

AIRTSC POPULAR SERIES

TRIBES OF ASSAM

PART-III

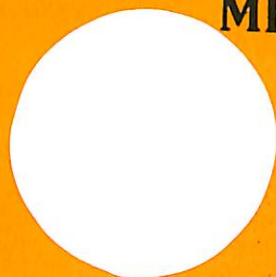
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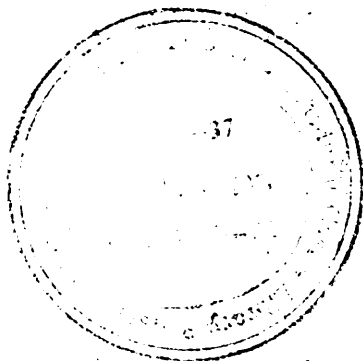
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DR. B.N. BORDOLOI

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PART-III



DR. B. N. BORDOLOI

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TRIBES OF ASSAM, PART-III, AIRTSC POPULAR SERIES

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

Published by :

DR. B. N. BORDOLOI

Director, Assam Institute of Research
for Tribals and Scheduled Castes
Guwahati-781028.

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First Edition, January 1991.

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PREFACE

In pursuance of the directives of the Ministry of Welfare (erstwhile Ministry of Home Affairs), Government of India, the Assam Institute of Research for Tribals & Scheduled Castes (erstwhile Tribal Research Institute, Assam) has taken up a scheme of preparation and publication of a popular series on the tribal communities of Assam. Although there are a good number of literary works on the scheduled tribes and majority of which are on piece-meal basis, nonetheless, there has not been any popular write-ups on the tribes of Assam, plains as well as hills, in a consolidated manner for the benefit of the common readers, administrators, etc.

The Ministry of Welfare (erstwhile Ministry of Home Affairs), Govt. of India, in one of the meetings of the Directors of Tribal Research Institutes of the country held in New Delhi had suggested that each of the Tribal Research Institutes of the country should bring out popular series of books containing ethnographic notes on each scheduled tribe of their respective States devoting 15 to 20 pages for each tribe with representative photographs on various aspects of their life and culture. Publication of such series would enable the persons with inquisitive minds to have a fair idea regarding the basic characteristics of the tribes of each State, their degree of development, problems of transition and adaption to the new technological changes. Apart from this, such publications would also help the administrators specially those who are quite new to the tribal areas, development agencies, research scholars, social workers and others who are directly or indirectly connected with the welfare and development of the tribal communities. Such a knowledge of our unknown or little known neighbours is a stepping stone for national integration through proper understanding of the cultural parameters which govern the more or less self-managed tribal societies.

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The present Volume is Part - III of the Popular Series containing the ethnographic write-ups on five tribal communities of Assam, four from the hills and one from the plains. The communities which we have covered in the Part - III of the Popular Series are the Hajongs, the Garos, the Khasis, the Jaintias and the Meches.

It may be pointed out here that in the Part - I of the Popular Series we have covered seven tribal communities namely, the Boro-Kacharis, the Deoris, the Dimasa Kacharis, the Karbis, the Lalungs (Tiwas), the Mishings (Miri) and the Rabhas. In the Part - II of the Popular Series we have covered six tribal communities, namely, the Barmans of Cachar, the Hmars, the Kukis, the Rengma Nagas, the Sonowal Kacharis and the Zeme Nagas.

Thus out of 23 tribal communities of Assam, we have covered 18 (eighteen) tribal communities in three parts of the Popular Series. The remaining numerically small communities are proposed to be covered in the Part-IV of the Popular Series.

The Part - I and Part - II of the Popular Series have been well received and these have been prescribed as Reference Books in the Universities and Colleges for subjects like Anthropology and Sociology. Like the two earlier Parts of the Popular Series, we have refrained from giving a scholarly treatment to our write-ups in the Part-III also so as to enable more and more readers to get an opportunity to read and understand our neighbours without great efforts. We will consider our efforts fruitful if the book serves the purpose for which it is primarily meant.

I am thankful to Shri Manish Chakrabarty, my Steno, who has taken sufficient pain to take dictation and to type out the manuscript.

DR. B. N. BORDOLOI

Director

Assam Institute of Research for
Tribals & Scheduled Castes,
Guwahati-28.

Dated Guwahati
the 26th January, 1991.

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THE GAROS

1. INTRODUCTION :

The Garos are one of the scheduled tribes in the two Autonomous Hill Districts of Assam, viz. the Karbi Anglong and the North Cachar Hills. However, in the Hill Districts their habitat is confined more or less into the Neparpatty area within the jurisdiction of the Bokajan Tribal Development Block in the Karbi Anglong District. The origin of these Garo families in the Karbi Anglong District could be traced back to the Garo Hills district of present Meghalaya.

In the early years of the present century, viz. the 20th century, some Garo families from the Garo Hills were brought as labourers for opening up the Kakodonga Tea Estate in the present Golaghat District for the purpose of works connected with growing of tea plants and plantation of the same since local labourers were not available. It may be mentioned here that the Garo people were not familiar with the types of work required to be performed in a Tea Estate. After working in the Kakodonga Tea Estate for sometime, they, therefore, had given up their jobs in the tea garden and resorted to paddy cultivation in the Kakodonga area. Later on, they migrated to the Bokajan area of the present Karbi Anglong district in search of good cultivable land and settled there permanently. It may also be mentioned that prior to independence the present Bokajan area was a part of the Golaghat Sub-division of erstwhile Sibsagarh district.¹

1. Bordoloi, B.N., District Handbook, United Mikir and Cachar Hills, Shillong 1972, page-30.

There are also a good number of Garo villages in the Guwahati Subdivision of Kamrup District, and Goalpara and South Salmara Subdivisions of present Goalpara district bordering Garo Hills of Meghalaya.

2. RACIAL AFFINITY :

The Garos call themselves ACHIK-MANDE which literally means-Hill Man, 'ACHIK' means hills and 'MANDE' means man.²

Ethnically the Garos belong to the Mongoloid race like most of the tribes of North-East India. The Garos believe that their original home was Tibet. S.N. Barkataki, however, believes that the Garos might have stayed in Tibet for a petty long time in course of their migration through the routes from Western China.³ Milton Sangma, another scholar, is also of the same opinion and he states that the Garos like the other Bodo Group of people belong to the Tibeto-Chinese family whose cradle is said to have been the north western China between the upper water of Yang-Tse-Kiang and Hoangho.⁴ A tradition is current among the Garos that a section of them, in course of their migration, settled in Koch Behar for a few centuries together and later on spread upto the Mymensing District of present Bangladesh. The partition of the country at the time of independence, had compelled them to migrate to the then undivided Assam.

Garos like the other tribes of Assam belong the Tibeto-Burman families of Bodo linguistic group.

The Garos have round and short faces and they are in robust health. Their complexion is dark-tan. The women

2. Barkataki, S.N., Tribes of Assam, New Delhi, 1969, Page-16.
3. Ibid, page-16.
4. Sangma, Milton, History and Culture of the Garos, an article in the book Garo Hills Land and the People, edited by L.S. Gassah, Guwahati / New Delhi, 1984, page-123.

are fairly beautiful with smiling faces. The men have scanty beards. By and large, they are short structured and the average height of a male person is about 160 cm and that of a female person is about 145 cm.

3. SUB-GROUPS AND CLANS :

Based on their place of residence, dialectical and cultural variations as well as inter-tribe marriages the Garos are divided into several sub-groups or sub-tribes. While some authors regard these divisions as sub-groups, the others regard them as sub-tribes. These sub-groups are mentioned below :

1. A'WES
2. A'KAWES
3. CHISAK
4. DUAL
5. MATCHI
6. MATJANGCHI OR MATABENG
7. AM'BENG
8. CHIBOK
9. RUGA
10. GANCHING
11. ATONG
12. MEGAM

The main feature of these subgroups or sub-tribes is the fact that each of them has some cultural traits which are not common among the others. The language spoken by each of them has also variations to a considerable extent. Barkataki, however, regards some of the sub-groups as breakaway clans only.⁵

Opinions seem to have differed in regard to the actual number of original clans and the actual number of clans found present among the Garos. In Garo, a clan is called CHATCHI.

5. Barkataki, S.N., Tribes of Assam, New Delhi, 1969, page-23.

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5. Barkataki, S.N., Tribes of Assam, New Delhi, 1969, page-23.

According to Mr. S. N. Barkataki, the Garos have three clans originally, namely, MARAK, MOMIN and SANGMA. Later on three other clans, namely, ABENG, ARENG and SIRA were created. These were in fact sub-clans of the original clans but in course of time they were branched away from the original clans and were developed later on into independent clans. To quote Mr. Barkataki - "But the main septs or clans into which the race is divided are three, the MARAKS, the MOMINS and the SANGMAS.....some sub-clans like the ABENGs, ARENGs and the SIRAS are beginning to branch away from the original clans and are developing into independent exogamous clans."⁶

Mr. Milton Sangma, however, has expressed his opinion slightly in a different tone. According to him the Garos had originally two clans only, viz. SANGMA and MARAK. Later on three more clans namely MOMIN, ARENG and SHIRA were evolved. The clan MOMIN is believed to have originated from the union of a Garo girl with a Muslim from Bihar during Mirjumla's invasion of Assam in 1661. While the clan ARENG is said to have come out of MARAK, the clan SHIRA is said to have originated from SANGMA. Thus, according to Mr. Sangma, the Garos at present have five clans or septs, namely, SANGMA, MARAK, MOMIN, ARENG and SHIRA.⁷

All the clans mentioned above are sub-divided into several sub-clans called MA'CHONG which literally means motherhood. Although the MA'CHONGS are named after animals, birds, trees, bamboos, hills, rivers, etc, nevertheless, the Garos have neither reverence nor fear for them unlike of the people of totemic clans.

6. Ibid, Page—23.

7. Sangma, Milton, History and Culture of the Garos in the book Garo Hills Land and the People, edited by L.S. Gassah, Gauhati/New Delhi, 1984, P-133.

4. DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS :

As per 1971 Census the total Garo population in Assam is 9,139 out of which 5,222 persons are males and 3,917 are females - the sex-ratio being 750 females per 1000 males.⁸ The total population of 9,139, of course, does not include the Garos living in the plains districts of Assam. They constitute 0.56 per cent of the total scheduled tribes population and 0.06 per cent of the total population of the State of Assam. Their percentage of literacy is, however, much below the State percentage of literacy. As against the State percentage of literacy of 28.72 as per 1971 Census, the percentage of literacy of the Garos is 22.89 only. While the male literacy among the Garos is 31.36% against the State percentage of 37.19, for the females it is only 11.62% against the State percentage of female literacy of 19.27. It is now obvious that from the point of literacy, the Garos are found to have lagged much behind.

5. FAMILY STRUCTURE :

The Garos like the Khasis follow the matriarchal family structure. Unlike some other tribes, like the Rabhas and the Lalungs (Tiwas) which were once matrilineal peoples, the Garos have been maintaining this type of family structure without any erosion. The line of descent is always traced through the females only. The group on which the Garo society is based is the sub-clan which is called MA'CHONG. MA'CHONG is described by Colonel Dalton as 'motherhood'.⁹ All persons belonging to a MA'CHONG or sub-clan trace their descent from a common ancestress or mother. Because of this matrilineal family structure, the mother is the head of the family and the father is

8. 1981 Census could not conducted in Assam due to Foreign Nationals' Issue.

9. Das, S.T., Life Styles, Indian Tribes, Locational Practice, New Delhi 1987, Page-189.

considered to be an outsider only who is inducted to the family by virtue of marriage. The children also acquire the title of the clan/sub-clan name of their mother only.¹⁰ Thus in a Garo family the father, according to the customs, is not required to play any dominant role.

6. MARRIAGE :

In marriage the Garos strictly follow the rules of exogamy. That is to say, marriage between a boy and a girl belonging to the same clan can not take place. For example, a Sangma boy cannot marry a Sangma girl; a Momin boy can not marry a Momin girl and so on. If this customary law of exogamy is violated; viz. if a marriage takes place between a boy and a girl of the same clan, it is looked down upon by the society.

It is generally the girl who selects her husband and the marriage proposal shall have to be initiated from the girl's family and not from the boy's family. The negotiated form of marriage is the prevailing practice and it is called DO'SIA. When a girl falls in love with a boy not belonging to her clan, she reveals her intention either to her family members or to her nearest kins. Her parents or guardians then visit the house of the boy on an appointed day to negotiate the marriage. If the boy's family accepts the proposal a date for the marriage is fixed. DO'SIA or the negotiated marriage is performed in a very simple way by killing two fowls in front of the couple followed by a feast, dancing and merry-making.

Marriage by capture, marriage by elopment, marriage as an outcome after a girl goes and sleeps with a boy of her liking stealthily at night, marriage after a boy partakes food with a girl at her invitation, etc. are other forms of marriage prevalent among the Garos.¹¹

10. Bordoloi, B.N., District Handbook, United Mikir and North Cachar Hills, Shillong, 1972, Page-31.

11. Sangma, Milton, History and Culture of the Garos, in the book Garo Hills Land and the People, edited by L.S. Gassah, Guwahati/New Delhi, 1984, page-139.

Cross cousin marriage i.e. marrying the daughter of mother's brother is a preferential system of marriage among the Garos but marrying the daughter of the father's sister is a taboo. If there is no marriageable daughter of the mother's brother, a girl from her clan is chosen for their son. But now a days this rule has also been slackened and even endogamous marriages have also been recorded among them.¹²

But the most interesting factor among the Garos is the NOKROM system arising out of the marriage relations. After marriage the son-in law has to reside in the house of his parents-in-law and becomes a NOKROM which means a kind of representative of his father's clan in the family of his mother-in-law. "There are two kinds of son-in-laws among the Garos, one is called NOKROM and the other CHOWARY. Between these two a great deal of difference exists as to the rights and privileges about the property of their parents-in-law. The NOKROM is the luckier man of the two, because after the death of the father-in-law he becomes the owner of everything" quotes Mr. J.K. Bose.¹³

What Mr. Bose wants to mean by saying that the NOKROM becomes the owner of everything is the fact that he (NOKROM) as the husband of the daughter of the family is required to manage the property on behalf of his wife since the inheritance is always in the female line. The CHOWARY, on the other hand, is not required to stay in the house of his parent-in-laws. He builds a house in the village of his wife at his own cost and manages whatever landed property his wife receives from her mother as inheritance. If the father-in-law of a NOKROM is also the NOKMA or the headman of the village, the NOKROM automatically becomes the NOKMA after the death of his father-in-law. Under no cir-

12. Bose, J. K., Glimpses of Tribal Life in North-East, Calcutta, 1980, pages-64-65.

13. Op. cit., page-94

cumstances the son can become the NOKMA at the death of his father.

The youngest daughter is generally the most favourite member of the family and it is she who stays with the father, the elder sisters, if there be any, being married before her. The person who marries the youngest daughter or the most favourite one of the family, therefore, becomes the NOKROM.

Another very interesting fact about the marriages of the Garos is the system of marrying the mother-in-law also by the NOKROM at the death of his father-in-law and thus he becomes the husband of both of his mother-in-law and her daughter at the same time. Regarding this peculiar custom Mr. Barkataki opines thus— "This custom... is rather extraordinary and I do not know if there is anything parallel in any other primitive society. Mere marriage with the widow is not sufficient. In order that the female children may be entitled to inherit the mother's property there must be nuptial consummation between the young husband and his old wife."¹⁴

The Garos are polygamous in the sense that a man can marry more than one wife. If he marries two sisters of the same family, he is to marry the elder sister first. The prior consent of the first wife has to be obtained in the event of his marrying a second wife. By virtue of her seniority the first wife becomes the principal wife called JIK-MAMUNG while the other wives are called JIK-GITES meaning concubines.

The Garo society is marked by the absence of the payment of bride price. Child marriage is unknown and divorce is rather easy and so it becomes common.

Junior levirate, viz. marrying the widow of the elder brother by the younger brother is prevalent but not favoured while the senior levirate, viz. marrying the widow of the younger brother by the elder brother, is forbidden.¹⁵

14. Barkataki, S.N., Tribes of Assam, New Delhi, 1969, p-24.

15. Bose, J.K. Glimpses of Tribal Life in North-East India, Calcutta, 1980, Page-87.

7. CUSTOMARY LAW OF INHERITANCE :

The Garos being matrilineal, the line of descent is traced through the mother only. All properties of the family whether movable or immovable belong to the mother and at her death, properties are inherited by the youngest daughter of the family who is considered to be the most favourite. This privileged daughter is called NOKNA meaning heiress. Without the consent of the heiress, the other sisters who are generally elder ones, can not even live under the same roof. If the woman of the family does not have a daughter, she might adopt one of the daughters of her sister as NOKNA and it is rather a common practice among the Garos. At the death of the woman, property of the family does not pass on to the sons although there may not be any daughter in the family.

8. NOKMA AND HIS ROLE :

Among many hill tribes in the North-East India, the system of community ownership of land is a common feature. But so far as the Garos are concerned, the ownership of land and its management are quite different. The traditional village chief who is also the clan chief is called NOKMA. All lands suitable for shifting (Jhum) cultivation in and around the village are administered by him and in fact he is the custodian or guardian of all lands in the village. This has been described by some scholars as the private ownership of land. But, in fact, it is not so. A man is free to cultivate any plot of Jhum land he chooses within the village. A NOKMA, however, cannot sell, any land without the permission of his wife's MACHONG. Land administration in a Garo village is carried on by the NOKMA and the council of village elders in accordance with the customary laws. A man from another village may also cultivate Jhum land within a village with the prior permission of the NOKMA and if he is not a Garo he is required to pay land revenue to NOKMA in terms of paddy.

In spite of the fact that the Garos have a matrilineal society, the NOKMA, the male tribal chief of the village, plays a very very important role in the village administration. The NOKMA with the assistance of the Village Council constituted with the elders tries all cases and disputes in an open assembly. The plaintiff and the accused are under oath to speak the truth and nothing but the truth. The decisions of the Village Council presided over by the NOKMA are binding on both parties. In all matters of village administration like the observance of festivals, religious rites, marriages, death ceremonies, starting of cultivation, harvesting of new crops, etc, the NOKMA is to be consulted.

9. RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS :

Although it is a fact that almost all Garo families living within the territorial jurisdiction of Assam, have accepted Christianity, none-the-less, they still remember their traditional religious beliefs and practices. Their conversion to Christianity does not prevent them from practising some of the traditional religious rites according to the needs of the hour.

According to their traditional religious beliefs there is a Supreme Being and there are also numerous deities-benevolent as well as malevolent. These deities/spirits pervade everywhere. They exist in the sky, on earth, in water, in the hills and mountains, caves, and so on.

Each of the deities/spirits has an assigned role to play just like the division of labour in the human society. Some of the important deities/spirits are mentioned below :

- (I) TATARA-RABUGA is the chief deity in the Garo Pantheon and it was at his command that the earth was created by NOSTU-NOPANTU and MACHI, two deities subordinate to him. TATARA-RABUGA is also the presiding deity of all kinds of fever including Kalazar. For his appeasement expensive sacrifice of animals is necessary.

- (II) SALJONG is sun-god according to the Garo pantheon. It is this god who gives everything to mankind. WANGALA, the greatest harvesting festival of the Garos, is celebrated in his honour.
- (III) NOSTU-NOPANTU and MACHI are two spirits subordinate to TATARA-RABUGA who created the earth. These two spirits are harmless.
- (IV) CHORABUDI is the deity who protects the crops.
- (V) GOERA is the god of lightening and thunder.
- (VI) KALKAME is a benevolent god responsible for the safety of human beings from all kinds of dangers arising from wild animals and diseases. He is also considered to be a brother of GOERA.
- (VII) SUSIME is the goddess of richness.

For the appeasement of these deities, animals and birds are essential. The only deities who do not demand any sacrifice are NOSTU-NOPANTU and MACHI.

The Garos believe in life hereafter and rebirth. The form of rebirth is determined by the acts that a man performs during his life-time in this world. A serious sin committed by a man might lead to his rebirth in this earth in the form of an insect or a plant. A virtuous man or woman on the other hand is most likely to be reborn in the same MACHONG. It is considered to be the highest form of reward for a virtuous man or a woman.

Another very interesting fact about the traditional religion of the Garos is their belief in the existence of a Supreme-Being. But neither do they worship it nor do they sacrifice any animals or birds for its appeasement.

10. ECONOMIC LIFE :

Like the other tribes of Assam, the Garos too depend on agriculture for their livelihood. Besides paddy, they also

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9. RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS :

Although it is a fact that almost all Garo families living within the territorial jurisdiction of Assam, have accepted Christianity, none-the-less, they still remember their traditional religious beliefs and practices. Their conversion to Christianity does not prevent them from practising some of the traditional religious rites according to the needs of the hour.

According to their traditional religious beliefs there is a Supreme Being and there are also numerous deities-benevolent as well as malevolent. These deities/spirits pervade everywhere. They exist in the sky, on earth, in water, in the hills and mountains, caves, and so on.

Each of the deities/spirits has an assigned role to play just like the division of labour in the human society. Some of the important deities/spirits are mentioned below :

- (I) TATARA-RABUGA is the chief deity in the Garo Pantheon and it was at his command that the earth was created by NOSTU-NOPANTU and MACHI, two deities subordinate to him. TATARA-RABUGA is also the presiding deity of all kinds of fever including Kalazar. For his appeasement expensive sacrifice of animals is necessary.

- (II) SALJONG is sun-god according to the Garo pantheon. It is this god who gives everything to mankind. WANGALA, the greatest harvesting festival of the Garos, is celebrated in his honour.
- (III) NOSTU-NOPANTU and MACHI are two spirits subordinate to TATARA-RABUGA who created the earth. These two spirits are harmless.
- (IV) CHORABUDI is the deity who protects the crops.
- (V) GOERA is the god of lightening and thunder.
- (VI) KALKAME is a benevolent god responsible for the safety of human beings from all kinds of dangers arising from wild animals and diseases. He is also considered to be a brother of GOERA.

- (VII) SUSIME is the goddess of richness.

For the appeasement of these deities, animals and birds are essential. The only deities who do not demand any sacrifice are NOSTU-NOPANTU and MACHI.

The Garos believe in life hereafter and rebirth. The form of rebirth is determined by the acts that a man performs during his life-time in this world. A serious sin committed by a man might lead to his rebirth in this earth in the form of an insect or a plant. A virtuous man or woman on the other hand is most likely to be reborn in the same MACHONG. It is considered to be the highest form of reward for a virtuous man or a woman.

Another very interesting fact about the traditional religion of the Garos is their belief in the existence of a Supreme-Being. But neither do they worship it nor do they sacrifice any animals or birds for its appeasement.

10. ECONOMIC LIFE :

Like the other tribes of Assam, the Garos too depend on agriculture for their livelihood. Besides paddy, they also

cultivate maize and cash crops. They are very good horticulturists and they raise pineapples in large quantities. There are many progressive cultivators among them. Some of them have their own tractors, power-tillers and pump sets for irrigation purpose.

The Garos also rear cattle, pigs and poultry. Like the other tribes of Assam weaving is a household industry and most of their domestic requirements of clothes are met from their family looms. Sericulture, mainly Endi, is also an important subsidiary occupation for them.

The Garos are a laborious people. Their main avenues of regular employment are the police battalions and army.

