SELECTED ESSAYS ON TRIBES AND CASTES OF ASSAM

Part-I

Dr. G. C. Sarmah Thakur

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Dedicated to
Late Prof. Madhab Chandra Goswami,
Department of Anthropology, Gauhati University
who initiated me into the field of
social Anthropology.

PREFACE

The Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled Castes, Guwahati under the aegis of Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, have been providing grants-in-aid to authors for publication of books written on different aspects of tribals and scheduled castes. The scheme is known as 'Grants-in-Aids for Literary Works for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.' The scheme receives very good response from different authors. In fact, it is difficult to accommodate all the authors under the scheme. As a part of this popular scheme, the book on ***Selected Essays on Tribes and Castes of Assam (Part-I)*** by ***Dr. Ganesh Ch. Sharma Thakur*** has been sponsored by the Institute for publication. It is expected that the readers will receive the book with pleasure. We look forward to comments and suggestions from the readers.

I am grateful to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, and Welfare of Plains Tribes and Backward Classes Department, Government of Assam for providing financial assistance for implementation of the scheme.

I also offer my thanks to the officers and staff of this Directorate for their help and cooperation.

Finally, I like to thank M/s. Bohniman Printers, Guwahati for their help and cooperation in bringing out the book.

(G.C. Kakati)
Joint Director
Assam Institute of Research for
Tribals and Scheduled Castes.
Guwahati-22

Content

1.	Introduction	7-14
2.	The Autochthones of the Brahmaputra Valley and Their Contributions Towards The Cultural Heritage of Assam	15-25
3.	The Plains Tribe of Assam Spatial Pattern of Clustering and Concentration	26-36
4.	Strategies for Scheduled Tribe and Scheduled Caste Development in Assam	37-48
5.	Acculturation, Assimilation and Retribalism Relating to the Ethnic Groups of Assam	49-60
6.	Tribal Elements in assamese culture Socio-Cultural Consequences of Tribal Development : With Special Reference to the Scheduled Tribes of Assam	61-83
7.	Area Restriction–the Constitutional Constraint of Tribal Development in the Autonomous District Council of Karbi Anglong	84-94
8.	Nehru's vision of tribes and tribAl welfare The Sixth Schedule and Apprehension of Identity Crisis Among the Karbis of Assam – A Few observations.	95-113
9.	The Forest-human interface Some Reflection on Endogenous Arrange-Ment of Land in Traditional Tribal Society	114-125
10.	An Overview of the Ethnographic Study on the Plains Tribes of Assam in the Pre Independence Period	126-134
11.	Some Traditional Institutions of the Karbis, Mishings, Deoris, Lalungs (Tiwas), Sonowal Kacharis of Assam	135-141
12.	Indegenous Health Practices and System of Cure Among the Tribes of Assam Plains Problems of Marketing Among the Plains Tribes of Assam	142-157
13.	The Matrix of Assamese Culture	158-161
14.	Property Rights With Special Reference to Inheritence Rights of Women in the Boro Kachari Society of Assam	162-170
15.	Religious Beliefs and Folk Deities of the Boro Kacharis, Deoris, Mishings, Rabhas, Tiwas (Lalungs), Sonowal Kacharis and Barmans of Cachar	171-185
16.	A-Religious Beliefs and Folk Deities of the Boro Kacharis	186-194
17.	Social Status of the Karbi Women as Reflected in the Socio-Cultural Life and Legends of the karbis.	195-200
18.	Ethno Medicine and Tribal Health	201-207
19.	Women in Tribal Development in Assam – Condition and Meaning of Their Involvement	208-214
20.	Change of Traditional Diatary Habit and Its Impact on Tribal Health and Economy	215-219
21.	Religious Beliefs and Folk Deities of the Dimasa Kacharis and Karbis of Assam	220-225
22.	Characteristic Features of the Hill Tribal Communities with Special Reference to their Customs, Taboos, Beliefs and the Role of Traditional Institutions Among Them	226-248

INTRODUCTION

No other social groups dominate the Social Demographic sphere in India and for that matter in Assam, than the tribes and castes. Very often these terms have been used as synonymous. Various scholars, Anthropologists, Sociologists have defined the tribe possessing characteristic features like kinship ties, common dialect, joint ownership of property, one political organisation, a common territory and a traditional defence mechanism in the form of youth dormitories. The Imperial Gazetteer defined tribe as collection of families bearing a common name, a common dialect, a common territory and endogamous marital behaviour. In the distant past these characteristics were more or less similar with tribes and castes. In course of time distinctive features have developed in the social organisation and a tribe caste continuum became a force to reckon with. "It is believed that most of the lower and exterior castes of today were formerly tribes. Actually the earliest reference to the Hindu caste system mention there Aryan castes and a forth or a fourth and a fifth caste or Sudra and Chandala comprised the dark skinned, noseless tribal people. This process of incorporation of tribes into castes has, therefore proceeded ever since the coming of the Aryan speaking people into India."[1]

The present day trend of defining a tribe with features like primitive traits, traditional tribals characteristics, geographical isolation, Shyness of contact with the community at large and backwardness are by and large applicable in case of castes also although untouchability is the main criterion for determining a caste, Kroeber, a renowned Anthropologist puts stress on "a characteristic folk culture or tribal culture belongs to a small isolated close knit society in which person to person relations are prevalent, kinship is a dominant factor and organisation both social and cultural is

1. Majumder, D.N. Madan T.N. 1956 An Introduction to Social Anthropology Asia Publishing House, Calcutta, P 243
2. Kroeber 1967 Antropology. 281

therefore largely on basis of kinship as in many other clans and societies. But contrast political institutions are weakly developed."[2]

While discussing the tribe and caste situation in Assam we cannot avoid reference to the tribes and castes of North Eastern India, a veritable tribal museum of more than 200 tribes with variations culturally, linguistically and even socio politically, comprising, eight states almost all of whom constituted greater Assam under the common ethnicity called Indo Mongoloids. The present ethnic complexity of Assam dates back to pre British days. The tribal populations of the region speak different dialects having distinct socio cultural relations distinguishable from one another. Entering into this region at different times the ethnic groups became autochthones. Although generally the tribes belong to Mongoloid stock, yet Australoid elements also become discernable. Besides, many tribes living in the plains of Assam possess certain Cancasoid strains, The Indo Mongoloids of this region have two distinct linguistic divisions viz Tibeto Burman and Siamese Chinese. The Thais are one of the major sub divisions of the latter group. In this sub division we find the Tai Ahoms, Tai Phakes, Tai Turungs Tai Aitonias, Tai Khamyangs and Tai Khamtis.

Unlike other states of the Indian Union, the ethnic communities of Assam have been divided into two broad categories viz tribes living in the two Autonomous hill districts and tribes of other than the Autonomous districts or plains tribes.

After Independence the hill tribal people demanded regional autonomy. The Interim Government of India in 1947 had to consider their demand as the outgoing British administrators gave assurances to the hill people in this regard. Thus in order to address the grievances of the hill people the Constituent Assembly appointed a committee known as Bordoloi Committee (North East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas Committee) under the Chairmanship of Gopinath Bordoloi with Rev. J. J. M Nichols Roy, Rupnath Brahma and Mayang Nokcha (later replaced by Aliba Imti Ao) as members. The committee toured extensively the then North East Provinces. In some places they had to face

serious opposition. The chairman lamented, "The point presented before us whether we should raise in them (tribals) the spirits of enmity and hatred by application of force or whether we should bring them up under the broad principle of Government by good will and love." Members of the Constituent Assembly like Kuladhar Chaliha and Rohini Kumar Choudhury criticised the special treatment as they feared that would perpetuate the colonial policy of isolation and 'tribalstan'. Chaliha said in the second reading of the resolution of the Sixth Schedule on 5th September 1949. 'If you see the background of the schedule you will find that the British mind is still there. There is the old separatist tendency and you want to keep them away from us. You will thus be creating, a Tribalstan' just as you have created a Pakistan'. Dr. Ambedkar, however convinced the members that Tribal Council will not be free from the executive power of the Government of Assam Thus Article 244 (2) was incorporated in the constitution forming District Council under the Sixth Schedule to provide the hill tribals with a simple administration of their own.

The plains tribes were left out of the Article 244 (1) as they were thought to be tolerably advanced. They were and still are, enjoying the privileges of reservation of seats in the parliament and state Assembly plus other benefits granted to them by executive authority.

As per the latest Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes order (Amendment) Act of 2002, there are fifteen tribes in the list of two hill districts. But as per the 1976 SC and ST. orders (Amendment) Act there were fourteen hill tribes and nine plains tribes. Thus in the new list one more (Lalungs) group has been incorporated in the hill tribal list while two new ethnic groups have been included in the plains tribal list Besides three hills tribal communities i.e. Dimasa, Hajong and Garo are also included in the plains tribal; list. In fact only two tribes i.e. Khamtis and Singphows constitute new additions totalling twenty five scheduled tribes in Assam. It may be mentioned that the figures of tribes in the hill tribal list will be more as several sub tribes are clubbed in one major tribe. For instance in serial No. 7 (Any Kuki tribes) as

many as thirty seven sub groups are included.

Of late Autonomous District Council status has been extended to some of the plains tribes like Boros. Rabhas, Tiwas (Lalung), Mishings (Miri), Deoris, Sonowal Kacharis and Thengal Kacharis. Thus the tribal people in Assam are no longer a 'depressed lot rather some of the tribes have marched forward educationally, economically and politically. The constitution of India provides ample opportunities to develop the scheduled tribes and as many as 24 Articles in two schedules viz 5th and 6th Schedules, provide benefits to the tribals. Eight of the 24 Articles come under the Fundamental Rights of Part III of the Constitution. These are Articles 15, 16, 17, 19, 23, 26, 29 and 35.

