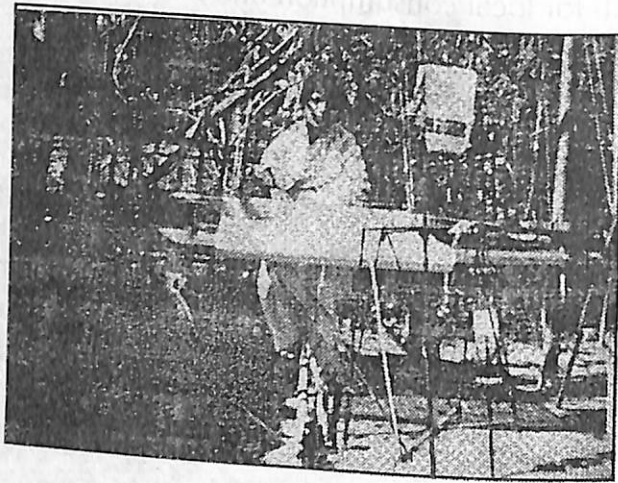
Both male and female are very laborious and hard working. They reap a bumper crop of Sali paddy by the strenuous labour of both male and female. Just as the menfolk are experts not only in agriculture but also in other household activities like house building, gardening etc., similarly the women folk also are experts in their own fields. The women help their men in the fields, weave clothes and prepare the meals for all the members of the household.

FAMILY AND INHERITANCE

A Sonowal Kachari family consists of a nucleus of father and mother with separable units in sons and daughters. Both primary and joint family systems are prevalent. The eldest male member of a family runs the house. Their system of inheritance is patrilineal. The land belongs to the family and the head of the family is the owner of the lands. After the death of the father, the land is also divided equally among the sons. The house is also considered to be immovable property and after the death of the father generally the eldest becomes an automatic possessor of it. None have yet been known to dispute such possession by the eldest brother. Every house has its movable property in the form of domestic utensils, implements, livestock and ornaments.

Within the family the world of man is clearly distinguished from that of the woman. There is no segregation nor is any seclusion of woman observed but each has a special sphere of activities clearly demarcated. From early childhood a girl knows the type of work she has to do and the boy knows his. So a boy always looks up to his elder brothers and father for guidance in regulating his behaviour. In the same way does a girl derive her instructions from the female relatives and builds up her behaviour on the pattern of her mother and sisters. This division of labour is scrupulously observed and both the man and the woman accept the traditional pattern without any question and grumbling.

In social life no woman will formally join the Mel though she does not hesitate in making her voice heard



A Sonowal Kachari girl at her loom

and her opinion felt. This distinction of man and woman makes itself manifest in the behaviour of the household members and unconsciously young boys and girls have their character and outlook moulded in the traditional form.

CLAN

The Sonowal Kacharis are divided into seven clans (Banshas) namely, **Bali khitiari, Chiri Puriya, Amarabamiya, Dhulial, Ujani Kuchia, Namani Kuchia and Tipamia**. These clans are again subdivided into fourteen Khels or subclans. They are **Hagral, Muktal, Madan, Manikial, Ahmal, Formal, Bor Hajoal, Saru Hajoal, Kumral, Dhekial, Dingial, Lothial, Dangral, and Chetial**. There are again branches of these sub clans namely **Makrari, Daphlari, Nezkatar, Daimari, Khakhlari** etc.

MARRIAGE

As regards clan the Sonowal Kacharis are exogamous. Marriage in the same clan is strictly prohibited, a motto postulated in the remote past, is scrupulously followed till today. According to their patrilineal system once a girl is married she belongs to her husband's family and the children born of their marriage, in all cases, bear their father's surname.

Monogamy is the general rule and rarely is a second wife taken before the first has died. But having more than one wife is not treated as breach of social law provided one can afford to maintain such a big family. In case of a second wife

permission from the first wife is essential. If a second wife is taken without prior permission from the first wife, then the latter can file a case before the village elders. In such cases the second wife shall have to live in a separate house. Polyandry is quite unknown although divorce and widow marriage can be made effective if they so desire.

FORMS OF MARRIAGE

Asked about the forms of marriage one literate Sonowal from Dangari area remarked jokingly,

'Ahomar chaklong

Hindur Bei

Kacharir Jei Kore Sei,

Meaning :- The Ahoms solemnise their marriage ceremony according to their own **Chaklong** system. The Hindus perform the marriage ceremony according to the elaborate traditional system of marriage. The Kacharis can solemnise their marriage ceremony according to their whims. But this is only a joking remark. As a matter of fact the Sonowals have four distinct forms of marriage. These are :

(i) **Nowa Dhowa or Bor Biya.**

(ii) **Hom Diya.**

(iii) **Gandharba.**

(iv) **Churchuria or Rabha Sarakai Diya.**

The first and second forms entail huge expenditures. These are usually planned and arranged by the parents. Only in the Hom system may a Brahman be appointed.

The widely prevalent form of marriage is **Gandharba** where the couple concerned take the

initiative. The girl is taken away without any pomp and ceremony. After three days of the incident information must be sent to the parents of the girl which is called **Jananidiya** or **Chordekhadiya**. The **Rabhasarakaidiya** or **Churchuria** marriage is also a popular type of marriage where the runaway couple are formally recognised as married couple with an unceremonious feast of a few elders of the village.

BRIDE PRICE :

Every girl is considered as an asset in the family to which she belongs. So depriving a family of a girl by taking her away in marriage has to be compensated for by payment. But nowadays this is true in the fullest sense in the case of **Gandharba** marriage only. There is no fixed sum as bride price. It may vary according to the status of the groom and the goodwill of the girl's parents towards the groom's family. In some villages near Joypur, the amount is very nominal (Rs 5.00) which is to be given along with a **Sarai** (wooden or brass vessel with a stand) full of betel leaves and nuts. It is reported that in no case does the bride price exceed Rs. 300/- even in the case of **Gandharba** marriage.

DEATH AND ATTENDANT CEREMONIES:

The dead bodies among the Sonowals are cremated. It has been reported by one of the literate and well informed persons of Dangari that among the Behari section of the Sonowals (nowadays the distinction is merged) the system of **Peradiya** was prevalent. In this type of burial the coffin is made of two boats,

especially made for such burials. One in which the body is placed, while the other is used as a cover. But since 1921 the system has been totally abolished. The dead bodies of children below the age of five, pregnant women and epidemic cases are buried. Dying inside the house is not ominous. Purificatory ceremonies are almost similar to those at the Caste Hindus with the exception that the Kacharis generally do not employ any Brahmin to preside over the purificatory ceremonies. The **Medhi** presides over all the functions. They observe a three tier purificatory ceremony namely, **Tiloni** on the third day, **Dahdiniya Daha** on the tenth day and **Kuridinia Kaj** on the twentieth day. Annual **Sradh** ceremonies are also performed. **Namkirtan** and a general feast are the main characteristics of these functions

RELIGION

The Sonowal Kacharis are the devout followers of Mahapurushia Vaisnav Dharma. All the Sonowals are the disciples of Auniati Satra with the only exception of a few Sonowal Kacharis of Lakhimpur district who over their allegiance to the Checha Satra. Among the villagers there are two broad religious divisions, namely **Sarania** and **Bhajania**. As a matter of fact all the Sonowal Kacharis above the age of sixteen may be regarded as **Saraniyas** and those who are on the other side of the fifties follow the strict rules of **Dharma**, thus upgrading themselves in the socio-religious ladder. They are popularly known as **Bhakats**. These **Bhakats** have different grades and the senior may be a **Medhi**.



A Sonowal Kachari *Namghar*



A Sonowal Kachari *Thagi* kept
in a *Namghar*

Though Vaisnavism takes its root deep into the heart of the Sonowal Kacharis yet the people maintain much of the primitive belief what is commonly known as animism. Good luck, flourishing agriculture, misfortunes etc. in the village are attributed to the pleasures and furies of the gods and goddesses. **Bura Buri, Gajai** (Almighty Siva) are still believed to be supreme deities by many Sonowals. However the worship as practised nowadays, are simply a chain of customary rites. The sense of awe and reverence are gradually diminishing. The **Bhakats** do not worship the gods and goddesses and they show example to other villagers that even without worshipping different gods and goddesses a peaceful and happy life can be led. The summum bonum of the religious motto is 'Ek deo ek seo

Ek bine nai keo.

There is only one god and only god should be worshipped. The Vaisnava adherents never perform idol worship and they express that;

**'Grihako Nazaiba
Prasado Nakhaiba
Bhakti haiba Byabhichar.'**

One should not enter the place of worship where sacrifice is performed. One should not touch the **prasada** of such performances otherwise the religion will be polluted.

FESTIVALS :

The festivals of the Sonowal Kacharis are multifarious and the most important and universally practised one is the **Rangali Bihu**. During this **Bihu** the

whole village is astir with joy and merrymaking knows no bounds. The main trait of the **Bihu** is the dance of young boys and girls in separate groups highlighted by the rhythmic beating of drums and graceful movement of the green leaves of the paddy at different stages of growth moving in a circle to depict the eternal repetition of different seasons.

Besides this the Sonowal Kacharis observe **Kati Bihu**. Tulshi plant is ceremonially planted at **Namghar** campus. **Magh Bihu** is also celebrated in the month of Magh after the harvesting is over.

There are many more festivals all over the year. Mention may be made of the following :

Festival	Venue
1. (a) Husori Samora	Namghar
(b) Bihu Urua	"
2. Bator Sabah	End of the village road.
3. Bhur Utua	River.
4. Gati Giri	Forest.
5. Pal nam	Namghar.
6. Gaji	Forest.
7. Garakhia Sobah	Namghar and Forest.
8. Tithis of Mahapurusha	
(a) Sri Sankardev	Namghar
(b) Sri Madhabdev	"
(c) Sri Lila Kanta Goswami	"
9. Janmastami	"
10. Kheti Utha or Chengeli Machor Sabah	"
11. Lakhimi Tola Sabah	"
12. Narasiga Sabah	"
13. Bali Sabah	River bank and paddy field.

The following are the important household religious festivals.

1. Nadit pinda diya.
2. Ai mata.
3. Gopini Sabah.
4. Lakhimi Mata.
5. Apsara Sabah.
6. Saragdeo Puja.
7. Morak diya.
8. Pir diya.
9. Bura Poha.

CHAPTER-IV

THE PHAKEALS.

The Phakeals or popularly known as Phakials were originally a hill tribe within the famous Tai family. The Phakeals call themselves Tai Phake. They entered Assam through the Patkai in the later half of the 18th century. E.A. Gait writes, "They (Ahoms) are genuine Shans. They called themselves Tai (meaning celestial origin) which is the name by which the Shans still designate themselves. Nor is their movement across the Patkai by any means an isolated one. The Khamtis, Phakials, Aitonees, Turungs and Khamjangs are all Shan tribes who at different times moved along the same route from the cradle of their race".

Opinions differ regarding the origin of the word **Phake**. The Phakeals say that they are descendants of the Tai royal officials. They came through the Patkai range and lived in Mogoung till 1700 A.D. They are the Mau people of the parent Tai race. In **Khamtai** (Tai language spoken by the Phakeals) **Pha** means a king and **Ke** means an official.

The Assamese people who live near the Phakeal village in Naharkatia, Joypur, and Margherita, however define the word Phakeal in their own way. According to them Phakeals were originally Burmese who managed to stay in Assam after the depredations by telling a lie (Pha si). Whenever the Assamese people queried about the identity of the Phakeals, they were told that they were **Phakes**. Thus in course of time the word **Phake** came to be known as **Phaki** and the people were known as Phakials.

Regarding the immigration into Assam, the Phakeals relate the facts which to a considerable extent tally with the contemporary chronicles.

At first they pitched their tents on the banks of the river Nam Turung or Turungpani. Probably this river is in the Nongtao forest above Namchik. In this hilly abode they lived for about sixty years without encountering serious odds. Often times they came to the plains to sell their produce and became familiar with the Assamese people. One Ahom royal official came in contact with them and after obtaining due permission from the throne he brought them towards the river Disoi and on the bank of this river the Phakeals lived under the protection of the Ahom King for about sixty years. During the time of the Burmese invasion of Assam the Phakeals were ordered by the Burmese authority to return to their own land i.e. Mogoung. The Phakeals had no other way but to obey and followed the Burmese soldiers upto Namchik. The rainy season had already started and movement in the hilly tracks became impossible for a considerable period. There was a serious problem of food supply as the existing stock was depleting day by day. Being disgusted the Burmese left the Phakeals at Namchik. The Phakeals came downwards and reaching the bank of the Buridihing river they established a village. A few years later a section of the Phakeals went out in search of cultivable land and arrived at Joypur. They established a village on the bank of the river Dihing. In course of time this village became the most prominent village and it came to be known as Nam Gaon or Raja Gaon, because it was the venue of the meeting of all the Phakeal village chiefs. The Phakeals used to call this village **Man**.