11. CULTURAL LIFE :

(a) Language :

The Garos have a rich culture and their cultural traits are manifested through their fairs and festivals, dances and music, folk literature, dresses and ornaments, etc.

Their language is called Garo and according to G.A. Grierson it is one of the languages of the Bodo Group of the Tibeto Burman family.¹⁶

(b) Dance and Music :

Singing and dancing are integral parts of the cultural life of the Garos. Both men and women take part in dancing and singing in accompaniment of musical instruments. There are various occasions like the installation of a new NOKMA (village headman), ceremonies observed for the dead, annual worship at the sacrificial stone, entering into a newly constructed house by a newly-wed couple, inauguration of a newly constructed bachelors' dormitory, etc. For each occasion the style of dances performed shows varieties. But the most lively dances performed by the Garos are during the performance of their harvesting festival called WAMGLA other-

16. Grierson, G.A., Linguistic Survey of India, Vol-III, Part-II, Tibeto-Burman Family, Reprint 1967, Patna, pp-86-94.

wise known as the festival of hundred drums. It is, in fact a feast for the eyes.

The number of musical instruments are only a few. They use three types of drums. The longer one called DAMA is about 1.5 to 1.8 metres in length. The shorter one, bigger in diameter but shorter in length, is called KRAM. This is, of course, used only in the performance of funeral ceremonies and religious ceremonies. They also use a small drum called NADID. All the three drums are made of wood covered by cow hides at both ends. They also use different kinds of wind instruments and cymbals of various sizes. They, however, do not use any string instruments.

(c) Food habits :

Like the other tribes of the North-East India, rice is the staple food of the Garos. Rice is generally cooked in earthen pots and sometimes in bamboo tubes. In addition to rice they also eat maize, millet and tapioca roots occasionally. Dried fish called NAKAM is one of the favourite delicacies. They eat fleshes of almost all kinds of animals except that of tigers and almost all kinds of birds. Another delicacy for them is the curry prepared from tender bamboo shoots. Oil or ghee is never used by them for cooking purpose. They also use in curries a kind of potash obtained from ashes by burning dried plaintain stems.

Rice-beer is the most favourite drink for the Garos. They rather use it as a kind of nutritious food and the young ones have a taste of it from the time of their mothers use to carry them on their back. But those who have accepted Christianity, disfavoured drinking of rice-beer.

(d) Weapons :

The Garos were once a warrior tribe. Their indigenous weapons used in battles were of course limited in number. They used a two-edged sword called MILAM which was made of one piece of iron from the hilt to the point.

They had two kinds of shields—viz. (I) one made of wood is called SEPI and the other (II) made of bear skin or cowhide is called DANIL. Another commonly used weapon is spear.

(e) Dresses and Ornaments :

The Garos have their own traditional dresses and ornaments. Their dresses are, of course, not too many.

The traditional attire of a man is a strip of woven cloth measuring about two metres in length and 15 cm in breadth. In the bygone days rows of white beads or cowries were used along the end of the flap as a part of decoration of the cloth. The men also use turbans and these are wrapped round the heads leaving the top of the heads bare. The NOKMAS or the village chief on important occasions use special turbans made of Assamese silk (mulberry).

Women also do not use too many dresses. Their main attire consists of a piece of cloth measuring about 46 cm in length and 36 cm in breadth. This piece of cloth is tied around the waist leaving the entire region from the thigh to the foot exposed. In the past they kept the upper part of the body exposed without using any cloth. But now a days a blouse is used to cover the upper part of the body. The educated girls are very much conscious about it. Like men the women also use turbans keeping the top of the head bare. During the winter season, the women also use shawls to cover the upper part of their body.

The Garos, both men and women, are fond of ornaments. There are ornaments which are exclusively used by women and there are also ornaments which are used by men and women alike.

Their traditional ornaments are mentioned below :

(I) NADONGBINR SISHA :

It is a kind of ear-ring made of brass worn in the ear-lobe.

(II) NADIRONG :

It is a brass-made ring worn in the upper part of the ear.

(III) NATAPSI :

It is a string of beads worn in the upper part of the ear.

(IV) JAKSAN :

In Garo the bangles are called JAKSAN. These are made of silver as well brass.

(V) RIPOK :

It is a kind of necklace made of long beads. Some RIPOKS are made of brass or silver also. But the latter varieties are used on special occasions only.

(VI) JAKSIL :

It is an iron made elbow ring put on by rich men on special occasions and ceremonies.

(VII) SENG'KI :

It is a waist band made on several rows of conch shells put on only by women.

(VIII) PILNE :

It is a kind of head ornament used exclusively by women during the dance performances.

During the dance performances both men and women use a kind of head gear which is decorated with rows of beads in which the feathers of horn-bill are fixed vertically.

It has been observed that the young generation prefers to put on modern dresses only. The educated ones specially, do not show any preference for the traditional dresses and ornaments except during celebration of festivals and ceremonies.

BACHELORS' DORMITORY :

The bachelors' dormitory, called NOKPANTE, is a very important traditional institution among the Garos. As a rule, each village should have a NOKPANTE. But sometimes, depending on the number of families belonging to each clan, a village might have two or three dormitories - each clan having one bachelors' dormitory. The NOKPANTE serves as an institution of informal education in the sense that the members of a dormitory are trained in different traditional arts and crafts of the Garo society. Trainings were imparted to them in singing, dancing, playing of musical instruments, use of weapons, etc. Entering of women to a NOKPANTE is a taboo. All the bachelors of the village are required to sleep at the dormitory at night.

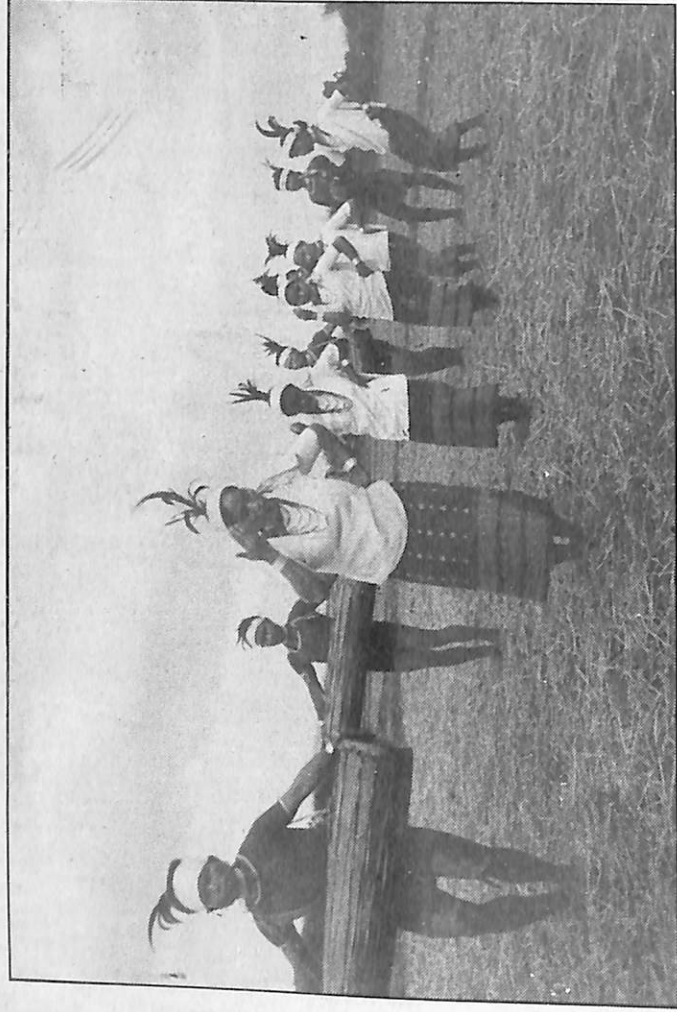
However, in the present days' context, the bachelors' dormitory has less relevance in the sense that the school and college going boys can hardly afford to spend their nights in the dormitory. Dormitory is not a place for homeworks for their studies. This institution, as such, is gradually decaying although its spirit still pervades.

CONCLUSION :

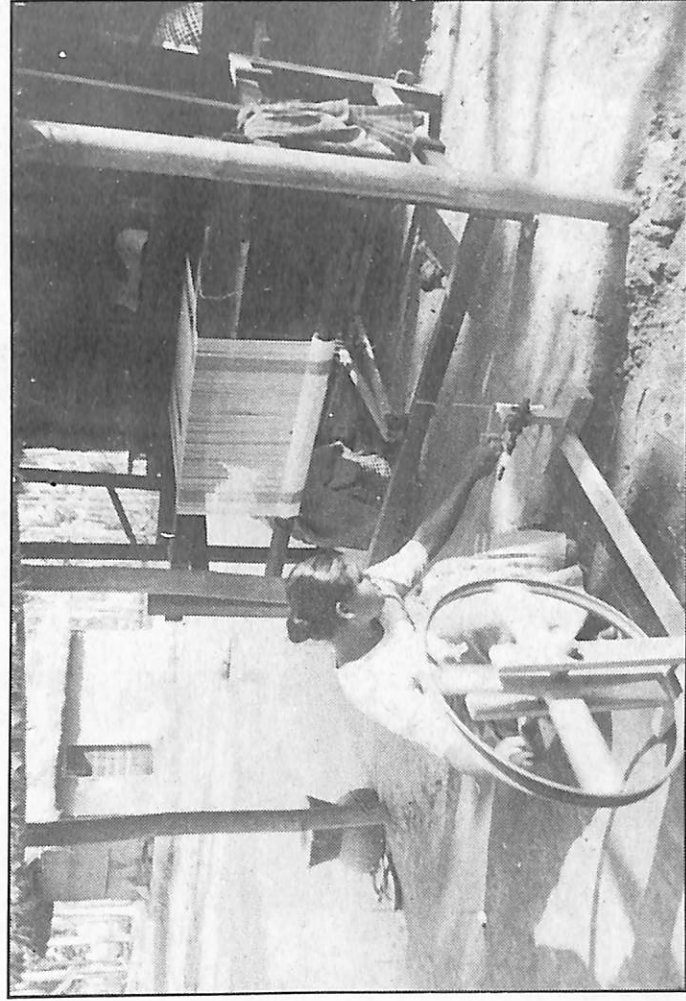
Like other tribal societies, the Garo society has also been subject to social change and transformation. The spread of modern education, the developmental processes that are inherent in different five year plans and their implementation in the different spheres of science and technology areas specially in the sphere of agriculture and so on have made the Garo society adaptable to changes. Political consciousness has given rise to a new set of leadership. But fortunately in the Garo society the conflicts between the traditional leadership and modern leadership have not been significant. There is rather a harmonious relationship between the two. The impact of modernism has transformed the Garo society to a considerable extent. But nevertheless, it has not affected the core culture of the Garos.



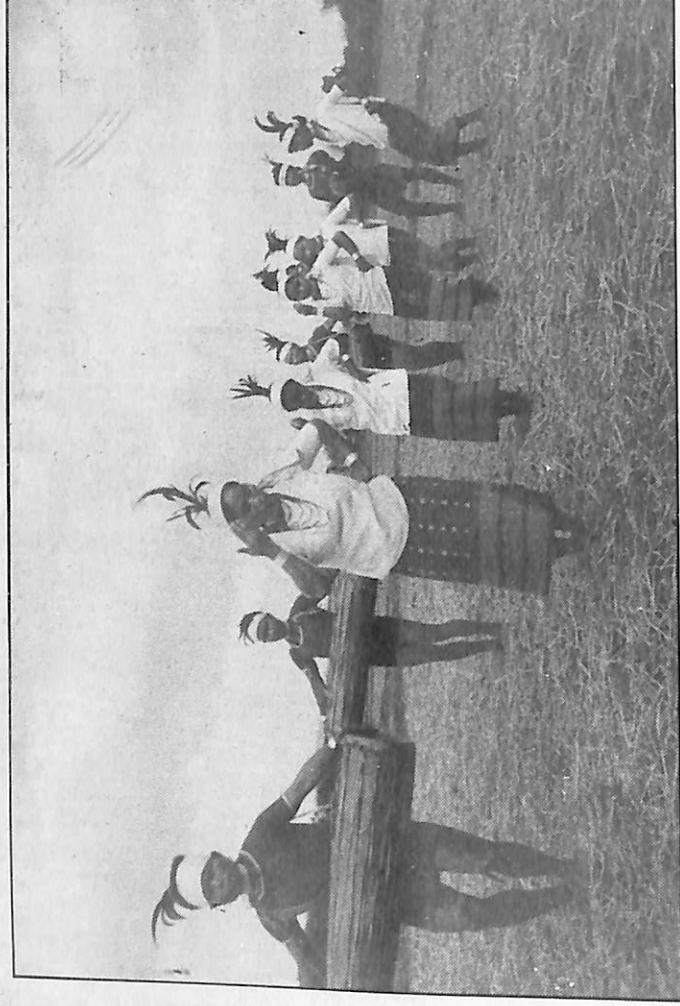
Rice pounding in traditional Garo way.



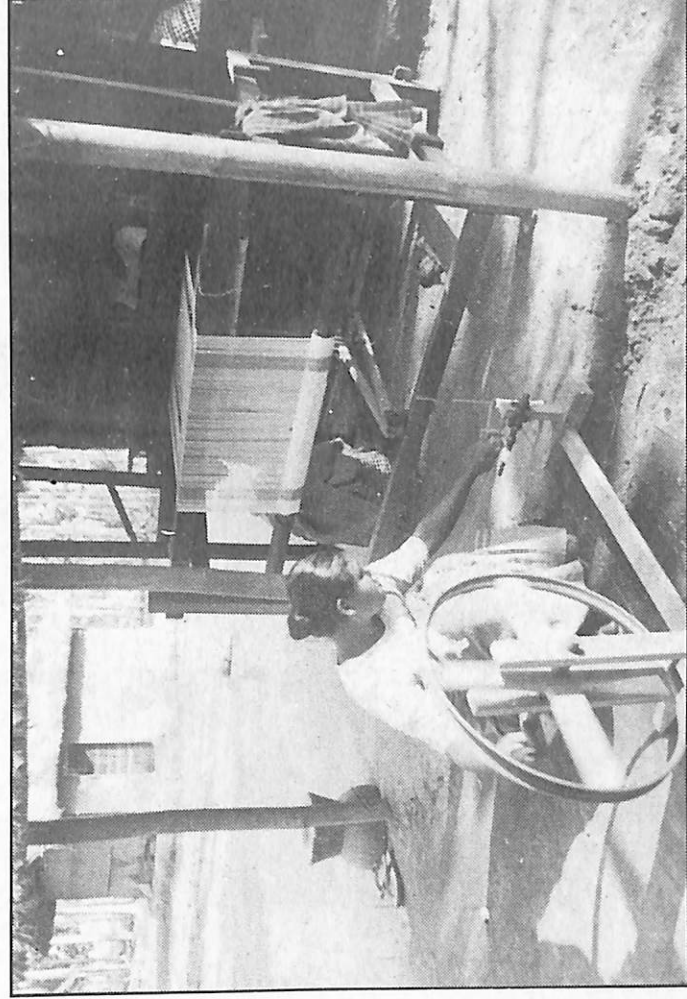
Warengal dance performed by Garo youths.



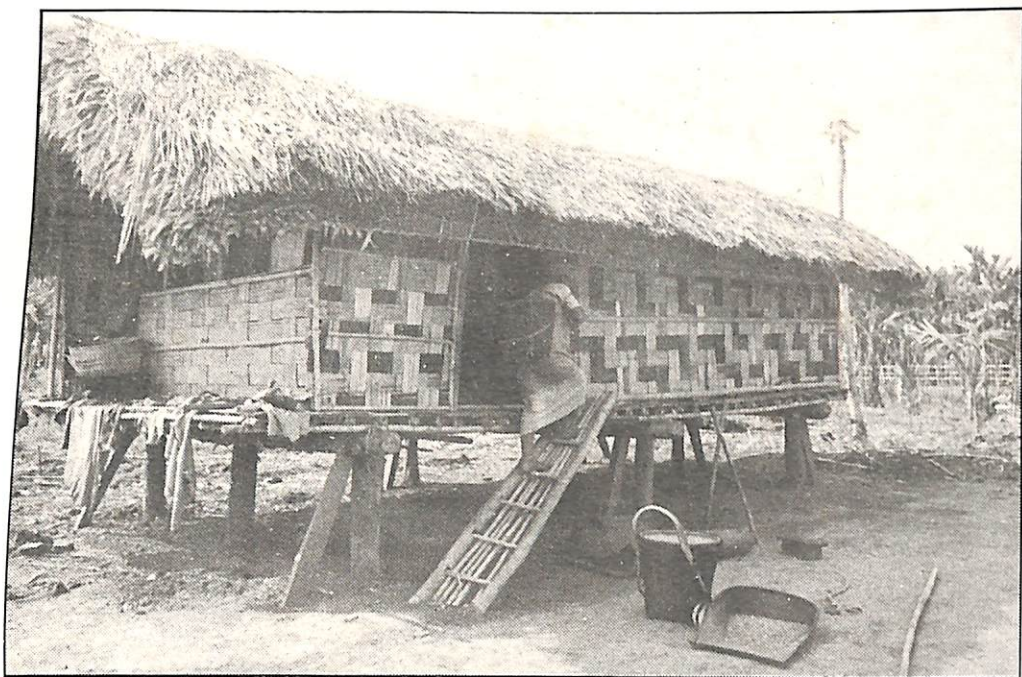
Garo maidens busy in weaving activities.



Warengal dance performed by Garo youths.



Garo maidens busy in weaving activities.



A traditional Garo House.

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— X —

THE HAJONGS

1. INTRODUCTION

The Hajongs are one of the numerically small tribal communities of Assam. They are scheduled as a tribe in the two autonomous hill districts, viz., Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills. While the major portion of the Hajong population live in the Garo Hills of Meghalaya, a small number of them live in Assam. Apart from the two hill districts, there are a good number of Hajong villages scattered over the plains of Assam in the Brahmaputra valley. In the plains districts of Assam, their main concentration is, however, confined to the Lakhimpur area and the southern region bordering Meghalaya in the South Salmara subdivision of Goalpara district. A limited number of Hajong families are at present inhabitants of Arunachal Pradesh also. Prior to independence of India there were several Hajong settlements in Mymensing and Sylhet districts of present Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan) But the partition of the country had resulted in migration of these people to then undivided Assam.

There has not been any agreed opinion in regard to the place where the Hajongs originally inhabited. According to their own traditional belief, they originally inhabited 'Has Paragana' or in Hajo area of present Nalbari district. Due to some historical reasons they were compelled to leave Hajo area and they fled to Garo Hills from where they spread to Mymensing, Rajshahi, Sylhet, etc, places of the Bengal.¹

1. Barman, Matilal, Hajong Samaj Aru Sanskriti (in Assamese) in Golden Jubilee Souvenir of Uttar-Pub Bharat Hajong Unnayan Samiti, Lakhimpur, 1987, Page-38.

Whatever might be their original place of habitation, it could conclusively be said that the Hajongs like the other tribes of North-East, had been living in this part of the country including some areas of present Bangladesh, which was once an integral part of India, from time immemorial although due to various socio-political, historical and economic reasons they had migrated within a specific area either voluntarily or out of compulsion.

Why the members of this particular community are called 'Hajong', the expressed opinions of the scholars belonging to this community differ, not to speak of others.

According to Mr. Paresh Hajong, a reputed writer hailing from this community, the Hajongs, as the traditions say, are the descendants of Kartayabirjarjun, one of the greatest Khasatriya kings of the Mahabharata era. The great saint Parasuram who vowed to annihilate all the Khasatriyas from the earth primarily for taking revenge on king Kartayabirjarjun who was responsible for killing his father Jamadagni ultimately had killed the king in the process. His queen Swarupa Devi was pregnant at that time. The queen fled away from the capital and took refuge in the hermitage of the sage Kamdatta in ancient Kamrup. She gave birth to a son who came to be known as Padangsku who occupied the ancient Hajo township including the temple there. His descendants included Kumar Bhaskar Barman also according to Mr. Paresh Hajong. During the last king of this dynasty, namely, Bharat Barman, the Hajo township was destroyed and about twelve thousand people fled away to the Garo Hills and the place in the Garo Hills where they established their first settlement was called Hajari. From Hajari they spread over to different areas. These people coined a new name for them with the term Haj corresponding to their place of origin Hajo. And in course of time 'Haj' became Hajong.²

2. Hajong, Paresh, Hajong Janajati Janma Rahashya, an Article in Assamese, Published in Janaskikhya, Page 11-12.

This traditional anecdote assumes that the Hajongs were the descendants of the king Kumar Bhaskar Barman and the term Hajong is derived from the term 'Haj' which refers to the inhabitants of the ancient township of Hajo.

Mr. Ratan Kumar Rai Hajong is of the opinion that the term Hajong is derived from 'Harajan' which means a section of the people who had accepted a new occupation by abandoning the traditional one. According to him 'Ha' means to express sorrow and 'Jan' means people. The Hajongs were once a part of larger community. In course of time they broke away from the greater community and formed a separate entity by accepting a new occupation.³

But Mr. Ratan Kumar Rai Hajong has not indicated from which greater community the Hajongs had broken away. Secondly no mention has been made about the traditional occupation of the larger community of which the Hajongs were one of the sections. Thirdly, he has also not mentioned the new occupation accepted by the members of the Hajong community after breaking away from the larger group and establishing themselves as a separate ethnic group.

Some other scholars believe that the term Hajong is derived from 'Hajar' or 'Hajari' which was used in counting the number of soldiers. But we do not find any documentary proof to support this version since the Hajongs were never considered to be a martial tribe or warrior tribe whose members were solely dependent on soldiership for their maintenance.

A few scholars, on the other hand, are of the opinion that the word Hajong is derived from the Kachari work 'Haju' which literally means the people who live in high hills.

Majority of the scholars, however, are of the opinion that the word 'Hajong' originates from Garo word 'Ha-Jong'.

3. Rai Hajong, Ratan Kumar., Hajong Samaj Ati Samikhyaa-an article in Assamese in Payobhara, Vol. 13, No.20, 16-31 December, 1982, page. 16.

In Garo 'Ha' means land and 'Jong' means ants or worms. Thus Hajong literally means land-ants or worms. But here 'ants' or 'worms' should not be regarded in its literal meaning. Here the term 'Jong', meaning 'ants' or 'worms' refers to people who are expert in ploughing⁴. Since the Hajongs depend mainly on agriculture with plough cultivation, hence the reference. The term 'Jong', therefore, should not be treated as derogatory equalizing a section of the people with ants or worms.

4. RACIAL AFFINITY :

About the racial affinity of the Hajongs, there has been a lot of confusions and it is very difficult to say what is precisely their racial affinity.

Colonel Dalton regards them as one of the branches of the Kacharis. To quote in his own words—"The Rabha and Hajongs of the Gawalparah District are branches of the Kachari race and connected with the Garos".⁵ Dalton has also mentioned further—"The Hajongs appear to be identical with Hazai Kacharis of North Cachar...."⁶

Colonel Dalton, of course, does not mention in what way the Hajongs and the Hozais of the North Cachar Hills are identical. Hojai or Hojaisa is one of forty male clans of the Dimasa Kacharis called 'Semphong'. In their material culture we do not find any identical features between the members of Hojaisa clan of the Dimasa Kacharis and the Hajongs. Colonel Dalton has used the verb 'appear' in his statement leaving enough scope for further probe in this respect.