As per 2001 Census the total scheduled tribe population of Assam is 3308570 (male 1678117 Female 1630453) out of a total population of 26655528 (Male 13777038 Female 12878491). Percentage of S.T. literacy is slightly below the state average i.e. 62.5 (Male 72.3 Female 52.4) against state P.C. of literacy of 63.3 (Male 71.3 Female 54.6) The percentages of major tribes are Boro Kachari 40.88, Karbi 10.68, Mishing 17.76, Lalung 5.16 Rabha 8.39 Kachari Sonowal 7.13.

The scheduled castes, originally known as lower castes had several names such as 'broken men', 'outcasts', 'Panchamas', 'Parihas', 'unseeables', 'Atisudras' 'Avarnas', 'Antyajas' and Namosudras. The colonial administrators used the term 'depressed classes' while the Census Report of 1931 coined the terms 'exterior classes'. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Poposed 'Protestant Hindus' or non conformist Hindus (London Round Table Conference, 1931). The scheduled castes in those days were denied access to Hindu religious temples, water sources meant for upper castes and admission in the schools. They had separate wells and while moving in the roads, they had to give way to the caste Hindus. Ghurye mentions that they were denied admissions to tea stalls, hotels, theatres owned by private owners (G.S. Ghurye Caste and Race, Popular Book Depot, Bombay, 1932)

Dr. Ambedkar Fought relently to upgrade the scheduled

castes and his proposal at the London Round Table Conference in 1931 became a milestone for providing the scheduled castes a more or less respectable social status. The resolution interalia contained "The Conference resolves that hence forth among Hindus no one shall be regarded as an untouchable by reason of his birth and that those who have been so regarded hitherto will have the same right as Hindus in regard to the use of public roads and all other public institutions. This right shall have statutory recognitions of the opportunity and first be one of the earliest act of the Swarajya Parliament if it shall not have received such recognition before that time."

The term scheduled caste was first coined by the Simon Commission and incorporated in the Government of India Act, 1935. Meanwhile the scheduled castes started temple entry campaign in 1933. Mahatma Gandhi who tried to abolish caste differences, coined a word for scheduled caste which is known as Harijan. Other Hindu reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Devendra Nath Tagore, Keshab Chandra Sen came forward to assist the scheduled castes in this movement. The Brahmo Samaj founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy had members from scheduled castes also.

The British administrators co-operated sincerely and they passed an act to remove untouchability known as Caste Disabilities removal Act of 1850. Another notable act namely Special Marriage Act of 1872 brought tangible changes in the prevailing caste system in sofar inter marriage caste was concurred. Efforts were on by various organisations to remove the disabilities faced by the scheduled castes. Mention may be made of 'Prarthana Samaj' founded by Sindhis, Parsis and Marathis under the leadership of M.G. Ranade. N.G. Chandravarkar and R.G. Bhandarkar. In 1875 Swami Dayananda (Mulshankar) established the Arya Samaj and the main aim of the Samaj was to eliminate casteism. According to Swami birth should not be the criterion to determine a status of a person rather caste should be on the basis of three basic qualities i.e. 'Guna' (good character), 'Karma' (noble activities) and 'Swabhaba' (ideal behaviour). There should not be untouchability

between man and man. Swamiji went further to mobilise his theory of casteless society in India and in 1875 he established the Theosophical Society at Newyork. He was assisted by Annie Besant in India. The social organisations continued their stir against the untouchability of Hindu society and the Satya Sadhak Samaj Started by Jyotir Phooley at Poona in 1873 started primary schools for the scheduled caste children. No government aid was given to the institutions which maintained untouchability. In 1925 Madras Government passed a bill and educational institutions were compelled to admit scheduled scheduled caste (Dabit Barga) students. This was the position of Scheduled castes before Independence

The Constituent Assembly in the post Independent India had marathon discussion about the scheduled castes and ample provisions have been made in the Constitution to improve the status of scheduled castes. The Government of India appointed a committee under the Chairmanship of R. R. Diwakar in 1950 to examine the possibility of eliminating castes. The untouchability Act of providedpenal provisions for untouchability supporters punishment with imprisonment upto six months and a fine upto Rs. 500.00 was provided in the Act. Castes in the Eastern part of India have begun to be recognised in official records since 1872. Reference of caste could be traced in the writings of Kashinath Tamuli Phukan (Assam Buranji Saar), Gunabhiram Baruah (Assam Buranji 1876), E.A. Gait (A History of Assam, 1905) Rabinson (Descriptive Account of Assam, 1840) B.C. Allen (District Gazetteer, Kamrup, 1905). In these reports castes were referred to as performing all the unclean jobs. C.S. Mullan, ICS, Census superintendent, 1931 coned a term for depressed classes which was known as Hindu exterior castes-three in the Assam valley and eight in the Surama Valley. According to Mullan they were 'Other Hindus' below the salt or 'Jal Achal' (i.e. cooked food or water is not accepted by the caste Hindus.

Changes of far reaching significance took place in the wake of the Indian Political Reforms during the thirties of the last century (20th century) when the depressed castes placed their

grievances before the Simon Commission (for separate electorate). Later on depressed classes became scheduled castes-a term agreed by the honourable members of the Constituent Assembly. In the post Independence period scheduled castes and scheduled tribes became co-terminus and a Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled tribes was in charge of SC & ST development. Bifurcation of the two took place only recently. Special provisions have been made in the Constitution for development of scheduled castes under Articles 46, 330, 332, 341 etc.

The scheduled castes in Assam are largely assimilated and there are no exclusive pockets for scheduled castes. The rigour of untouchability is also not found at least openly. In the rural areas, however, disguised form of untouchability still prevails. In this context the contributions of the great Baisnava reformers and preachers Sri Sri Sankardeva and Sri Sri Madhabdeva had much to do towards elimination of caste difference. Purnananda, a scheduled caste was one of the favourite disciples of Sri Sri Sankardeva.

There are fifteen scheduled castes in Assam as per SC and ST Orders (Amendment) Act of 2002. As many as 53.5 p.c of the scheduled castes are engaged in agriculture. Next to agriculture fishing is the most important occupation of the scheduled castes. The Kaibartas, Namasudras and Jhalo Malo communities engage themselves in agriculture. The urban scheduled castes like Bansphors, Lalbegis, Maharas, Mehtars Dhubis, Muchis are engaged in night soil clearance, sweeping, shoe making and repairing, washing cloths etc. The Banias and Hiras have their traditional professions of goldsmithy and pottery making respectively in addition to cultivation. The patnis eke out their livelihood by making boats and serving as boatmen. The Sutradhars are generally carpenters by profession. As per 2001 census the total population of scheduled castes is 1825949 (Male 943674 Female 882275). Percentage of literacy is 66.8 (Male 75.7, Female 57.1)

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Unlike the schedule tribes, the scheduled castes of Assam are largely assimilated groups and the Assamese Society can boast of a harmonious cohesive life of cross section of people belonging to scheduled tribes and castes. Perhaps Assam is the only state of the Indian Union where the scheduled castes do not feel the pangs and other disabilities of untouchability.

During my long thirty years of continuous service under the Directorate of the Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled Castes (formerly Tribal Research Institute) I had the opportunity to gain first hand knowledge of almost all the tribes and castes and based on emperical research, I used to contribute research papers to the national or state level seminars of various universities, research Institutes of India from time to time. The present book is the outcome of those published papers which were published long back in bulletins, magazines and newspapers. The demographic data in most of the articles therefore, required updating and the updated data (2001 census) of scheduled tribes and Castes are in corporated in the Appendix.

The author is indebted nor only to the publications listed in the selected bibliographies but to more book and authors. It may happen that views of some authors whose names are nor mentioned, may find a place in some articles and I am indebted to those authors.

I take this opportunity to express my sincerest gratitude to Prof. Promod Chandra Bhattacharyya, who encouraged me to publish the research papers in a presentable book form. I also thank Mrs. N. A. Hazarika ACS former Director, Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled Castes (A.I.R.T.S.C) for arranging financial assistance for the publication. Thanks are also due to Sri Ganesh Chandra Kakati, Joint Director, AIRTSC, for his help in bringing out the research papers in a book form. I will be failing in my duty if I donot express my love and affection to proprietor of the Bohniman Printers, Guwahait who meticulously printed the manuscript.

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THE AUTOCHTHONES OF THE BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY AND THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS TOWARDS THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF ASSAM

Introduction :

In this paper an effort has been made to focus some of the contributions made by the autochthones of the Brahmaputra valley who are known as Scheduled Tribes (plains) of Assam, towards Assamese and for that matter towards Indian cultural heritage. Indian culture is an admixture of the great traditions of Aryan, non Aryan, Dravidian, Mongolian, Austro-Asiatic, Negrito, Sak, Hun, Pathan, Mughal, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Jain, Christain,Tantric, Vaishnav, Vedic and Prevedic peoples. It is said that North Eastern India has been greatly benefitted by the traditional cultural traits of the Mongoloids and among the North Eastern states Assam gets the maximum benefit. Surprisingly most people outside Assam know very lillte about the Mongolian People of the plains of Assam.