Choupha.

Whether the Phakeals established their village on the river bank of Buri dihing before or after the Burmese invasion it is difficult to opine. Major Hannay writes that the Phakeals lived on the bank of the Buridihing river before the Burmese invasion. "After being settled", says Hannay, "on the Buridihing river for about 10 years, the Captain Gohain (Chandra Gohain of the Buragohain family) an officer of the Ahom Government, who visited the eastern districts with a small force early in the present century (19th) for the purpose of repelling the encroachment of the Singphos, brought them thence with the concurrence of his master and they settled down in the vicinity of Jorhat, the whole tribe and their dependents consisting of about 150 houses."

In Dewar's Census Report 1931, we find that when the British took Assam in 1824 there were a number of distinct Shan groups living in the general area of Sadiya and Ledo. Among these were a group referred to by contemporary writers as Phakeals.

Since their arrival in the Brahmaputra valley the Phakeals maintained a healthy social intercourse with their plains brethren. Shan names were given to the rivers, and other objects of nature surrounding their village. Assamese people were called a **Munun** a broken Shan name of **Mungnun** (mung means cotton). After entering the valley the Phakeals were surprised to see the people both male and female, in pure white dress, so they began to call the Assamese people as **Mungnun**, people with white dresses.

SLAVE DEALING.

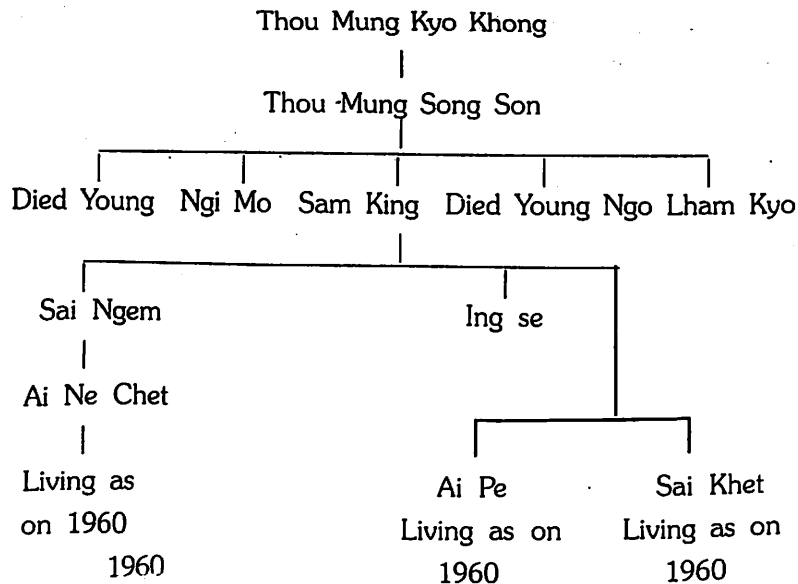
Unlike other plains tribes of the district of Lakhimpur, the majority of the Phakeal families have their part-time or full time servants mostly recruited from the ex-tea garden labourers. These servants are kept only to help the owner in agricultural and such other allied activities. They cannot be called slaves in the real sense of the term. However, history bears testimony to their slave dealing in the days gone by. E.R. Leach in his "Political systems of Highland Burma" reveals this interesting slave dealing of the Phakeals. It is probable that the Phakeals while returning with the Burmese invaders into their home land commanded the Assamese slaves who were taken along with the booty by the Burmese. But when an incessant downpour made the hilly track quite unfit for further advance and when the stock of rice and other vegetables dwindled away, the invaders left some slaves in the custody of the Phakeals and went away. "The Phakeals in Assam" writes E. R. Leach, "lived at Mungkong tat, their Jingphaw (Singphow) allies close by at Ningroo. Both groups then acquired a large number of Assamese serfs. The British Policy in Assam from 1824 onwards was to release slaves held by Shans and their Jingphaw chiefs. To escape this persecution most of the Phakeal Shans and their Jingphaw allies returned to their former sites on the Turung river in Hukawang valley".

HOLIKBOL

The Phakeals have a nice tradition of keeping records of family history. **Holikboi** is such a record in which genealogies of a particular family are recorded.

Generally **Holikbois** are prepared by a man (**Pathek**) who is well informed and who is in the know of all the details about the people in general. One such **Holikboi** was found in the possession of Sri Ai Mya Kheng Gohain of Nam-Phakeal village, Naharkatia. It was written in the year 1790 and was read by one Thou Mung Seng Son on the occasion of **Barsahasa** festival held at Nong-Tao. According to this record the first person who descended from Mung Phake (Phake principality in Mugoung) was Thou Mung Kyo Khong. The Phakeals had one thousand and nine clans (**Fans**) and the boundary of Mung Phake was the Patkai Hills on the North, Noi Langta attached to Borkhamti on the East, Jambu Bum Attached to Mugoung on the South and Hakong Hame hills along with the Pungi Punga peak on the West.

GENEALOGY



MYTHICAL BACKGROUND.

About their mythical origin the aged among the Phakeals relate very interesting stories. According to them the Phakeals were the descendants of **Khunlu** and **Khunlai**, the two heavenly beings who were God's favourites and who were deputed to earth to become rulers. They descended from heaven by a golden ladder and settled down on the bank of the Sewli river (**Nam Mao**). The all powerful **Khunlu** and **Khunlai** brought many people under their control. One Laungu volunteered to act as servant for these divine rulers. While deputing these rulers to earth the Almighty God favoured them with two articles, namely a cock and a knife. He further directed that after performing necessary oblations to Him, the cock should be sacrificed and the head of the sacrificed bird should be taken by both of them. But as luck would have it, the divine rulers had forgotten to bring the cock with them. So they sent Laungu to bring back the cock from heaven. But Laungu played a trick. Returning from heaven he told the divine rulers that God was very angry with them and they were allowed to take only the body of the sacrificed cock. As soon as they took the body of the cock, the two divine rulers were turned into ordinary human beings and remained on earth for ever as Mao Shans. The Phakeals introduced themselves as the descendants of Khunlu, who was in charge of their God Somdeo and who came from the original abode and established a city near the Uyu river (Sindwin). Khunlai stayed in the original place i.e. on the bank of the Sewli river

In the official records the Phakeals have no separate identity. They are bracketed with the Khamtis. The Phakeals, however, dislike this and they represented their case to the Government of Assam. In October 1952, a representation signed by Sri Soi Gohain, Sri Ai Mya Kheng Gohain and Sri Chaocha Gohain was sent to the Government of Assam in which a demand for inclusion of the Phakeals in the list of Scheduled tribe was made. Resolutions were also passed requesting the Government to treat the Phakeals as a distinct tribe in the Margherita, Nam Phakeals and Betoni sessions of the All Assam Buddhist Association.

THE PEOPLE

The Phakeals are handsome race. Their complexion is, by and large, light. Like other Assam tribes the Mongolian peculiarities are visible among the Phakeals also.

DRESS

Phakeal males wear a **Lungi** (Fatong) round the waist extending upto the ankle. These are woven in every house by the womenfolk. Shirts and pullovers are purchased from the markets. Old men use a white shirt with long and loose sleeves while going to the temple or to a distant village. White turbans (**Fahoho**) are part of their dress for both male and female. A white chaddar (Fafekmai) with a plain border ($2\frac{1}{2}$ yds. long and 1 yd. wide) is worn by the elderly persons when they go to their temple.



Pakhel man and woman

Little boys and girls use **Lungi** specially prepared for them. On the body boys wear shirts and girls frocks purchased from the nearest market.

The Phakeal women wear a **Mekhela (Chin)** which extends up to the portion below the knee-joint. It is just like the men's lungi with the difference that stripes in a **Chin** are breadthwise and the waist portion (hochin) of the **Chin** is much thicker. On the breast the women use a long stripped cloth called **Fanangwat**. Round the waist a cloth belt (**Chairchin**) is worn. The unmarried girls use a white breast cloth (Fafek) which signifies immaturity for marriage. An extra white **Chaddar** is worn by the women when they go to a village or to their temple.

THE VILLAGE

At present there are ten Phakeal villages with a total population of 1900 approximately. These Phakeal villages lie under the jurisdiction of Margherita and Tengakhat Development Blocks of Lakhimpur district.

The typical Phakeal villages are invariably built on the bank of Dihing river. These are fortified and protected by natural boundaries.

Their houses are built on bamboo platforms raised about 5' above the ground. The length and breadth of an average house is about 60' and 20' respectively. They construct only one house for a family and if family members increase, the house is extended to accommodate the increased number of persons. A House is divided into compartments and the front room (Toup) is used by the unmarried youths for their night rest. Outsiders can easily enter this place. Every house



An old Phakeal

contains a small room at the extreme end of the house (**Touphaun**) where the household God is worshipped. This worshipping place may be arranged in a corner of the **Toup** also. Sleeping rooms (**Tinon**) are arranged according to the number of married couples. Attached to the **Toup** towards the south or east, an open place called **Tisan** is kept for drying paddies and such other purposes.

The fireplace (**Fangfai**) is looked upon with much reverence and it is constructed in the middle of the room. There may be an extra fireplace in the portico (**Toup**) for the winter months.

THE TEMPLE

The Buddha Vihar or the village temple is constructed in the middle of the village. It is a big spacious hall with walls on all sides. There are at least two doors on the front side. Towards the wall just opposite to the entrance door an image of Lord Buddha is enshrined. Inside the boundary a few yards away from the Vihar, there is a house (**Kookte**) for entertainment of the monks. In a Phakeal; village the temple forms the nucleus of all the socio-cultural activities of the people.

VILLAGE STRUCTURE

In a village the **Gaonbura** has a predominant role in all the social matters. He is the headman of the village. Another important man in the social hierarchy is the **Pathek** who is an expert in religious matters and acts as a minister to the **Vikshoos** whenever any

religious function is held. Along with the **Vikshoos** the **Pathek** also gets customary honour from the villagers.

The **Gaonbura** also acts as the President in the congregation of village elders who gather in his house for certain purposes. Complaints regarding any socio-religious matters are brought before the **Gaonbura** who with the help of other village elders sitting together delivers judgment and punishes the offenders.

AGRICULTURE

Agriculture is the mainstay of their life. They produce Sali paddy in large quantities. Ahu cultivation is not very popular among them. Potatoes and other winter crops are produced both for local consumption and for selling in the market.

FOOD

The staple food of the Phakeals may be said to be rice but leafy vegetables, edible roots, fish and meat are also included in their menu. Besides these, **Panao** and **Pasom**-- the two special preparations of fish, are their main delicacies. Fishes are dried in the sun for two or three days. Then these dried fishes are kept in an earthen pot or a bamboo pipe after adding salt. This special preparation of fish called **Panao** can be stored for weeks together. Similar procedure is followed to store dry meat called **Nguhaing**. For the preparation of **Pasom** boiled rice and salt are added to the cut pieces of raw fish and after making a mixture the whole thing is kept in an earthen pot for at least one month. This is one of the important items for their marriage

ceremony. **Pokatsom** is another special preparation of the Phakeals. For this, at least two kilograms of **Laisag** is dried in the sun for two days and then it is mixed with starch. The diluted mixture is kept in a bamboo pipe for at least seven days and after that it is ready for consumption. They do not kill animals for consumption purpose but they take meat whenever available. Use of mustard oil and spices is becoming popular among the well-to-do sections of the people.

SOCIO-CULTURAL LIFE

Both male and female are equally hard working. The Phakeal women are very laborious and in spite of whole day's labour their sinews are strong enough to bear still heavier burdens. Round the year one will find the Phakeal girls and women busy at their looms in their leisure hours. Every Phakeal woman must know the art of weaving. It is a disqualification on the part of the women folk to use clothes woven by other ladies. Not only are the women partners of their husbands in the daily walk of life but the Phakeal women are responsible mothers too.

They are overpolite to their own people as well as the strangers. They are never rough and queries of all are attended to with interest. Obeissance are extended to the **Vikshoos** and **Sramans** and during festival to the elderly people also.

The Phakeals have a good sense of decency in all spheres. Even in their religious functions and other ceremonies a high standard of decency is maintained.

They have a good sense of etiquette. The first question of Phakeal will ask to a stranger in their house



A Phakeal house

at meal time is whether the stranger had taken his meals. They do not hate anybody and food is offered to all. There is no separate house for guests. Unknown guests are given shelter in the temple for one or two nights. A stranger in the village though suspected at first, is later accepted and honoured. He can attend any religious function and participate in the social activities.

Right from early childhood training is imparted to the children. But a definite and formal training is imparted only in the temple. For a preliminary knowledge of the religious scriptures all the children have to go to their temples. But those boys who want to dedicate their lives to Dharma can be permanent members of the temple and they would be upgraded provided they master the scriptures. Girls and women cannot stay in the temple at night.