4. Hajong, Biresh Chandra., Uttar Purbanchal at Hajong Janagosthir Abhumuki, an article in Assamese in the Souvenir published on the occasion of the 3rd Annual Session of All Assam Hills Tribal Council, Guwahati, 1989, page-5.
5. Dalton, E.T., Tribal History of Eastern India, Reprinted, New Delhi, 1978, page-87.
6. Ibid-page-88.

In the Census Report of 1891 while the Hajongs have been considered as a separate tribal ethnic group, their racial affinity to the Garos and the Kacharis has also been referred to.⁷

It is, however, very much doubtful when the two communities who are poles apart from the point of view of lineage (while the Garos are matrilineal the Hajongs are patrilineal) could have close racial affinity apart from the fact that in other socio-cultural and religious aspects also there are differences rather than likeness between the Garos and the Hajongs. Since the Hajongs and the Garos have been living in close proximity from time immemorial, one can easily understand why some scholars try to establish racial affinity between two ethnic groups.

Mr. L.A. Waddel on the other hand regards the Hajongs as the primitive Kachari of the hilly tracts.⁸

The Hajongs like to introduce themselves as Kshatriyas.⁹ Neither the Garos nor the Kacharis consider themselves as such.

Whatever might be their racial affinity, it is certain that like the other tribes of North-East India, the Hajongs are also Mongoloids. With the successive hordes of the different ethnic groups, the Hajongs perhaps entered into this part of the country in the long past and moved towards south-east and finally settled in the Garo Hills and adjoining areas which are now a part of present Bangladesh.

While the Hajong male members have dark-tan complexion, the women are fair complexioned with long uncut hair. The average height of a man is about 1.60 metres

while that of a female it is about 1.40 metres. They have round face and the size of their eyes is not so small like some of the tribal communities of the North-East. Physically they are strong and stout and capable of hard labour and physical strain.

3. DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS :

Numerically the Hajong population in Assam is very small. It has already been mentioned in the Introduction that the Hajongs are a scheduled tribe in the two autonomous hill districts of Assam only. Their population, as per 1971 Census, in the two autonomous districts of Assam is 386 out of which there are 227 males and 159 females.¹⁰ This population figure does not, however, include the Hajongs inhabiting the plains districts of Assam. The Hajongs constitute 0.0026 per cent of the total population of Assam, 0.0240 per cent of the total tribal population of Assam and 0.146 per cent of the total Hill tribal population of Assam as per 1971 Census. Their sex ratio is 700 females per 1000 males. From the point of view of literacy, the Hajongs are lagging far behind. As per 1971 Census, their percentage of literacy was 10.88 only as against the State percentage of literacy of 28.72. The level of literacy between the males and females among the Hajongs is 14.98 and 5.03 respectively as against 37.19 per cent for males and 19.27 per cent for females for the State of Assam. Thus the level of female literacy is found to be almost one third of that of the males.

4. CLANS :

A clan is called NIKNI in Hajong. But it is a matter of great surprise to observe that nobody actually knows as to the precise number of clans the Hajongs have at present.

10. 1981 Census could not be conducted in Assam due to foreign nationals' agitation.

7. Majumdar, Dr. D.N., *Hinduized Communities of Western Meghalaya in Garo Hills and the People* (Ed), L.S. Gassah, Guwahati 1984, Page-151.

8. Waddel, L.A., *the Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley*, Reprinted, Delhi, 1975, Page-4.

9. Rai Hajong, Ratan Kumar, *Hajong Samaj—Ati Samikhya*, an article in Assamese in *Payobhara*, December 16-31, 1982, New Delhi, Page-17.

According to some authorities they have 21 clans.¹¹ But their names are neither available nor known. During my field investigation I was given to understand that they had only 7 clans. But when their names were asked, the people simply expressed their inability to memorise all of them except three, namely, Chondi, Kendagaiya and Baliati. One fact is, of course, certain that whatever clans the Hajongs have at present these are all patrilineal. These clans being exogamous, only at the time of marriage negotiations the concerned families try to trace their clans from oblivion.

Dr. D. N. Majumdar believes that the Hajongs had once matrilineal clans also. He is of the opinion that due to the adoption of the practice of prohibition of marriage between the kins of both the paternal and the maternal lines, the matrilineal clan organization was perhaps lost sight of long back.¹²

5. FAMILY STRUCTURE :

The Hajongs have a patrilineal family structure and the line of descent is traced through the father only. The father is the head of the family and in all important matters concerning the family his decisions are final. At the death of the father the sons inherit the property. As per their customary law the property of a man having no male issue will be inherited by his nearest male kin and not by his daughter at his death. But this customary law is found to have been relaxed and a daughter might inherit her father's property at his death if he is sonless. This new phenomenon has been observed among the educated sections of the

11. Hajong, Paresh Chandra., Gotra Ba Nikni, an article in Hajong language published in Smritigrantha, Uttar Pub Bharat Hajong Unnayan Samity, Lakhimpur, 1987, page-5

12. Majumdar, Dr. D.N., Hinduized Communities of Western Meghalaya in the book - Garo Hills Land and the People (Ed), L.S. Gassah, New Delhi, 1984, page-159.

people. This is perhaps due to their living in close proximity with the Bengali people for centuries together.

6. MARRIAGE :

The Hajongs, in the matter of marriage, follow the clan exogamy fully. In other words no marriage can take place between a boy and a girl belonging to the same clan since they are considered to be brother and sister. They are also very much orthodox regarding marriage matters in the sense that no one is allowed to marry outside his or her community. Violation of this customary law automatically leads to ex-communication from the Hajong society.¹³ But owing to unavoidable circumstances sometimes, the erring couple has to be inducted into the Hajong society with due atonement followed by fine in cash and providing a feast to the people of the concerned village. Since such a process is extremely expensive, the Hajong youths generally refrain from inter-community marriages.

Marriage system in the Hajong society has some important aspects. These are as follows :

(a) KHALTI OR BRIDE PRICE :

Like other tribal societies the Hajongs do not have any dowry system. However the parents or guardians of the girl are to be paid a nominal amount in cash as a bride price which is called KHALTI in Hajong. But now-a-days payment of bride price has been replaced by payment of something to the bridegroom by the parents of the bride provided the boy has a high demand in the marriage market. That is why, for the poor Hajong families to give their daughters in marriage has become a difficult problem.¹⁴ It would not be out of place to mention that in the Dimas society the bride price is called KALTI.

13. Hajong, Paresh Chandra., Hajong Bia Aru Bibah Padhati, an article in Assamese published in Danik Asom, 21st July, 1985.

14. Ibid.

(b) GHAR JANGOI :

The Hajongs do not have the system of keeping the son-in-law at the residence of his in-laws, called GHAR JANGOI, after the marriage. However, there are exceptions also. It is observed that some rich families are found to have kept their son-in-laws in their residences after marriage.

(c) MONOGAMY :

From the point of view of marriage the Hajongs are monogamous. Marrying more than one wife is rather a taboo. A man having no issues does not go for marrying a second wife even if his wife may permit him to do so. In the Hajong society, therefore, to find a man marrying a second wife, while his first wife is living, is very very rare.

(d) DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE :

In the Hajong society divorce is very rare. Divorce is allowed by the society in exceptional cases only. A widow or a divorcee can remarry with the consent of the village elders and in such marriages, rituals are not performed. The villagers are to be entertained with a simple feast by the couple in the event of solemnizing such a marriage.

(e) ABSENCE OF CHILD MARRIAGE :

System of child marriage is completely absent in the Hajong society. While the marriageable age for an eligible boy is 25 years and above, for an eligible girl, it is 16 years and above.

There are three types of marriages that are found to be prevalent in the Hajong society. They are- (1) Negotiated marriage called SUBHA VIVAH

(2) Marriage between a widower and a widow or a divorcee called HANGO

(3) Marriage by elopement called DAI PARA

Negotiated marriages are generally settled through a go-between called JASU. As soon as the marriage is settled a party from the boy's village attends a ritual called PAN-SINI or GUA KHOWA at the residence of the girl in presence of the villagers and the family members. The boy's party entertains them with tea and bettle nut and also offers ornaments, clothes, oil, etc. meant for the bride. The actual marriage ceremony which continues for two days takes place at an auspicious date taking into consideration of the convenience of both the families.

The marriage takes place at the boy's residence only. The first day of the marriage is called BHOR BIA in which the boy and the girl exchange rings and the second day of the marriage is called BASI/BAHI Bia. The Hajongs have their own community priest called Adhikari. It is the Adhikari who performs the marriage rituals in presence of all the people of the village and the bridegroom party. Now-a-days, of course, there appears to be a tendency among the well-to-do families of the Hajongs to perform the marriage ceremony in the Vedic way by requisitioning the services of the Hindu Brahmins as priests.

Prior to the celebration of the marriage a friend called MITAR is to be selected for the bridegroom who acts as a witness in the performance of the marriage and he remains a life long friend of the married couple. Secondly the services of an elderly couple-a husband and a wife - are also required to serve as 'god-father' and 'god-mother' in the marriage performed in the traditional way. As soon as the marriage

ceremony is over, the god-father and the god-mother take the newly-married couple to the room meant for the couple. The boy and the girl regard their god-father and god-mother as if they were their own parents.

At the end of the marriage the bride and the bridegroom play a game of dice. The bridegroom faining defeat tries to flee from the marriage pandel by brandishing a sword. But the bride persuades him not to go and he abides by her request.

In the Hajong marriage the services of five women are very much essential. But they must not be widow as well as childless. These five women help the bride and the bridegroom in all matters concerning the performance of the marriage.

The most interesting episode in a Hajong marriage is, perhaps, the continuous singing of marriage songs in the accompaniment of musical instruments by a party of male singers only whom they call GEETAL or GEETALU. It would be worthwhile to mention that the Hajong women never sing marriage songs.

A Hajong marriage is a very costly affair. Not only the relatives of the two sides—one from the boy and the other from the girl—but also all the people of the village are to be invited to the marriage ceremony. From the beginning to the end of the marriage celebration all the invitees from the children to the aged persons are to be entertained with food and drinks.

In the second type of marriage, viz. marriage between a widower and a widow or a divorce, ritualistic performances are too few. Even singing of marriage song with musical instruments is also a taboo in such a marriage. Although such a marriage is performed in the traditional way, the people are not entertained with lavish food and drink. Throwing a simple feast or a tea-party is sufficient on such an occasion.

So far the marriage affairs are concerned the Hajongs are very orthodox and hence the third type of marriage,

viz. marriage by elopment is totally disfavoured by the society. In case of elopment the boy and the girl are kept aloof from the society till they pay the fine imposed on them by the village elders or agreeable to bear the punishments that might be decided by the society in general and people of the two concerned villages in particular. Because of such severe stricture by the society, marriages by elopment are few and far between.

7. BIRTH :

When a pregnant woman expects her baby, a separate room for the birth of the child is kept ready and it is in this room in presence of the local midwife the delivery takes place. A bed specially prepared for the purpose of delivery with thatch is used by the woman and under it an iron implement is kept so that neither the mother nor the new-born child could be harmed by any evil spirit. After birth a drop of honey is poured into the tongue of the child. Prior to this, the tongue of the child is cleansed with the tip of hair of the mother.

The period of segregation of the mother and the baby depends on sex. In case of a male child the segregation period is for a week and for a female child it is for five days. After the purification ceremony the blessings of the village elders are sought.

The name-giving ceremony, of course, takes place at a much later date. On this occasion the villagers are entertained with a feast quality of which depends on the status of the family in the society. When the child grows up and attains about five years the Adhikari, the traditional headman of the village and village priest, initiates the child to the Hajong society by reciting some Mantras in his or her ears. Without this ceremony the child, when comes of ages, cannot enter into wed-lock.

8. DEATH :

The Hajongs at present profess Hinduism and as such all the rituals connected with death of a person are per-

formed in the Hindu way with some variations which can distinctively be distinguished. The Hajongs like the other Hindus believe in the immortality of the souls, life hereafter, rebirth, heaven and hell. Their performance of rituals connected with death is dependent on these beliefs.

After death, the dead body is brought near a Tulsi (Basil) plant. It is washed with a turmaric paste. With a view to preventing entry of any evil or malevolent spirit, the thumbs of both hands are tied together with a white thread. The dead body is then taken to the cremation ground. The body is burnt in a funeral pyre. A few charred bones are collected and brought home. These are buried under the Tulsi (Basil) plant. Besides offering some food items and a few coins at the cremation site, two bamboo poles are also fixed. These two poles are then tied together with a white thread so that the spirit of the deceased can travel to the other world with ease.

Every evening earthen lights are lighted and incense is burnt at the site where the charred bones are buried in the courtyard near the Tulsi (Basil) plant. In the name of the deceased a share from the vegetarian meal prepared by the son or near male relative who has lit the funeral pyre has also to be offered and these rituals would continue till the performance of the Sradha ceremony or the death ceremony which is observed on 11th or 13th day. On the 10th or 12th day a ritual called GHATKAMANI is required to be performed on the bank of the nearest river. On the river bank special food is prepared by the villagers for the deceased in an earthen pot. The sons of the deceased after shaving their heads take a holy dip in the river and purify themselves.

The actual Sardha or death ceremony is observed on the 11th or 13th day, as has been mentioned earlier, in the Hindu way. The Sardha ceremony formally comes to an end with the entertainment of the relatives of the deceased and the villagers with a feast. One important

aspect that can be observed in the performance of the death ceremony by the Hajongs is the absence of the use of wine—whether in the form of rice-beer or other kind. It may be mentioned that the use of rice-beer in the performance of the death ceremony is a must for those tribal societies who are still maintaining their traditional religious practices. The absence of the use of rice-beer by the Hajongs on this occasion, therefore, can be ascribed to the performance of the death ceremony almost in the Hindu way.

The sons of the deceased observe a few taboos for one year from the death of their father or mother. In the event of the death of the father, the sons must not use umbrella, eat banana, eat meals in others' houses and they must not sit on the seats made from planks at the time of taking their food during one year period. In the event of the death of the mother, the sons must not take milk either of cow, buffalo or of goat, for a period of one year from the date of the death of their mother.

9. RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

It cannot precisely be said if the Hajongs were also animists like most of the tribal communities of the North-East India in the by-gone-days. They, however, now consider themselves to be Hindus, although some of the traditional religious practices are still found to be prevalent. Hence the religion professed by them at present can be said to be Hinduism combined with their traditional religious practices.

The Hajongs are mostly Saktas although a few of them are found to be Vaishnavas also. They worship various gods and goddesses some of which are the Hindu ones and some others belonging to their own traditional belief. They have a great regard for the Tulsi (Basil) plant. In every household it is planted in the eastern side and in the evening devotional songs specially by women are

sung near the plant by the womenfolk of the house by lighting earthen lamps and burning incense. The Hajongs believe in various evil spirits like JARANG DEO, MAC-HANG DEO, ZUKHINI, DAINI, MAILA, BHUT, etc. The Hajongs also worship snakes and the snake goddess Manasa also called Padma is worshipped every year on the last day of the month of Shravana by sacrificing white ducks, goats, tortoise, etc.

The Hajongs perform various Pujas in a year where the village priest called ADHIKARI has to play a very important role. Some of the important Pujas performed by the Hajongs are described below briefly.

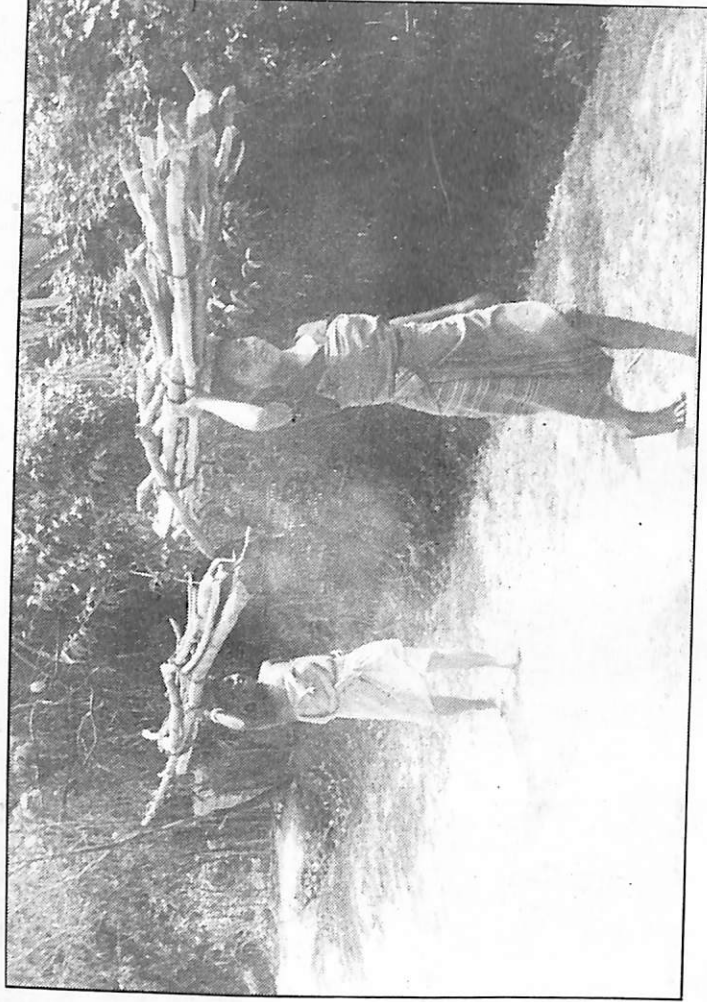
BASH PUJA

Bash Puja or the worshipping bamboo is one of the important religious ceremonies performed by the Hajongs. It is held in the month of Baisag, the first month of an Assamese year. Three newly cut bamboos are used in the performance of this Puja which continues for three days. The three bamboos are cut by an assemblage of villagers from a particular grove. After decorating them with white or red cloths, the bamboos are fixed on the ground and then worshipped. The two main bamboos represent two gods. But who are the two gods? There are divergent opinions. According to some, the two bamboos represent Madan and Gopal (Krishna) while according to some others, they represent Siva and Parvati. A few scholars regard this Bash Puja as a kind of worship to Indra, the king of gods. Majority, however, believe that it is a kind of sex-worshipping and the two main bamboos actually represent Madan-Kam, the sex god.

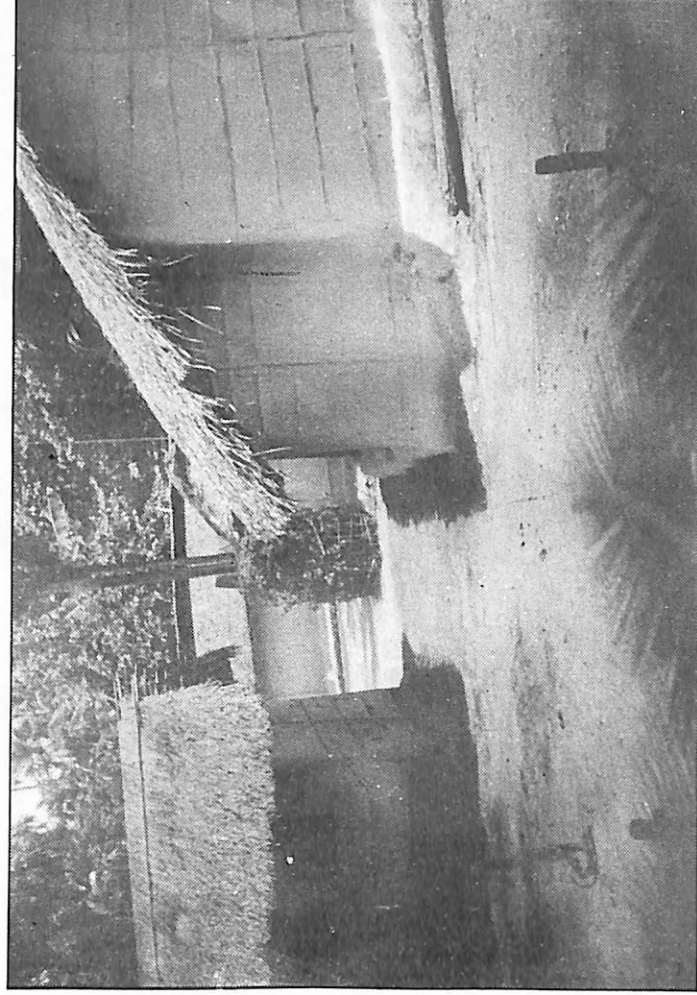
The last opinion seems to be more logical because of the fact that during the entire period of Bash Puja continuing for three days, the young boys dance in rhythms in the tunes of the musical instruments and the songs sung by the GEETALS or the professional singers. While the first few songs are devoted to various gods and



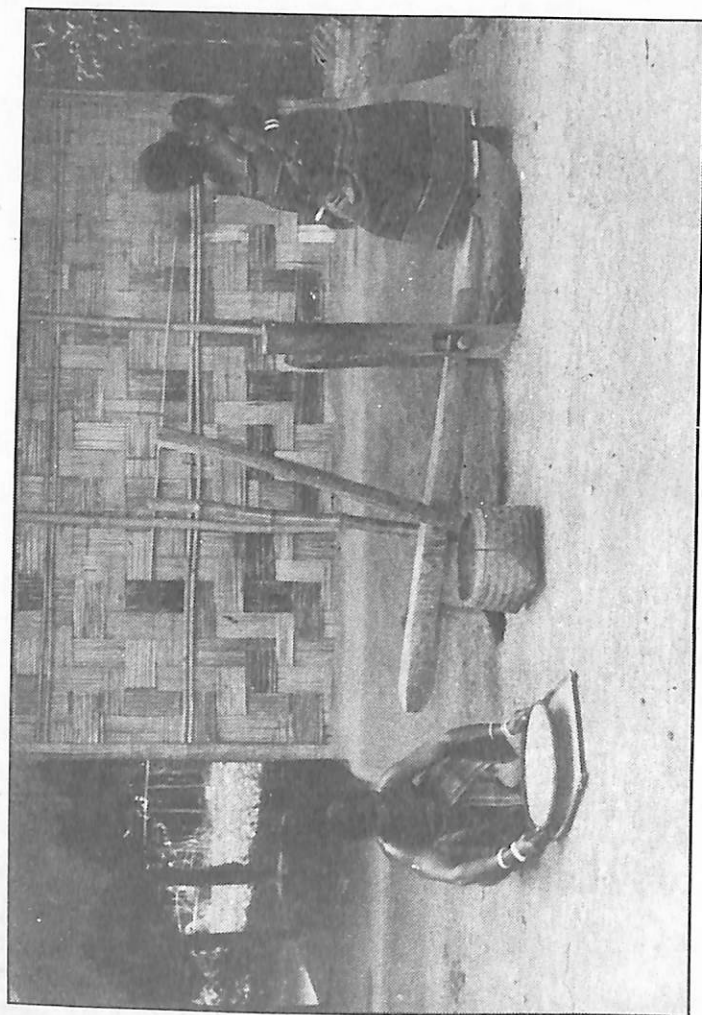
Two Hajong women in their traditional costumes and ornaments.



Hajong women returning from the jungle with headload of firewood.