Probably it will not be out of context to add here a few demographic information about the plains tribes of Assam. According to 1971 Census 1344413 (male-684274, female 660139) were enumerated as members of the Scheduled Tribes (plains) of Assam. Their backup is shown in Table-A below:–

Table-A Scheduled Tribes (Plains) population, 1971 census

Sl No.	Name of the tribe	Total population	Male	Female	P.C. to S.T. population	P.C. to total state population
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.	Boro-Boro Kachari	610459	308768	301691	45.41	4.17
2.	Miri (Mishing)	259551	131764	127787	19,31	1.77
3.	Kachari, Sonowal	198619	102547	96072	14.77	1.36
4.	Rabha	138630	71497	67133	10.31	0.95
5.	Lalung (Tiwa)	95609	48397	47212	7.11	0.65
6.	Deori	23080	11901	11179	1.72	0.16
7.	Barmans of Cachar	13210	6761	6449	0.98	0.09
8.	Mech	2570	1276	1294	0.19	0.02
9.	Hojai	2298	1135	1163	0.17	0.02
10.	Hajong	387	228	159	0.03	0.00

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The above table shows the tribewise population of the plains of entire Assam but for our present paper the plains tribes of the Brahmaputra valley are mainly taken into consideration. The tribes living in the plains of the Brahmaputra valley belong to different ethnolingual groups, possess diverse socio-religious characteristics and are at various levels of economic devlopment. peculiarly extended along the entire plains ranging from far more Hinduised section of the Sonowal Kacharis living extensively in the plains areas of Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat, and Laihimpur districts, the Miris (Mishings) and Deoris of the riverine areas of the Brahmaputra valley with their traditional socio-cultural life being unimpaired by the widespread contact with non-tribals, the lesser known Rabhas of Kamrup, Goalpara, Sonitpur and Darrang districts and Lalungs of Nagaon district, to the far more advanced and conscious section of the Boro Kacharis of Kamrup, Goalpara, Sonitpur, Barpeta, Kokrajhar and Darang districts– the plains tribal communities constitute an important segment of the Assam population.

Historical Restrospect:

Before evaluating the contribution made by the plains tribes, it would be worthwhile to peep into the past of these tribes. Considered to be of the Mongolian origin, they are supposed to have entered into the Indian territory through Yunnan in South West of China and upper Burma. "According to George Grierson the upper waters of the Hoang Ho and Yang-Tse-kiang was the cradle where from these tribes migrated in different times and in different directions. The first to enter Assam were the Mon Ammans followed by the Boro Kacharis[1]'. Sir Edward Gait[2], Risley[3], and K.L.Barua[4], also have expressed similar views. Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee opines that Mongolians lived in the Tibbetan Plateau for about one thousand years and later on spread in the Ganga Brahmaputra plains. "From early times at least from the second century B.C., there was a regular trade route by land between eastern India and China through Upper Burma and Yunnan[5]". It is an undisputed truism that prior to the Aryan penetration into the valley of the Brahmaputra, the pragjyotishpur, later known as Kamrup, was inhabited by Kirata, Nishada and Mlechcha people referred to in the Yajurveda and Atharbaveda

as Kiratas. The Mongolians descending southwards from Tibbet began to settle in the foothills of the Himalayas. As these people lived in far flung foothill areas, they were referred to as 'Kakshawat' or 'Kassat'. Later on this Kassat changed into Kirat. There are various explanations regarding the origin of the Kiratas. In the Mahabharata reference of Kirata is made while describing the martial qualities of king Bhagadatta. There Kiratas have been described as 'glittering like gold'. The Puranas describe them as 'foresters', 'barbarians' and 'mountaineers'. According to the 'Kalika Purana' Kiratas are strong, ferocious, ignorant, addicted to meat and drink.

The original habitat of the Tibeto Burman group of people was western China near Yang-Tse-Kiang and Hoang Ho rivers. Entering Assam following the course of the river Brahamaputra one section of the people occupied Garo Hills and Hills Tippera. Another section proceeded towards Kapili valley and hill areas of North Cachar. Still another group took possession of the Naga Hills. The fourth group occupied Lushai (At present Mizoram) hills, Manipur and parts of Naga Hills. The group that draws our attention most for the present paper, is the Boro whose domain once extended the entire Assam west of Manipur and Naga hills excepting only the Khasi and Jaintia hills. Into this fold can be traced the ethnic groups like the Kacharis, Koches. Lalungs (Tiwas) Dimasas, Garos, Rabhas, Tipras, Chutias, Deoris, Morans, and Meches. The Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Puranas and the Tantras have ample reference of kingdoms established by the Kiratas, Danavas and Asuras. Later on Barahis, Morans, Chutias, Barmans, Palas, Jitaris, Koches and Rajbangshis had also reigned in this part of India. Impact of the rule of the Boros can be felt in the names of hills, rivers and beels etc. within Assam. Thus we find names of rivers with Boro prefix 'Di' for water, (example Dehing, Desang, Dekhow, Daiyang, etc).

Now let us consider the contributions of these autochthones towards Assamese cultural heritage. In respect of language the Boro influence upon the Assamese cannot be underestimated, although Aryan Hindus have had a strong background in the making of the Assamese language. Before the advent of the Aryans the unwritten Boro Language was widely prevalent in Assam. But in later period the unwritten language of the os could not compete

with the written language of the Aryans. Yet the influence of Boro language upon the Sanskrit was not insignificant. Dr. Banikanta Kakati[6] has mentioned about the influence of the tribal language on the Assamese language prevalent in those days from different angles viz., phonological, morphological and laxical. The present "Assamese language possesses a good number of Boro words. Such as 'Tekeli' (a small earthen jar) in Assamese has been taken from the Kachari word 'khing Khili'. Assamese 'Dalang' (a bridge) has its root in the Boro prakrit. The original word was 'Daalaang'. Again 'Aapa', Kamrupi equivalent of the Assamese word 'Lora' (boy) has its root in Kachari 'Aafa' and Chutia 'Appa' meaning boy. There are many more Assamese words which have their roots in the Boro Prakrit.

Boro Prakrit	Assamese	English
1. Manggot	Mekuri	A cat
2. Naanglaa	Nangalaa	A gate
3. Baalandaa	Baralaa	Bachelor
4. Aai	Aai	Mother
5. Jangkhlaa	Jakhalaa	Ladder
6. Gandu	Gaaru	A pillow
7. Khaangsi	Kaanhi	A bell metal plate
8. Khaanthaal	Kathal	Jackfruit.

Dr. Promod Chandra Bhattacharyya[7] opines " in this way Assamese language has at least twenty percent words of tribal origin". The president of the Borpeta Session of the Assam Sahitya Sabha commented that Assamese language contains at least fifty percent tribal words.

Although there is no visible record of pre Aryan written language (except the Tai Script) in the Brahamaputra valley, famous historian like late Benudhar Sharma opined while mentioning about the Deoris' " Teolok Lipi Baa Aakhor Byabahaar Karaa Sabhya Jaati" (meaning-They are cultured people possessing script). But no authentic record has yet been unearthed regarding this finding of a reputed historian. The Mishing folktale tells us how the hungry possessor of the prized Mishing script boiled and ate the dried animal skin containing the god given script of the Mishings thereby depriving the Mishings of the scripts for all time to come. J. F.

Needham[8] and J. Herbert Lorrain[9] mention about the existence of written language among the Mishings. The Mishings are accepting the Assamese language to express their ideas to non Mishings.

The contribution of the Boros towards Assamese literature, culture and tradition is no less insignificant. The Borahi king Mahamanikya appointed Madhav Kandali to translate the Ramayana into Assamese. King Naranarayana of Kochbehar patronised the great Vaishnavite saints Sri Sankardeva and Sri Madhavdeva. Their stone inscriptions, copper plates and architectural designs are the treasures of Assam. Assamese culture and tradition had prehistoric publicity in the distant Dwaraka, Saurashtra and Punjab when marital relations were established between Usha and Aniruddha, Rukmini and Sri Krishna and Amritprabha and Meghabahana.

In respect of religious beliefs and practices prevalent in Assam, the influence of the autochthones connot be exaggerated. Saivism has been in practice as far back in the early part of the first millennium A.D. Some authors even trace the existence of Saivism in Assam earlier than first millennium A. D. According to Rai Bahadur Gunabhiram Barua[10] Siva worship was first introduced in early Assam by Jalpeswara, a king of North Bengal which was once part and parcel of Assam. The Kalika purana, however, mentions that king Naraka introduced the cult of mother goddess Kamakhya into Kamrup. Before Naraka, Siva was regarded as the guardian deity of the province of Assam. Even during the reign of Naraka, worship of Siva was not abandoned ('Sambhurantarguptah Sa me Pure')[11] During that period Siva was privately worshipped by the Kiratas with wine and flesh. After Naraka, the worship of Siva came into prominence with new vigour and zeal. Even, today 'Bathowbrai', 'Baliababa', 'Fa-Mahadeo', are worshipped as supreme God (Siva) by the Boro Kacharis, Deoris and Tiwas respectively. They considar Siva as their benign protector. The practice of animal sacrifice such as duck, pigeon, hen, goat, buffalo etc. before gods and goddesses comes from Indo Tibbetan or Kirata culture. The Boros constructed stone pillars near Kamakhya according to their own tradition. The last Hindu king of Kamrup was Bhimpal or Barahi Pal. The Barahis married girls from Boros. After the fall of Pala dynasty the Barahis and Boros established one kingdom at Ghaguragarh in the North West

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of Dibrugarh. Later on they established one town at Simaluguri hillock. One Bisnu image was installed there and a monumant was constructed. Later on this place came to be known as Charaideo. The 'Charai' represented the 'Garuda', the divine vehicle of Lord Bishnu. During the reign of the Ahoms, Charaideo was occupied by the king's army and the Boros had to leave the place. They wandered in the North bank of the river Brahmaputra like nomadic tribe and established new townships such as Brahmapur–Balampur–Balam, Halalam–Helem, Bishwakarma-pur–Bispur–Bihpur–Bihpuria, Bodojyoti–Bardati–Badati, Baha––Iali–Behali etc. On the southern bank of the river Brahmaputra the township Brahmapur got its named changed into Brahmapur and the township on the bank of the river Dhansiri named Lakhindrapur later on changed into Dimapur[12].