Segregation of the sexes effects the early training of children. Girls follow their mothers, sisters and other female relatives and boys their fathers, brothers and other male relatives. But no water-tight compartment is made between the sexes. Both boys and girls, men and women and children of all ages can participate in economic, religious and other, ceremonial activities without any separatist feeling between the sexes.

The Phakeals are a peace loving people and complexities never arise. Rivalry and competition are hated and co operation and fello feeling are encouraged. Equality, fraternity and love to each other are the **summum bonum** of the social life among the Phakeals. Thus aggression as reaction to frustration in early life is not to be found among the Phakeals.

POSITION OF WOMEN

Among the Phakeals there is nothing like rights for women. The husband claims all rights over her person. In the field of religion, however, women are treated as equals. They can rise to the position of a **Vikshooni** or **Yasi**. There is no such a thing as high or low position of women, but it is only relatively high or low within the particular domains. The Phakeal women, however have more privilege and freedom in the household affairs than in the political and religious spheres.

CLAN ORGANISATION

The phakeals are divided into a number of clans, such as **Thumung Wingken, Manhai Chowhalilung, Kangmung, Chekhen, Mungnoi, Mahao, Homa, Homen, Chekhap, Choton, Tumten, Lokho, Misa, Tonkha, Pomung, Kolo** etc. Clans are named after some natural objects and also with some characteristics of their ancestors. The clan consists of a few lineages or groups of men and women who trace descent from that ancestor in the patrilineal line. The tradition of one clan to one village system is no longer operative, the reason being the migration to the plains.

FAMILY AND PROPERTY

A Phakeal family consists of father, mother and their children. The attitude towards the father, father's brothers and grandfather is one of respect and usually the father is considered to be the authoritative head having an effective voice in all matters that concern the



family. Obedience to elders is a part of the training for the Phakeal children.

The land belongs to the family as a whole and after the death of the father the land is divided equally among the sons. The house generally goes to the youngest son by virtue of his being the last to remain with the father. Every house has its moveable property in the form of domestic utensils, implements, livestock and ornaments. Ornaments are personal properties. The daughters and widows cannot inherit property.

Though co-operation is still the important characteristics of their social life, yet of late, individualistic ideas are gaining much ground. The agricultural produce is not jointly stocked.

MARRIAGE

The Phakeals consider a marriage to be indispensable and essential for fecundity. They regard the unmarried adults as socially lesser effective members of the community.

Though clan exogamy is the rule, departure from the old tradition is not looked with contempt. Due to the limited number of people the Phakeals do not want to keep the clans in water tight compartments. Moreover the people do not like to keep any matrimonial relation with people of other caste or tribe. Even so much of similarity in language, religion, customs and folkways with the cognate tribes like the Khamtis, Turungs, Aitoneas and the Khamjangs marriage between the Phakeals and any one of these tribes is very rare.

Adult marriage is the rule and boys and girls marry

between the age of 20 to 25 and 16 to 20 respectively.

The Phakeals, as a rule, are monogamous. The marriage by a man of two sisters concurrently is not forbidden provided he has the requisite means to support such a family. The second marriage is usually a non ceremonial one. A Phakeal woman considers it a sheer misfortune to become the second or the third wife of a man. Such a woman is generally seen to suffer from inferiority complex.

LEVIRATE

When a man dies without having any issue, his wife may live with the younger brother of the deceased as his wife, but there is no ceremony to solemnize it.

DIVORCE

Divorce is not a common affair in the Phakeal society and can be made effective by the verdict of the village elders. No social ceremony is necessary for divorce. The causes of divorce are infidelity, hot temper on the part of the husband, illegal contact with others, barrenness, inefficiency in household matters, inadaptability etc. on the part of the wife.

CROSS-COUSIN AND PARALLEL-COUSIN MARRIAGE

Among the Phakeals cross-cousin and parallel cousin marriage are socially prescribed. One can marry father's sister's daughter or mother's brother's daughter. Again the son of a sister can marry the daughter of the

brother but not vice versa. A widow must not return to her father's house, If it is inevitable that a widow must stay at her father's house, then a separate house is erected for her. Anybody can marry her again but in that case a formal permission of her father is required. The Phakeal women are particular about their chastity and purity. Illicit contact, Infidelity and incestuous relation are very rare among them.

FORMS OF MARRIAGE

Two forms of marriage are prevalent among the Phakeals, namely formal marriage and informal marriage, one is celebrated with ceremony and the other without. But both forms are equally binding and the informal marriage (**Aopoima**) confers no social stigma or disability on the wife or the issues. The formal type (**Aolongme**) is preferred by persons aspiring for self respect and for the honour of their fellow beings. It entails however, a certain amount of formality which is sometimes, perhaps, irksome.

AOPOIMA

Previously this was the most popular form of marriage among the Phakeals but today a considerable bulk of the population prefer the formal one. The young boys and girls develop love at first sight in the Chung Posao and Chung Pomao occasions on the eve of the pravarana festival. If the boy finds it impossible to get his sweetheart through a formal wedding, then one night, with the help of his friends he takes away the

girl. The girl's father is immediately informed, who with some of his neighbours starts for the boys' house. The father of the girl will be pacified only when the boy's father promises to pay the bride price on a certain date. On the fixed date the boy's father with some of his relatives visits the girl's house. He offers Rs. 140.00 to the girl's father (Rs. 70.00 for insulting the family prestige and Rs. 70.00 for the relatives of the girl's family). Besides this, he has to pay the bride price which is not less than Rs. 280.00. In addition to these, sometimes the girl's father may demand the expenses of a feast also.

AOLONGME

The ceremonial marriage is much more formal and is usually planned and arranged by the parents.

KATAN KAYONCHAO

On this day two or three relatives of the boy visit the girl's house for preliminary discussions. They must carry the customary tobacco bundles (**Hoiya Aolongme**) with them.

KAPUNG HOLYA

Two or three elderly relatives of the boy proceed to the girl's house one month after the Katan Kayonchao occasion. Complaints, if any, from both sides are made and solutions are offered mutually.

NUANNI

Again after one week two or three relatives of the boy visit the girl's house for fixation of the final date of marriage.

SAHAO PANHAO

On the day of marriage, feasts are arranged in the houses of both the boy and the girl. The invitees are presented with bundles of **Pasom** and **gur**. **Pasapg** or go-betweens are appointed by both the families who act as mediators. In the afternoon the **Pasaog** of the boy's family visits the girl's house to enquire whether everything is ready. If the reply is in the affirmative then the marriage party, which consists of young boys and girls and a few elders, proceeds to the girl's house. The groom is seated in the **Tuop** and in front of him the village elders take their seats. A formal offering of the bride is made by an elderly woman or a man and then the elderly people bless the couple.

BRIDE PRICE

There is no fixed bride price but on an average it stays at Rs 140.00. It may increase upto Rs. 280/- or Rs. 300/- or decrease to Rs. 70/- or Rs. 7/- Bride price should always be paid in cash. But only in special cases bullocks, buffaloes, land etc, are given as bride price.

DEATH

The Pahkeals believe in the immortality of the soul (**Khon Mou**). They say **Hai Chai Cho**, meaning soul is immortal. God has imprinted the tenure of a man's life in the forehead and man accordingly lives in this earth, One lives long if one performs noble activities and keeps oneself aloof from the earthly temptations. Gifts, charity and such like activities in the daily life are the golden paths for a happy and prosperous life in this world and a high birth in the life after death. The Phakeals believe in the Nirvana—a state of freedom from rebirth and the attendant pains and sufferings with it.

They have varied rules of disposing of their dead bodies depending upon age, sex and the manner of death. Both cremation and burial are practised. Dead bodies of children below ten years of age are buried without any ceremony. Similarly the dead bodies of persons who commit suicide, women who lose their lives during delivery of an issue, ill-facted persons who are the victims of diseases like typhoid, cholera and smallpox and persons killed by tiger are buried without any ceremony. The dead bodies of such persons should be taken out from the house immediately after death. Not much honour is shown to such dead bodies and immediate burial is the safest way to escape from contagion.

Formerly the Phakeals had a custom to keep the dead bodies for seven days in order to facilitate the relatives and well wishers to pay their last homage to the dead. But now-a-days the corpse is disposed of on

the same day. When a person dies on a Friday night or on a Saturday, the dead body is not taken to the graveyard on that day. Necessary funeral rites are performed on the next Sunday afternoon. To ward of the evil, the system of touching purified water is prevalent. This is arranged in the courtyard of the house of the deceased.

A purification ceremony is observed on the 6th day. The family of the dead is not taboo during these days, nor is there any taboo on food, rest or dress. Entertaining the villagers with a big feast and offering of gifts to the monks are the main functions of the purificatory ceremony. A comparatively less important ceremony is also observed on the seventh day. A feast is arranged and the villagers who participate in the funeral are invited. Valuable articles of daily use are offered to the monks. Annual ancestor worship is not observed by the Phakeals.

The people believe in the continuity of life after death. The path leading to the land of the dead is a difficult one which is always guarded by some spirits of the other world. It is believed that when a dying man sees a white shadow, he will go to heaven, if he sees a red one he will return to this earth as a living being ; if that shadow appears to be a forest, he shall have to haunt the dirty place in this earth as an evil spirit and if he sees a fire, he will go to hell.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND FESTIVALS

The Phakeals profess Buddhism. Except the Almighty Buddha they do not worship any other gods and goddesses. But the old religious beliefs are not

dying out and these are manifested in their beliefs upon certain spirits both benevolent and malevolent. This worshipping of spirits is taken recourse to only when the formal worshipping of Lord Buddha becomes ineffective.

On the basis of religion the villagers can be divided into two categories. In the first category elderly persons of integrity who follow the eight principles of Buddhism can be included. Except them all others are included in the second category, who follow the **Panchasheel**. Together both of them are called as **Dayaks**. Similarly among the priests the **Vikshoo** is at the top, the **Sramans** are in the middle and **Luk-On-Kiyongs** are in the lowest strata of the religious hierarchy. Except the **Luk-On-Kiyongs** who can visit their houses during the day time the other two categories of priests have to stay in the temple all the time. The **Vikshoos** and **Sramans** wear yellow dresses and shave their heads. Evening meals are strictly prohibited for them. Unless invited they cannot visit anybody's house. **Vikshooni** or **Yasis** also wear yellow dress, shave their heads but do not stay in the temple. **Kiyong tekas** are appointed to help the monks in their daily walk of life. They also stay in the temple but do not wear yellow clothes.

FESTIVALS

All Phakeal festivals are interrelated with the worship of Lord Buddha. Among the festivals mention may be made of the following :

The most important festival among the Phakeals is the **Poi Chang Ken or Pani Bihu**. This is observed

every year in the month of April. Buddha images are taken out from the temple and kept in a temporary improvised temple in the temple compound. All the villagers irrespective of age and sex pour ceremonial water over the images of Buddha and offer oblations to Him. This is continued at least for three days. The religious details are performed according to the Burmese astrological book. During these days merry-making knows no bounds and young boys and girls sprinkle water and mud over each other. A festive mood prevails everywhere. The people fetch water in batches in bell-metal pots and pour them three times each on **Buddha Dharma** and **Sangha**.

The next important festival is **Poi Nen Hok** or **Buddha Purnima** held in the month of May every year.

Paribot or **Paribasa** is a religious festival meant only for the monks.

Maiko-chum-fai is a festival of fire held in the month of Magh (January).

Lucheti or offering of **Cheti** or temporary cones to Lord Buddha is also observed in a village when the people experience natural calamities.

Prabajya is a festival held once in three or four years for the purpose of christening the disciples.

CHAPTER-V

THE KHAMTIS

INTRODUCTION

The Khamtis are a section of the great Thai or Tai race who are regarded as Shanghai, i.e., the greatest of the Shans. Their original habitat was **Mung Khamti Long** or **Bor Khamti** or **Manshi** in Upper Burma. "They emigrated to Assam from the country known to us as Bor Khamti near the source of the Irrawaddy. Their first settlements in the valley were, by permission of the Assam Rajahs, on the river called Tengapani; but during the civil wars in Rajah Gaurinath Singha's time (A.D. 1780-1790) they pushed on to Sadiya, ousted the Assam Governor of the province called the Sadiya khowa Gohain and gave that title to their leader. But in A.D. 1839 the Khamtis rebelled against the Assam Government and having been expelled from Sadiya in consequence, they, for some years lived the life of the hunted, scattered on the frontier, but were eventually allowed to settle somewhere in the vicinage of their old villages."¹²

Today, they are found in Bihpuria and Narayanpur areas of North Lakhimpur subdivision and in Sadia region.

12. E. T. Dalton, Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal, P. 10

THE PEOPLE

Among the Khamtis, people of both darker and whiter complexion are found although the features are generally coarse. Mongolian peculiarities are strongly marked in them. Sometimes in some Khamtis the features and complexion are conspicuously non-Mongolian. This may be due to the inter-tribal marriage which might have taken place in bygone days. "After settling in Assam the Khamti chiefs frequently took to themselves Assamese wives, and in some families the effect of this mingling is very marked in softening and improving the features of the generations that follow it".