Housing pattern of a Hajong village.



Pounding of rice in the traditional rice pounding Machine.

goddesses, the remaining ones are love songs only. Although the women can not participate in singing and dancing, nevertheless, they enjoy the dancing and singing by their menfolk as onlookers.

PADMA PUJA :

Every Hajong family is to perform this Puja prior to the celebration of any marriage in the family. Padma (Manasa), the goddess of snakes and reptiles is worshipped with offerings by the head of the family with left hand only. This is followed by a sacrifice of a goat. Goddess Padma is worshipped with prayers to protect the couple to be married from snake bite.

KARTIK PUJA :

Kartik Puja is performed exclusively by women only. Men are neither allowed to participate nor are they allowed to visit the place of worship. They can, of course, visit the place when the puja is over at the dawn. It is performed towards the end of the month of Kati (September-October). God Kartik is considered by the Hajongs as the giver of sons and crops.

For the observation of this Puja, a few days before the actual commencement of the function, near the Tulsi (Basil) plant an old woman performs mock cultivation by tilling a very small plot with the help of two small girls as if they were a pair of bullock. After tilling, various seeds are sown at the site. On the day of the Puja the idol of Kartik is installed and worshipped at night by the women of the village. The women who desire sons have to observe fast, come to the place of worship and pray to the god Kartik to bestow them with sons. Throughout the whole night singing and dancing by women continue. The songs narrate the various qualities of god Kartik.

Besides these three main Pujas, the Hajongs also perform BRAT Puja as a mark of the completion of wet-paddy cultivation, GARAM Puja in the paddy field when the rice

is about to ripe with a view to propitiating goddess Lakhmi and Bastu Puja under a tree or near a temple where the earthen idols in the shape of elephants and horses are worshipped.

It has earlier been stated that the Hajongs believe in the existence of a number of evil spirits which are required to be appeased sometimes even with the sacrifice of goats and birds.

10. SOCIAL LIFE :

A. Village structure :

The Hajong villages are situated on high grounds preferably near their wet paddy lands. In constructing their houses, they follow neither any definite pattern nor any definite plan. They construct their dwelling houses in clusters in the courtyard of the village headman called Adhikari. In fact the houses are huddled together in a disorderly manner.¹⁵ My field visits to Hajong villages in the South Salmara Subdivision of Goalpara district have laid before me this peculiar characteristic. I have found that 25 to 30 houses in a villages are huddled together in each Hajong village in the courtyard of the Adhikari. Some of the houses are too small even for a family having two to three members while some of them are of standard size. They are constructed in such a disorderly manner that while some are facing east, some are facing west and while some are facing south, some are facing north, leaving hardly any space between two houses. The only prominent house in village is the house of the Adhikari.

On being questioned the reason for having such a type of construction of dwelling houses, I am told that this has been done as a part of the defence strategy with a view to protecting the village from outside attack which was very

15. Majumdar, D. N., Hinduized Communities of Western Meghalaya, in the book Garo Hills Land and People (Ed) L.S. Gassah, New Delhi, 1984, page-152.

much common in the past due to inter-community feuds. Living in cluster, therefore, has been in vogue since time immemorial. As the Adhikari has to provide dwelling site for each and every family of the village in his courtyard, it is not possible to provide each family with sufficient space. This has led to the construction of the houses in a very unplanned and disorderly manner. However, for the construction of the houses by the villagers in his courtyard, the Adhikari does not demand any rent.

B. HOUSING PATTERN :

In a Hajong village except the house of the Adhikari and houses of some well-to-do families the other houses are almost similar in pattern with variations in sizes. The house of a common villager has an earthen plinth and two thatched roofs on both sides. Bamboos and sometimes timbers are used for super structure. The walls are made of split bamboos and plastered with mud mixed with cowdung. Except the houses of the Adhikari and the house of the well-to-do families each family has three to four singled room small houses. Attached to the main house there is a protruding Veranda either in the front side or in the back side where the family loom is installed. A small kitchen is attached to the main room. There is a common courtyard amongst a few families which is used for threshing grains (paddy) after harvest. Each family has a pile driving granary with floor made of split bamboos.

C. FOOD HABITS :

Like other communities of Assam, rice is the staple food of the Hajongs. It is generally taken with vegetables and occasionally with pulses twice a day. Fish is a favourite item of food for them. They do not generally eat pork and fowls. They however eat pigeon's and goat's meat. Eating of raw betel nuts with betel leaves is a common practice among all Hajongs. Smoking of tobacco is confined to the

male persons only. Rice beer brewed at home is a favourite drink but it is taken only occasionally. While the use of rice beer in all socio-religious festivals among the tribal communities of Assam who are followers of their traditional faiths and religion is a must, for the Hajongs it is not so. In the performance of socio-religious festivals as well in the performance of rituals rice beer is not used. Milk and milk products are also taken by them.

D. LANGUAGE :

The Hajongs have their own language which appears to be a mixture of Assamese and Bengali. Dr. D.N. Majumdar calls it JHARUA dialect of Assamese.¹⁶ Mr. Matilal Barman however, regards the language spoken by the Hajongs at present as a branch of Kamrupi language¹⁷ (Assamese spoken in lower Assam districts in colloquial sense).

Mr. Ratan Kumar Rai Hajong, however, believes that the Hajongs had their own language in the distant past. When and how the language disappeared nobody knows.¹⁸

E. FAIRS AND FESTIVALS :

Like the other sections of the Assamese society the Hajongs also observe three Bihus. The Rangali Bihu is called 'SAITA SANGRANI' by them. On the first day of this festival the cows are not only bathed but worshipped also in the evening. The second day activities are confined among the family members and the relatives. Shewing of Neem leaves and fixing of Neem

leaves on the roof are two important events. It is believed that Neem leaves have very highly effective medicinal value and their shewing and fixing on the roof would keep diseases away from the family concerned for the entire year. On this day the younger ones pay their respects to the elder members of the family and pray for the blessings.

Another important event performed by the Hajongs during this festival is known as 'LEWA-TANA BIHU'. 'LEWA' means creeper and 'TANA' means pulling. Thus the literal meaning of 'LEWA-TANA' means pulling of creeper. Among the Rabhas also there is a dance called 'LEWA-TANA' where two groups of young boys and girls one group at each end-pull at a strong creeper for the purpose of trying their strength. It is, in other words, just like the Tug-of-war game in modern sports. Among the Hajongs although there is no creeper pulling, still it is called 'LEWA-TANA-BIHU'. In this Bihu two groups of Hajong youth - one consisting of young boys of marriageable age and the other consisting of young girls of marriageable age putting on their traditional dresses and ornaments dance and sing songs of love in their own languages. If the songs are rendered into Assamese one would hardly find any difference between the contents of these songs and those of the Assamese Bihu songs. In fact in the 'LEWA-TANA BIHU' intimate relationship grows between the young boys and girls according to their liking and exchange of heart and mind takes place which ultimately ends up in marriage between the lovers in due course.

The Hajongs also observe Kati Bihu which they call KATIGASHA. On this day earthen lamps are lighted in the evening at the paddy field with a view to propitiating goddess Lakhmi.

The Hajongs also perform Magh Bihu which they call 'PUSHNA'. Arrangement of community feast with newly harvested rice is the main feature of this festival.

16. Majumdar, D.N., Hinduzed Communities of Western Meghalaya published in the book Garo Hills Land and People (Ed), L.S. Gassah, New Delhi, 1984, page-151.
17. Barman, Matilal., Hajong Samaj and Sanskriti, an article in Assamese published in Silver Jubilee Souvenir of Hajong Unnayan Samity, Lakhimpur, 1987, page-40.
18. Rai, Hajong. Ratan Kumar., Hajong Samaj-Ati Sameekshya, an article in Assamese in Payobhara, Vol. 13, No. 20, 16-31 December '82, page-17.

On the day of the immersion of goddess Durga, the Hajongs wash all the agricultural implements used in the cultivation of crops and worship them. The plough bullocks are also washed and worshipped on this particular day.

F. DRESSES :

The Hajongs have their traditional dresses which are, of course, few in number.

The main dress put on by a Hajong woman is 'PATIN' and it is also called RANGAPATNI because the colour of this piece of dress is red. PATIN is used by women like Mekhela and it covers their bodies from the waist to the ankle. PATIN is woven by women at their family looms. There are stripes of blue threads in this piece of cloth and it is woven with designs of flower. Their traditional loom is called BANA where the use of two hands is only necessary. The women generally donot use blouse. They cover the upper part of their body with a home woven cotton scarf called PASRA or AGRUN. This piece of cloth is also woven with flowery designs. During festivals they also use a piece of cloth around the waist and it is called KAMARBANDHA.

The men wear a home woven piece of cloth bigger than Gamosa and it is called NINGTI. During winter they use a scarf to cover their body and they also use a kind of muffler around their neck and it is called KAMPESH.

It may be mentioned here that all the clothes needed in the marriage of a girl are required to be woven at the family loom, preferably by the girl herself.

G. ORNAMENTS :

In the Hajong society no ornaments used by men could be identified. Whatever ornaments they now have, these are used by women only. Like the women of the other ethnic groups, the Hajong women have also a great liking towards their

traditional ornaments. Ornaments with modern designs which are available in the local markets are not at all favoured by the Hajong women whether young or aged. However, the number of traditional ornaments used by them is limited to a few only. Brief idea regarding their traditional ornaments is give below :—

1. KATA BAJU —Armlets made of silver used by women.
2. BAGHH —Very heavy silver made anklets used by women.
3. HARSARA —Silver made necklace having three rows of designed chains used by women.
4. GUNJAR —Round and heavy silver made anklets worn by women. Anklets when put on produce tinkling sounds.
5. KAIRU —Earring worn by women at the ear-lobes made of brass with gold plating.

Besides these, the Hajong women also use silver made nose rings called NALAS and earring called KANFUL.

H. MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS AND FOLK SONGS :

The Hajongs have a number of musical instruments and their musical instruments are similar to those used by the Bengali rural folk. They use two kind of drums—one is called DHULUK and the other is called KHUL. While the DHULUK is made of a piece of hollowed wood with hides on both ends, the KHUL is earthen made with hides on both sides. The former is used at the time of folk songs and dancing during the performance of social festivals, the latter is used during of devotional songs at the of performance of religious festivals.

They use two kinds of string instrument. The musical instrument called RASAMANDALI is made of gourd crust having one string only. The other string instrument is DOTARA. It is made of wood and the hollowed part at

the end is covered with skin of a kind of big lizard. The wooden portion is decorated with carrying of floristic designs.

Their wind instruments are BANSI (flute made of bamboo) and GUBUA (Gagana) which is also made from a piece of bamboo. The Hajongs use three types of cymbals called RAMTAL, KATRAL and DHAPA KARTAL.

From the point of view of folk songs, the Hajongs are very rich. Among them mention may be made of SAWA BAJANI GAHAN or lullaby, songs or lores sung at the time of playing different indigenous games by the adolescent boys and girls, songs sung at the time of performance of LEWA-TANA DANCE, THUBAU MAGH GEET (songs sung by young boys at every household praying for contribution for organising the community feast to be organised on the eve of Magh Bihu), songs relating to BASH PUJA or bamboo worship, KARTIK PUJA, GEETALU GAHAN or songs sung during PADMA Puja, marriage songs, and so on. The collection of all these folk lores and songs would itself be a work of great interest for a researcher. They have also innumerable folk-tales which are still current among them.

11. ECONOMIC LIFE :

The primary occupation of the Hajongs is agriculture. Unlike the tribal communities inhabiting the hill areas of the North-Eastern Region, who mainly practise shifting cultivation, the Hajongs are more or less found to be settled cultivators. While paddy is the principal crop cultivated by them, other crops like mustard, jute, etc. are also cultivated by them to a limited extent depending on the availability of land suitable for such cultivation. Their economy can be called a subsistence one in the sense that whatever they produce is mainly meant for domestic consumption for the sustenance of the families. They hardly produce anything keeping in view of the market economy or to say commercialisation of their agricultural products.

Surplus agricultural products, if there be any, after meeting the requirements of the families are only sold. According to one Hajong scholar, 90 per cent of the Hajongs depends solely on agriculture for their livelihood and the remaining 10 per cent is dependent on service, wage-earning, petty business, carpentry, etc.¹⁹

Regarding their agricultural practices it is observed that their techniques of cultivation with a pair of bullock and other implements do not fundamentally differ with those that are prevalent in the rural areas of Assam. Modern methods of cultivation have yet to make an inroad to their agricultural practices. Fragmentation of holdings has reduced the landholdings of the families. Many families have given their lands to be cultivated by others—sometimes to the families of their own community and sometimes to non-Hajongs on Adhiar system. Mortgaging of cultivable lands to meet the expenditure connected with marriages, death ceremonies and other consumption needs is also found to be rampant among them.

Like other tribes among the Hajongs also persons of both sexes work in the fields. The women, of course, do not plough land. They rear cattle, goats, ducks and pigeons. As per their customary rules rearing of pigs and fowls is prohibited.

The Hajong women are expert weavers. There is no any Hajong house without a loom and there is no any Hajong woman, married or unmarried, who does not know spinning and weaving. Weaving of cloth in their traditional looms is, in fact, a household industry. All the clothes required for the female members of a family are produced at the family looms.

19. Hajong, Harah Kumar., Agriculture, A Tradition of the Hajongs, an article in Smitrigrantha published in the Golden Jubilee Celebration of Uttar-Pub Bharat Hajong Unnayan Samiti, Lakhimpur, 1987, Page-7, (English Section).

There are good carpenters among the Hajongs. They are also expert in manufacturing of bamboo and cane goods. Cane and bamboo articles required in a household are produced by the family members, the surplus to the requirement is sold in the weekly markets.

12. CONCLUSION

The Hajongs are one of the numerically small tribes of Assam. They are also lesser known due to the lack of comprehensive literature and studies on them. In this brief ethnographic note it has not been possible to cover all aspects of their life and culture in details.

One important fact that has been observed by me is their adaptability to change although it is gradual. As for example, the rearing of pigs and fowls which was not allowed by the Hajong society until the other day, has now made an appearance in some of the villages and the society now does not consider it as an offence. Deviation has also been found in respect of residence in cluster in the courtyard of the ADHIKARI of the villages. Well-to-do families are found to have constructed their houses outside the arena of the courtyard of the Adhikari. Changes in any human society are inevitable and in the changing context, the Hajong society alone cannot remain static. The young generation, specially the educated ones, has realised this. Their own organisations like Uttar-Pub Bharat Hajong Unnayan Samiti, Hajong Sanskritik Sangathan, etc, have been doing very useful service for the welfare and development of the Hajongs.

The Hajongs, although numerically small, are one of the most colourful tribes of Assam with their own culture and tradition which find their manifestation in their songs dances, music, fairs and festivals. They are a peace-loving and mild natured people who are found to be conscious about their own place in the welfare and development field among the different ethnic groups of Assam. Their own conscious efforts together with the efforts of the State government would surely bring them at par with the others.

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THE JAINTIAS

INTRODUCTION :

The Jaintias, like the Garos and the Hajongs, are a scheduled tribe in the two autonomous hill districts, namely, Karbi Anglong and the North Cachar Hills of Assam. Although they are a major ethnic group in the State of Meghalaya, none-the-less in the hill areas of Assam also they have a number of settlements bordering Meghalaya. Within the boundary of the Cachar District also on the eastern border of the Jaintia Hills District of Meghalaya, there are a few Jaintia villages. In the pre British days and during the Ahom rule the Jaintia villages that are now within the territorial jurisdiction of present Assam were a part of the then Jaintia kingdom. History shows that prior to the advent of the British, the Jaintia kingdom, known as Jaintiapur, included the area lying between the town of Sylhet and the Cachar border on the one hand and the area stretching from the foot of the hills overlooking the Barak Valley (then called Surma valley) to the Kalong river of the present district of Nagaon.¹

Since there are no written records and the writing of history in Assam was started chronologically only from the beginning of the Ahom reign, nothing is definitely known regarding their origin and migration. The epics, Trantas, mythologies, legends and folklores have led to the scholars to some surmises only in regard to their origin, migration and settlement in the earlier periods.

1. Barkatoki, S.N., Tribes of Assam (compiled), New Delhi, 1969, page-42.

The exact time of the migration of the Jaintias to this part of our country is not known. Since the Jaintias have very close resemblances with the Mon-khmer people of Indo-China in many respects it can definitely be said that they came to the present habitat from the south-east like some other ethnic groups. Their legends also show that in course of their migration they once lived in the areas south of the river Kopili.² The reference to a 'Stree Rajya' a kingdom of females, in the Purana might have some relevancy to the Jaintia kingdom because of the fact that the Jaintias have been following the matrilineal system of family structure.³ It is also worthwhile to mention that there are two other matrilineal tribes, namely, the Khasis and the Garos in the present state of Meghalaya. Therefore, the reference to a "Stree Rajya" in the Purana might not indicate the Jaintias alone. According to Sir Edward Gait the Syntengs, meaning the Jaintias, and the Khasis are a part of the first Mongolian overflow into India who established themselves in their present habitat in the very remote past and could maintain their independence till the advent of the British because of their isolated position.⁴

2. RACIAL AFFINITY :

Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee believes that the term Jaintia is derived from the word 'Jain-tein' which is a synonym of 'Synteng'.⁵ According to some scholars the Jaintias are called Synteng since 'Sutunga' or 'Su-teng' was the first royal dynasty of these people. In course of time the term 'Sutunga' or 'Sutung' became Synteng. In other words they assume that the term synteng is derived from 'Sutunga' or 'Suteng'. Whatever might be the origin of the terms 'Jaintia'

2. Deb Roy, H.L., A Tribe in Transition—the Jaintias of Meghalaya, New Delhi, 1981, page-2.

3. Ibid, page-2

4. Gait, E., A History of Assam, (Reprint), Guwahati 1983, page-259.

5. Chatterjee, S.K. Kirata-Jana-Kriti, page-167.

and 'Synteng', one thing is certain that the Jaintias and the Syntengs are the one and the same people.

The Jaintias are also called Pnars.⁶ Colonel E.T. Dalton refers to this ethnic group as Jyntias.⁷

Regarding the racial affinity of the Jaintias and the Khasis all scholars are of the same opinion and they regard these two peoples belonging to the same stock. The Jaintias speak a language which belongs to the Mon-Khmer family of language. According to Gait the dialects of this linguistic family are believed to have been spoken by the earliest Mongolian invaders of India. He, therefore, believes that the Syntengs or the Jaintias as well as the Khasis are a remnant of the first Mongolian overflow into India.⁸

Whatever might be the origin of the Jaintias, at least one fact is certain that they are a Mongoloid people belonging to Mon-Khmer linguistic family and they entered into this part of the country from either the Far-East or from China through Burma and established their kingdom in the remote past in their present abode known as Jaintia Hills. But the exact time of their migration to their present abode cannot be precisely determined

The Jaintias, specially the women, are fair complexioned and nice looking people. They are medium structured and physically very strong capable of doing hard manual labour.

3. A GLIMPSE INTO THEIR HISTORY :

Quoting from the Jaintia Buranji, a chronicle of the Ahom period, Mr. H.L. Deb Roy mentions about a legend regarding the divine evolution of the Jaintia kingdom. According to this legend there were some Brahmin kings and

6. Barkataki, S.N., Tribes of Assam (compiled), New Delhi, 1969.

7. Dalton, E.T., Tribal History of Eastern India, Calcutta, 1872, page-54.

8. Gait, Edward, A History of Assam (Reprint), 1984, Guwahati, page-259.

The exact time of the migration of the Jaintias to this part of our country is not known. Since the Jaintias have very close resemblances with the Mon-khmer people of Indo-China in many respects it can definitely be said that they came to the present habitat from the south-east like some other ethnic groups. Their legends also show that in course of their migration they once lived in the areas south of the river Kopili.² The reference to a 'Stree Rajya' a kingdom of females, in the Purana might have some relevancy to the Jaintia kingdom because of the fact that the Jaintias have been following the matrilineal system of family structure.³ It is also worthwhile to mention that there are two other matrilineal tribes, namely, the Khasis and the Garos in the present state of Meghalaya. Therefore, the reference to a "Stree Rajya" in the Purana might not indicate the Jaintias alone. According to Sir Edward Gait the Syntengs, meaning the Jaintias, and the Khasis are a part of the first Mongolian overflow into India who established themselves in their present habitat in the very remote past and could maintain their independence till the advent of the British because of their isolated position.⁴

2. RACIAL AFFINITY :

Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee believes that the term Jaintia is derived from the word 'Jain-tein' which is a synonym of 'Synteng'.⁵ According to some scholars the Jaintias are called Synteng since 'Sutunga' or 'Su-teng' was the first royal dynasty of these people. In course of time the term 'Sutunga' or 'Sutung' became Synteng. In other words they assume that the term synteng is derived from 'Sutunga' or 'Suteng'. Whatever might be the origin of the terms 'Jaintia'

2. Deb Roy, H.L., A Tribe in Transition—the Jaintias of Meghalaya, New Delhi, 1981, page-2.
3. Ibid, page-2
4. Gait, E., A History of Assam, (Reprint), Guwahati 1983, page-259.
5. Chatterjee, S.K. Kirata-Jana-Kriti, page-167.

and 'Synteng', one thing is certain that the Jaintias and the Syntengs are the one and the same people.

The Jaintias are also called Pnars.⁶ Colonel E.T. Dalton refers to this ethnic group as Jyntias.⁷

Regarding the racial affinity of the Jaintias and the Khasis all scholars are of the same opinion and they regard these two peoples belonging to the same stock. The Jaintias speak a language which belongs to the Mon-Khmer family of language. According to Gait the dialects of this linguistic family are believed to have been spoken by the earliest Mongolian invaders of India. He, therefore, believes that the Syntengs or the Jaintias as well as the Khasis are a remnant of the first Mongolian overflow into India.⁸

Whatever might be the origin of the Jaintias, at least one fact is certain that they are a Mongoloid people belonging to Mon-Khmer linguistic family and they entered into this part of the country from either the Far-East or from China through Burma and established their kingdom in the remote past in their present abode known as Jaintia Hills. But the exact time of their migration to their present abode cannot be precisely determined

The Jaintias, specially the women, are fair complexioned and nice looking people. They are medium structured and physically very strong capable of doing hard manual labour.

3. A GLIMPSE INTO THEIR HISTORY :

Quoting from the Jaintia Buranji, a chronicle of the Ahom period, Mr. H.L. Deb Roy mentions about a legend regarding the divine evolution of the Jaintia kingdom. According to this legend there were some Brahmin kings and

6. Barkataki, S.N., Tribes of Assam (compiled), New Delhi, 1969.
7. Dalton, E.T., Tribal History of Eastern India, Calcutta, 1872, page-54.
8. Gait, Edward, A History of Assam (Reprint), 1984, Guwahati, page-259.

Jayanta Roy was the last of them. Being pleased with his prayers the goddess Gauri favoured the king who was issueless with a female child who was considered to be the incarnation of the divine mother herself. This female child was named Jayanti and according to her name the capital of the kingdom came to be known as Jaintiapur.