In the rural areas of Assam magico-religious practices are prevalent, the orign of which can be traced in the traditional magico-religious practice of the tribals. Thus 'Burã-Dãngariã' 'Jal Devota', 'Jal Kunwari', ;Birã, Pisãs etc., are the malevolent deities worshipped both in tribal as well as in rural areas of Assam.

In this connection it may be mentioned here that 'Bura-Dangaria', a tribal deity is still worshipped even by the high castes in certain places of upper Assam. The author himself took part in one such ceremony.

Tree worship which is commonly practised by the caste Hindus, no doubt, is a tribal custom. Even in the Assamese caste Hindu society such practice is observed. When a gril attains maturity, she is confined for a few days, generally four days, and at the end of the period she is ceremonially cleaned before the female relatives. After that she bows down before a plantain tree, planted specially for the occasion, symbolising it to be her groom.

The 'Siju' plant has great significance for the Boro Kacharis. They plant a 'Siju' sapling in the courtyard representing 'Bathow' and regular puja is offered to it. The Assmese Hindus plant 'Shal Kunwari' (a variety of sizu plant) near their houses in order to avert the danger from fire, rain and hailstorm. Siju plants are commonly seen in the paddy fields of Assam. Outwardly these appear to serve the purpose of fencing but in fact they cater to the need of the magico-religious needs concerning agriculture. Accoring to Assamese folk belief, a Siju plant is believed to protect

the women from post natal evils. The famous 'Dak Purusha' enjoins–

Griha Chari Chuke Duara Mukhata,
Basa Siju Ani Ruiba Sakata'

(meaning-Basa and Siju plants shoud be planted in the four corners as well as in the doorstep of the house)

The 'Than ghar' of the Deoris or the 'Barghar' of the Tiwas might have attracted the attention of Sri Sankardeva in formulating the idea of Namghar which is the nucleus of socio religious life of the Assamese peasantry. A Thanghar is used for public worship by members of various clans of the same tribe while a 'Barghar' is a public congregational hall where the members of the particular 'Bangsha' gather to perform public religious ceremonies.

In the present day Assamese menu we find certain tribal ingredients such as alkaline, processed out of cut pieces of plantains known as 'Kalakhar' a mixture called 'Kharisa' prepared out of bamboo offshoots, 'Pasala'– a curry, prepared out of the stem of a young plantain tree, 'Kahundi Kharali'– a mixture of thrashed mustard, alkaline and salt, mushrooms, Eri cocoons, varieties of creepers such as 'Vedailata', 'Lai', 'Chuka', 'Babori', 'Khutora', the shoots of pumpkin and bottlegourd, creepers etc. Similarly in the Assamese dietary habits we find traces of tribal food items especially when we consider the cases of Assamese Brahmins taking meat, fish, eggs etc. Such non vegetarian items are strictly forbidden for the Brahmins of the states of India except Bengalis. "Fish eating is probably a pre Aryan custom and in Assam it might have been borrowed from the Mongolian people[13]"

Betel leaves and nuts are inevitable items of Assamese culture. Any offering to gods and goddesses without betel leaves and nuts is incomplete. The first item an Assamese host offers to a guest (particularly in rural areas) is betel leaf and nut. Various scholars opine that the habit of taking betel leaves and nuts is derived from the Austrics. " In India the custom of chewing unripe betel nut exists only in Assam ; this has been recorded both in the Harshacharita as well as in the acconts of the Mohammedan historians. The Fateha-i-Ibriyah states that the people of Assam ate Pan in large quantities with unripe supari unshelled. The Yogini Tantra says that the woman of Assam would always be chewing

of Dibrugarh. Later on they established one town at Simaluguri hillock. One Bisnu image was installed there and a monumant was constructed. Later on this place came to be known as Charaideo. The 'Chārai' represented the 'Garuda', the divine vehicle of Lord Bishnu. During the reign of the Ahoms, Charaideo was occupied by the king's army and the Boros had to leave the place. They wandered in the North bank of the river Brahmaputra like nomadic tribe and established new townships such as Brahmapur–Balampur–Balam, Halalam–Helem, Bishwakarma-pur–Bispur–Bihpur–Bihpuria, Bodojyoti–Bardati–Badati, Baha––Iali–Behali etc. On the southern bank of the river Brahmaputra the township Brahmapur got its named changed into Brahmapur and the township on the bank of the river Dhansiri named Lakhindrapur later on changed into Dimapur[12].

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betel nut 'Tambulasah Sada Bhabet'. Arecanut and betel leaf, Tamul pan' as these are called in Assamese, have a definite place in many religious and ceremonial functions.[14]"

In respect of the Assamese social system there are visible signs of tribal influence. For example, widow remarriage, asking for a bride, runaway marriage, certain items of 'Joran' ceremony viz, a pair of fish, coconut, vermilion, betel leaves and nuts ; living in the bride's house before marriage, marriage by force, putting blocades on the path of the marriage procession and asking compensation (Dora Agosha) smearing of a mixture of mustard oil, matikalai and turmeric on the body of the bridegroom, construction of houses having thatched roof, placing thorns of plum tree on the door in order to keep off evil spirits, transplanting of paddy and system of 'Lakhimi Ana', use of Endi, Muga and Pat clothes, folk beliefs in respect of building a house etc.

Traditional Assamese culture was known as bamboo culture in the sense that bamboo was inevitable item in their material culture which is also widely grown in Assam.Whether in building a house, preparing indigenous articles of day to day use like 'Kharahi' 'Pachi', 'Chaloni', 'Don; fishing implements like 'Khoka', 'Chepa', 'Galphala', 'Jakoi', 'Juluki', 'Khaloi'; musical instruments like 'Taka', 'Gogona', 'Banhi', bamboo is extensively used. It needs no mention that the above items are of Mongolian origin. Similarly some popular Assamese names concerning agricultural activities like 'Haal', 'Kor', 'Kãnsi', 'Moi' names of varieties of paddy like 'Jahã', 'Mãguri', 'Ahu', 'Sali', household materials like 'Kaami', 'Ruwã', 'Mãrali', 'Japana' etc. are of Mongolian origin.

In an Assamese village the Gaonbura or the village headman plays an improtant role in the day to day affairs of a village. Similar role is played by the Gaonburas or the village headmen of the tribes of Assam. The system of solving local disputes under the leadership of a Gaonbura in his place, in the 'Morung', (Mishing's) or in any public place of a village, is a tribal tradition incorporated into the Assamese culture.

As regards Assamese dress, decoration and ornaments a close affinity is marked with those of the plains tribals. Assamese women wear Mekhela Chador, Riha which have resemblance with the 'Dakhana' and Mekhela of the Boro Kacharis, and 'Galuk'

and 'Sumpa', of the Mishings. Similarly the Deori, Rabha, Lalung (Tiwas), Sonowal Kachari women use two pieces of cothes. Besides, both male and female have had used head dresses and following the tradition head dresses are worn by the Assamese peasantry. In some villages the 'Gamosha' takes the place of headdress for the males. The Assamese traditional headgear i.e. 'Japi' formed a prestigions Boro item of presentation as early as seventh century and till this day the item maintains its glorious tradition. Kumar Bhaskar Barman, the celebrated king of Kamarupa presented a flower bedecked 'Japi', known as 'Hãlãli' to Hiuen T-Sang. 'Japi' 'Sarai' (Tai origin) and Gamosha are prestigious and inevitable items of present day Assamese culture. Use to Eri is exclusive in Assam. Various colours like red, yellow, and black were locally prepared. It may be mentioned here that the Tai women still use locally prepared dye. The Assamese weavers know the art of embroidery and motifs and birds and animals are woven in clothes which are undoubtedly tribal tradition.