VILLAGE

The first impression that an outsider forms about a Khamti village is not likely to be favourable. It may appear to him to be just an assemblage of huts without any plan or arrangement, But as a matter of fact there is always a careful planning in accordance with a well defined set of principles, evolved by them after experience. The number of houses in a village may vary from ten to forty. There is a central road with houses on either side facing each other. There are also paths between the rows leading away from the central road.

They construct their houses on raised platforms 4' to 5' above the ground. On the platforms are placed mats of thick split bamboo to form the floor. The roof is made of **Takau** or **Jengu** leaves. It is walled on all sides with mattings of split bamboo. Inside it is always pitch dark as there is no arrangement for letting in light.



A Phakeal Buddhist priest

The house is partitioned into rooms which are approachable through a corridor on one side of the house. The front room is meant for sitting purposes and any outsider can enter this place without hesitation. Every household has at least two or three fireplaces.

Almost all households possess a granary or a cowshed-cum-granary. Weaving is performed in the space between the ground and the floor of the main house.

The temple is constructed in a central place of the village. Superior materials are used in the construction of the temple. The design of the temple is also different from that of the dwelling houses. A few yards from the temple there is a kitchen for the monks.

Originally every village had two separate dormitories, one for the unmarried boys and the other for the unmarried girls. But now-a-days this dormitory system is not in vogue.

Whether it is a construction of a private house or a temple, all the villagers co-operate in such activities ungrudgingly.

ECONOMIC LIFE

The economic basis of life among the Khamtis is agriculture, though occasional individual hunting and fishing form important diversions from the monotony of the uneventful occupation. For their livelihood they depend solely on paddy cultivation. However, the food gathering stage is not totally extinct among them. Potatoes, brinjals, chillies, kachus, (Arums) banana, etc. are produced for local consumption. Some families can produce some of the produce in the local Hats. Co-operation

in the agricultural activities is also a salient feature of the Khamti society. The poor can live peacefully on the benign protection of the rich.

FOOD HABITS

Though the Khamtis are devout followers of Buddhism yet fish and meat form important items in their menu. But they do not kill any bird or animal for consumption purposes. Drinking is prohibited by religion. They rear cows and buffaloes and take the milk of these animals. Fish is a delicacy and special preparations like **Pasao** and **Pasa** are made from fish. **Khaolam** and cakes made from rice are their favourites. Richer people use oil and other spices but the common people take boiled vegetables. Grocery shops are now established in the vicinity of Khamti villages and the moneyed people are forming a habit of taking **dal** regularly. They do not prefer fried vegetables.

POSITION OF WOMEN

The position of women in society, though not high, cannot be called low. Women are unrivalled in their own fields. Both male and female are equally hard working and the males treat the women as partners. But women members are not included in the assembly of the village elders. In the field of religion also, they can ascend to the position of a nun. They cook meals and weave clothes for all the family members. They also collect herbs and roots from the adjacent forests and carry firewood on their backs.

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

In a Khamti village there may be a hereditary king who is honoured by all the villagers. Next in the social hierarchy is the **Keman** or **Gaonbura** who has to perform his duties in consultation with the king. After the **Gaonbura** the next position of honour goes to the **Pathak** who acts as a guide in all the religious activities.

All disputes of the villagers are settled by the assembly of village elders who congregate in the King's house. The severest form of punishment the assembly can inflict upon at present is *choileng* (Rs. 140/-) and one buffalo.

CLAN ORGANISATION

The social structure of the Khamtis is split into several clans, namely **Phan Lung King** (King's clan) **Phan Mung Kang**, **Man Pang**, **Man Pung**, **Luk Khun**, **Man Che**, **Ching Kai**, **Mung lang**, **Mok Run**, **Kam Tong**, **Lau hok** etc. The origin of the clan names may be traced from natural objects or some characteristics and special abilities of their ancestors. They have not any caste prejudice and usually there is no dress or insignia to indicate caste hierarchy.

FAMILY AND INHERITANCE

The Khamtis are a patrilocal and patrilineal people. The family is not a self contained unit. If not economic, at least the religious interests of a family, find scope for expression in the larger interests of the village. Both primary and extended families are found in

Khamti village. The family provides for the satisfaction of the fundamental bio-psychic drives of hunger and sex. Production of food is purely a concern of the individual family but in case of any shortage, the neighbours generally contribute to make-up the deficit. The village is not responsible for training of the children and other welfare activities of a particular family. Illness in the family is a private matter but the wider family group has the right to any action necessary to prevent the recurrence of the same. Marriage, death and festivals are though individual family matters, broadly speaking, they are community affairs.

DESCENT AND KINSHIP SYSTEM

Descent is reckoned through the male line. After the death of a father, his property goes to his sons, who are the rightful heirs. The daughters or widows cannot inherit property. If a man dies leaving no survivor, his property usually goes to the nearest agnatic relatives. All sons get equal proportions of their father's property.

MARRIAGE

Marriage in the same clan is prohibited, but there may be a few cases of endogamous marriage. In such marriages the relation between the spouses should be set apart by at least three generations. This liberal trend is due to the limited number of Khamtis in the plains.

Adult marriage is the rule. The Khamtis are monogamous. The marriage by a man of two sisters concurrently is not forbidden but in such cases the second marriage is without any pomp and luxury.

Levirate is prevalent. Divorce is not common in Khamti society. Cross-cousin marriages are socially prescribed but the parties concerned are not bound to conform to this principle.

There are mainly two types of marriages among the Khamtis viz, formal and informal. In the formal type guardians of the prospective boy and girl take the initiative. It entails huge expenditure. The commonest type of marriage is the informal one. Courtship is allowed but the period should not be unduly lengthened. Marriage between a king's clan and an ordinary clan is not forbidden.

BRIDE PRICE

Bride price is taken at the time of marriage. It may come down to three **Khan Nung** (Rs. 42/-) and may go up to six or seven **Choi Nung** (one Choi Nung is equal to Rs. 140/-). Bride price of the King's clan is higher. Today the educated youths among the Khamtis do not show much favour to the bride price system, as it puts a bar upon the marriageable youths.

The Khamtis are Hinajan Buddhists. At least in religious matters the Khamtis even today try to keep close contact with the Burmese. On the basis of religion the people in a village can be divided into two broad divisions viz., those elderly people who follow the eight principles of Buddhism (**Asstasheel**) and the rest who follow the five principles of Buddhism (**Panchasheel**). The monks reside in the temple and preside over the religious functions of the villagers. Previously the monks had to beg from door to door but today the villagers themselves supply their meals in the temple. They cook

their meals early in the morning and before partaking of it, they make a first offer to Lord Buddha. Anybody can rise to the position of a monk provided he abandons all the worldly cares and anxieties and leads the life of a mendicant. The position of a monk in Khamti society is a very high. Any religious activity in a village can be performed only when a monk approves a date in consultation with the scriptures. The monks are the Gurus who impart training to the young disciples in different religious matter's

FESTIVALS

The Khamti festivals are very closely connected with their religious beliefs. In fact any oblation to Lord Buddha is always followed by community eating and merry making. Among the festivals mention may be made of the following :

POI CHANGKEN

Poi Changken or **Pani Bihu** is held every year in the month of April. Generally it synchronises in a limited sense with the Assamese **Rongali Bihu**. During this festival, Buddha images are taken out from the main altar of the temple and kept in an impoverished temple erected temporarily for the purpose outside the temple campus. All the villagers irrespective of age and sex pour water over the images and offer prayers to Lord Buddha. The people in batches fetch water in bell-metal pots and pour water three times each on Buddha, Dharma (represented by the scripture) and **Sangha** (represented by the monks). The festival may continue

for two or three days and during three days merry-making knows no bounds, young boys and girls sprinkle water over each other. A festive mood prevails everywhere-- women are busy in preparing **Khaotek** (a kind of indigenous sweet) and girls in collecting flowers. The elderly people encircle the monks for some discussion about Lord Buddha-- his life and work-- and the young boys in addition to keeping a watch at night perform songs and dances.

POI NEN HOK

The next important festival is **Poi Nen Hok** i.e. Buddha Purnima held in the month of May. Prayers to Lord Buddha and offering of gifts to the monks are the highlights of this festival

PARIBOT

Paribot or **Paribasa** is a religious festival meant only for the monks. It is a self purificatory ceremony of the monks. It may be observed in any temple and it is continued for three months.

MAICO CHUMFAI

It is a festival of fire. Huge logs of firewood are offered to Lord Buddha and his faithful disciples. A river side is preferable for this festival. Prayers to Lord Buddha and gifts to the monks are the salient features of this festival.

LUCHETI

Lucheti or offering of **Cheti** (temporary sandy cones) to Lord Buddha is also observed in a Khamti village when the people suffer badly from natural calamities.

PRABAJYA

This is not a regular festival among the villagers. It may be observed once in three or four years for the purpose of christening the newly converted monks.

DEATHS

Both cremation and burial are practised by the Khamtis. Dead bodies of children below 10 years of age are buried without any cremony. Similarly the dead bodies of persons who commit suicide, women who lose their lives during delivery of an issue, ill-fated persons who are the victims of diseases like typhoid, cholera and smallpox are buried without any ceremony.

Dying inside the house is not considered as ominous. The dead body may be kept for one or two days but generally it is disposed of on the same day. When a person dies on a Friday night or on a Saturday the dead body is not taken to the graveyard on that day. Necessary funeral rites are performed on the next Sunday afternoon.

A purification ceremony is observed on the sixth day. Entertaining the villagers with a big feast and offering of gifts to the monks form the nucleus of the

ceremony. A comparatively less important ceremony is also observed on the seventh day.

Annual ancestor worship is not observed by the Khamtis.

CHAPTER-VI

THE DOWANIAS

INTRODUCTION :

Anthropologically speaking there is no original tribe like Dowania. The Dowania, now known as a plains tribe is composed of several Assamese communities. They are found in Margherita and Ledo areas of Dibrugarh Subdivision and they have altogether established ten villages namely Duarmara, Enthem, Munggong, Muk, Ulup, Bahbari, Ketetong, Enthong, Dibang and Khujan.

The Dowanias were the Assamese people, who were brought under the control of the Singphos sometime in 1791. "The admixture of the Singphos and the Assamese brought forth the Doaneahs who formed useful auxiliaries in warfare in the far eastern frontier"¹³. In 1825 captain Neufville released three thousand serfs from Bisagaon and Dufagam areas of the Singphos. Again in 1826 another three thousand Assamese serfs were released by Neufville. The descendants of these six thousand Singphos serfs constitute the present Dowania people. Living with the Singphos for long 34 years, it was natural on the part of the serfs to forget their own mother tongue and cultural assimilation was complete when they were freed by Captain Neufville.

13. H. K. Borpujari, Problem of the Hill Tribes : North East Frontier, 1882-42.

They were completely accustomed to the Singpho dialect (**Dowan**) and hence they were known as Dowania (one who knows Dowan). According to the Singpho dialect Downia means people under the kings or chiefs.

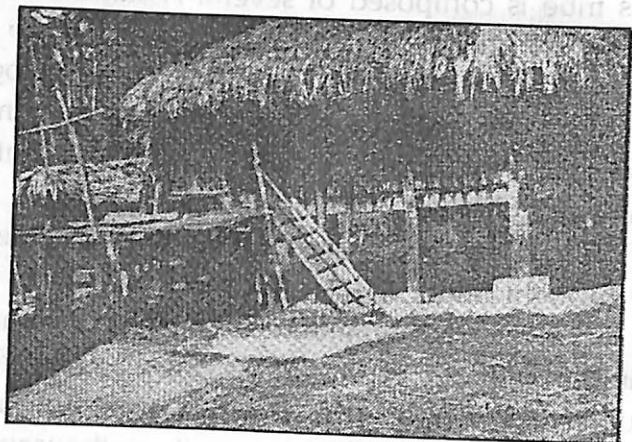
"From the intercourse of the Singphos with their Assamese female slaves, a mongrel race has sprung up, well-known in Upper Assam under the denomination Duaniahs. They have been found very useful auxiliaries in frontier wars from their knowledge of the Singpho language and tactics."¹⁴

VILLAGE LIFE

Their houses are built on bamboo platforms raised about five feet above the ground. Houses are constructed in a North-South direction. The open space at the extreme end of the house is called **Nisang**. The front room is kept open on three sides and a ladder connects this with the ground. The fireplace is treated as a sacred place.

Both men and women work in their respective fields from dawn to dusk. The women, besides helping their men in agriculture, weave their clothes, collect edible roots and leafy vegetables and carry firewood from the forests.