It is further stated that princess Jayantia was married to the son of the royal priest, named Landhabar. It was, however, princess Jayanti who became the queen and governed the kingdom. Queen Jayanti later on came to be known as Ranee Singha. Displeased with the queen her husband Landhabar left the capital and in course of his wandering arrived at a place called Sutnga. Here he resided in a Garo family. He caught a big fish in a small stream and it was revealed to him that the fish was in fact a mermaid, a sister incarnation of mother Gauri or Durga. Landhabar married her and their son Bara Gossain or Bar Gohain Roy became the king of Sutnga. Bar Gossain occupied Jayantiapur and Ranee Singha had to renounce the throne. Thus Bara Gossain or Bar Gohain Roy became the king of the Jaintia kingdom probably in 1250 A.D.⁹

Sir Edward Gait in his 'A History of Assam' has furnished a list of seven Jaintia kings chronologically starting from Prabhat Ray (1500-1516) to Dhan Manik (1596 to 1605) confirming its veracity on the basis of inscriptions on coins, copper plates and references in the Ahom chronicles.¹⁰ Gait has also further stated that the Jaintia people formed a single state in 1500 A.D. under the leadership of their king Prabhat Ray meaning "the lord of the Hills".¹¹

That the Jaintia kings were under the Brahminic influence could be understood from the fact that all of them

bore Hindu names. The Jaintias, as the chronicles say, had conflicts with Koch kings as well as the Kachari kings. One of Jaintia kings was slain by Chilarai, the brother of the Koch king Naranarayan. The Jaintia king Dhan Manik was defeated by the Kachari king compelling him to be a tributary of the Kachari monarch. Dhan Manik's son Josa Manik had established a friendly relationship with the Ahoms by giving in marriage one of his daughters to king Pratap Singh. During the reign of the Jaintia king Jasamanta, hostility broke out between the Ahoms and the Jaintias and it took nine years to come to an amicable settlement between these two peoples.

During the reign of the Jaintia king Ram Singh, Kachari king Tramadhavj, was made a prisoner in Jaintiapur treacherously. Being helpless Tramadhavj invoked the help of the Ahom king Rudra Singh. King Rudra Singh sent two armies one from the south Khaspur (in present district of Cachar) and one from the north through Jagi (present Jagiroad) under two capable commanders. The expedition was a complete success. The Jaintia King was not only defeated but taken as a captive to the camp of the Ahom King Rudra Singh where he died in captivity. His son Jay Narayan was, however, released by the Ahom King. He returned to the kingdom and reigned upto 1708.

The last king of the Jaintia was Rajendra Sing during whose reign the Jaintia Kingdom was annexed by the British in 1835 by desposing him.

Chronologically the place of the kings of the Jaintia Kingdom beginning from 1500 A.D. to 1835 would be as follows :

9. Deb Roy, H.L., A Tribe in Transition, the Jaintias of Meghalaya, New Delhi 1981, page-66-67.
10. Gait, E., A History of Assam, Third Reprint Edition, 1984, pages-260-261.
11. Ibid, page-261.

Prabhat Ray	—	1500 A.D. to 1516 A.D.
Majha Gosain	—	1516 A.D. to 1532 A.D.
Burha Parbat Ray	—	1532 A.D. to 1548 A.D.
Bar Gosain	—	1548 A.D. to 1564 A.D.
Bijay Manik	—	1564 A.D. to 1580 A.D.
Pratap Ray	—	1580 A.D. to 1596 A.D.
Dhan Manik	—	1596 A.D. to 1605 A.D.
Jasa Manik	—	1605 A.D. to 1625 A.D.
Sundar Ray	—	1625 A.D. to 1636 A.D.
Chota Parbat Ray	—	1636 A.D. to 1647 A.D.
Jasamanta Ray	—	1647 A.D. to 1660 A.D.
Ban Singh	—	1660 A.D. to 1669 A.D.
Pratap Singh	—	1669 A.D.
Lakshmi Singh	—	1669 A.D. to 1697 A.D.
Ram Singh	—	1697 A.D. to 1708 A.D.
Jay Narayan	—	1708 A.D. to 1729 A.D.
Bar Gosain	—	1729 A.D. to 1770 A.D.
Chatra Singh	—	1770 A.D. to 1781 A.D.
Jatra Narayan	—	1781 A.D. to 1786 A.D.
Bijay Narayan	—	1786 A.D. to 1790 A.D.
Ram Singh II	—	1790 A.D. to 1832 A.D.
Rajendra Singh	—	1832 A.D. to 1835 A.D. ¹²

4. DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS :

Since the Jaintias and the Khasis were enumerated together in 1971 Census for the two Autonomous Hills Districts of Assam, namely, Karbi Anglong and the North Cachar Hills, the exact number of the Jaintias living in Assam cannot precisely be determined.¹³ The total population of these two ethnic groups in Assam, as per 1971 Census, was 6,487 out of which 3530 were males and 2,957 were females.



Two Jaintia women and a man in their traditional dresses and ornaments.

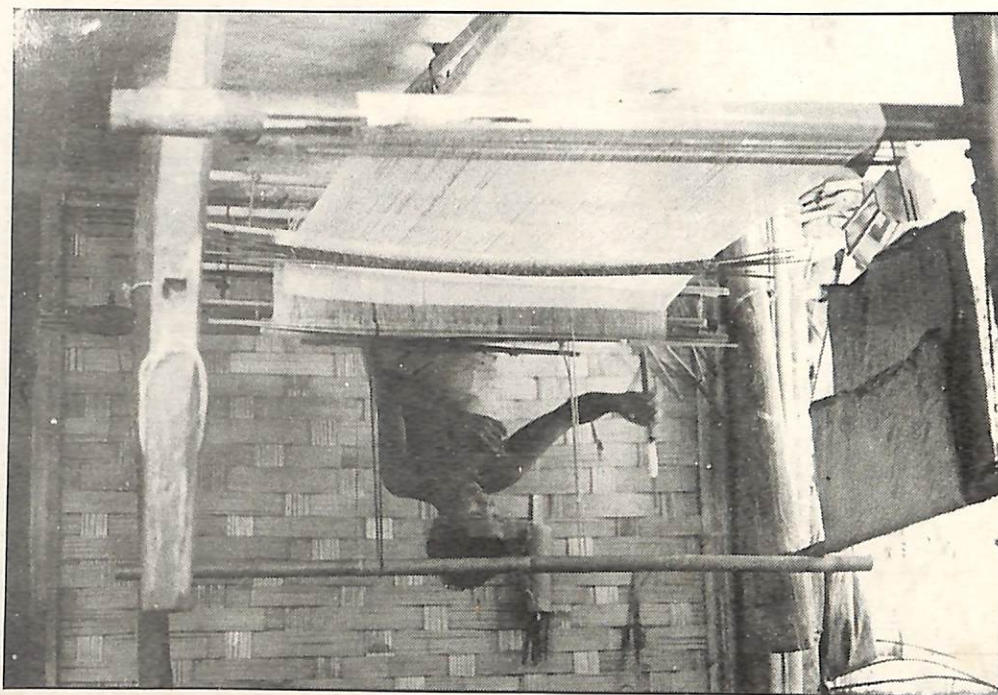
12. Ibid, page-261-267.

13. Due to Foreign Nationals issue 1981 Census could not be conducted in Assam.

Jainthias are good horticulturists - A Jainthia woman at her pineapple garden.



A Jainthia woman at her loom





Two Jaintia women returning from the weekly market with baskets full of purchased articles.

It may, however, be mentioned that since the two hill districts of Assam are situated on the border of the Jaintia Hills district of Meghalaya, it may be presumed that out of the total Jaintia and Khasi population of 6,487 quoted in preceding para, majority of them would be Jaintias. These two ethnic groups constitute 0.048 percent of the total population, 0.44 percent of the total tribal population (hills and plains combined) and 2.70 percent of the total tribal population in the two autonomous hill districts of Assam as per 1971 Census. Their sex ratio is 837 females per 1000 males.

From the point of view of literacy they are lagging far behind. Against the state percentage of literacy of 28.72, their literacy as per 1971 Census was only 18.27 percent. Against the state percentage of male literacy of 37.19, their percentage of male literacy was 20.65 while that for the females it was 15.42 against state percentage of female literacy of 19.27

5. CLAN :

In Jaintia a clan is called 'KUR'. It is worthwhile to mention that in the Karbi society also a clan is called 'KUR'. A clan has several sub-clans and they are called KPOHS. All members of a clan trace their descent through a common ancestress.

There are four ancestress from whom the clans of Jowai were founded.

They are as follows :

A. Ancestress Ka Bon—

From this ancestress four clans, namely, (i) Liban (ii) Ryngad (iii) Syngkon and (iv) Litan were founded.

B. Ancestress Ka Tein—

From this ancestress three clans, namely, (i) Pakyntein, (ii) Nikhla and (iii) War were founded.

C. Ancestress Ka Wet—

Eleven clans were originated from this ancestress and they are (i) Pariat (ii) Lywait, (iii) Kynjing, (iv) Catpoh,

(v) Myreen, (vi) Lanong, (vii) Lakhiang, (viii) Niangphoh, (ix) Kima, (x) Siangbord and (xi) Pyrdiang

D. Ancestress Ka Doh—

Only two clans were originated from the ancestress Ka Doh and these two are— (i) Langoh and (ii) Nongbath.

Besides the above four ancestress reference to another two ancestresses is also found. From the ancestress San Syngk originated the following 8 (eight) clans and they are—(i) Shylla, (ii) Pariat (iii) Pde, (iv) Blah, (v) Hato, (vi) Dom, (vii) Slong and (viii) Thankiew.

It can now be seen that the clan Pariat has originated not only from the ancestress Ka Wet but from the ancestress San Syngkong also.

There was also another ancestress called Laloo from whom twenty clans after her twenty daughters were originated.¹⁴

But the names of the clans are not available. Thus 38 clans of the Jaintias could be traced. There might be more clans which are yet to be identified and recorded.

These clans (KURS) are strictly exogamous and no marriage can take place between a boy and a girl of the same clan because the clan members are considered to be close blood relations. The line of descent is also always through the mother and under no circumstances through the father.

6. FAMILY :

The Jaintias, like the Khasis and the Garos, have a matriarchal system of family structure. The father, in fact, has practically no place in the family. A family is always introduced with the name of the mother and never with the name of the father and that is why a Jaintia family is an IUNG BEI meaning mother's house. Thus a Jaintia family means the mother and her children irrespective of age and

14. Deb Roy, H.L., A Tribe in Transition - the Jaintias of Meghalaya, New Delhi—1981, Appendix.—C.

marital status. Although the Jaintias have joint family system in which mother, her married sons and daughters are found to have been living together under the same roof nevertheless, the joint family system in the present days context has now less relevancy and nuclear family, specially among the educated section of the society, is emerging at a faster rate.

As per customary rules, after marriage the bridegroom is required to reside with her wife in her house, that is to say, the house of his mother in-law and becomes a member in the family of his wife and not of his mother. His marriage does not confer on him any right to own his wife's property. He can, of course, own property only through his own earning. But these customary rules are not uniform. In some areas the property earned by a married son belongs to his mother and not to the wife. In some areas again the father may earn property for his wife and children.

The matrilineal bond among the Jaintias is so strong that a married son living in his mother-in-law's house after his marriage is expected to die in his mother's house and that is why after death the dead body is required to be sent to the mother's house.

In a Jaintia family the mother is the head of the family and her authority is undisputed. She is the custodian of the family property although she might allow her adult son/sons to manage her property.

In the Jaintia society, to be precise, the son has the responsibility towards his mother and the other family members of his mother first. His responsibility towards his wife and children comes next only. Under customary rules a son can never inherit the property of his mother, that is, the property of the family, even if there might not be any daughter in the family.

7. LIFE CYCLE :

A. Marriage :

The matriarchal system of family structure has influenced the marriage system of the Jaintias to a great extent.

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7. LIFE CYCLE :

A. Marriage :

The matriarchal system of family structure has influenced the marriage system of the Jaintias to a great extent.

It has already been mentioned that the Jaintia society is fully exogamous and no marriage can take place between a boy and a girl of the same clan since the members of the same clan are considered to be blood relations.

One important aspect of the Jaintia marriage is that nobody can be compelled to enter into marriage alliance against his or her will. In other words forced marriage is unknown in the Jaintia society. The most common form of marriage among them is the marriage through acquaintance and this has been described as marriage of acquaintance by Mr. Deb Roy. Prior to negotiation the boy and the girl should not only develop an intimate acquaintance but also develop love and liking between them. When the matter comes to the knowledge of the parents or guardians of the boy and the girl, from the boy's house a negotiator called KSIANG sends a formal proposal for marriage to the girl's family after ascertaining the fact that the boy and the girl do not belong to the same clan or sub-clan. The selected negotiator should preferably be a maternal uncle of the boy. If every thing is found to be smooth sailing the KSIANG completes the negotiation process with the parents or guardians and the maternal uncle of the boy and a date for the marriage is fixed. The marriage takes place at the bride's house at night only. The marriage party consists of all the male family members and male relatives of the boy. Accompanying a female relative in a marriage party is a taboo. Carrying fire with the party is compulsory. In the evening a few persons from the house of the bridegroom arrive at the house of the bride carrying with them two torches of fire.

On arrival at the bride's house, the bridegroom's feet are washed. He is then required to sit on a specific mat used for this purpose. After an exchange of betel-nuts and leaves the girl is brought before the gathering. One person from the boy's party then speaks highly of the qualities of the boy and similarly one person from the girl's side also speaks about the qualities of the girl in the same vein. After this the negotiator (KSIANG) of the boy's party declares the

bride and the bridegroom as wife and husband and wishes the newly married couple a happy conjugal life.

The Jaintia priest LANGDOH (LYNGDOH) worships goddess SIEM WABOO and prays for a happy married life of the couple. The priest then mixes rice beer offered by the two parties in gourd pots in one container and the mixed beer is then poured on the ground (Mother earth called BEIRAYMMAW) thrice with prayer which refers to perpetual unity and fertility leading to birth of offsprings and wealth for the newly married couple.

This is followed by a feast consisting of rice, pork and rice beer.

The formal marriage comes to an end by midnight. Formal marriage ceremony being over, the boy's party returns leaving the boy in the residence of his bride. The boy spends the remaining part of the night with his wife and returns home in the morning.

The most peculiar characteristic of a Jaintia marriage, as one can see and observe, is perhaps the custom of visit marriage. The son, after his marriage, is allowed by the mother to spend the night at the residence of his mother-in-law with his wife and he must come back to his mother in the morning. He must work and eat at his mother's residence and not at the residence of his wife. This virtually renders the husband as an agent of procreation only. Thus as a customary rule, the residence of the boy after marriage is not matri-local. But this custom is already in the process of erosion. If the residence of the husband is at quite a distance or if he works in a distant place, then he might be allowed by his mother to stay in the residence of his wife.

By and large the Jaintias are monogamous. But there were some instances of the Jaintias practising polygamy. But those who had practised or are found to have practised polygamy during these days are looked down upon by the society. Therefore, the incidence of polygamy is not so acute. Polyandry has never been practised by the Jaintias.

Another important factor which directly relates to the practice of monogamy is the institution called KA SATI. The wife who dies having only one husband during her life time is considered to be a sacred woman and after her death her bones are given a special distinguished place in the family cairn kept in the cremation ground. This is perhaps an incentive for a woman to have only one husband so that she might acquire a social status in the Jaintia society even after her death.

Divorce among the Jaintias is too common. Divorce generally takes place if both the parties agree. Divorce is rampant among them because of such factors :- (I) Divorce is too easy a process, (II) visit marriage where the husband stops visiting his wife or wife shows reluctance to entertain her husband continuously for sometime, (III) in the divorce process the wife loses nothing except her husband, her property and her children remain with her after divorce and lastly (IV) barrenness of the woman.

Widow remarriage is prevalent among them while child marriage is unknown.

B. BIRTH

The birth of a child is an occasion of rejoice for the entire family. The most important ceremony performed in connection with child birth is, however, the name giving ceremony. It is generally performed within a few days from the birth of the child. An old man allows drops of rice beer to fall on the ground from a gourd pot and the people assembled there utter some names. If the new born child is a boy, names of female persons are uttered. If it is a girl, then the names of male persons are uttered. The name which synchronizes with the falling of the last drop of rice beer will be the name of the new born baby.

C. DEATH

The Jaintias, who have been following their traditional religion, cremate the dead persons. So far as the death

of male married persons is concerned, the customary laws of matrilineal family structure appear in the scene. A married man is supposed to breathe his last at the residence of his mother only. Even if he dies at the residence of his wife, the post-death rites are required to be performed at the residence of his mother. Like the Karbis, the Jaintias also cleanse and wash the dead bodies first and then traditional new cloths are put on.

The dead bodies are kept inside the house for a period of three days so that all the relatives of the deceased might have a glimpse of the departed ones. Specially prepared food has to be offered to the departed ones twice daily.

During these three days, the relatives observe GENNA or no-work. In the funeral pyre all the personal belonging of the deceased are to be consigned to the flames. For a departed person a cock is sacrificed at the cremation ground so that being a divine bird, it might show the way to the ancestral world. The Jaintias have the peculiar system of preserving the bones of the dead in the clan repository.

When the cremation is over, charred bones are collected either by the relatives or by the clan members. The collected bones are then taken to the family cairn first and taken to the clan repository within one year from the death. In Jaintia the repository is called STUPA. At the time of keeping the bones in the clan repository, meals specially prepared by clan women along with betel nuts and betel leaves called KWAIS are offered to the departed ones. It may, however be mentioned that no bones of people whose death is unnatural can be kept in the clan repository. These can be preserved in a place particularly earmarked near the cremation ground.

8. RELIGION

Influence of Hinduisim is markedly visible in the traditional religion professed by the Jaintias. They believe

in life hereafter, rebirth, heaven and hell. They not only worship the spirits of the natural objects, but worship the spirits of their ancestors also. In fact the ancestor's worship is the fundamental characteristic of the Jaintia religion. For the memorials of the dead, stones (monoliths) are erected. Just like annual Sardha ceremonies performed by the Hindus for their departed ones, the Jaintias also offer periodic oblations to their dead annually by offering food specially prepared by the womenfolk. The offering of food can only be done by females and this is perhaps due to their matrilineal family structure. Prior to the performance of any community festival in a village or in a region each individual family has to worship their ancestors with a view to obtaining their blessings. Blessings of the ancestors are also sought during difficulties, birth and marriage ceremonies.

The Jaintias, like the other tribes, believe in a number of spirits - benevolent as well as malevolent.

The Jaintias have diviners among them who are considered to be capable of invoking the spirits of the dead. The post of a diviner is not hereditary. A diviner must be a knowledgeable man and he must acquire the art of divination with great perseverance.

Many of the Jaintia families living in the two hill districts of Assam, however, have already embraced Christianity. Nevertheless, some of the traditional religious practices are still found to be observed by the converted Jaintias.

9. ECONOMIC LIFE

The Jaintias of Assam are mainly agriculturists. Although they practise shifting cultivation in the hills near their habitats, nevertheless, they also practise permanent cultivation side by side. Wet rice cultivation is done by them wherever lands suitable for this type of cultivation are available. They are very good horticulturists. They produce large quantities of pineapples and oranges. In the North Cachar Hills they supply bulk of raw materials, namely, pineapples

and oranges to the Fruit Preservation Industry located at Haflong under the Assam Hills Small Industries Development Corporation.

The Jaintias also do terrace cultivations by irrigating these terraces with stream water. Manufacturing of bamboo and cane goods, live - stock rearing, etc. are their subsidiary occupations. Although they do not have any class distinction based on occupation or division of labour, nevertheless, the women are found to work more and they are more laborious than men.

9. SOCIAL LIFE :

A. Village Administration

The Jaintias have a very strongly knitted village administration. Each village has a village council which manages the affairs of the village. During the reign of the Jaintia kings, there were regional chiefs called DOLOI. DOLOIs were elected by the people. In addition to their administrative works, they were also required to perform a number of religious rights. All religious festivals performed in their localities are supervised by them. The DOLOI is assisted by a large number of officers in discharging his duties. The PATORS have to settle disputes of minor nature. Collection of tax and tolls is the duty of the DANS. BASANS are to execute the orders of the DOLOIs. The officer called SANGOT acts like a policeman and he is under the PATOR of his locality. The village crier is called CHUTIYA. Although the emergence of new set of leaders like the Members of the District Council has deprived the DOLOIs some of their functions and responsibilities, nevertheless, in the Jaintia society DOLOISHIP still plays an important role so far as the traditional matters are concerned.

B. FAIRS AND FESTIVALS :

The most important socio-religious festival performed by the Jaintias is BEHDEINKHLAM which literally means

the driving away the evil spirits with wooden sticks. This festival is celebrated annually in the month of July. Although the Jaintias living within the territorial jurisdiction of Assam do not perform this festival here, nevertheless, they participate in this festival by going to Jowai in Meghalaya where the festival is centrally celebrated. BEHDEINKHLAM festival is the most popular, gayest and colourful festival of the Jaintias which is participated by young and aged, males and females. It may, however, be noted that females can not participate in the dances performed during the festival. The festival continues for a few days and the last day is considered to be the most important since it is on this date that the evils are driven off. All the male persons who come to attend this festival in their best traditional dresses participate in the dances to the accompaniment of musical instruments. At noon on the last day a few chariots called ROTS made of long bamboo poles and decorated with multi-coloured designed papers are drawn and pulled by the participants and immersed in a pool of water called AITNAR amidst great rejoicing and merrymaking and this brings the festival to a close. The basic idea perhaps is to put an end to the evil spirits confined into the chariots through immersion in the water leading to a watery grave.

Another important dance performed by the Jaintias is the LAHO dance which is performed annually and where young boys and girls in their traditional dresses and ornaments participate. In this dance one girl is positioned between two girls. But the girl must not belong to clans of either of the boys.

The Jaintias are also lovers of sports and they have many indigenous sports among them including archery. Hunting, Fishing, Wrestling and dancing are their favourite pastimes.

C. FOOD HABITS :

Like the other tribes of the North-East, the Jaintias' staple food is rice. Potatoes, wild roots and tubers

collected from the nearby jungles are also taken by them. Although they are non-vegetarians, they do not take all kinds of meats of animals and birds. Their most favourite meat is, of course, pork. The Jaintias who are still professing their traditional religion never take beef. Beef is taken only by the Christian converts. Rice beer is their favourite beverage. Although the cows are reared by them, the Jaintias living in the two hill Districts of Assam neither drink milk and the milking avenues are not exploited for commercial purpose.

D. DRESSES AND ORNAMENTS :

The traditional dress of a Jaintia male consists of three apparels (1) Dhoti, (2) a sleeveless coat called JYMPHONG or PIRAN and (3) PAGRI (Turban). In bygone days the common male persons used Loin-cloth only. The wearing of a turban by a DOLOI is a must since the wearing of PAGRI signifies a social status.

The Jaintia women put on home-woven SARIs, of course, in a different way. They also wear another piece of cloth called KA JAINKUP which is tied around the neck and the lower part of this piece of cloth covers up to the ankles like a gown.

Beside ear-rings called CHA-SHKOR BEI, the Jaintia women also put on necklaces made of round silver balls and these necklaces are generally used in festive occasions and dance performances. They also use necklaces made of beads.

10. CONCLUSION :

The Jaintias, a matriarchal tribe, have already undergone social transformation and some of their cultural traits have disappeared due mainly to the changing panorama of developmental activities, spread of education and conversion to Christianity. However in spite of erosion of their culture in the periphery, they are found to have maintained their core culture in tact.