It has been admitted by almost all the scholars that Assamese national festival Bihu originated in the dim past when the Mongolians arrived in this eastern part of India. That the Assamese word Bihu derives its name from 'Bisu' or 'Baisagu', there are fewer scope of controversy, although some scholars, want to trace the origin of Bihu from the word 'Bisuva', i. e, the 'Bisuva Sankranti'. The 'Baisagu' of the Boros is mainly a two day' festival, while the Deoris, Mishings and other Assamese observe it for seven days with some minor variations. The ceremonial bathing of cows, tuning the flute with the 'Chatrãwali'rhyme of 'Kherai pujã', so that the eggs of the reptiles become stillborn, resemble with similar activities of the first day Assamese Bohag Bihu. Spreading of garlic water around the house on the first day of Bohag Bihu is done in order to avert the danger of serpents all throughout the year. The traditional Boro Kacharis observe the Bihu festival for seven days. Dancing in the courtyard of the households of the locality by the groups of young boys and girls with flute, 'cymbal', 'Kharkha'(a bamboo instrument 'Takaa' in Assamese), 'Gogna' (Gogona in Assamese) and 'Ramtal forms the salient feature of the merrymakings. From the second day of Bohag this community dancing and singing continues and no household in the village must be left out. The songs are mostly

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It has been admitted by almost all the scholars that Assamese national festival Bihu originated in the dim past when the Mongolians arrived in this eastern part of India. That the Assamese word Bihu derives its name from 'Bisu' or 'Baisagu', there are fewer scope of controversy, although some scholars, want to trace the origin of Bihu from the word 'Bisuva', i. e, the 'Bisuva Sankranti'. The 'Baisagu' of the Boros is mainly a two day' festival, while the Deoris, Mishings and other Assamese observe it for seven days with some minor variations. The ceremonial bathing of cows, tuning the flute with the 'Chatrãwali'rhyme of 'Kherai pujã', so that the eggs of the reptiles become stillborn, resemble with similar activities of the first day Assamese Bohag Bihu. Spreading of garlic water around the house on the first day of Bohag Bihu is done in order to avert the danger of serpents all throughout the year. The traditional Boro Kacharis observe the Bihu festival for seven days. Dancing in the courtyard of the households of the locality by the groups of young boys and girls with flute, 'cymbal', 'Kharkha'(a bamboo instrument 'Takaa' in Assamese), 'Gogna' (Gogona in Assamese) and 'Ramtal forms the salient feature of the merrymakings. From the second day of Bohag this community dancing and singing continues and no household in the village must be left out. The songs are mostly

romantic in character. The dancing parties receive gift ('Magon') which is spent in a community feast. Now if we compare the traditional Bihu of the Boro Kahcharis, Mishings, Deoris and Sonowal Kacharis we observe striking similarities with that of the Assamese Bihu in general.

Now let us consider the contribution of the educated sections of the plains tribes towards Assamese language and literature. The contributions of Medini Moran Choudhury, Rupnath Brahama, Bhaben Narzi, Mohini Mohan Brahma, Jogesh Das, Ramdas Boro, Madhu Boro, Bandhuram Kachari, Monoranjan Lahari, Dayaram Wari, Ram Charan Brahma, Gohin Chandra Basumatari, Bishnu Rabha, Rajen Pam, Mani Rabha, Dhirendra Nath Rabha, Listi Rabha, Amar Sing Koch, Tarun Chandra Pamegam, Bhrigumuni Kagyug, Nomal Pegu, Tabu Taid, Indreswar Pegu, Nahendra Padun, Bikram Sing Yein, Durgeswar Doley, Gogon Sonowal, Dandidhar Sonowal, Padam Pator, Balai Senapati, Gonesh Senapati, Sittesh Ch. Bordoloi, Dharma Ram Bordoloi, Dambarudhar Deori, Nandeswar Deori Bora, Paban Ch. Saikia, and many others have enriched the Assamese language and literature.

CONCLUSION

Histrorical and antiquarian studies, anthropological researches have indicated that a group of people speaking a branch of the Mon Khmer language were the earliest settlers in what constitutes the present state of Assam. They were followed by the great Boro people from the north eastern direction. Then came the Aryan migrants from the middle Gangetic plain.

The special socio-cultural and political characteristics of Assam have in fact evolved with contribution of all autochthones who preferred to make Assam their home land and have merged their distinct traditional identities into a common Assamese nationhood. It is in the late medieval period, the autochthonous Boros together with the Austrics and the Aryan Hindu settlers of the valley formulated a unified and integrated nation called Assamese. The Aryan Assamese speech had embraced considerable Mongolian elements and the synthesis thus created continued ever since. Professor S. K. Chatterjee observes, "This

can be synthesis of cultures and fusion of races in the formation of the great nation which is chcracterised like a cut gem by many facets among which the north eastern frontier facet is the most remarkable".

The contribution of the autochthones (Here the plains tribes of the Brahmaputra valley) like the Boro-Kacharis, Rabhas, Mishings, Lalungs, Deoris, Sonowals towards building the foundation of a composite Assamese culture with their 'socifacts', 'mentifacts', 'agrifacts' and artifacts' is significant. From the diverse traditional tribal cultural elements there emerged a harmonious social system, a symbol of integration and assimilation. Dr. P.C. Choudhury, rigthly opines, 'It is due to the admixture of these elements and mutual influence of one upon the other, that the Assamese culture, though fundamentally allied to that of India, has retained its separate entity with local variations."

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THE PLAINS TRIBES OF ASSAM SPATIAL PATTERN OF CLUSTERING AND CONCENTRATION

INTRODUCTION

According to 1971 census 13,44,020 persons were enumerated as members of the Scheduled Tribes (plains) of Assam. These tribes belong to different ethnolingual groups, possess diverse socio-religious characteristics and are at various levels of economic development. Peculiarly extended along the entire spectrum-ranging from the far more Hinduised section of the Sonowal Kacharis living extensively in the plains areas of Dibrugarh district, the Miris (Mishings) and the Deoris of the riverine areas of the Brahmaputra valley with their traditional socio-cultural life being unimpaired by the widespread contact with non tribals, to the far more advanced section of the Bodo Kacharis of Kamrup and Goalpara districts, the tribal communities constitute an important segment of the Assam population. The spatial distribution of the entire plains tribal population is characterised by a traditioned tribal tendency to cluster generally in a pocket within an environmental setting which is, by and large, far from the madding crowd. The pattern of concentration is such that even cognate tribes like the Boro Kacharis do not have socio-cultural interaction with the Sonowals, which for all practical purposes once belonged to the same ethnic compelx. Further the typical ethnic clustering and concentration has contributed significantly to the lack of sufficient interaction between plains tribes and the non-tribal component poputation. Thus the process of change within the ethnic groups has operated at a low key enabling the tribals to perpetuate their modes and morals far beyond. This aloofness results in socio-economic stagnation.

Before penetrating deep into the clustering trend of the plains tribes in the far flung areas of the districts, some demographic information of the plains tribes, perhaps will not be out of relevance which are shown below in Tribes 1 to 3.

TABLE–1
SCHEDULED TRIBES (PLAINS) POPULATION

(CENSUS 1971)

Sl. No.	Name of the Tribe	Total population	Male	Female	P.C. of S.T. population (Plains)	P.C. to total plains and Hills Tribes Population	P.C. to total State Population
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1.	Boro-Boro Kachari	610459	308768	301691	45.41	37.99	4.17
2.	Miri (Mishing)	259551	131764	127787	19.31	16.15	1.77
3.	Kachari including Sonowal	198619	102547	96072	14.77	12.36	1.36
4.	Rabha	138630	71497	67133	10.31	8.63	0.95
5.	Lalung (Tiwa)	95609	48397	47212	7.11	5.95	0.65
6.	Deori	23080	11901	11179	1.72	1.44	0.16
7.	Barmans of Cachar	13210	6761	6449	0.98	0.82	0.09
8.	Mech	2570	1276	1294	0.19	0.16	0.02
9.	Hojai	2298	1135	1163	0.17	0.14	0.02
10.	Hajong	387	228	59	0.03	0.02	0.00
	TOTAL	1344413	684274	660139	–	–	9.19

TABLE–2

PERCENTAGE OF LITERACY AMONG THE PLAINS TRIBES
(CENSUS 1971)

Sl. No	Name of the Tribe	Total P.C. of literacy	P.C. of male literacy	P.C. of female literacy
1.	2	3	4	5
1.	Boro-Boro Kachari	20.51	29.73	11.06
2.	Miri (Mishing)	18.20	28.54	7.54
3.	Kachari including Sonowal	27.33	35.36	18.77
4:	Rabha	22.24	31.23	12.66
5.	Lalung (Tiwa)	21.43	31.47	11.14
6.	Deori	27.72	39.58	15.10
7.	Barmans of Cachar	30.45	37.97	22.56
8.	Mech	30.57	39.65	21.63
9.	Hojai	27.72	36.56	19.08
10.	Hajong	10.88	14.98	5.03
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TABLE– 3

DISTRICT WISE BREAK-UP OF SCHEDULED TRIBES POPULATION OF ASSAM AS PER CENSUS 1971

Sl. No.	Name of the District	Total Population	Total ST Population	P.C. of S.T. Population to total population
1.	2	3	4	5
1.	Lakhimpur	711600	204811	28.78
2.	Dibrugarh	1411119	81489	5.77
3.	Sibsagar	1837389	125311	6.82
4.	Nowgong	1680895	125115	7.44
5.	Goalpara	2231103	308287	13.85
6.	Kamrup	2854183	298090	10.44
7.	Darrang	1736188	185640	10.69
8.	Cachar	1713318	15283	0.89
9.	Karbi Anglong	379310	210039	55.37
10.	N.C. hills	76047	52583	69.15
	Total of the State (Assam)	14625152	1606648	10.98

The Table I above shows the population of various plains tribes as per census 1971 (1981 census was not conducted in Assam) along with the percentage of tribal population to state's total poputation. The Table no.2 indicates the tribe wise percentage of literacy.