Their diet is not very different from that of the Assamese people. They prepare a special kind of rice boiled in steam, which is called **Chewa Diya Bhat**. For this special type of preparation they require Lahi



A typical Dowania house

14. E. T. Daltron, Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal, P. 14.

rice which they produce in their fields in large quantities. Besides rice, potatoes and other winter crops are produced for local consumption. Consumption of rice-beer or any alcoholic product is prohibited by religion.

The people are very hospitable and a newcomer to their village is impressed at their pleasing manners and sense of etiquette.

The temple is constructed in a central place of their village. Buddha images are enshrined in an altar in the main hall. Permanent monks are appointed to look after the temple who are also eligible to preside over the religious ceremonies.

CLANS

We have already mentioned in a preceding paragraph that the Dowanias were the original Assamese people of different tribes and castes. Majority of these Dowanias were Moran, Matak, Miri, Kachari and Ahom people but today they have totally forgotten their original identity and they introduce themselves as **Umban, Mache, Nungree, Ginsang, Kolo, Gumju, Pangkhung, Ulup, Nuingkrok, Lidoy, Gamfang, Ningda, Chiring, Lajum, Gumgi, Lachai, Kiyong, Bare, Luthong, Jili, Kanmai, Luchu, Gazu, Chaik etc.** These divisions or clans as they may be loosely called were the names of the Singphos under whom they were living as serfs. Today the Singphos do not treat the Dowanias as serfs, but in fact intermarry with them.

THE GAONBURA AND HIS PRESENT POSITION

Till the advent of the panchayati system of administration the **gaonbura** had the sole authoritative position in a village. But today he is the head of the socio-cultural activities only. Much of his political powers have been taken by the panchayats.

MARRIAGE

The Dowanias prefer monogamy but the well-to-do among them have the tendency to marry more than one wife. Though they have many divisions, marriage and interdining is common among the divisions.

Widows can live as wives with widowers but there is no ceremony to solemnise their marriage. Marriageable age for boys and girls is 20 and above and 16 and above respectively. Levirate and cross-cousin marriages are socially approved.

Between the two types of marriages namely formal and informal, the incidence of the latter is the highest. The formal marriage requires a huge expenditure and lots of formalities. Formal marriages are always arranged by the parents. The groom besides spending a large amount in the entertainment of guests, has to bear the expenses of the feast in the bride's house. Formal marriages are continued for three days. The part played by the **Khungmang** (messenger) is very important in such marriages. In the informal type all these formalities are avoided and the girl is taken away secretly, though later on the boy must establish



A Dowania Buddha Vihar



A Dowania

good relationship with the girl's family by paying the bride price.

BRIDE PRICE

Bride price is given at the time of marriage. There is no fixed bride price. It may vary from Rs. 200/- to Rs. 500/-.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

The Dowanias have long left the animistic beliefs and today they are the devout followers of Buddhism. On the basis of religion the people can be divided into two sections, namely, the followers of the **Panch Sheel** and the followers of the **Aasta Sheel**. They worship the images of Buddha on every full moon and new moon day and offer gifts to the monks of the temple. Before partaking of their daily morning meals, the villagers offer some portion of the cooked food to the temple monks who in turn offer a little of it to Lord Buddha.

One or two assistant monks or **Sramans** and a few other disciples also reside in the temple to learn the religious scriptures as well as to serve the monks.

The main festival of the Dowanias is the **Pani Bihu** which synchronises with the Assamese **Rangali Bihu**. It is observed in the month of April every year and continues for at least three days. Unlike the Rangali Bihu, the Pani Bihu has got much religious significance. Outside the temple a temporary improvised temple is constructed and Buddha images are placed in an altar for ceremonial bathing. All the villagers irrespective of



age and sex pour water over the images which symbolises the bathing of Lord Buddha. The manuscripts and the monks are also bathed just to symbolise the bathing of religion and congregation of monks. But the religious bathing of **Tri Ratna** (Buddha, Dharma and Sangha) is not the only characteristic of this festival. Everywhere there is a festive mood. Young boys and girls sprinkle water over each other. In the evening there is prayer before the image of Lord Buddha. A big feast is arranged on the closing day where all the villagers take part.

There are many other festivals which are also part and parcel of their religion. They are **Prabajya**, **Baribasa**, **Lucheti** and **Buddha Purnima**. The religious beliefs and practices of all the plains tribes of Assam who follow Buddhism, are the same and therefore the details about these festivals which have been given in the article on the Phakeals, are not mentioned here.

General prayers, offering of gifts to the monks and a community feast are the salient features of their festivals. It is to be noted that no animal is killed for the feast of such occasions. Of course taking of meat and fish is not prohibited by religion.

DEATH

Both cremation and burial are practised. Dead bodies of those above the age of 20 are cremated and those below that age are buried. If anybody dies on a Tuesday or on a Saturday the cremation or burial as the case may be, is performed on the same day. In the ordinary cases however, dead bodies can be kept for

two or three days for the distant well-wishers and relatives to enable them to pay their last respect to the dead. When a death occurs, a monk is invited to perform **Mangal Sutra**.

The purification ceremony is observed on the 6th day. Monks are invited and a general prayer is held. Gifts consisting of articles of daily use of the monks are offered to the congregation of monks and all the fellow villagers are entertained with a feast.

A comparatively less important function is held on the following day. A feast is arranged and valuable articles of daily use of the monks are offered on this day also.

CONCLUSION

Due perhaps to long captivity as serfs the Dowanias are still suffering from an inferiority complex and as a result they are lagging much behind the onward march of civilization. They are extremely backward in all respects. But the day is not far off when the Dowanias will be able to show their abilities and inherent talents and rise in the estimation of the people.

CHAPTER-VII

THE SINGPHOS

INTRODUCTION

According to A. F. Hannay the Singphos were the original inhabitants of the Shan States in Upper Burma and they came to Assam in 1793 "The Singphos are of the race called by the Burmese **Ka Khyen** or **Kaku** whose original settlements were on the great eastern branches of the Irrawaddi river. It was only on spreading into the valley of Assam that they assumed the name of Singphos which in their own language means 'man',"¹⁵

"The Singphos who lived on this side of the Patkais were called by the Burmese **Krkhyen**, **Kakhyen** or **Kakos** whose original home formerly located in the east of the Irrawaddi extending to the confines of Yunam... The Singphos who immigrated into Assam were mainly of the **Tesan** group and they were sub divided into three classes-- **Tenghai**, **Meyho** and **Nimbrong** living is not less than a dozen of gaums or cantonments. Their new settlements bear the names of their respective chiefs, viz. **Bessa**, **Duffa**, **Lattora**, **Wakeyat**."¹⁶ At first they established their colonies in **Tengapani** and **Namrup** areas, but during the Burmese invasion of Assam they went back towards **Sadiya** with

15. E. T. Daltron, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*. P. 14.

16. H. K. Borpujari, *Problem of the Hill Tribes of North East Frontier*-1822-42

a considerable number of Assamese captives who were later released by captain Neufville in 1826. The Singphos never recognised the British administration and it was a very intricate problem for the Britishers to bring the Singphos under control. At present the Singphos have established some villages in and around Margherita and Ledo, namely **Bisagaon**, **Kathagaon**, **Kumsai**, **Pangsum**, **Hasak**, **Ninggam**, **Langgam**, **Ulup**, **Dibang**, **Uban** and **Manggong**.

THE PEOPLE

The Singphos are a medium statured athletic race and like all the tribes, they can endure fatigue. Their strong sinews and martial spirits are however effected by their use of opium.

The features are of Mongolian type with oblique eyes and eyebrows, wide mouth and high cheek bones - their complexion varies from dark brown to yellow.

Like other cognate tribes the Singphos too construct their houses on raised platforms. Houses are quite big and the length of a single house is about 80ft to 100ft. The whole house, except the portico is covered with bamboo walls. The portico is used for miscellaneous purpose. Agricultural implements and other household paraphernalias are also stored in one corner of this portico. Guests are entertained in this place and entry to this part of the house is not prohibited for anybody. The compartments inside the house are approachable through a corridor on one side of the house.

The Singphos do not have any dormitory system

for the unmarried boys and girls. Almost all the villages have 'Boudha Vihar' constructed in a central place of the village. The image of Lord Buddha is enshrined in an altar. They do not have any permanent monks in their temples and hence at the time of any religious ceremony monks from nearby villages are invited.

SOCIAL LIFE

There is division of labour between the sexes. But this division is not watertight. The women folk look to the internal affairs of the household. They weave clothes, cook meals and collect firewood from the nearby forests. Similarly the menfolk keep themselves busy in agricultural activities. But agricultural activities are not the exclusive business of the men. Women also help them in the fields. The position of women in Singpho society is neither high nor low, rather it may be called as equal. Women members are not included in the assembly of the village elders.

Almost every household possesses a servant. Till the thirties of this century buying and selling of serfs was prevalent in the Singpho society.

AGRICULTURE

The Singphos produce sali paddy in large quantities which is the main source of their living. The Jhum system of cultivation is fast disappearing. Besides these, they produce mustard, maize and other winter crops for local consumption.

FOOD HABITS

Rice is the staple food. Pork and chicken are their special delicacies. Tea is used as beverage and of late use of milk is becoming popular. Traditionally the people were very much addicted to opium and even today the Singphos especially the elders cannot live without opium.

CLANS

The people are divided into several clans, namely **Bisa, Minlung, Kungki, Inthem, Gudung, Insai, Lajun, Kiyang, Lasu, Wakhum, Magawng, Singuriyang, Chom, Ningroo, Phup**, etc. A serf can become a member of the master's clan. Each clan is named after some natural objects or some characteristics of their ancestors. The old tradition of one clan to one village system is no longer operative.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Among the Singphos the Bisa Raja is the supreme in all the socio-political activities. Every village has a Raja and his position is hereditary. The next important position in the social hierarchy goes to the **Gaonbura**. But in all matters effecting the village, the **Gaonbura** has to consult the Raja. Another important person in a Singpho village is the Deori (**Dumsa**) who presides over the religious ceremonies. These **Dumsas** are not found in every village and their services can be hired. They are helped by the **Kingjongs** (assistants).

ASSEMBLY OF VILLAGE ELDERS 'RUNG JUTA'

All the disputes among the villagers are settled by the village assembly (**Rung Juta**). This assembly of elders meets at the Raja's house and it is empowered to give judgment in case any dispute arises. The severest punishment the assembly can inflict upon a culprit is Rs. 600/- and one buffalo. Previously the offender was excommunicated.

FAMILY, PROPERTY AND INHERITANCE

Both primary and joint family systems are prevalent in the Singpho society. Within a family the oldest man is the head and he is obeyed by all the family members. Polyandry is quite unknown.

The Singphos follow the patrilineal system of inheritance. During the father's life time the family property is enjoyed by all the sons but after the death of the father the family property is divided in the following manner. The eldest son inherits the landed property and the office of the father if any. The youngest son gets the movable property but the intermediate sons do not get anything. The widows and daughters are also not eligible to inherit any property.

MARRIAGE

The Singphos are exogamous. Though they prefer monogamy, polygamy is not totally extinct among them. E. T. Dalton tells us that the Singphos preferred polygamy. "Polygamy prevails among the Singphos and

chiefs especially rejoice in a plurality of wives. The girl is bought with a price and a feast completes the ceremony.¹⁷

A master and a serf may possess the same clan yet the masters do not marry into a serf family. This social division is taken into account only in the case of marriage; otherwise all Singphos are equal. After the marriage the girl becomes a full-fledged member of the husband's family and the children born out of their marriage bear their father's surname. Widows can live with widowers but in such cases no ceremony is observed. Levirate is prevalent. Cross-cousin marriage (M.B.D. type only) is compulsory on the part of the boy.

Broadly speaking their marriages can be classified under two major heads, namely formal marriage and informal marriage. In the formal type the groom has to bear considerable expenditure. Formal marriages are arranged by the parents. The most widely prevalent form is the informal one where the couple take the initiative. Even in the the case of informal marriage the Singpho boys are very much careful about the selection of their mates. A boy from a master's clan selects his partner from a master's clan. Similarly a serf's boy marries only a serf's girl.

In the formal marriages the **Deodhai** presides over the ceremonial functions. Both in formal and informal marriages the marriage feast is the most interesting and an important feature. Buffaloes, pigs and chickens are essential for a marriage feast.

17. E. T. Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, P. 17

For the general welfare of the members of the household the Singphos observe **Intanat** once or twice in a year. The Deori must preside over such religious ceremonies and it is he who only determines the kind of animals to be sacrificed.