The Jaintias inhabiting in the two Hill Districts of Assam are good horticulturists. They are also good terraced cultivators. Since the Integrated Jhumia Development Projects, Compact Area Projects and other activities undertaken by the Hill Areas Department of the Government of Assam as well as the District Councils of Karbi Anglong and the North Cachar Hills have also embraced the Jaintias, the incidence of Jhum cultivation among them has been gradually coming down. One of the basic objectives of introduction of the Sixth Schedule among the hill tribes of Assam as well as some other states like Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura, etc. is to enable the tribals to development according to their own genius and own way of life. The Jaintias living in the Karbi Anglong and the North Cachar Hills Districts can have a greater say in their own development by actively participating in the affairs of the District Councils.

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—X—

THE KHASIS

INTRODUCTION :

Although numerically small, the Khasis are a Scheduled Tribe in the two hill districts of Assam, viz, the Karbi Anglong and the North Cachar Hills. Their main concentration is, however, in the East and West Khasi Hills districts of Meghalaya. In Assam their concentration is in the Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills bordering Meghalaya. There are a number of Khasi villages in Tripura and in the Sylhet and Mymensingh Districts of Bangladesh also.¹

ORIGIN, RACIAL AFFINITY AND MIGRATION :

As regards the origin of the Khasis as well as the Jaintias a few theories have been adduced. Sir Edward Gait has, in fact, made no distinction between the Khasis and the Jaintias or Syntengs. Gait believes that the Khasis which belong to the Mon-Khmer linguistic family were one of those hordes of Mongolian people who entered into North-East India first and established themselves in their present habitat at a very remote period.²

Colonel Dalton, on the other hand, tries to establish a connection between the Khasis and the Hos of Singbhum and the Mundas of Chota Nagpur basing on the facts that like the Khasis, the Hos and the Mundas also preserve the ashes of their departed ones on the repository made of flat

1. Bhattacharjee, J. B., Changing Khasis : A Historical Account, in Tribes of North-East India, edited by S. Kerotemprel, Calcutta, 1984, Page-319.
2. E. Gait, A History of Assam, Third Edition, Guwahati, 1984, Page-259.

stones and also erect monoliths for commemoration of the deceased. Dalton has further stated that there are many similarities in the funeral ceremonies observed by these peoples. He has, therefore, come to the conclusion that these people who have derived their ceremonies from a common source might have been separated by circumstances in the long past.³

In 'Tribes of Assam' dealing with the Khasis, Barkataki has also raised the same vital question regarding the affinities between the Ho-Mundas and the Khasis on the basis of the erection of monoliths to perpetuate the memory of the deceased ancestors and preservation of bones in stone cairns. He observes "Taking all these affinities into consideration, can it be said that the two groups, one almost at the centre of India and the other in the far north-eastern corner, stem from the same parent group? It may also be that both groups received their culture elements from a common source, even if they were not related to one another."⁴

According J. N. Chowdhury the Khasis from the point of view of their speech can be linked with the great Mon-Khmer family in the east on the one hand and to the Mundari speaking Ho, Santal, Kharia, Birhor and others on the west, on the other hand.⁵

Regarding the origin of the Khasis as well as the Pnars or the Jaintias there has been a traditional story handed over from generation to generation since time immemorial. According to this God had originally created 16 families in the heaven. By means of a golden ladder these families could travel between the heaven and earth, at their sweet will. While nine families preferred to stay in heaven along with their

3. Dalton, E.T., Tribal History of Eastern India (Reprint), New Delhi, 1978, pp-55 & 56.

4. Barkataki, S.N., Tribes of Assam, New Delhi, 1969, P-31.

5. Chowdhury J.N., The Khasi: Conjectures about their origin, The Tribes of North-East India (Ed), S. Karo-temprel, Shillong, 1984, page-62.

creator God, the remaining seven families came down to earth and stayed in this part of the earth what we call the Khasi Hills and the Jaintia Hills. The Khasis and the Jaintias are the descendants of these seven families.⁶

Although a few scholars have tried to establish a well-knit relationship between the Khasis and the Ho-Mundas on the basis of the ceremonies connected with funeral rights, erection of monoliths and preservation of ashes/bones in stone cairns, racially and linguistically these two groups of people are quite different. The Khasis are Mongoloids and they are the only people, including the Jaintias of course, who speak Mon-Khmer language in entire India. It is, therefore, certain that the Khasis migrated to this part of the country in the remote past along with other hordes of Indo-Mongoloid people and once settled in the Khasi Hill areas, did not migrate to other places unlike some other Indo-Mongoloid tribes.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS :

Since the Khasis and the Jaintias were enumerated together in 1971 Census for the two Autonomous Hill Districts of Assam, namely, Karbi Anglong and the North Cachar Hills, the exact number of the Khasis living in Assam cannot precisely be determined. The total population of these two ethnic groups in Assam, as per 1971 Census, was 6,487 out of which 3530 were males and 2,957 were females.

SOCIAL LIFE :

1. Family :

The Khasis, like the Jaintias, have the matrilineal family structure where the entire affairs of the family centre around the mother who is also the head of the family. A Khasi family being a nuclear one consists of the woman,

6. Ibid, pp-63 & 64.

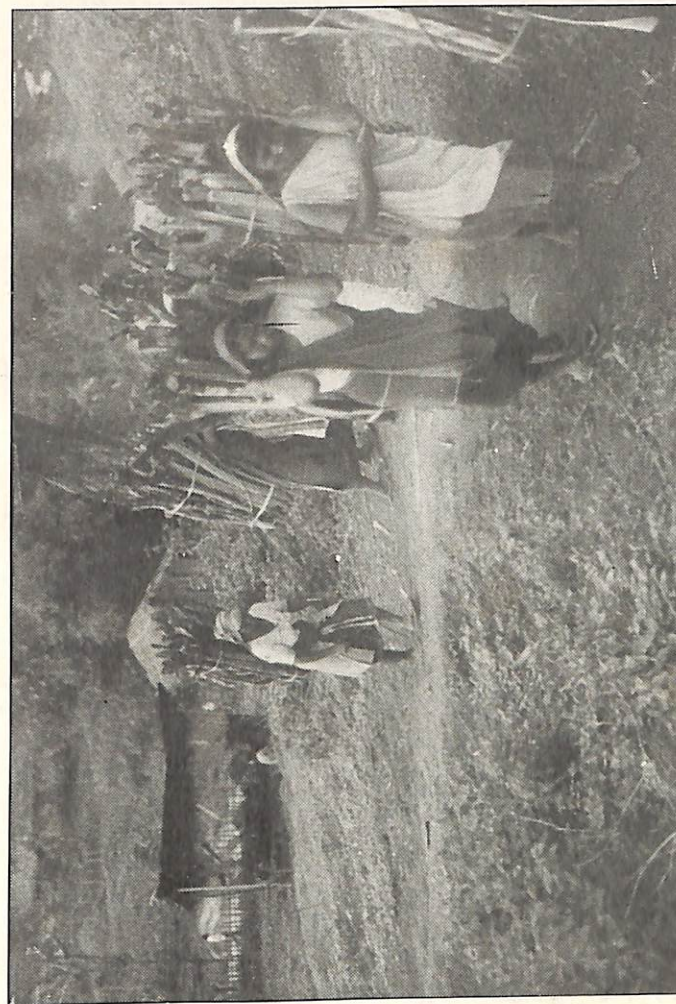
her husband and their children. It is the woman who owns the family property and exercises authority over it. While in a traditional Jaintia family, the husband has practically no role to play except as a procreator, strictly speaking in a Khasi family it is not so. The father is responsible for the upbringing of the children, providing security to the family members and also for sharing the responsibility with his wife so far as the earning of the livelihood is concerned. Regarding the place of father in a Khasi family R.T. Rymbai says thus—"The father is nevertheless the most highly respected because the mother's tribe can only increase through him."⁷ Their maternal uncles also act as the guardians of the children of their sisters.

2. Clan :

In Khasi a clan is called KUR - the Jaintias and the Karbis also call it the same. The mother's clan (KUR) is always prominent. The father's clan called KHA is of secondary importance. Since according to their legends only seven families descended to the earth from heaven, in the beginning, therefore, they were supposed to have seven clans only. In course of time the clans had multiplied because of various reasons. Every clan is supposed to have originated from an ancestress. When a Khasi man marries a non-Khasi wife, a new clan lineage becomes inevitable for the wife and in the clan names where the prefix KHAR (abbreviated form of DKHAR) is used, it refers to a non-Khasi ancestress. But when a non-Khasi marries a Khasi woman, the children would automatically be inducted to the mother's clan. These clans are strictly exogamous.

Another peculiar characteristic of the clan organization of the Khasis is that it is the clan, and not the individual

7. Rymbai, R.T. *Sturdy and Cheerful Communities of Meghalaya*, Souvenir, All India Tribal Conference, Gauhati, 1978, page-15.

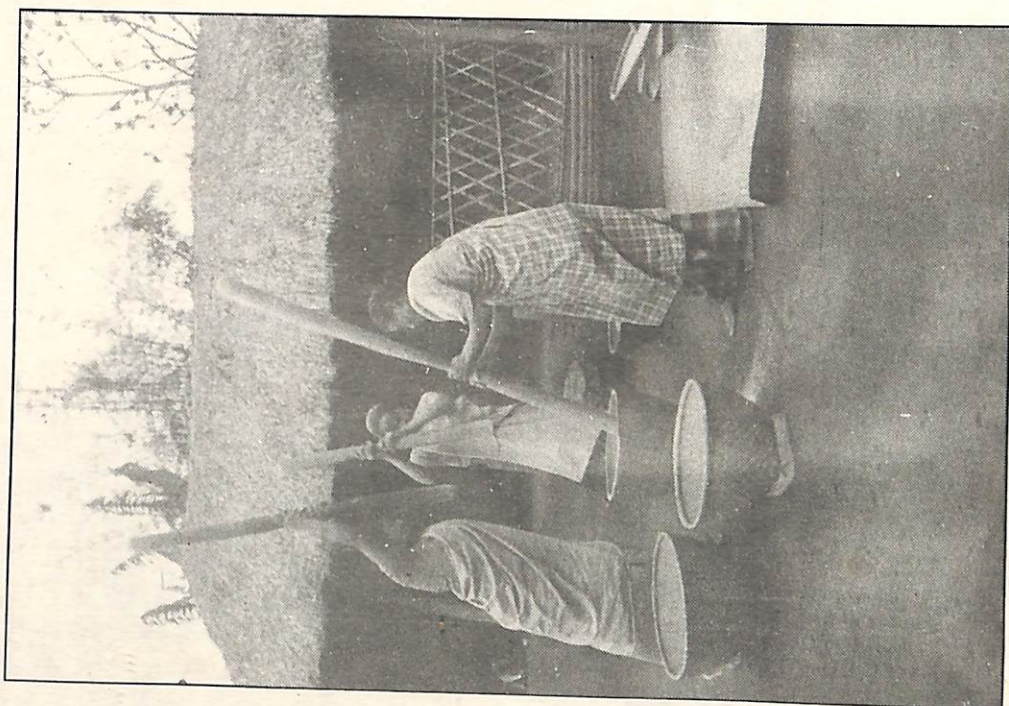


Khasi women returning from forests and approaching home with basket loads of firewood.

A Khasi girl at her family loom



Rice pounding by Khasi women.





Spinning of Endi silk yarn in traditional way

family, which is considered as a unit of the society where the maternal uncle is the head.

3. MARRIAGE :

Since the Khasi clans are exogamous, under no circumstances a marriage can take place between the boy and a girl of the same clan. Violation of this customary law of exogamy is considered to be a sin of gravest nature. The society does not forgive such persons. They are not only excommunicated from the society but driven out from the village after dispossessing and disinheriting them.⁸

It has been mentioned earlier that the Khasis have father's clan also which is called KHA. The rules of exogamy, therefore, covers father's clan also. There is, of course, no bar in marrying a non-Khasi by a Khasi girl. Similarly the society does not stand in the way if a Khasi boy marries a non-Khasi girl because the girl does not belong to his mother's or father's clan. Thus a Khasi society can absorb new elements without serious difficulties.

Cross cousin marriage is prevalent among the Khasis under certain limitations.

A Khasi boy can marry his maternal uncle's daughter only after the death of the maternal uncle. Because in a Khasi household a maternal uncle is rather regarded and respected as if he were the father of the family. A Khasi boy can also marry a daughter of his father's sister only after the death of his father. However such unions are not favoured by the Khasi society.⁹

Both types of levirate, viz. senior levirate (practice of marrying the elder brother's widow by the younger brother) and junior levirate (practice of marrying the younger

8. Ibid, P-15.

9. Bose J.K., *Glimpses of Tribal Life in North-East India*, Calcutta, 1980, Page-65.

brother's widow by the elder brother) are forbidden among the Khasi.¹⁰

In the Khasi society a girl has a greater freedom in choosing her life partner. If a girl expresses her desire to marry a boy of her choice and if the boy agrees to marry the girl, it is well and good. But if the boy is not willing, her relatives bring him forcibly and he is compelled to marry the girl.¹¹ The traditional Khasi marriage is a simple one. The boy and the girl are given marriage addresses in the assemblage which is followed by marriage feasts. Those who have accepted Christianity, marriages are performed in the churches only according to Christian ways. After marriage the bridegroom is required to stay with his wife in his mother-in-law's house. Children born out of the wedlock will be inducted into the clan of the mother and they will naturally adopt the title of their mother.

Child marriage is unknown to the Khasis. Divorce and remarriage of divorcee are permissible. Widow remarriage is also prevalent among them provided the rules of exogamy is strictly maintained.

4. BIRTH :

The birth of a child, whether it is a boy or a girl, is considered to be a joyous occasion for the family. Among some non-tribal communities, it is observed that while the birth of a male child in the family is received with joy, the birth of a female child is very often considered as an unwelcome addition to the family. The matter does not end here ; the mother is also blamed squarely for begetting a female child. But in the Khasi society it is not so. Whether

10. Ibid, Page-87.

11. Monin Bordoloi, R.P., Tribal Women of North-East India—Some Aspects of Their Way of Life, Souvenir, All India Tribal Conference, Gauhati, 1978, Page-26.

the new born is a boy or a girl, it is immaterial. The maternal uncle, however, plays a very important role in the name giving ceremony of the new-born baby.

It may be mentioned here that the Khasis believe in rebirth. It is believed that the deceased members of the family would be reborn in the same family in due course. Hence at the time of name giving ceremony the maternal uncle taking a few drops of rice-beer in a small pot utters the names of those who were dead and gone by dropping the rice-beer from the pot on the ground. If the new born baby is a boy, names of all dead male persons are uttered by associating a name with one drop of rice-beer. If the new born baby is a girl, the names of all females those were dead and gone are uttered by associating a drop of rice-beer with one name. The name thus associated with the last drop will automatically be the name of the newborn. During the name giving ceremony a bow and three arrows are kept beside the new born baby if it is a boy. If the new born baby is a girl, then a slashing knife and a head strap for carrying loads are kept. When the ceremony is over these articles are preserved under the thatch of the roof.¹²

5. DEATH :

The Khasis cremate the dead like the Jaintias and the Karbis. Just after death the person is washed and dressed and after putting the corpse in bed food articles, betel nut and betel leaves are offered. The corpse is kept inside the house for three to four days until all the relatives of the deceased arrive.

In the earlier days the rich men were cremated on stone platforms.¹³ The corpse is placed on the funeral pyre in an wooden coffin having four legs. Cremation ceremony is

12. Shadap Sen, Namita Catherine, The Origin and Early History of the Khasi Synteng people, Calcutta, 1981, Page-226.

13. Ibid, Page-229.

normally performed by a maternal uncle or his relation. When the cremation is over bones are collected by a maternal uncle and received by a maternal unt in a piece of white cloth. The bones are then kept in cist made of flat stones where specially prepared food articles, rice-beer, betel nuts and betel leaves are offered to the deceased. At a later date bones are collected from the cist by a male member of the family or a male relative and deposited in the clan repository or cairn.

Dalton has mentioned that although the ashes (bones) of a clan are deposited in the same vault, nevertheless, the remains of a man and his wife cannot be mingled together since both belong to different clans.¹⁴

SOCIAL LIFE

1. Law of inheritance :

It has already been mentioned that the Khasis like the Garos and the Jaintias have a matrilineal system of family structure and therefore, their system of inheritance is also matrilineal. The central figure of Khasi inheritance is, of course, KA-KHADDU or the youngest daughter who by virtue of her birth becomes the custodian of the family property. She lives in the ancestral house of the family whereas her brothers and elder sisters after marriage, leave the house of the mother to start homes of their own. Although the KA-KHADDU or the youngest daughter inherits the family property, nevertheless, the family property has actually been managed jointly by her elder brothers and uncles. Without consulting them, she cannot dispose of a part or the whole of the property.

In the book—'A study of the Land system in Meghalaya' it has been shown with illustrations that if KA-KHADDU gets herself converted into Christianity or any other religion

14. Dalton, E.T., Tribal History of Eastern India, (Reprint), New Delhi, 1987, P-56.

her right to inherit the ancestral property would automatically cease.¹⁵

If the youngest daughter dies without any daughter, her next elder sister inherits the ancestral property. If all the daughters are incapable of retaining the ancestral property because of absence of female issues, the property goes back to mother's sister, mother's sister's youngest daughter, etc.

2. LAND SYSTEM :

In the Khasi land system two types of land can be identified distinctively and they are RI-KYNTI lands and RI-RAID lands. The main difference between these two categories of land lies in ownership. While R-KYNTI lands are owned by the clans - each clan having a well demarcated area - RI RAID lands are owned by the whole community. In fact RI-RAID lands belong to the entire community of a specified area, distributed into a group of villages. RAID actually means a group of villages.¹⁶ In Assam all land belonging to the Khasi families fall within the above two categories.

As per their customary laws the clan members have the right of use and occupancy, the right of inheritance as well as the right of transfer on the R-KYNTI lands under their possession. But so far as the RI-RAID lands are concerned, the members of the community have the rights of use and occupancy and the right of inheritance only. They donot have the right of transfer.

In the Jhum land, of course, the land automatically reverts back to the community as soon as the plot of land is abandoned by the Jhumiya family.

Bhattacharjee, however, states that the traditional land tenure system among the Khasis consists of the following :

15. Das, J. N., A Study of Land System of Meghalaya, Guwahati, 1990, Page-135.

16. Ibid, PP 54-55.

- (I) RI RAID land or public land
- (II) RI KUR land or clan land and
- (III) RI KYNTI or private land.¹⁷

3. SOCIO-POLITICAL SET-UP :

The entire territory inhabited by the Khasis has several democratically elected chiefs or rulers called SYIEM. Every ruler has a DARBAR consisting of several officials including MANTRIES and village elders which assists him in discharging his duties. BAKHRAWS, BASANS, and LYNKSKORS are the other officials besides the MANTRIES. In each village or in a group of village the presiding headman is always assisted by a DARBAR.¹⁸

Socio-politically, the Khasis can be divided into three groups— (I) SYIEMS, WAHADADARS, SIRDARS and LYNKDOHS which constitute the ruling class ; (II) MANTRIES, BAKHRAWS, BASANS and LYNKSKORS which constitute the aristocratic class and (III) the common subjects or people.¹⁹

It may be mentioned here that the SYIEMship still continues. But their offices are nominal in nature since the District Council set-up under the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India has more or less deprived the SYIEMS of their traditional duties and responsibilities to a considerable extent. The village DARBARS as well as the DARBARS of the SYIEMS still settle disputes and try cases of minor nature.

It is also very interesting to note that although the Khasis have a matriarchal system of family structure,

17. Bhattacharjee, Dr. J.B. Changing Khasis, A Historical Account, The Tribes of North-east India, (Ed). Karo-temprel, Calcutta, 1984, P-325.
18. Das, J.N., A Study of the Land System of Meghalaya, Guwahati, 1990, P-53.
19. Shadep-Sen, N.C., The Origin and Early History of the Khasi-Synteng People, Calcutta, 1981, P-175.

nevertheless, the women were not allowed to participate in the traditional administrative set-up starting from the SYIEMSHAIP to village DARBAR.

4. CRIMES AND PUNISHMENT :

Murder, adultery, incest, rape, arson, robbery, etc, are considered to be heinous crimes and as per the customary laws of the Khasis, very severe punishments including capital punishment and imprisonment for life were inflicted in the bygone days. Even punishment for robbery or theft was of such a nature that the culprit was compelled to sit on a bamboo platform under which hot chillies were burnt. It is perhaps due to heavier doses of punishment inflicted upon the evil-doers that has led to the growth of the Khasi society to one with lesser number of crimes.

5. VILLAGES :

It is very interesting to note, that while most of the hill tribal communities living in the north-east, build their villages at the hill tops, the Khasis never build their villages at the hill top since it is a SANG meaning taboo. The hill top is considered to be the abode of its tutelary god. Secondly by building the villages below the summit they can protect the settlements from lightening, wind and storm.

A Khasi village is built on both sides of the main street and the villages are not shifted. In a Khasi village while building the houses, no distinction between the rich and the poor, chiefs, nobles and the commoners is made.

In building the Khasi houses while uniformity in regard to the building materials like thatch, timber, bamboo, mud plaster, etc, is maintained, there has not been uniformity in the housing designs. The traditional Khasi houses are build without nails since using of nails for construction of houses is a taboo.

RELIGIOUS LIFE :

The Khasi believe in one Supreme God called U BLE NONGTHAW whom they consider to be the Creator of all life and beings. Corresponding to this Supreme God there is also a female Goddess called KA BLEI SYNSHAR who is considered to be the protector and preserver of life. The Khasis refer to them as the parents of the members of the community.

The Khasis also believe in the existence of a number of smaller gods and goddesses or deities - benevolent as well as malevolent. They worship these spirits and other natural objects like the sacred groves, hills and their peaks, forests, rivers and even the great snake god called U THLEN.

The Khasis believe that the serpent god U THLEN might appear in various shapes. But the most common one is the shape of a python. This serpent god is considered to be the giver of wealth provided it is nourished with human blood by the family which keeps this spirit. It is believed that in the bygone days to appease this deity human sacrifice was also made most secretly. Those who nourish this serpent spirit are considered to be dangerous and such families are shunned by other Khasis.

The Khasis believe in the existence of heaven, life hereafter and rebirth. They also worship their ancestors so that the ancestors might protect their descendants and shower them with prosperity.

As regards Khasi religion Barkataki says thus—"....to a Khasi, his religion is a 'practice' or a 'way of life', it is something that he does. There are certain rules that have been set down for him to follow and to do with respect to U BLEI or KA BLEI (God), the ancestors, the spirits, and with respect to those that are living, his parents, uncles and unts, brothers and sisters, friends and relatives. But more, his everyday life is hemmed in with rituals and ceremonies. From the moment he gets up in the morning and starts

the fire for the day to the time that he creeps into the bed at night his life is one long series of ritual.²⁰

Majority of the Khasi families living in the two hill districts of Assam, however, have been converted into Christianity. Even then some of the religious rituals traditionally practised, have still been followed by the converted Khasis.