The analysis of Table I shows that the plains tribes constitute. 13.44 lakhs i.e. 9.1 p.c. of the total state poputation. Out of these population 62% concentrate in Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Lakhimpur districts and rest 38% in southern part of the river Brahmaputra i.e. parts of Goalpara, parts of Kamrup, Nowgong, Sibsagar and Dibrugarh districts (Table-3). It may be mentioned that Boro Kacharis form the largest group among the plains tribes and their main concentrations are the Kamrup, Goalpara and Darrang districts. While the Boro Kacharis are more predominant in the northern bank of the river Brahmaputra, thr Rabhas are fairly wide-spread in the southern belt. The concentration of rest of the tribes Viz, Miri (Mishing), Deori, Lalung, Sonowal Kachari and Barmans of Cachar in the above mentioned three districts is insignificant. Kachugaon, Gambaribil, Binnyakhata, Jaleswari,

Sapkata, Saraibil, Bhumka, Gasaigaon, Tulsibil, Serfangguri, Ramfalbil, Saktiashram, Datama, Fakiragram, Titaguri, Salakati, Bhatgaon, Balajan, Patgaon, Amteka-Amguri, Patabari, Rumkhata Santipur, Bengtal, Kajalgaon, Sidli, Tilakgaon, Bidyapur, Borabazar, Malipara, Ulubari, Bishnupur, Bijni, Dakhin Bijni, and Goroimari Gaon Panchayat areas of Kokrajhar Sub-Division of Goalpara district ; Parbat jowar, Rongamati, Salkocha, Bahalpur G.P. areas of Dhubri Sub-Division of Goalpara district; Jakhili, Dudhnoi, Darrangiri, Rangjuli, Bikali, Dhanubhanga, Bordamal, Balijana, Badhapur, Dadan, Joyramkuchi G.P. areas of Goalpara Sub-Division of Goalpara district, Uttar Bijni, Dakhin Bijni, Hastinapur, Koklabari, Chapaguri, Manikpur, Kharija, Bijni, Uttar Gobardhana, Pub Gobardhana, Howli, Gopinath, G.P. areas of Borpeta Sub-divison of Kamrup district ; Barama, Pachim Baska, Uttar Baska No. 1, Uttar Baska No. 2, Madhya Baska No. 1, Madhya Baska No. 2, Madhya Baska No. 3, Dakhin Baska, Dakhin Kumarikata, Pachim Kumarikata, Dakhin Defeli, Pub Defeli, Pachim Defeli, Pub Tamulpur, Pachim Tamulpur G.P. areas of Nalbari Sub division of Kamrup district ; Goreswar, Maharipur, Kaurbaha G.P. areas of Gauhati Sub-Division of Kamrup district ; Ambagaon, Borchilajhar ; Lalpur, Dalgaon, Sonai, Rowta, Odalguri, Paneri, Dakua, Harisinga, Mazikuchi, Sekhar, Cheuni, Suklai, Khairabari, Chinakona, Kalaigaon, Silpota, Lakhimpur, Pukhuripar, Tengabari, Bhakatpara and Chapai G.P. areas of Mangaldoi Sub- Division of Darrang district are the main abode of the Boro Kacharis. While out of the 1,38,630 souls of th Rabhas, the overwhelming chunk of the population is mainly concentrated in the districts of Kamrup, Goalpara and Darrang districts.

In respect of population, the Miris, also known as Mishings, constitute the second highest tribal group with a population of 2,59,551 (1971 cesus). They are a riverine tribe and are mainly found in the flood prone areas of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang districts. Their G.P. wise concentrations are Kherkata, Dangdhara, East Dhakuakhana, East Machkhoa, Mingmang, Gogamukh, South Gohaingaon, Ghilamara, Jiadhal, Narayanpur, Pachim Dhemaji, Dhemaji, Maridhal, Bordoloni, Sissi Tangani, Sissi Borgaon, Pachim Jonai, Jonai, Kulaian, Muktiar, Subansiri, Kadam, Panigaon,

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In respect of population, the Miris, also known as Mishings, constitute the second highest tribal group with a population of 2,59,551 (1971 cesus). They are a riverine tribe and are mainly found in the flood prone areas of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang districts. Their G.P. wise concentrations are Kherkata, Dangdhara, East Dhakuakhana, East Machkhoa, Mingmang, Gogamukh, South Gohaingaon, Ghilamara, Jiadhal, Narayanpur, Pachim Dhemaji, Dhemaji, Maridhal, Bordoloni, Sissi Tangani, Sissi Borgaon, Pachim Jonai, Jonai, Kulaian, Muktiar, Subansiri, Kadam, Panigaon,

Baginadi Ukhamti, Telahi, Ranaganadi, Bangalmara, Dhalpur and Bihpuria of Lakhimpur district ; Gezera, Jengrai, Karatipara, Ahotguri, Kamalabari, Nitai, Pub Konwarpur, Jakaichuk, Parbatia, Mahura, Kuruabahi, Rogamati, Brahmaputra of Sibsagar district ; and Lohitmukh, Kolongpar, Gohpur, Kolabari, Rangajan of Darrang district.

The Sonowal Kacharis, originally scheduled under the nomenclature 'Kachari including Sonowal, were, however, renamed as 'Kachari Sonowal' in the revised list of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Order (Amendment) Act 1976. Their population as per 1971 census is 198619 and they are mainly concentrated in the district of Dibrugarh. In Dibrugarh district Na Khat, Khowang, Haldhibari, Kheremia, Tengakhat, Sachoni, Tinkhong, Larua, Mankata, Jamira, Rajgarh, Salaguri, Ouphalia, Nigam, Joypur, Tipling, Phakial, Naoholia, Bakulani Chariali, Madarkhat, Bogdong, Dangari, Kakapathar, Tangana, Talap, Buridihing, Hapjan, Borbil, and Saikhoa G.P. areas are the main abode of the Sonawals. Besides, Sonowal Kacharis are also concentrated in Doomdooma, Borbhagia Borchala, Sirajuli, Omiyapur, Borgaon, Naharbari, Bihaguri, Ghoramari, Bahbari and Charduar Gaon Panchayat areas of Darrang district.

The Lalungs (the people prefer to be called as Tiwas) are exclusively found in the district of Nowgong. A few Lalung villages are also found in the Dhemaji Sub-Division of Lakhimpur district. The non Lalungs of Dhemaji refer to the Lalungs of Dhemaji area as Lalung Kachari, In Nowgong district they are concentrated in Ghaguamanipur, Barangabari, Bhurbandha, Silpukhuri, Mikirbheta, Habi Barangabari, Kohtali, Baralimari, Jagi, Bhakatgaon, Baghjap, Baghara, Jagiroad, Pub Uttarkhola Telelia, Silchang, Sahari, Charaibahi, Barapujia, and Raha G.P. areas.

The Deoris are a riverine plains tribe of Assam with their exclusive concentrations in the Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh and Sibsagar districts. The Miris and the Deoris live in contiguous areas. The Gaon Panchayat areas of Hazari Baligaon under Jorhar Sub-Division and Jengrai Sub-Division of Sibsagar district, Nakhat G.P. areas of Dibrugarh Sub-Division, Borbil, Uttar Sadiya, Pachim

Sadiya and pub Sadiya G.P. areas of Tinsukia Sub-Division of Dibrugarh district, Narayanpur, Bihpuria and Bangalmara G.P. areas of North Lakhimpur Sub-Division of Lakhimpur district are the largely concentrated areas of the Deoris.

The Barmans of Cachar, as the name indicates, are found exclusively in the district of Cachar. They are almost completely detached from the mainstream of their cognate brethren of the plains of Brahmaputra valley and not much research is done in respect of their socio-cultural life. They are mainly found in the Joypur, Harinagar and Jiri Fulertal G.P. areas of the Silchar Sub-Division of Cachar district.

TABLE - 4

I.T.D.P WISE TRIBAL POPULATION (Census 1971)

I.T.D.P. No.	Name of the I.T.D.P.	Name of the sub-division	No of G.P. covered	Total Population	Tribal Population	Major Tribes Inhabiting the project
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.	Kokrajhar	Goalpara	34	387197	196029	Boro Kachari
2.	Dhubri	Dhubri	4	32788	16893	Boro Kachari, Rabha
3.	Goalpara	Goalpara	11	141126	73618	Boro Kachari, Rabha
4.	Barpeta	Barpeta	11	126487	64482	Boro Kachari, Rabha
5.	Nalbari	Nalbari	15	148518	76375	Boro Kachari, Rabha
6.	Guwahati	Guwahait	3	190487	99782	Boro Kachari, Rabha
7.	Guwahati	Guwahati	14			
8.	Marigaon	Marigaon	18	136297	68401	Lalung
9.	Mangaoldoi	Mangaldoi	22	204690	107487	Boro Kachari, Rabha
10.	Tezpur	Tezpur	15	25594	18480	Boro Kachari, Rabha Kachari Sonowal
11.	Jorhat	Jorhat	4	54968	34042	Mishings, Deoris
12.	Jorhat	Jorhat	5	29546	15354	Kacharis Sonowal Mishings, Deories
13.	Golaghat	Golaghat	6	27626	16787	Thengal, Mishings
14.	Sibsagar	Sibsagar	4	18595	11377	Kacharis Sonowal Mishings, Deoris
15.	Dibrugarh	Dibrugarh	18	95529	48561	Kacharis Sonowal
16.	Tinsukia	Tinsukia	11	28489	14264	Mishings Sonowal Kacharis Sonowal
17.	North Lakhimpur	North Lakhimpur	15	100202	63968	Mishings, Deoris
18.	Dhemaji	Dhemaji	19	214836	129948	Mishings, Deoris
19.	Silchar	Silchar	3	13490	7083	Barmans of Cachar
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Table 4 shows the Integrated Tribal Development Project (I.T.D.P.) wise dispersal of plains tribal poputation. It may be noted that these pockets having 50% or more tribals are not exclusive tribal areas. Nor these projects are exclusively inhabited bya single ethnic group. Thus various ethnic collaboration inside a project is inevitable, at least so far as day to day economic transactions are concerned. Futher within the project area these different tribal groups maintain their typical traditions and adherence to their own socio- religious culture pattern does not hamper in any way the formulation and implementation of the special development schemes of the tribals.Again there are I.T.D.Ps where a certain ethnic group is dominant. For example Kokrajhar, Dhemaji, Morigaon and Silchar I.T.D.Ps where the major tribal groups are Boro Kacharis, Miris (Mishing) Lalungs (Tiwas), and Barmans respectively.