CHAPTER-VIII

THE KHAMYANGS

INTRODUCTION

The Khamyangs who are popularly known as Noras are a section of the Great Thai or Tai race. They had their independent principality in **Mung Kong** upto the end of the 18th century. **Mung** means a country and **Kong** means a special kind of drum called **Dhakdhol**. Thus **Mung Kong** means the country of drums. They had descended from the **Hukong** valley of Burma. "It is related in one **Buranji** that there was a war between the Noras or Shans of Mungkong and the people of Mantara or Burma.... The Noras are regarded by the Ahoms as their close kinsmen. In the fabulous or half fabulous account of Khunlung and Khunlai, the former is credited with having occupied the western portion of the country i.e. the tract around Mungkong in the Hukong valley..... Their original seat was probably in Khamti. However that may be the Noras were a comparatively civilized people. They are Buddhists and are generally employed as astronomers and writers."¹⁹ It is not certain when the Noras came to Assam. It may be that some Noras had accompanied Swargadeo Sukapha and later on their separate identities were merged with the Ahoms. History bears testimony to the fact that in 1524 Swargadeo Chuhungmung married the daughter of Nara Raja and Nara Raja equally was honoured with an Ahom damsel.

19. E. A. Gait, A History of Assam, 1963, P. P. 80-81.

It is quite probable that some Noras might have accompanied the princess. In 1576 Swargadeo Chukhamfa also married one Nora princess. The princess was accompanied by a Nora prince, a priest and 1000 Nora people. Again during the reign of Swargadeo Rajeswar Singha (1751-69) an Ahom officer named Kirty Chandra Barbarua brought many Nora people in order to prove his identity of being a real Ahom. At present the Noras as a distinct tribe are found in Deasngpani and Cholatpathar villages of Sibsagar Sub-division and near Titabar in Jorhat Subdivision.

They construct their houses on raised platforms 4' to 5' above the ground. Of late, due to the dearth of housing material some of them are seen constructing their houses on the ground. But they were so much accustomed with the platform type of houses that even in the latter cases at least the kitchen is constructed in the traditional pattern. The house is partitioned into rooms which are approachable through a corridor on one side of the house. The front room is kept open on three sides and outsiders and guests are entertained here. Almost all households possess a granary or a cowshed-cum-granary. The ladies do their weaving in the space between the platform and the ground.

The *Bauddha Vihar* or the temple is constructed in a central place of the village.

By far the most important aspect in the life of the Noras nay all the tribes, is the co-operative outlook in their day to day life. Wheather it is a construction of a private house or a temple, all the villagers co-operate in such activities ungrudgingly.

AGRICULTURE

Paddy cultivation being the only resort of the people, they grow Sali paddy in large quantities. But they do not consume Ahu rice, as such emphasis is not given in the Ahu paddy cultivation. Potatoes, brinjals, chillies, arums etc. are produced for local consumption. Betel-nuts which are needed for regular consumption, are also produced locally. Some families can sell some of the produce in the local *hats*. Co-operation in the agricultural activities, mainly in the cultivation of paddy is also a salient feature of the Nora social life.

FOOD HABITS

Though the Khamyangs profess Buddhism, religion does not stand in the way of their consumption of fish and meat. But they do not kill animals for consumption purposes. Drinking is prohibited by religion. They rear cows and buffaloes and take their milk also. Fish is a delicacy and pork when available is not avoided. Richer people use oil and other spices but the common run of people consume boiled vegetables. Now a days *dal* is very common in the daily menu of the richer sections of the people.

POSITION OF WOMEN

The position of women in Khamyang society cannot be called as high or low. In the social activities the women get equal treatment. They not only weave clothes for all the family members but also cook meals

and help their menfolk in agricultural activities. Both male and female are equally hard working and the males treat the women as partners. But women members are not included in the assembly of the village elders. However there is no prohibition of women becoming nun.

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

The **Gaonbura** is the head man in a village who presides over the meetings of the village elders. Anything effecting the whole village must be consulted with the **Gaonbura**. Next in the social hierarchy is the **Barik** who acts as an informer. He informs the general villagers about the deliberations of the village elders. He has a part to play during the time of festivals also. After the **Barik** comes **Pathek** who acts as a guide in all the religious activities. All these portfolios are honorary.

CLAN ORGANISATION

The social structure of the Khamyangs is split into nine clans namely **Thumung, Bailong, Pangyoik, Chowlu, Chowlek, Chowlik, Tungkhang, Chowhai** and **Chowchong**. The origin of the clan names are traced either from natural objects or with reference to some characteristics and special abilities of their ancestors. There is no caste or creed in the Khamyang society. Except in a marriage, reference to the clans is hardly made.

FAMILY, PROPERTY AND INHERITANCE

Like all the cognate plains tribes of Assam the Khamyangs are also a patrilocal and patrilineal people. The interests of an individual family are co-existing with the general interests of all the villagers. Production of food is purely the concern of an individual, but in case of shortage the needy families are helped by the richer ones. Education is purely a matter of an individual family. Similarly illness in a family is considered to be a private matter but the village in general has a right to any action necessary to prevent recurrence of the same. Even today marriage, death and festivals are, by and large, community affairs. Among the Khamyangs both primary and extended families are prevalent.

During the lifetime of a father the property is divided equally among the sons. The father may keep some property exclusively for his use but after his death his share goes to that son who takes care of him in his old days. The daughters or widows cannot inherit property as the descent is reckoned through the male line. if a man dies leaving no survivor, his property usually goes to the nearest agnatic relatives.

MARRIAGE

Among the Khamyangs adult marriage is the rule. Marriage in the same clan is strictly prohibited. As a rule the Khamyangs are monogamous but marrying two or more wives is not looked upon with contempt, provided one is economically sound. Levirate is in vogue but divorce is not common in Khamyang society.

Cross-cousin marriages are socially prescribed but there is no legal binding on the parties concerned.

Among the Khamyangs two types of marriages are prevalent, viz. formal and informal. In the former type the guardians of the prospective boy and the girl take the initiative. But it entails huge expenditure as such the people in general do not show much eagerness towards this type excepting those who are more conscious about their self respect.

BRIDE PRICE

It is reported that the system of paying bride price at the time of marriage is fast disappearing. The poorer sections of the people, however, express their willingness to receive bride price. But the severity of demand for the price is no longer to be seen. In the case of a marriage by elopement the system is however still in vogue and the groom shall have to pay the bride price which may come to Rs. 300/-. But sometimes the angry father of the girl can be pacified simply by offering a *sarai* laden with betel leaves and nuts.

DEATH

The Khamyangs practise both cremation and burial. Dead bodies of children, persons who commit suicide, women who lose their lives during delivery of an issue, ill-fated persons who are the victims of diseases like typhoid, cholera, smallpox etc. are buried without any ceremony.

The corpse is disposed on the same day. To ward off any evil the system of touching purifide water after

coming from the cremation or burial ground is practised by the Khamyangs. The main purification ceremony is observed on the 6th day. Entertaining the villagers with a big feast and offering of gifts to the temple monks constitute the main functions of the purification ceremony. A comparatively less important ceremony is also observed on the 7th day. On this day the monks are invited to perform the **Mangal Sutra** and after that the owner of the house offer valuable articles of daily use to them.

RELIGION AND FESTIVALS

The religion and festivals of the Khamyangs are the same as those of the Phakeals and the Khamtis.

CHAPTER-IX

THE AITONIAS

INTRODUCTION

The Aitonias are a small section of the great Tai or Thai race. Their original habitat was in the Aiton part on the upper region of the Sindwin river in Burma. Their entry into Assam may be dated towards the latter part of the 18th Century. The present abode of the Aitonians is spread in the Sarupathar and Barpathar areas of the district of Sibsagar.

They construct their houses on raised platform 4' to 5' above the ground. A big Aiton house is divided into compartments. The front room is kept open on three sides and outsiders have easy approach to this part of the house. Almost all the household possess granaries or cow-shed-cum-granaries. The space between the platform and the ground is used by the womenfolk for weaving purposes. There may be two or more fire-places in a house which are held in high esteem.

The temple (*Buddha Vihar*) is constructed in a central place of the village and superior type of materials are used for the construction of the temple.

Mutual co-operation is the keynote of the social life of the Aitonias. Whether it is a house-building, solemnising a marriage ceremony, observing the death rites, fishing or reaping paddies, all the villagers co-operate ungrudgingly in all such activities.

ACRICULTURE

All the Aitonias are out an out agriculturists and they grow Sali paddy in large quantities. Till a few years back the Aitonias did not take Ahu rice and therefore the production of this kind of paddy was very much neglected. But due to the growth of population and the limited size of the agricultural plots, the people are facing hardship and of late Ahu paddy cultivation is becoming popular. Potatoes, brinjal, chillies, arums etc. are produced for local consumption. Betel nuts, which are connected with the socio-religious life of the Aitonians, are produced locally.

FOOD HABITS

Among the Aitonias religion is not a bar to the consumption of meat and fish. But the animals are not killed for consumption purposes. Individual as well as community fishing is practiced. Drinking is prohibited by religion. The rear cows and buffaloes and take their milk also. Rearing of certain animals are prohibited by religion. Pork, when available, is not avoided. Richer people use oil and other spices but the common run of people consume boiled vegetables. Now a days *dal* is a common item in the daily menu of the richer section of the people.

POSITION OF WOMEN

The Aitonians do not regard the womenfolk as inferior. The day to day life of the Aitonias pass smoothly with the joint effort of both men and women.

The women not only weave clothes for all the family members, but they also cook meals and help their menfolk in agricultural activities. The division of the work between the sexes is not watertight. Both male and female are equally hardworking and the males treat the womenfolk as partners. The assembly of the village elders women members are not included. However a woman can become a nun and command priestly respect from both the sexes.

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

Due to the spread of panchayati raj the old coveted position of a **Gaonbura (Hoban)** is fast disappearing yet there is a **Gaonbura** in an Aitoni village who, even now, presides over the assembly of the village elders. His opinion is respected by all the villagers. His post is honorary and there is no special dress as mark of his superiority. Next in the social hierarchy is the **Pathek (Trayo)** who acts as a guide in all the religious activities. After **Pathek** comes the **Barik (Chao)** who is entrusted with the task of informing the villagers about the plans and programmes of different socio-religious activities. It is the **Chao** who informs the villagers about the activities of the village council. He has a part to play during the time of holding each festival.

Clan :

The tribe is divided into a number of clans both big and small, namely-

Thumung Taofai

Thumung Thaosong

Charing Kon

Charing Mu

Fa Lung

Clou hu hau

There are some inferior clans such as the **Fa-lung Chaojap Kheptin (Cobblers)** and **Fa-lung Chaojap Chew (tailors)**. It should be noted that except in a marriage, reference to the clans is hardly made. Marriage within the same clan is prohibited. Generally people from the superior clans do not marry from inferior clans. The origin of the clan names may be traced either from natural objects or with reference to some characteristics and special abilities of their ancestors.

FAMILY, PROPERTY AND INHERITANCE :

The Aitonias are a patrilocal and partilineal people. The interests of an individual family are merged with the general interests of all the villagers. Every household must procure the required paddies for a year. The needy families are normally helped by the richer ones. Of late, due to economic hardships the rich families can hardly meet the recurring needs of the poor people. So the poorer sections have to serve as day labourers. Education is purely a matter of the individual families. Likewise illness in a family is a private matter. But individualism is not very prominent in different socio-religious activities. Even

marriage and death ceremonies in a particular family are, broadly speaking, regarded as community affairs of the whole village. The villagers not only pay a courtesy call to the family where a death occurs or a marriage ceremony is held, but they also supply the materials required for such ceremonies. Fellow feeling and neighbourliness are the special characteristics of their social life.

Both primary and extended families are found in an Aitonia village. Property is divided equally among the sons. The father may keep some property exclusively for his use during his lifetime but after his death his share goes to that son who takes care of him in his old days. Descent is reckoned through male line. Daughters and widows cannot inherit property. If a man dies without leaving any survivor, his property usually goes to the nearest agnatic relatives.

Marriage

Adult marriage is the rule. Marriageable ages for boys and girls are 20 and above and 16 and above respectively. Marriage in the same clan is prohibited. The Aitonias are monogamous and now-a-days polygamy is not preferred by any one in the Aitonia society. The plurality of wives does not connote special privilege or honour. Levirate is in vogue but divorce is not common in their society. Cross-cousin marriages (M.B.D. type) are socially prescribed and there is legal binding on the parties concerned. If the boy does not marry the girl under the preferential type, then he shall have to pay a fine of Rs. 5.00 to the girl's parents. Cross-cousin marriage with father's

sister's daughter is prohibited.

Widow marriage is prevalent and in such cases the man has to pay Rs. 10.00 (Kaprai) to the brother of the former husband of the widow. Both formal (**Aolungmi**) and informal (**Aopoimi**) types of marriages are prevalent in Aitonia society. In the former the guardians of the prospective boy and the girl take the initiative. But this type of marriage is an expensive one and therefore the people in general do not show much eagerness for it excepting those who are more conscious about their self respect. In the Aitonia marriages—both formal and informal, the **Pasang** or the mediator plays an important part.

BRIDE PRICE

Bride price system (**Tanka Tangho**) is still prevalent among the Aitonias. But this is more applicable in an informal type of marriage where the bridegroom has to pay a maximum of Rs. 500/- or a minimum of Rs. 150/- as the bride price. Payments are to be made in terms of cash only. Payment by easy installments is allowed.