ECONOMIC LIFE :

Agriculture is the primary occupation of the Khasis. They practise wet rice cultivation as well as shifting or Jhum cultivation. But in wet rice cultivation they do not use plough. They prepare the land with hoe and harrow only. They also do wet rice cultivation in the terraces in the hill slopes with their own indigenous way of irrigation with rain water which is quite abundant in the monsoon season. In their Jhums they raise mixed crops. Besides rice, maize, millet, chillies and other vegetables are grown by them in the Jhum fields. They cultivate potatoes and various types of vegetables in the hill slopes. The Khasis are also good horticulturists and they produce large quantities of pineapples, oranges, nachpatis, bananas and many other fruits. In fact, the Khasis occupy an important place among the hill tribes of the North-East from the point of view of agriculture and agricultural production.

While weaving is a household industry almost among all the tribal communities of the North-East, the Khasi society is marked by its absence. The Khasis mainly depend on the Jaintias and Assam plains for the supply of their cloths.²¹

Bee-keeping is an important subsidiary industry or occupation among the Khasis.

The Khasis prefer to raise pigs to the rearing of other livestock such as cows, buffaloes, goats, etc. Fowls are

20. Barkataki, S.N., Tribes of Assam, New Delhi, 1969, P-39.

21. Shadap-Sen, N.C., The Origin and Early History of the Khasi-Synteng People, Calcutta, 1981, P-252.

reared by almost every household within the territorial jurisdiction of Assam.

The Khasis also produce various articles made of bamboo, combs, clasp-knives, betel nut boxes, etc. They have among them a good number of petty traders, shop-keepers, carpenters, blacksmiths, masons, service holders etc.

FOOD HABIT :

Like the other tribes of the North-East, rice is the staple food of the Khasis. Pork is a special delicacy for them. They are fond of beef also. Mutton and chicken are also favourite delicacies for them. Colonel Dalton says that they partake nearly all kinds of flesh and dried fish.²² But they never eat dog's meat since dog is considered by them as a true friend.²³

The Khasis generally partake two meals a day, in the morning—prior to leaving for works and in the evening. Chewing of battle leaves and betel nuts is very much common among them. Smoking is also a common sight. The Khasis drink not only rice beer and beer made from the root of a plant called KHAWIANG but also other alcoholic drinks. They drink tea very often without milk. The urbanized Khasis, however, drink tea with milk.

DRESSES :

The Khasis have their traditional dresses for men as well as for women. Since the Khasi women do not practise weaving, the traditional dress materials are collected from the plains of Assam.

The traditional dress for a Khasi man consists of a sleeveless coat with long fringes coming below the hem and

22. Dalton, E.T., Tribal History of Eastern India (Reprint), New Delhi, 1978, P-37.

23. Shadap Sen, N.A., The Origin and Early History of the Khasi-Synteng People, Calcutta, 1981, P-261.

a DHOTI made of silk, a CHADAR or shawl made of silk thrown loosely across the shoulder. The wealthier men use a silk turban also. During the bygone days, of course, a common Khasi man used a loin cloth tied with a long flap in front. The dresses used by the Khasi SYIEMS are, of course, most gorgeous indicating their aristocracy.

The Khasi women use a few pieces of cloths as their dresses and they are as follows :

KA JYMPIEM :

A garment tied around the waist which extends up to the knee. This is generally used by women as a working dress.

KA JAINSEM :

Those women of well-to-do families who are not required to work in the agricultural field wear a long piece of material made of Assamese Muga silk called KA JAINSEM over the KA JYMPIEM which hangs loosely from the shoulder to the ankle.

JAINKUP :

During winter the Khasi women put on a long cloak called JAINKUP by tying its two ends with a knot in front.

The married women while going out use a head-scruf. It is also very interesting to note that no Khasi woman leaves her house without a bag hanging from her shoulder. This bag generally contains all the ingredients for chewing betel nuts betel leaves.

ORNAMENTS :

The Khasis, like the other tribes, have their traditional ornaments made of gold and silver and coral beads. Gold plated bead necklaces are used not only by women but by men also during festive occasions. There were differently

designed earrings for women as well as for men. But now-a-day no Khasi man is found to have put on earrings. The educated section of the women has also given up the wearing of traditional ornaments.

CULTURAL LIFE :

A. Folk Literature :

The Khasis have many folk tales and mythological stories among them which have been handed down from generation to generation orally. Their folk songs are, however, limited.

B. Music :

The Khasis are great lovers of music. The peasants while working in the field sing folk melodies which are supposed to be composed during the last one hundred years.

They have different kinds of musical instruments. Their indigenous bamboo flute is called KA SHARATI. They use different sets of drums on different occasions. KA DUITARA is their most popular string instrument.

C. Sports :

Archery is the most popular game or pastime among the Khasis. Archery competitions are held intra-village and inter-villages and such tournaments lead them to gamble on results. Community hunting, bird-catching and fishing may be regarded as their favourable pastimes.

D. Festival :

The most important festival performed by the Khasis annually is called KA POMBLANG NONGKREM, popularly known as NONGKREM. This festival represents how democratic the Khasis are. In this festival the Khasi chiefs (SIEMS), their advisers, officers, priests and the common people in general participate without any class distinction

praying to their God to give them strength, peace and prosperity so that co-operation, fellow-feeling and a spirit of understanding could be development for the welfare; development and betterment of the entire Khasi society. Dancing during the entire period of the festival wearing gorgeous traditional dresses and ornaments by the Khasi men and women enhances the beauty of the festival.

CONCLUSION :

The Khasis are a distinct ethnic group and except the Jaintias or Pnars (Syntengs) they do not have similarities with other hill tribes of Assam as well as the north-east. They are not only hard-working people but consider it below their dignity to have two square meals a day without doing any work. That is why, one can hardly see a beggar in Khasi society. Although a section of the society has embraced Christianity, nevertheless their way of life, customs and traditions have undergone very little changes. In other words, the mere change of religion has not cut the members of the society off the roots.

Transformation has already taken place in the Khasi society. The efforts of the British Government as well as the Christian Missionaries specially in the field of spreading education and removal of illiteracy had paved the way for further development. After independence the district Councils and the various development departments have been also inducing changes through programmes involving peoples' participation. Even in their traditional land tenure systems where people were thinking in terms of entire community wherever land matters are concerned, a change in the form of individual assertion for possession has appeared in the recent years. The traditional leadership vested in their chiefs or SIEMS has now also been replaced by a new set of leaders inherent in the District Council set-up.

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10. Karotemprel, S. : The Tribes of North-East India.
11. Machenzie, A. : North-East Frontier.
12. Shadap-Sen, N.C. : The Origin and Early History of the Khasis-Synteng People.

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THE MECHEs

INTRODUCTION :

The Meches are a scheduled tribe in the plains districts of Assam. They are a numerically small tribe. Although their main concentration is found in the Mechpara area of present South Salmara subdivision of the Goalpara district, they are found in small pockets in Khowang area of Dibrugarh district and also in Parakhowa area of the Karbi Anglong District just on the border of the Nagaon District. In the Sonitpur district also some Mech villages are there. The Mech families who are at present found in Khowang area of Dibrugarh district had migrated from Goalpara district during pre-independence days. A good number of Mech families had migrated from the Goalpara district to the Dayang Reserved Forest Area of Golaghat District also bordering Nagaland and settled there.

2. ORIGIN AND RACIAL AFFINITY :

According to Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee the Meches are of Tibeto Burman origin and they belong to the great Bodo section of the Tibeto-Burman people and they are now in the course of rapid acculturation with the surrounding Bengal and Assamese speaking Hindus of North Bengal and Assam.¹

According to Dalton the Meches and the Kacharis refer to the same stock of people. Even if they are not one and the same people, at least they had a common origin. The Meches are found in the Goalpara district of Assam and the Terai areas of the Himalayan starting from 'Bhutan

1. Chatterjee, S. K., Foreward in the book, The Meches and the Totos by C.C. Sanyal, Darjeeling, 1973.

Duars' in the east and the Konki river in the west. Dalton also believes that the large tract called Mechpara which was under the Zamindar during the British regime took its name from the inhabitants, viz. the Meches. It is, of course, a fact that the Zamindar family of Mechpara belonged to the Rajbangshi community and not to the Mech community.³

Guha maintains that according to the History of Koch Behar, the Mechpara Zamindari was created by bifurcating the Bijni Zamindari. The first Zamindar of Mechpara was Bhagadatta Das Choudhury and the Mechpara Zamindar family members introduced themselves as Rajbangshi-Kshatriya.⁴ It now appears that while the tenants of the Zamindar of Mechpara were Meches, the Zamindar did not belong to the Mech community.

In ancient times the Kiratas in Kamrupa (ancient Assam) were called 'Mlecchas' and the term 'Mech' is a corruption of the term "Mleccha".⁴ Grierson also opines that 'Mech' is a corruption of 'Mleccha'.⁵ He also maintains that the Bodos living in Jalpaiguri and Terai areas call themselves Mech since they settled on the banks of the river Mechi.

Quoting Hamilton Buchanan in 'Jalpaiguri District Handbook on 1951 Census' it is stated that the Mech is a tribe of Kamrup.⁶

In Rev. Endle's book also we find that the Meches are regarded as one of the five branches of the Bodo race.

2. Dalton, E.T., Tribal History of Eastern India, (Reprint), New Delhi, 1978, p-28.
3. Guha, Amalendu, Zamindarikalin Goalpara Jilar Arthsa-majik Abastha : Ati Oaitihasic Distipat, Dhubri, 1984, p-28
4. Vasu, N., Social History of Kamrup, Vol-1, 1922, p-98.
5. Grierson, G.A., Linguistic Survey of India, Vol-III, part-II, 1903, p-1.
6. Mitra, A.K., Jalpaiguri District Handbook, 1951 Census, Appendix-III.

(Anderson's introduction Endle's book - the Kacharis.)

Gait regards the Kacharis as the original aborigines or earliest known inhabitants of the Brahmaputra Valley. According to him the Kacharis are identical with the people called Mech in Goalpara and North Bengal.⁸

Risley in his book the Tribes and Castes of Bengal (Vol-II) narrates a Limbu legend in regard to the origin of the Meches and the Dhimals. We may quote Risley here—"A singular reference to both Mech and Dhimal is met with in the legend that when the three brothers, their ancestores, were first dropped by gods from Heaven, they fell in Benares whence they wandered northward, seeking the place appointed for them to dwell in. So they came to Khachar, or mule-country as the Nepalese call the tract at the foot of the hills between the Brahmaputra and the Kosi rivers. There the youngest brother determined to settle and became the father of the Kochh, Dhimal and Mech, while the two others went further into the hills, and their descendants are the Limbus and Khambus of Nepal."⁹

Risely also mentions another story according to which the proper home of the Meches who have a close relationship with the Garos is Assam.¹⁰

According to some other scholars the Meches and the Dhimals are the descendants of the Nepalese. They were driven out of Nepal for breaking caste rules. They then settled in Khachar and established marital relationship with local women.¹¹

Risely, however, does not like to attach any historical values to these traditions or stories. In his own words 'With-

7. Endle, S., The Kacharis (Reprint), 1975 (Introduction by Anderson).
8. Gait, E., A History of Assam (Reprint), Guwahati 1984, p-247.
9. Risley, H.H., The Tribes and Castes of Bengal (Reprint), Calcutta, 1981, p-87.
10. Ibid, p-87.
11. Ibid, p-87.

out attaching any historical value to these traditions, we may perhaps infer from them that considerable intermixture of blood has taken place between the inhabitants of the hills and the plains, and that types originally distinct may in this way have been greatly modified and to some extent amalgamated. The process of fusion, however, has not yet gone so far as to render it impossible to discern in the Mech traces of a primary Mongolian stock while the Dhimal tribe appears to be connected by features and complexion with the black races, who may be conveniently designated aboriginal'.¹²

From the above discussions we can now come to definite conclusions in regard to the origin and racial affinity of the Meches.

The Meches and the Dhimals are two separate ethnic groups and the Meches are not the descendants of the Nepalese. Risley has pointed out that while the Meches are Mongolian stock of people, the Dhimals are not.

The Meches like the other Bodo groups are Indo-Mongoloids and they are one of the branches of the Kacharis. In course of their migration along with other Bodo-Kacharis following the river course of the Brahmaputra they might have settled in the lower Kamrup region (present Goalpara district) first. Some of them till went westward and entered into Jalpaiguri area and the Terai area of the Sub-Himalayan region and settled there.

Another important aspect that we have to consider here is as to whether the term Mech is a corruption of the term 'Mlecha'. It is a well known fact that in ancient Kamrupa those ethnic groups whom we regard as the scheduled tribes of Assam today were called Kirata (S.K. Chatterjee, *Kirata Jana Krti* 1951). These Kiratas were also called 'Mlecchas' by the non-Kiratas or Aryans. If the term Mech is a corruption of the term 'Mleccha', in that case all the ethnic groups covered by the generic term Kirata would have also been covered by the generic term 'Mleccha'.

12. Ibid, p-87.

The scholars have failed to prove why only a section of a specific ethnic group was called Mech which is supposed to be a corruption of the term 'Mleccha'. Hence we do not agree that the term Mech is a corruption of the term 'Mleccha'.

Gait expresses his doubt as to whether Hariya Mandal, the progenitor of Koch kings who was resident of Chikangram village in the Khuntaghat Pargana of the Goalpara District was a Mech or Koch. According to him whether the twelve families namely, Panbar, Phedela, Phedphedo, Barihana, Kathia, Gubar, Megha, Baisagu, Jagai, Gurikata, Jugbar and Dakhura of which Hariya Mandal was the leader or patriarch were actually Meches or Koches is yet to be ascertained. Gait, However, admits that the names of the families are Bodo names.¹³

3. DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS :

The Meches are a numerically small tribe. It can be pointed out here that many of them do not like to introduce themselves as Mech. In the Khowang area of Dibrugarh district if a member of this community is asked to what tribe he or she belongs, the answer would be Kachari. If he or she is again asked to what section of the Kachari he or she belongs — the answer would be Mech Kachari.

According to 1971 Census the total Mech population of Assam was 2570. They constituted 0.02 per cent of the total population of the State ; 0.16 per cent of the total tribal population, hills and plains combined and 0.19 per cent of the total plains tribe population.

The Meches are quite advanced from the point of view of literacy. As per 1971 Census the Meches have the highest percentage of literacy among all the nine plains tribes of Assam. It was 30.58 per cent against the State percentage of literacy viz. 28.17. Literacy level among the males and females is also found to be slightly higher than that of the State level of literacy. The percentages of literacy among

13. Gait, Edward, *A History of Assam* (Reprint), Guwahati 1984, p-48.

the males and the females are 39.66 and 21.64 respectively as against 36.7 and 18.6 at the State level.

4. SOCIAL LIFE :

A. Clans

A clan is called 'Ari' by the Meches and they have five principal clans having different origins. Below they are described briefly :

(I) SAMPRAMARI OR CAMPRAMARI :

In regard to the origin of this clan, there is an interesting story. It is believed that when the people of this sept were cooking their food, they were attacked by an enemy so suddenly that they were compelled to flee leaving the half-cooked food called Sampram.

This clan (Ari) is considered to be a highly placed one since the members of this clan has to provide priests for the celebration of socio-religious ceremonies.

(II) NARZINARI OR NARZENARI :

Narzin or Narzen literally means a kind of tree. The members of this clan, whose position is just below the priestly clan Sampramari, are supposed to have originated from a tree.

(III) BASUMATARI :

The members of this clan are supposed to have originated from mother (Mata) earth (Basu).

(IV) MOCHARI OR MOSHARI

Mocha or Mosha means a tiger. The members of this clan are supposed to have originated from a tiger.

(V) HAJOARI :

The members of this clan trace their origin to a Hajo, meaning a hill.

In addition to these five principal clans or Aris, the Meches have other four clans also based on occupations. They are as follows :

- (a) Bargao - ari meaning village leaders (Mandal)
- (b) Doi-ma-ari meaning riverine people.
- (c) Goya-ari meaning people who grow arecanut.
- (d) Khatlou-ari meaning growers of sweet ground (Khatlou).

It is worthwhile to mention that the Bodo-Kacharis in Assam have 23 clans and like the Meches, a clan is called Ari in their language also. Although there are slight differences in the spellings, all the five principal clans as well as three occupational clans, viz. Borgaori, Doimari and Goyari of the Meches are also found among the Bodo-Kacharis. The clan Khatlauari is, of course, not found in the list of the Aris of the Bodo-Kacharis. The presence of similar clans between these two people clearly indicates that the Meches and the Bodo-Kacharis are one and the same people although the Meches have so long been treated as a separate tribe.

B. Marriage :

The clans of the Meches are exogamous and hence no marriage can take place between a boy and a girl belonging to the same clan. But this has now been relaxed. The Meches generally marry within their tribe. They also come into marriage contact with the Bodo-Kacharis. In the Khowang, area of Dibrugarh district we have found instances of inter marrying with other castes specially with the members of the Other Backward Classes. Such inter marriages are taking place without any social inhibition. Marrying outside their own tribe does not lead to ex-communication from the society unlike the Dimasa Kacharis of the North Cachar Hills. Society willingly absorbs such persons into its fold. Gait says that in the past the Meches and the Koches intermarried freely. But the conversion of the Koches to Hinduism had led to discontinuance of this practice.¹⁴ In

14. Gait, Edward, A History of Assam (Reprint), Guwahati 1984, p-47.

Goalpara district we have found instances of inter marriage among the Meches, Rabhas, Garos and Koches but not with Koch-Rajbangshis.

Many of the old customs and customary laws governing the Mech marriages are not prevalent at present due to changes brought about by modernism as well as the spread of literacy. However we are making an attempt here to narrate their marriage customs in the bygone days on the basis of data collected by interviewing the aged persons of the community.

In those days marriages were settled by mothers and elderly women of the family. Bride price called JAN was paid in cash and it varied according to the accomplishment and beauty of the concerned girl. The marriage ritual was very much simple. The marriage contract was established simply by exchanging betel nuts and betel leaves between the bride and the groom in presence of elderly persons. The completion of the marriage ceremony was marked by organising a feast at the residence of the bridegroom in which the bride was to serve the groom with food first and then the other guests. The bride was required to go the house of the bridegroom where the actual marriage took place. It may be mentioned here that this system viz. the bride going to the bridegroom's house for the celebration of the actual marriage is prevalent among the Bhils of Rajasthan and Gujrat and the author had the opportunity of witnessing such a marriage in a Bhil village of Gujrat situated on the Rajasthan border on the bank of the river Sabarmati.

Now some of the above mentioned old traditions and customs have already be abandoned by the Meches of Assam. The payment of bride price is now looked down upon by the educated sections of the Meches. If insisted at all, only a token bride price is paid to satisfy the traditionally bound old parents of the bride. Although in the past only elderly women including mothers could settle the negotiated marriage, now elderly members of both the sexes take part. Now-a-days

the marriages are performed with rituals and ceremonies depending on the religious faiths of the concerned families and the bride also does not go to the house of the bridegroom for the celebration of the actual marriage. It is the bridegroom who now goes to the bride's house for the celebration of the actual marriage.

Widow marriage is prevalent among them. The widow of the elder brother can be married by the unmarried younger brother. But the widow of the younger brother can never be married by the elder brother.

Divorce is allowed but it is not common. The procedure of divorce is also very simple. The headman of the village tears a betel leaf into pieces while one side is held by the husband and the other side is held by the wife in the presence of the village elders. The divorce is immediately effected.

Child marriage is not prevalent. Marriage take place only between a grown-up boy and a grown-up girl, the marriageable age for a boy being 25 years around and for a girl being 20 years around.

After marriage a wife is supposed to be faithful to him. Risley has mentioned about a peculiar usage found to be prevalent among the Meches through which they could detect conjugal infidelity of their wives. We may quote him here—"In the courtyard of every Mech house a Sij plant (*Euphorbia Indica*) is carefully tended as the abode of the god Siva and as the emblem of conjugal fidelity. Should the leave of this plant wither, this is supposed to show that something is wrong with one of the women of the household. Rice is deposited under the tree, and on the next day a Panchayat is called, before which all the women are summoned and a handful of rice is given to each to chew. She who fails to masticate her portion is held guilty of unchastity and if married, is at once turned out of the house. If it is an unmarried girl who breaks down in the chewing ordeal

she is called upon to disclose the name of her parmour, so that arrangements may be made to get her married at once".¹⁵

C. Birth :

Since Tuesdays and Saturdays are considered inauspicious by the Meches, a pregnant woman is not allowed to go out alone on these days. After delivery a piece of iron or a knife is placed below the bed for the protection of the mother and the new born baby from the evil spirits. The Meches donot have professional midwife. Experienced elderly women of the village and of the household help the woman at the child birth. The umbilical chord is cut by the sharp edge of a slip of green bamboo skin by five strokes in case of a male child and seven strokes in case of a female child. A name is given to the new born child just after the cutting of umbilical chord. If the child is found to be still-born, they believe that the child was killed by an evil spirit called GOTHAMODAI.

D. Family :

Like the Bodo-Kacharis, the Meches also follow the patrilineal system of family structure. The line of descent is traced through the father only. Most of them have joint or extended family. Married brothers and sons generally stay in the same house. After marriage the boys, whether brothers or sons, donot like to live in separate houses unless the head of the family considers such separations essential. Girls after marriage live with their husbands in the parent-in-laws' houses.

The joint family as well as the extended family is now breaking up due to the spread of education and some other factors brought about by modernism. We have now seen that the educated section of the Meches goes for nuclear family system. Such changes, when come from within, cannot

15. Risley, H.H., The Tribes and Castes of Bengal, Vol-II. (Reprint), Calcutta, 1981, page-89.

be stopped although the elderly people may not have a liking for them.

E. Inheritance :

The Meches, being patriarchal, the customary laws allow only the sons to inherit property at the death of their father. The daughters, whether married or unmarried, have no rights over the property of the family. A daughter cannot inherit her father's property even if there are no sons in the family. Under such cases, the property is inherited by the nearest male kin of the deceased person. It is, however, the duty of the son to look after his widowed mother and also his unmarried sisters, elder or younger.

F. Houses :

The traditional housing pattern of the Meches does not differ with the traditional housing pattern of the Bodo-Kacharis of Assam. Like the Bodo-Kacharis their traditional house contains four huts constructed on the four sides of the courtyard. The northern hut meant for the parents is the biggest and it is in this hut the goddess of wealth called MAINOU resides. The houses are constructed with locally available raw materials like timber, bamboo, thatch, etc. Now many families replace the thatched roofs with C.I. sheets. The Meches living in the Khowang area of Dibrugarh district have already abandoned the traditional housing pattern. All the Mech families who have not been converted to Christianity or who have not yet accepted the other forms of Hindu faith like the Brahma cult of Kalicharan Brahma or the Vaishnava cult of Shri Sankardev, however, keep a Siju plant (*Euphorbia Indica*) in the north-eastern corner of the courtyard enclosed by five layers of bamboo trellis. This Siju plant is considered to be the abode of their Great God—Bathou (Siva).

G. Food habites :

The food habits of the Meches do not fundamentally differ from those of the other plains tribes of Assam. They take two principal meals daily - one during mid-day and the other in the evening. Prior to going for work in the morning they generally take some light food consisting of boiled stale rice with salt, chillies, burnt fish, etc, as a kind of breakfast. Their mid-day and evening meals consist of boiled rice and vegetable curry with fish, dried or recently caught with chillies. Occasionally they take pig meat (pork), meat of pegeons, fowls, ducks, etc. Formerly they used to take buffalo meat also.