Rest of the nineteen I.T.D.Ps have multiethnic character. For example Mangaldoi I.T.D.P has both Boro Kacharis and Rabhas, Tezpur I.T.D.P has Boro Kacharis, Miris (Mishing), Sonowal Kacharis, and Deoris; Tinsukia I.T.D.P has Sonowal Kacharis, Miris (Mishing), Deoris; Gauhati I.T.D.P No. 6 has Boro Kacharis, Rabhas and Lalungs and so on.

Land alienation and indebtedness are the chronic problem of the tribals and unless some ameliorative and protective measures are adopted, the tribals will in course of time be relegated to the landless depressed section of the people. Thus in order to preserve the tribal tradition and culture, the exclusive pockets of the tribals were identified by the Government and restrictions have been imposed on surreptitious handing over of tribal lands to the non tribals. These pockets known as tribal belts and blocks are spread in six districts of Assam namely Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh and Nagaon. Table 5 indicates the Sub-Division wise and circle wise clustering of such tribal pockets. It may be mentioned that the belts and blocks mentioned in table 5 are not exclusively inhabited by a single ethnic group, rather in each belt/block people of two or more tribes are traced.

Table-5

SHOWING TRIBAL BELTS AND BLOCKS IN THE PLAINS DISTRICTS OF ASSAM WITH THE MAJOR TRIBES LIVING IN EACH TRIBAL BELT/BLOCK

Name of the District	Name of the Sub-Division	Names of the belt/block	Name of the revenue circle	Area	Major plains tribe within the Belt/Block
1	2	3	4	5	6
Goalpara	Kokrajhar	1. Sidli Tribal Belt	1. Gossaigaon	B–K–L 27,322–4–7	Boro Kachari
			2. Kokrajhar	1,77,872–2–16	–Do–
			3. Sidli	2,61,065–2–13	–Do–
		2. Bijni Tribal Block	1. Bijni	2,28,405–4–4	–Do–
Kamrup	Gauhati	1 South Kamrup (Chaygaon) Tribal Belt	Chaygaon	2,37,716–3–14	Rabha
		2. South Kamrup (Gauhati) Tribal Belt	1. Palasbari	1,36,736–3–0	Rabha
			2 Sonapur	3,78,762–0–0	Rabha Lalung
	Gauhati and Nalbari	Tamulpur Tribal Belt	1 Rangia	1,43,09–0–0	Boro Kachari
			2. Tamulpur	350740–0–0	–Do–
	Nalbari	Baska Tribal Belt	Tihu	3,48,118–1–7	–Do–
	Barpeta	Chapaguri Tribel Belt	1. Bojali	1,22,182–1–18	–Do–
			2 Sarupeta	42,078–3–13	–Do–
		1. Kharija Bijni Tribal Block	Barnagar		–Do–
		2. Bajegaon Tribal Block	–Do–	72,416–0–0	–Do–
		3. Gobardhana Tribal Block	–Do–		–Do–
Darrang	Tezpur	1. Gohpur Tribal Block	Helem	16,999–0–0	Miri
		2. Balipara Tribal Belt	Tezpur Sadar	110545–2–16	Boro-Kachari
Darrang	Mangaldoi	1. Teteli Bhanguria Tribal Block	Mangaodoi Sadar	49,211–3–9	Boro-Kachari
		2. Kacharipara Tribal Block			
		3. Dalgaon Tribal Block		B–K–L	
		1. Lalai Tribal Belt	Kolaigaon	11,87,352–1–10	–Do–
		2. Tezial Tribal Block			
		3. Bhuyankhat Tribal Block			

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			2. Kokrajhar	1,77,872–2–16	–Do–
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		2. Kacharipara Tribal Block		B–K–L	
		3. Dalgaon Tribal Block			
		1. Lalai Tribal Belt	Kolaigaon	11,87,352–1–10	–Do–
		2. Tezial Tribal Block			
		3. Bhuyankhat Tribal Block			

Lakhimpur	North Lakhimpur and Dhemaji Sub-Div.	1. North Lakhimpur (sub-Montain) Tribal Belt	North lakhimpur	8,34,462–0–0	Miri
		2. Murkongselek Jonai Tribal Belt	Jonai	Area under resettlement	–Do–
	North Lakhimpur	1. N. Lakhimpur Tribal Block	1 Bihpuria	2,67,313–0–0	Miri, Deori
			2. Subansiri	1,57,016–0–0	Miri
Dibrugarh	Tinsukia	Abor Misimi Tirap Tribal Belt	1. Sadia	14,23,896–0–0	Miri, Deori
			2. Tinsukia (B)	3,83,528–0–0	Sonowal Kachari
Nowgong	Nowgong	Boro Kachari Tribal Block	Nowgong Sadar	22.090–0–0	Lalung
		Amguri Chang Phulguri Chang Tribal Block	Kaliabar	4594–0–1	Lalung
		Bardalong Lanka Bheta Tribal Block	Lanka	23,336–0–18	Lalung
		I. Bagariguri T. Block			
		2. Amchoi T Block	Rabha	67,000–0–6	Lalung
		3. Boronchila T. Block Borpathar T. Block	Kampur	17,006–0–0 B–K–L	Lalung
Nowgong	Marigaon	1. Jamadari T. Block			
		2. Borongoni Pathar T. Block	Laharighat	29,813–4–0	Lalung
		1. Bhalukjari T. block			
		2 Changana T. Block			
		3. Tetelia T. Block	Marigaon	1.24,974–3–4	Lalung
		4. Gobha T Block	–	–	-Do-
		5. Phulaguri T. Block	–	–	-Do-
		6. Bagariguri T. block	–	–	-Do-

It is clear from Table 5 that the Boro Kachari belts/blocks are concentrated in Kokrajhar, Gauhati, Nalbari and Borpeta Sub-Divisions where as Miri (Mising) belts/blocks are located in Tezpur, North Lakhimpur, Dhemaji and Tinsukia Sub-Divisions. The Lalungs on the other hand are spread in the tribal belts/blocks of Nowgong and Marigaon Sub-Divisions while the Sonowal Kacharis

are concentrated within the tribal belts/blocks of Dibrugarh and Tinsukia Sub-Divisions. It may be noted that all the plains tibal people of Assam are not concentrated within tribal belts/blocks mentioned in the said table. Sizable sections of the plains tribals are either found in the periphery of the belts/blocks or spread in the general areas interspersed with non tribal habitations.

Thus the clustering pattern of the plains tribes is characterised by:

1. a tendency to cluster generally in a pocket.
2. non exclusiveness of the habitations,
3. clustering of one and more tribes in a pocket or belt/block.
4. clustering amidst non tribal habitations while maintaining most of the tribal traditional characteristics.
5. a preference of riverine areas by certain tribes (Miris, Deoris) while abvoidance of such areas by rest of the ethnic groups.
6. Cohesiveness among the non tribal populations.
7. Unity in diversity in as much as all the plains tribes have a common socio-cultural forum.

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		Borpathar T. Block	Kampur	17,006–0–0 B–K–L	Lalung
Nowgong	Marigaon	1. Jamadari T. Block			
		2. Borongoni Pathar T. Block	Laharighat	29,813–4–0	Lalung
		1. Bhalukjari T. block			
		2 Changana T. Block			
		3. Tetelia T. Block	Marigaon	1.24,974–3–4	Lalung
		4. Gobha T Block	–	–	-Do-
		5. Phulaguri T. Block	–	–	-Do-
		6. Bagariguri T. block	–	–	-Do-

It is clear from Table 5 that the Boro Kachari belts/blocks are concentrated in Kokrajhar, Gauhati, Nalbari and Borpeta Sub-Divisions where as Miri (Mising) belts/blocks are located in Tezpur, North Lakhimpur, Dhemaji and Tinsukia Sub-Divisions. The Lalungs on the other hand are spread in the tribal belts/blocks of Nowgong and Marigaon Sub-Divisions while the Sonowal Kacharis

2. non exclusiveness of the habitations,
3. clustering of one and more tribes in a pocket or belt/block.
4. clustering amidst non tribal habitations while maintaining most of the tribal traditional characteristics.
5. a preference of riverine areas by certain tribes (Miris, Deoris) while abvoidance of such areas by rest of the ethnic groups.
6. Cohesiveness among the non tribal populations.
7. Unity in diversity in as much as all the plains tribes have a common socio-cultural forum.

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STRATEGIES FOR SCHEDULED TRIBE AND SCHEDULED CASTE DEVELOPMENT IN ASSAM

INTRODUCTION

The paper has been divided into two parts.In the first part strategies of development of the scheduled tribes have been discussed. There are twenty three tribal groups having distinct cultures, language and at various stages of development socially, educationally and economically. As per 1991 census the total population of scheduled tribes is 28, 74, 441 constituting 12.87 percent of the total population of the state. The scheduled castes and scheduled tribes (Amendment) Act 1976 specifies 14 tribes in the two Autonomous Hill Diatricts, namely Karbi Anolong and the North Cachar Hills and 9 tribes in 21 plains districts of Assam. The 14 tribes which are scheduled in the two hill districts are (1) Chakma, (2) Dimasa Kachari (3) Garo (4) Hajong (5) Hmar (6) Khasi, Jayantia, Synteng, War, Bhoi, Lyngam (7) Any Kuki tribes (8) Lakher, (9) Man (Tai speaking) (10) Any Mizo (Lushai) tribes (11) Mikir (12) Any Naga tribes (13) Pawi and (14) Synteng

The nine plains tribes are : (1) Barmans of Cachar, (2) Boro Kachari (3) Deori (4) Hojai (5) Sonowal Kachari (6) Lalung, (7) Mech (8) Miri and (9) Rabha.