DEATH AND DISPOSAL OF THE DEAD

Both cremation and burial are practised by the Aitonias. Dead bodies of children, persons who commit suicide, women who lose their lives during delivery of an issue, ill-fated persons who are the victims of diseases like typhoid, cholera, smallpox etc. are buried without any ceremony.

The corpse is disposed of on the same day. To ward off the evil spirits, the system of touching purificatory water after coming from the cremation or burial ground, is practised. The main purification ceremony is observed on the 6th day. Entertaining the villagers with a big feast and offering of gifts to the monks of the temple constitute the main functions of the purification ceremony. A comparatively less important ceremony is also observed on the 7th day. During these days the monks perform the **Mangal Sutra** in the house of the deceased and the owner of the house offers valuable articles of daily use to them.

Religion and festival

The religion and festivals of the Aitonias are very similar to those of the Phakeals or the Khamtis.

CHAPTER-X

THE TURUNGS

INTRODUCTION

Like the Aitonias and the Khamyangs, the Turungs are also a small section of the great Thai race. Their entry into Assam may be dated sometime in the middle part of the 19th Century. "The Turungs in fact, did not reach the plains of Assam until the beginning of the nineteenth century."²⁰ Their original home was on the bank of the river Turungpani in Burma. At present the Turungs are found in a few villages at Titabar and Sorupathar in the district of Sibsagar. They speak a dialect which is a mixture of the Singhpho and the Tai. The Turungs had to live under the Singhphos for a considerable period of time and as a result they had to accept the dialect of the rulers. "Thus within the last hundred years the Shan tribe of Turungs while held in captivity amongst the Singhphos, abandoned their native tongue and adopted that of their captors."²¹ After arriving in the plains the Turungs at first pitched their tents near Tokolai. Later on they established their villages at Kachukhat near Titabar and at Rajapukhuri near Sarupathar. The total population of the Turung community will be approximately 1,500.

They also construct their houses on raised platforms. A typical Turung house is divided into compartments and the frontal portion is kept open on three sides. Any outsider can unhesitatingly enter this

20. E. A. Gait, A History of Assam, P. 78.

21. E. A. Gait, History of Assam. P. 2.

portion of the house. Almost all the households possess granaries which are usually cowshed-cum-granaries. The space between the platform and the ground is used by womenfolk for weaving purpose.

THE TEMPLE

The temple or the Buddha Vihar is constructed in a central place of the village. The design of the temple is almost similar to that of the Burmese temples.

CO-OPERATION

The salient feature of the Turung society is the co-operative outlook among all the villagers irrespective of any social status. On the occasions like the building of a house, solemnising a marriage ceremony, observing death rites, or harvesting paddies, the villagers co-operate whole heartedly in all such activities.

AGRICULTURE

Paddy cultivation is the sole source of living among the Turungs and they grow *Sali* paddy in large quantities. They prefer *Sali* paddy to *Ahu* and naturally the production of the former gains the upper hand. Of late due to economic hardships and rising prices of all the commodities the production of *Ahu* paddy is becoming popular among the Turungs. Potatoes, brinjals, chillies, arums and other winter



• A Turung girl carrying water

crops are produced for local consumption. A few families can however sell some of the produce in the local consumption. in the local *hats*. Betel-nuts, which have so much use in the socio-religious life of the Turungs, are also produced locally.

FOOD AND DRINK

Rice is their staple food. Though they profess Buddhism, religion does not stand in any way from consuming meat and fish. But animals are not killed for day-to-day consumption purpose. They also do not go for hunting and fishing at regular intervals, Of course during the seasons individual and common fishing is not avoided. Pork, when available, is not avoided, Beef is strictly prohibited, Richer people use oil and other spices but the common run of people prefer boiled vegetables. Now-a-days *dal* has entered the daily menu of the richer section of the people. Drinking is prohibited by religion.

POSITION OF WOMEN

The position of women in Turung society is neither high nor low, rather it may be called as equal. Both men and women help each other in the smooth running of the day-to-day activities. The women not only weave clothes and prepare meals, but they also help their menfolk in agriculture. The division of work between the sexes is not water-tight. Both male and female are equally hard working and the males treat the females as partners. Though a woman cannot be a member of the village council yet there is no bar

for a woman to rise to the position of a nun. Thus a woman can command high respect from both the sexes.

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

In every Turung village a **Gaonbura (Merengdingla)** is appointed by the villagers but his appointment is not hereditary. He presides over the council of the village elders and his opinion is respected by all. This is a honorary position and there is no special dress to mark his status. Next in the social hierarchy is the **Pathek (Zare)** who acts as a guide in all the religious activities. Besides the two offices mentioned above there may be a **Barik** in a village whose duty is to inform the villagers about the plan and programmes of different socio-religious activities. In fact he acts as a middleman between the priest and the villagers. He also informs the villagers about the proceedings of the village council. He has a part to play during the time of holding each festival.

CLAN ORGANISATION

There are two broad divisions among the Turungs namely **Tailung** and **Taioi** or **Durung** and **Drarai**. But today the reference to such divisions. is hardly made. The tribe is divided into a number of clans e.g. **Lungking, Chewman, Namchom, Chaopu** etc. Except in a marriage, reference to the clans is not made. The origin of the clan names may be traced from some natural objects or with reference to some characteristics and special abilities of their ancestors.



A Turung woman



Turung girls busily weaving



A Turung house



An elderly Turung gentleman

FAMILY, PROPERTY AND INHERITANCE

Like all the plains tribes of Assam the Turungs are a patrilocal and patriolineal people. Both primary and extended families are prevalent in their society. The interests of an individual family are merged in the general interests of all the families. But in certain avocations the individual family has to bear the responsibility itself. Every household must produce the required amount of paddies for the year. Of course the needy families are helped by the richer people. Education is purely a concern of the individual families. Likewise illness in a family is a private matter. But it should be noted that an individualistic trend is not very prominent in many of the socio-religious activities of a family. Even marriage and death ceremonies in a family are regarded as the common affairs of the whole village.

The sons get equal share of the father's property. The father keeps some property to meet the exigencies of his old age. After his death his share is owned by that son who takes care of him in his old days. Descent is reckoned through the male line and daughters and widows are not eligible to inherit property. If a man dies without leaving any survivor, his property usually goes to the nearest agnatic relations.

MARRIAGE

Adult marriage is the rule. Marriageable ages for boys and girls are 20 and above and 16 and above respectively. Marriage within the same clan is prohib-

ited. They prefer monogamy and polygamy is very rare in the Turung society. The plurality of wives is not regarded as an insignia for special honour. Levirate is in vogue but divorce is not common. Preferential and widow marriages are in vogue in their society.

Both formal (**Nom Chew**) and informal (**Frongwa**) marriages are prevalent in the Turung society. In the former type of marriage, the guardians of the prospective boy and the girl take the initiative. But this type of marriage is an expensive one and therefore the people do not generally show much eagerness for it excepting those who are more conscious about their self respect. The presence of the **Pasang** or **Kataki** is essential in their marriage.

BRIDE PRICE

Bride price system (**Pho**) is still prevalent among the Turungs. But this is more applicable to an informal type of marriage. In such a marriage the bridegroom has to pay Rs. 500/- at the maximum and Rs. 50/- at the minimum as the bride price. Payments are to be made in terms of cash only.

The death rites and other religious ceremonies and festivals are almost similar to those of the Phakeals and therefore detailed notes on these topics have not been given here.

CHAPTER-XI THE LALUNGS

INTRODUCTION

Opinions differ about the origin of the word Lalung. The Lalunngs introduce themselves as Tiowa. According to the popular belief prevalent among the Lalungs, it was Lord Mahadev who created the Lalungs. There is a mythological story behind the legendary origin of the Lalungs.

Once Lord Mahadev was heavily intoxicated with rice-beer and while he was lying unconscious on a road, a stream of saliva (Lal), oozed out from his mouth. From this divine liquid the Lord created two human beings— one male and one female, As these two human beings are created out of the saliva ('Lal'), they were known as Lalungs. Even today the Lalungs consider Lord Mahadev as their beign protector.

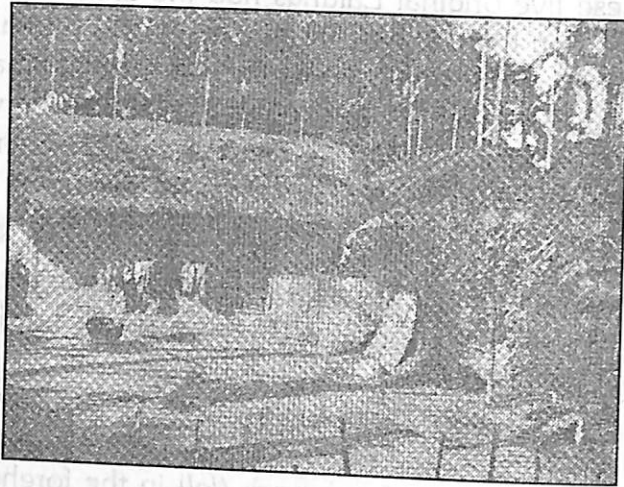
Another similar story with slight variation, is also prevalent among the Lalungs. Once upon a time Lord Mahadev and his consort Parvati were enjoying the natural scenary along the Manas Sorowar lake. The soothing beauty of the lake area enchanted the Lord so much that he immediately fell asleep on the bank of the lake. As he woke up he found five drops of Saliva at the place where he was resting. Out of these five drops of saliva the Lord created five male human beings. As these human beings were created out of the saliva ('Lal'), they came to be known as Lalungs.

These five original Lalungs had the unique priviledge of seeing their creator in the shape of a human being and therefore the Lalungs call the Lord Mahadev as Manus Mahadev. At the behest of Goddess Parvati, the Lord created another five female human beings who were allowed to co-habit with the five male human beings.

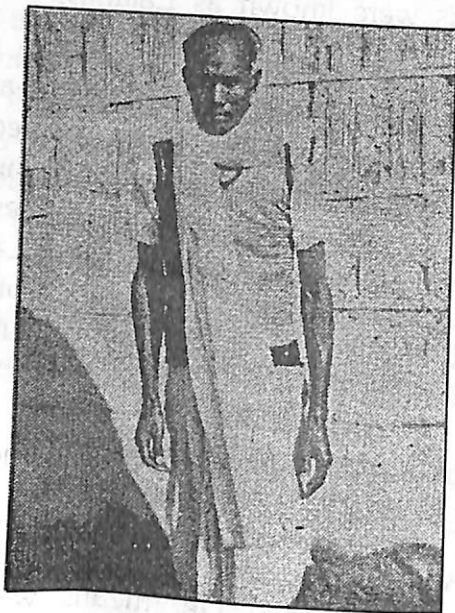
Originally the Tiowas were the subjects of the demon king Bali. Bali was a devotee of Lord Vishnu and it was the desire of the king that all his subjects should embrace the royal religion. Those Tiowas who did not follow the royal injunction were compelled to bear an imprint of red mark (*lal*) in the forehead and turned out from the country. Later on the bearers of red marks were known as Lalungs.

Opinions vary about the origin of the word Lalung. The Mikirs called those people as Lalungs (la means water and 'Lung' means rescued) who were living in the south bank of the river Brahmaputra. The river Brahmaputra gave shelter to these bohemian people and hence they were known as Lalungs. In fact it is assumed that there was a branch of river Diyang in the Mikir Hills called 'Nila Lung'. During the reign of the Kamata kings, the Lalungs had to leave their original habitat and pitched their tents on the banks of the 'Nilalung'. Later these people came to be known as the Lalungs.

According to the Lalung dialect **Tiowa** means superior, or elevated (Te' means water and 'Wa' means superior). As the people were cooming to Assam following, the course of the holy river Brahmapaputra, they might have introduced themselves as 'Tiowa'.



A Lalung house



A Lalung man

The Lalungs living in the hills and the foot hills of Mikir hills bordering Nowgong district introduce themselves as Tiowas. They entered Assam through the North Eastern hilly tract of Assam from their original habitat, the Tibetan Plateau, Probably Tiowas are the last Bodo group entering Assam through this tract.

The Lalung folk literature gives us some interesting data about the original habitat of the Tiowas called Hillali, the area comprising the whole of the present Nowgong and eastern part of Darrang district. The Tiowas were living in this kingdom. At first they were living on the northern bank of the river Brahmaputra but later on their habitation spread to the other bank also. The Hillali kingdom was later known as Lali. On the northwestern side of Nowgong district, there is a dead branch of the Brahmaputra called Lali. The reference of this Hillai kingdom is still traceable in the folksongs of the Lalungs which are sung in the different socio-religious festivals.