Coming to the drinks we find that the Meches drink tea in most cases without sugar and milk. Unlike some tribal communities of Assam they do not have aversion towards drinking of milk or drinking of tea with milk. Their most favourite drink, however, is rice-beer brewed at home. There is no hard and fast rule as to when and how much rice beer called JOU one should drink or consume. Rice-beer is a must in the performance of socio-religious festivals as well as for the entertainment of guests. Offering of JOU to Bathu (Siva) is, of course, a taboo.

They smoke tobacco and chew betel nuts and betel leaves. But they are not addicted to opium eating and smoking of hemp.

H. Death and death rituals :

The Meches cremate as well as bury their dead depending on the circumstances in which death has taken place and also the social status and economic conditions of the concerned families. In this connection Risley mentions as follows :

"Those who can afford a funeral to burn the dead, while the poorer members of the tribe bury, placing the corpse face upwards with the head pointing towards the south. In the latter case a small fire is kindled upon the grave, in

which food and drink are burned for the benefit of the deceased."¹⁶

Death is considered by the Meches as a natural phenomenon of life and hence large wailing serves no purpose. After death the feet of the corpse is always kept towards north so that the legs might carry the deceased to Kailash where their God Bathou (Siva) lives. In other words a dead man or woman is supposed to go to Kailash after death.

Death due to committing suicide, death due to killing by a tiger or an elephant are always considered inauspicious and hence such death should not be considered equivalent to usual death. The dead body of a person killed by a tiger or by an elephant or due to committing suicide must not be cremated. Dead bodies of such persons should be buried only. In this connection it may be mentioned that the Karbis also consider death in the hand of a tiger to be the most ominous. Not to speak of cremating the dead body of such a person, even burying it in the TIPIT, the cremation ground belonging to clan members of a village, is not allowed.

Another important fact that requires mention here is that the dead bodies can be carried to the cremation/burial ground only by the members of the clan to which the deceased belongs.

Death ceremony is performed in accordance with their customs and traditions on the eighth or twelfth day as may be fixed by the village headman in consultation with the village elders. On the day of the Sradha the village people and the relatives of the deceased are to be entertained with a feast. Help and co-operation are extended by every family not only with manual labour but also with provisions of food and drink like rice, Jou (rice-beer), fowls, betel leaves and betel-nuts, etc.

16. Risley, H.H., Tribes and Castes of Bengal (Reprint) Calcutta 1981, pp-89,90.

5. RELIGIOUS LIFE :

According to Risley the religion of the Meches is still in an early stage of transition from animism to Hinduism. They describe themselves as Hindus of the Saiva sect and worship Siva called Bathou and his consort Kali called Bali Khungri.¹⁷

Sanyal mentions that Meches believe in the existence of a soul in every tree and the souls are transferable to human beings and animals and vice versa. The worship of the Siju plant (*Euphorbia Indica*) in every Mech household is a kind of tree worship although this plant represents Siva.¹⁸

From the point of view of religion the Meches can be divided into three sections, viz.—(I) Those who are still professing the traditional religion, (II) those who have accepted the religion propogated by Kali Charan Brahma and (III) those who have accepted Christianity.

Those who are still following their traditional religion, Bathou or Siva is the Premier God for them. He is represented by the Siju plant (*Euphorbia Indica*) planted in the north-eastern side of the courtyard. For his appeasement every family worships him by offering sacrifices. Apart from this he is also worshipped once in a year by all the villagers in a specific place. They also worship Bathou-Buroi or Bali Khungri (Parvati or Kali), the consort of Siva and Mainao, the goddess of wealth (Lakshmi).

Those who have accepted the Brahma religion, they do not worship Bathou, Bathou-Buroi and Mainao. For them there is only one God - Brahma. Their principles are based on Vaisnavism. Hence in the performance of their religious rites no sacrifice of animals and birds and no offering of rice-beer are essential.

Those who have converted themselves into Christianity, they perform the religious ceremonies, functions and rites

17. Ibid, p-89.

18. Sanyal, C.C., The Meches and the Totos, Darjeeling, 1973, p-12.

according to the Christian religion. But the number of such converted families are few and far between.

The Meches believe that the diseases are caused by the malevolent spirits and each disease has a presiding malevolent spirit. Their medicineman is called Ojha or Dousi. He uses herbal medicines and propitiates the specific presiding spirit for the cure of the patient. Now-a-days, however, the people prefer modern medicines but this does not mean that the Ojha has no place in the society.

6. ECONOMIC LIFE :

Agriculture is the primary and basic occupation of the Meches. Like the other plains tribes they are also settled cultivators practising wet-rice-cultivation. Cultivation with a plough and a pair of bullock is a common site in the Mech area. Besides cultivation of rice, the Meches inhabiting Goalpara district cultivate jute also to a limited extent. Like the Bodo-Kacharis they have also an institution of mutual help and co-operation called 'Sauri'. This is an instance of village co-operation in which all the villagers help in cultivation, either tilling the land or transplanting paddy seedlings or harvesting the crop of a family where there is no man-power to till the lands or to transplant the paddy seedling or to harvest the crop. This 'Sauri' system is applicable to the other forms of activities like the construction or repair of a dwelling house. Here the question of payment for the services does not arise.

Although small in size, the Meches have horticultural gardens also. Seasonal vegetables are also cultivated by them.

Animal husbandry plays an important role in their economic life. They rear cows, buffaloes, goats, pigs fowls, ducks etc. Women in the families generally look after these animals and birds. Pigs have a very good market and raising of pigs, therefore, has become a very lucrative activity for them.

Weaving in the family looms and rearing of Endi are not only favourable pastimes for the ladies, but are also important cottage industries for them. Most of the domestic requirements of cloths specially for the womenfolk are met from the family looms. Rearing of Endi brings a substantial income to the family. The Endi cocoons are sold in the local markets and also to the village Mahajans. Many families produce Endi scarfs for women as well as for men in their family looms.

The Meches are good hunters. But they have practically abandoned hunting due to lack of games in the nearby forests. The stringent forest laws for preservation of wild animals and birds have compelled them to stop hunting in the Reserved Forests. The Meches are also expert fishermen. They do fishing in rivers, streams and in the Beels.

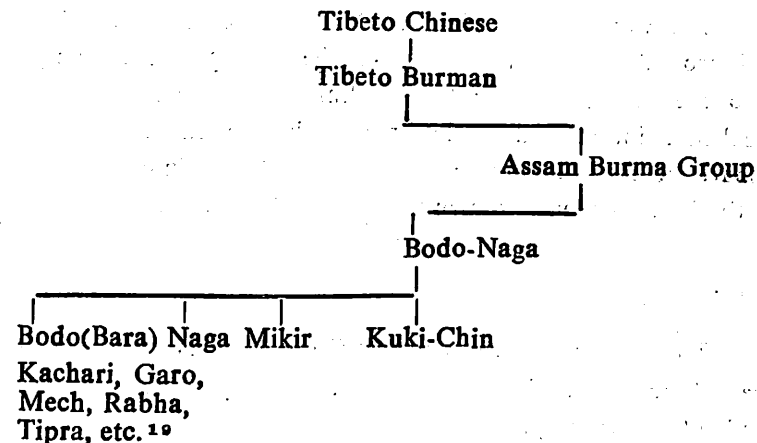
The Meches are expert in manufacturing bamboo and cane goods. In fact their domestic requirements are produced by themselves.

The Meches have taken advantages of tribal Sub-Plan schemes, Point-II (B) of the 20 point programme, I.R.D.P., Nehru Rojgar Yojana, Trysem, etc. From the point of view of economy, however, the Meches inhabiting the Dibrugarh district are better placed than those who are found to inhabit the Goalpara district.

7. CULTURAL LIFE :

A. Language :

The Meches have their own language which is more or less similar to that of the languages spoken by the Bodo-Kacharis of Assam. The Mech language has been classified as a language belonging to Tibeto-burman group. According to S.K. Chatterjee it is also a speech of the Bodo-Naga group. He has shown this in a tabular form given below (only the relevant portion is shown here) :



Grierson does not consider Mech to be a separate language although it is spoken by a section of a people whom he does not consider to be a distinct separate tribe. He agrees with Hodgson when the latter opines that Mech and Bodo are the same. It will be worthwhile to quote Grierson here :

"It is very doubtful whether Mech should be considered as a dialect of plains Kachari, or as identical with the standard of that form of speech. If we take the plains Kachari of Darrang as the standard, the difference between it and Mech are certainly very slight, and are principally matters of pronunciation ; ..."²⁰

The Meches living in upper Assam, however, have forgotten their own language and they speak Assamese only.

B. Dresses :

The Meches have their traditional dresses and these are almost similar to those put-on by the Bodo-Kacharis. The men put-on a Dhuti called 'Gamcha' which is woven at the family loom. The breadth of the Gamsa is one meter or so. They also use a kind of waist coat made of either Endi or cotton and it is called Bodo-Busta.

19. Chatterjee, S.K., Kirata Jana Krti, 1951, p-13,14 & 15.

20. Grierson, G.A., Linguistic Survey of India, (Reprint), Vol-III p-36.

The women use a piece of home woven cloth which is tied around the chest just below the arm pit which hangs upto the knees. It is called Dokhna. The plain Dokhna is called Thinthai and the designed Dokhna is called Dokhna Ashar. It may be mentioned here that the main cloth used by the Bodo-Kachari women is also called Dakhna.

ORNAMENTS :

The Meches have their traditional ornaments which are, of course, a few in number. All the ornaments are made of silver only.

The following ornaments are used by women :

CHANDRHAR It is a heavy necklace having five layers. It may be mentioned that the Bodo-Kacharis in the plains of Assam and the Dimasa Kacharis in the North Cachar Hills also use the same kind of silver necklace called Chandrahar.

THAKAN SIRI It is silver chain worn around the neck.

MUTHA It is a designed bangle about 6 cm in length. This is also worn by the Bodo-Kacharis and they call it Asan Mutha.

ASAN It is a flat bangle with ornamental designs.

PUTI Small earring put on at ear lobes.

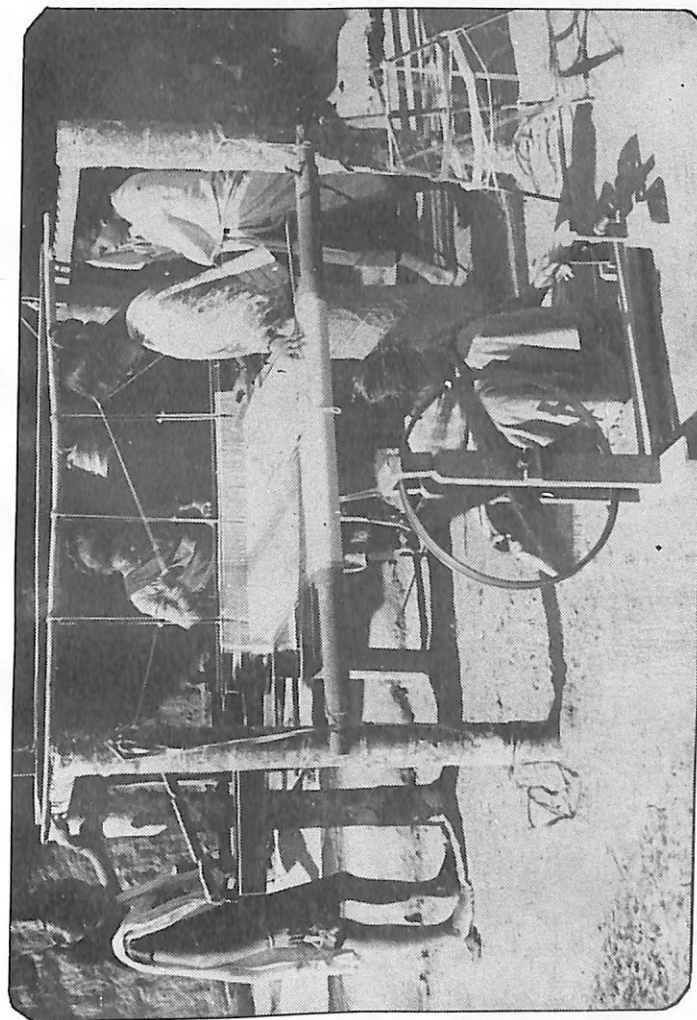
NAK-PHUL It is a small flower knob worn at the nose through a whole made earlier.

BULAKI It is a nose pendent.

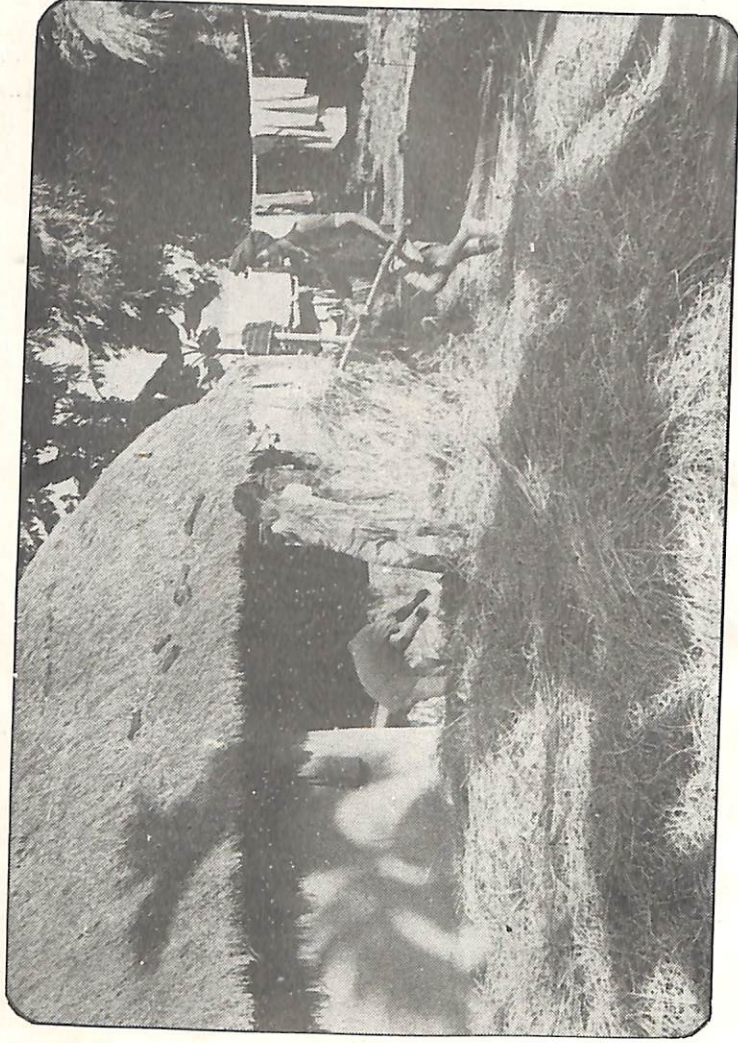
It may also be mentioned that there are no ornaments specifically meant for men except finger rings.

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS :

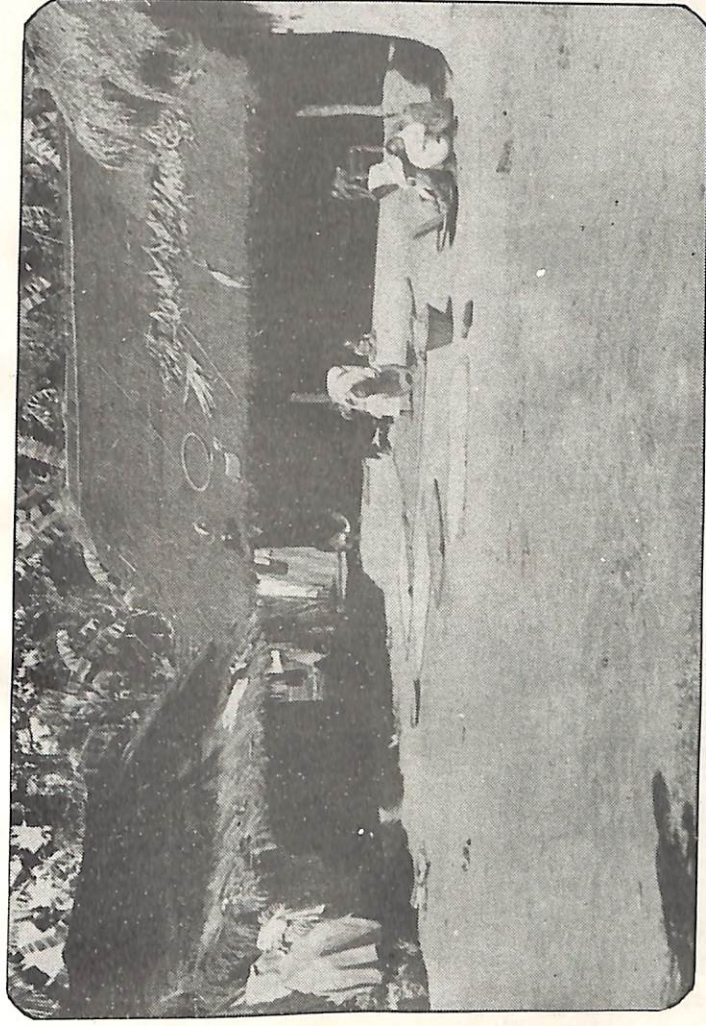
At present only two musical instruments are found to have been used by the Meches and they are - KHAM or



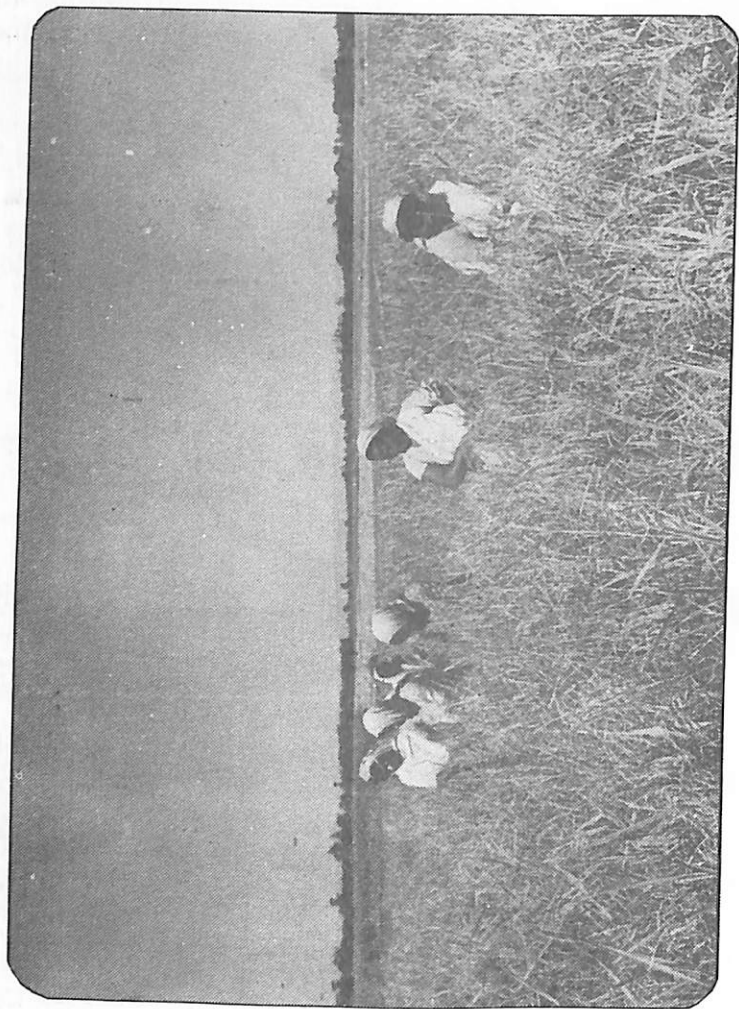
Mech girls concentrating on their family loom.



Family members of a Mech family are seen busy in threshing paddy.



Two Mech women seen busy in household activities. In the background houses are seen.



Mech women harvesting paddy.

the drum and the SIPHUNG or the flute. The two instruments have no difference with the KHAM and SIPHUNG of the Bodo-Kacharis. While the Bodo-Kachris use a string instrument called SERZA, which appears to be a kind of indigenous violin, the Meches have no such string instrument at present. They are also not sure if such a string instrument was used by their forefathers in the past.

So far their dances are concerned no detailed materials could be gathered except the following :

MOSANAI

This dance is performed by young girls in their traditional dresses with ornamental designs showing how peacocks dance when they are happy. This dance can be compared to the Bagrumba dance performed by the Bodo-Kachari girls.

BORAINAI

This dance is performed by young Mech girls in their traditional dresses while welcoming important guests or visitors to their village. In fact the guests are welcomed considering them as if they were gods.

DOSA THOI-LONG NAI

This is a very important religious dance performed at the Bathou Puja or worshipping of their God Siva. In this dance the priestess called Deodini dances with a bowl on her head in which the blood of a sacrificed fowl is kept. It is believed that while the Deodini performs this dance in a condition of trance lord Bathou (Siva) will snatch away the bowl and drink the blood.

FOLK SONGS :

From the point of view of folk songs the Meches are quite resourceful. They have specific songs to suit every occasion.

They have a song called Jal-ke-cal which literally means to fetch water. This song is sung by the ladies while they go to fetch water from the nearby stream or river in a group. They have their marriage songs, lullaby, cow-tending songs and many religious songs. Collection of these folk songs in a scientific and systematic way will not only be a treasure but will also throw many hitherto unknown aspects of the life and culture of the Meches.

CONCLUSION :

In this brief ethnographic note an idea regarding the origin, life and culture of the Meches, a plains tribal community of Assam is attempted to be presented in a systematic way. In this connection it is worthwhile to mention that there are practically no literatures on this unmerically small tribe.

From our discussion presented in this ethnographic note it is obvious that the Meches are one of the sections of the Bodo-Kachari tribe. Since they have more or less been isolated from the main stream of Bodo-Kachari group for centuries together, there is bound to occur some regional differences in their life, culture and way of life including their language. In fact the earlier writers have made no distinction between the Bodo-Kacharis and the Meches.

Changes are inevitable in any living society and the Maches are not exception to this. The changes are markedly visible among the Meches of upper Assam who happened to migrate there from the lower Assam areas during the British regime. Their acculturation and assimilation with the neighbouring people have brought changes to their life and culture to the greatest extent possible.

The Meches are a peace-loving people and their physical features are similar to those of the Bodo-Kacharis. In fact from the point of view of physical feature, the two communities are not distinguishable. It has already been mentioned that the Meches have the highest percentage of literacy among all the plains tribes of Assam as per 1971 Census and their percentage of literacy was higher than the State average. This is due to their progressive outlook and selfconsciousness. Because of their higher percentage of literacy, they are better employed. Their (menfolk) principal avenues of employment are the Police Department of the State - regular Police and Police Battalion - as well as para-military forces. They have also been deriving benefits from various developmental schemes implemented under the Tribal Sub-plan and by agencies like District Rural Development Agency, Assam Plains Tribes Development Corporation, Tribal Development Authority, etc. It is observed that their urge for development has manifested itself from within and it is a good sign of a dynamic society.

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