Due to the invasions of the Kamrup and Kamata kings the people Hillali came southwards. They further came to the foot hills extending upto Kandali, Bamuni and Kathiatali, Laopani, Jokkata, Amsi, Singimari, Sahari lying on both sides of the Kapili were the original Lalung villages. Some Lalungs went towards Ragkhoi, Langkoi, Amni, Marjong lying on the boundary of the Jayantia hills but included into the Mikir Hills.

During the reign of Swargadeo Jayadhwaj Singha one dependent Pancharajya was established under the Raha Administrative circle. The Ahom administrative policy was to live and let live. They

wanted good neighbourly relations with the tribes. Thus the Tiowas (Lalungs) under the benign protection of the Ahom king returned to the plains and established villages, Behari Burharaja gaon, Bangaldhara Barapujia, Topakusi, Khahigar, Mikirgaon, Khora, Khaplankusi, Mahadeosalthan villages were established at that time. Later on Lalung villages were established at south eastern part of Nowgong district, During the reign of Swargadeo Rajeswar Singha, 'Sato Rajya' was established under Jagi administrative circle. The Lalungs were encouraged to settle in Mayang, Baha, Ghagua, Jagi, Manpur, Telelia and Dandua Villages.

The Lalungs had to live in the Jayantia hills for a considerable period of time and thus they erroneously opine that their original habitat was in the Jayantia hills. When the Jayantia King became a titular head under the Ahom king and had to supply serfs to the latter, the Jayantia King tried to utilise these Lalungs for that purpose and knowing the evil intention of the king the Lalungs fled away towards plains bordering Gobha. On way they sacrificed one **Komora** symbolising their cutting off the relation with the Jayantias. The place took its name as Komorakata. A particular clan of the Lalungs, do not eat *Komora* even today.

According to some authors the original place of the Lalungs was Jaita Khairam in the Khaurang areas of K & J Hills. At present large concentrations of the Lalungs are found in Kapili. Mayang, Bhurbandha, Kathiatali and Kampur Development Block areas of Nowgong district. A few Lalung villages are found in the western areas of the Mikir Hills and in K & J Hills. In Dhemaji Block areas of Lakhimpur

district there are four Lalung villages. In the whole of Assam the Lalungs number 61,315 according to the 1961 Census.

VILLAGE LIFE

The Lalung villages, like all other plains tribal villages are important units in the organisation of their socio religious life. Though a plains tribe, their houses are almost similar to those of the Kacharis. The villages are surrounded either by paddy fields and jungles or by a river on one side and paddy field and jungles on the other. The number of houses in a village may vary from 10 to 100. Namghars (public congregational halls) are popular among the Lalungs, especially with the followers of the Mahapurushia cult.

The Lalung had a proud tradition of well managed dormitory system, called *Deka Sang*. This important instituton was the training centre for all the young boys of a particular clan or sub-clan. Sometimes it acted as the venue of the village council. Of late the reading clubs and such other institutions have taken the place of the old *Deka sang*.

VILLAGE STRUCTURE

Among the Lalungs a single village does not form the lowest administrative unit. The lowest administrative unit is a **Buni**, constituting with more than one village. For the smooth running of the Eunis there are different office bearers namely, the **Lorok, Forongai, Changmaji, Karaimaji, Deori, Hatari** and the **Randhani**.

Before the advent of the British the lalungs had their own independent Rajas, whom they called **Deo Raja**. One of the important principalities of the Lalungs was Gobha and under Gobha there were twelve small Rajas called **Soto Raja** and **Pacho Raja**. There may be several **Bunis** under the administrative control of a certain Raja. The Raja is helped by a number of office bearers such as the **Bordoloi**, **Konwar**, **Patra**, **Barbarua**, **Dhulia**, **Dalia**, **Kalia** and the **Paik**. All these ranks are hereditary.

Today considerable changes in the village structure have taken place in some of the Lalung villages. In these villages besides the Gaonbura, there are **Pathek**, **Medhi**, **Gayon** and **Bharali** who have to play different roles in the Socio religious functions of a village. Politically the villages are administered under the *Panchayati Raj* system.

AGRICULTURE

The Lalungs are primarily agriculturists. The outturn of the fields is the chief means of their livelihood. They produce Sali, Bao and Ahu paddy in their fields and these form their major crops. Jute, mustard and Matikalai are also produced. Winter and summer vegetables of several varieties are grown. In all the agricultural activities co-operation among the villagers is a salient feature.

The people are very laborious and therefore Nature blesses them with bountiful crops. The women among the Lalungs are also equally hardworking. Besides helping their menfolk in agricultural activities, they weave clothes and prepare meals for all the family



A Lalung woman weaving at her pleaser



A Lalung dancing party

members. It is the duty of the womenfolk to keep the house neat and tidy. Because of their keen interest in agriculture, the economic condition of the Lalungs is visibly better, They are quite content with their simple way of life and love the traditional methods of struggle for existence.

FOOD HABITS

Rice is the staple food of the Lalungs. Their two major meals consist of rice and vegetables. Fowl and pork are their special delicacies, Previously home made rice beer was an essential item in their daily menu but now-a-days consumption of rice-beer is restricted.

CLAN

The Lalungs are divided into a number of exogamous clans (Wali or Kul) namely, **Macharang Machereng, Magor, Madur, Ladur, Puru, Sagara, Maloi, Fangsong, Puma, Dafoi, Mithi, Lamfoi, Sukai, Khoroi, Aagra, Chanchara, Kasa, Cholong, Muni, Melang, Kakhog, Darfong, Farpang, Damlong, Ansong, Amchi, Khakar and Loron.** Originally there were only 12 clans but later on these main clans were subdivided into a number of subclans (**Dhan Bangah**). The Lalung clans are all ancestral and they do not trace their origin from anu totemic object. It should be noted that the existence of clan system is realised only in the matter of regulating marriage.

FAMILY

Among the Lalung both primary and joint family systems are in vogue. Besides the father, mother and other unmarried family members, the same homestead is also occupied by the married sons. The father is the head of the family and all the members obey him.

KINSHIP

Of late, the mother's superiority in the socio-religious life of the Lalungs has been considerably reduced and today the Lalungs reckon their relationship, by and large through the male line. Their kinship terminology may be termed as descriptive. But the use of a certain classificatory kinship terminology cannot be overlooked. Thus Magara Ayung is used to address the father's elder sister as well as mother's elder sister. Similarly **Ma-aa Aying** denotes the father's elder brother and also the mother elder sister's husband. Some of the kinship terminologies, prevalent among the Lalungs, are shown below.

English	Lalung
Father	Pang
Mother	Ayang
Grand mother	Buri
Grand father	Aja
Son	Cha
Grand son	Chu

Daughter	Choja
Father's elder brother	Ma-an-Ayung
Father's younger brother	Dada
Bother (elder)	Kaka
Brother (younger)	Gajal
Sister (elder)	Bai
Sister (younger)	Nanao
Son in-law	Jangai
Brother-in-law	Jela
Brother-in-law (younger)	Chali
Father's elder sister	MagaraAyung
Father's younger sister	Ani
Elder brother's wife	Bauji
Younger brother's wife	Aachi

PROPERTY AND INHERITANCE

Among the Lalungs matrilineal system of inheritance is practised but recent efforts are also on way to find out a compromise between the matrilineal and patrilineal system of inheriting property. Women are the sole owners of property but in certain cases males are also allowed to hold charge of the family property. Daughters are also eligible to share properties. Apart from the jointly owned family property, individual members can acquire personal property to the extent of personal requirements.

POSITION OF WOMEN

The position of women in Lalung society is high. But it should be noted that menfolk also command high respect and the women members of a family leave all the responsibility of management of the household affairs to their men. There is close cooperation between male and female.

MARRIAGE

In Lalung Society 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 can social recognition be given to such unions. Marriages are solemnised after the attainment of puberty. Boys usually marry between the ages of twenty to twenty-eight and girls between fifteen and twenty five. Clan exogamy is the general rule and monogamy is the socially and legally recognised form of marriage. Polygamy is avoided. Preferential marriages are not in vogue in their society. Similarly levirate is also not practised while sororate is still popular in the Lalung society.

Widow marriage is allowed. Cases of divorce are very rare and there is harmonious relation between a husband and his wife.

Among the Lalungs two forms of marriages are prevalent, namely, marriage by negotiation (**Khoja**) or formal marriage and **Gandharba** marriage or informal marriage.

FORMAL MARRIAGE

The educated and wel-to-do Lalungs prefer this type of marriage which entails huge expenditure and long drawn out formalities. It is solemnised with much pomps and grandeur, In this form of marriage the guardians of the prospective couple take the initiative. **Zelas** or go-betweenes have to play important roles in such marriages.

INFORMAL MARRIAGE

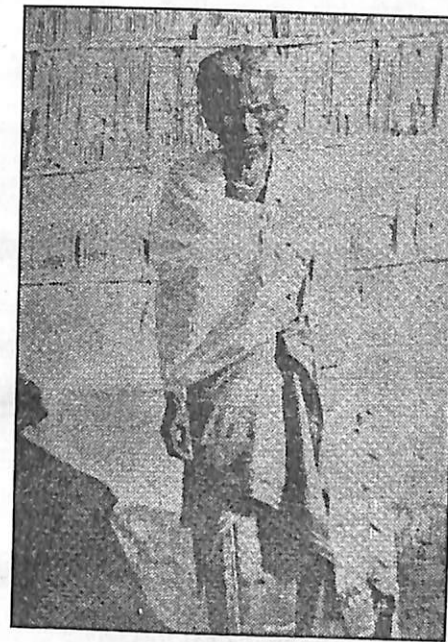
The second form i.e. **Gandharba** marriage is the most widely prevalent form of marriage among the Lalungs. It is love marriage in which the lover takes away his beloved on a stipulated night, Next morning the lover's relatives approach the girl's parents and if terms and conditions laid by the parents of the girl are agreeable to the parents of the boy then the parents of the girl give consent to the marriage. After some days the boy's party entertains the villagers with a big feast.

MARRIAGE BY FORCE

In the truest sence of the term this type of marriage cannot be called a marriage at all because in such marriages the girl hardly lives one night with her lover who takes her away without her previous consent. As soon as the matter is known to the parents and relatives of the girl, they rush forth to the lover's house and demand the girl. If the boy's family does not hand over the girl then the girl's relatives apply force and take away the girl with them. Next day the



A group of Lahung students with their teachers



An elderly Lahung woman

girl's parents invite a sitting of the village council and place the grievances before the elders. Generally the judgement goes against the boy and as a punishment the boy's family has to pay Rs. 100/- to Rs. 150/- along with a jar of rice beer, rice and betel-nuts.

It should be noted that the Lalungs do not demand any bride price in their marriages.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

Like all other tribal religions the religion of the Lalungs is based on a belief in some deities. Lord Mahadev is considered as the Supreme God. He is a benevolent God who showers blessings upon those who worship with devotion. The Lalung deities should be regularly propitiated by offering and sacrifices. Among the chief Gods and Goddesses mention may be made of the following :

Gods

Mahadev

Ganesh

Parameswar

Badarmaji

Baolakong

Goddesses

Ai Gosani or Devi

Lakshmi

Padumi

Kalika

Kamakhya

Saru Ai

Bor Ai

Akari

Kanai

Adheli

FESTIVAL

The Lalung festivals are interrelated with their religious practices. Throughout the year they worship different gods and goddesses, both public and private. The following are some of the important festivals of the Lalungs.

Pujas\Festivals	Venue
1. Mal Puja	Forest
2. Bison Kunwari Puja	-do-
3. Thal Puja	-do-
4. Sani puja	-do-
5. Dewali Puja	-do-
6. Jankang Puja	-do-
7. Garakhia Puja	The <i>Thanghar</i> (a sacred place of worship)
8. Nam Bhatima	-do-
9. Kalika Puja	-do-

Every year from January to April, the Lalungs observe the following household festivals :

Mahadev Puja

Lakshmi Puja

Sukil Bhakat Sewa

Madahi Bhakat Sewa

Najaniya Bhakat Sewa

Besides these festivals they observe the annual **Gobha Raja's Mela**, the **Jon Bila Bazar** and the

Kharbila Bazar with much pomp and grandeur. These melas are held a few days after the Assamese **Magh Bihu** and the **Bohag Bihu**. Intertribal exchanges in the barter system take place in these melas.

DEATH AND DISPOSAL OF THE DEAD

Both cremation and burial are practised by the Lalungs. 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, pregnant women, epidemic cases etc. are buried. Dying inside the house, is allowed, Before carrying a dead body to the cremation ground, the relatives express their last respects. A dead body is ceremonially washed and cooked food is offered to it. People of a particular clan are cremated in the cremation ground earmarked for that clan only.

Among the Lalungs relatives of the deceased have to play very important part in the death rites. Both male and female participate in the last rites. After returning from the cremation or burial ground the participants have to purify themselves by washing their bodies and touching fire and holy water.

The main purification ceremony is observed on the seventh day. The villagers are entertained in a big feast where pork and rice-beer form the most essential items.

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