It may be mentioned that Mikir in the hills tribes list is popularly known as Karbi while the Miri and Lalung in the plains tribes list are known as Mishing and Tiwa as these names are considered as derogatory. Almost all the ethnic groups belong to the Mongoloid racial stock and speak Sino Tibetan and Tibeto Burman family of languages. Assamese life and culture has been largely moulded by these ethnic groups. Table shows the tribewise break up of scheduled Tribes population of Assam as per 1991 Census.

In the second part strategies of development of the scheduled castes of Assam have been discussed. Spread over entire rural and urban areas of Assam, mostly plains districts, the sixteen groups of scheduled castes account for 9,12,537 as per 1971 census or 6.24 percent of Assam's total population of 146.25 lakhs and 16,59,412 as per 1991 census or 7.40 percent of Assam's

total populantion of 2,24,14,322 (1991 census). The percentage of urban scheduled caste is higher than the state's total urban plains population. This urban status, however, does not indicate a high socio-economic standard with allied modern facilities. There are sizable influx of rural scheduled caste people to towns in search of employment and small petty avocations like fish selling, thela pulling, rickshaw plying,opening pan shops, doing menial jobs in hotels and individual households etc. Besides there are scheduled castes like Bansphors, Dholis, Maharas, Lalbegis, Mehtars, Muchis who live in urban areas doing all low and unclean jobs with pitiable economic standard.

Among the sixteen scheduled castes, the Namasudras and the Kaibartas account for 32.97% and 32.31% respectively of the state's total scheduled caste population followed by the Patnis 9.41%, Muchis 4.47% Hiras 3.58%, Banias 3.10%, Malis 2.40%, Dhobis 2.30%, Bansphors 0.7%, Bhangis 0.7%, Dholis 0.4%, Maharas 0.1%, Jalkeots 0.3% and Lalbegis 0.01% (as per 1971 census). Table II shows the population and percentage of literacy of the scheduled castes of Assam.

PART I– SCHEDULED TRIBES

A question may arise why do you need a separate strategy for tribal development? The anwer is the grinding poverty, age old indebtedness and overall backwardness. In those olden days they wre kept aloof from the mainstream population branding them as 'Kiratas', 'Mlechchas', etc. During British days too, not much attempt was made to develop the tribal communities. The British administrators preferred to leave them alone by adopting the policy of 'excluded' 'Partially excluded' areas. Only after Independence benevolent measures have been taken to bring these people at par with other communities. But there are constraints in the tribal development. As erroneously believed by some authors lack of economic resources is not the major criterion of economic backwardness of the tribal communities, but it is their inability (rather lack of opportunity) to exploit the available resources which is responsible for the age old backwardness. Each tribal community possesses distinct characteristics in respect of culture, language, modes and morals. In fact the tribes differ from one another ethnically, linguistically and socio-culturally. The problems

also differ from tribe to tribe and from region to region. The cultural pattern of each tribe is such that the same does not permit the emergence of entrepreneurship among the youths. Entrepreneurship is basically culture based. The social norms, taboos, value system mould the individuals to engage themselves in the culturally defined goals.

Due to the lack of awareness, the tribal people are losing their resources like land and forest. The rampant conspicuous consumerism of the produce is a deterrent for their development. It has been observed that the people produce not only for day to day consumption but also for innumerable household and community socio-religious festivals and ceremonies. Sumptuous feasts are arranged where locally brewed rice beer, fish ans meat are taken. As a result whatever a tribal family produces in a year is consumed in that particular year. Majority of the families exhaust their produce even before the harvest. Modern cropping patten, use of fertilisers and pesticides are limited to a few families. Lack of additional resource mobilisation and love of easy going life without caring for economic upliftment coupled with lesser needs and aspirations make the tribal people less enterprising, if not indolent in their endeavour to possess a healthier economic position.

By and large, the egalitarian tribal society is community oriented. Major events in an individual family such as marriage, serious disease and death are not treated as affairs of an individual family, rather entire village is involved in such affairs. This umbrella of a secured life is also responsible for lack of competitive spirit.

Another constraint is the apathetic attitude towards education as agricultural operations require the co-operation of all the members of a family. Thus literacy level, particularly gender literacy, falls far short of the state's overall percentage of literacy. The following table shows the percentage of literacy of the scheduled tribes of Assam as per 1971 census (1991 tribewise figures are yet to be published)

State's percentage of literacy as per 1971 census was 28.72, male 37.19, female 19.27. As per 1991 census the percentage of literacy of the scheduled tribes of Assam is 49.16 against the state's percentage of literacy of. 52.79

Although the tribes are living amidst plenty of resources, they are not in a position to reap the benefits. Besides the above

mentioned self- generated inhibitions, there are other factors like loss of basic resources due to prolonged exploitation in various forms, tapping of natural resources by outside agencies, non-tribal cultural prejudices and pride, a psychological feeling of being ignored, low level of nutrition, illiteracy, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large et.al. which led to formulation of separate development strategies for the tribals. Although the Government of IndiaAct.1935 had envisaged some development strategies for the tribal communities, they were primarily meant for the tribes of Central India and not for the tribes of North East. The Dhebar Commission, the ShiluAo Committee set up by the Government of India after Independence recommended special measures for the development of tribal communities.

The founding fathers of the Indian Constitution incorporated benevolent welfare provisions for the upliftment of the scheduled tribes. Thus the Article 46 lays down that the state shall promote with epecial care the educational and economic interests of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. It should be the duty of the state to protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation. Article 244 empowers the president of India to declare an area as scheduled or tribal area under the Fifth Schedule and (or) the Sixth Schedule. Thus the hill tribal areas of Assam had been brought under the Sixth Schedule. Tribal interests have been protected under various articles such as Article 339 (2), 275 and 399.

The First Prime Minister of India Late Jawaharlal Nehru enunciated the famous 'panchasheel' principles for the tribal development. It may however be pointed out that Nehru's genius principle i.e. development of tribal. should be in tune with their own genius,directly and indirectly contributed to ethnocentricism and the mainstream approach has been affected adversely. Based on this principle strategies and objectives have been laid down in the Five year plans.Even a plan within a plan i.e. Tribal Sub-plan, has been formulated exclusively for the tribal people. Special Multipurpose Development Blocks were set up to cater to the special needs of the backward people and most of these were converted into Tribal Development Blocks where the tribal population was 66% or above. During the Fifth Five year plan the

Expert Committee headed by the Prof. S.C. Dube recommended area development programmes suiting the actual needs of the tribal people. Thrust was on integrated approach to tribal development and improvement of 'quality of life' of the tribal people.

Accepting the recommendations of the Dube Committee, Government have launched the special plan for the tribals known as Tribal Sub-plan (T.S.P) and for the proper implementation of the integrated approach, Integrated Tribal Development Projects (ITDP) have been created in compact areas having more than 50% tribals. Thus in Assam nineteen ITDPs have been created. T.S.P. area of Assam covers 10,991 sq kms. The T.S.P covers 80.57 percent of the total plains tribal population. Besides the T.S.P. Areas there are tribal villages in non compact areas and in order to provide succour to these dispersed tribals, special funds have been allocated under the Backward Sector plan.The core strategy of the T.S.P. is to attain an accelerated rate of development thereby bringing up the level of development of these areas to that of the general areas within a specified time frame. Since the Seventh Five year plan efforts have been made to cover greater number of scheduled tribe families under the family oriented programmes. Infra-structural development gets priority while human resource development becomes the topmost strategy of tribal development. These objectives have been sought to be achieved by strengthening project administration (ITDO) improving better supervision and monitoring and proper and timely evaluation of the already implemented and on going schemes under various sectors of development, introducing family beneficiary cards and decentralising the planning process. It has been felt that involvement of the tribal people in the grass root level is of paramount importance as it is oftentimes alleged that the schemes have imposed from above without studying the actual needs and peculiar socio-economic background of the tribal beneficiaries.

Tribal development in Assam got a new lease of life when in 1983 the tribal Development Authority was created to prepare short term and long term plans for all round socio-eonomic development of the tribal people. The Authority has indentified 19 most backward Gaon Panchayats, one each in the 19 ITDPs of Assam. Special schemes under six sectors namely Irrigation, Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Veterinary, Education, PWD

mentioned self- generated inhibitions, there are other factors like loss of basic resources due to prolonged exploitation in various forms, tapping of natural resources by outside agencies, non-tribal cultural prejudices and pride, a psychological feeling of being ignored, low level of nutrition, illiteracy, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large et.al. which led to formulation of separate development strategies for the tribals. Although the Government of IndiaAct.1935 had envisaged some development strategies for the tribal communities, they were primarily meant for the tribes of Central India and not for the tribes of North East. The Dhebar Commission, the ShiluAo Committee set up by the Government of India after Independence recommended special measures for the development of tribal communities.

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(roads) and Health have been implemented.

In the two hill districts of Assam, viz Karbi Anglong and N.C. Hills, the respective District Councils, constituted under the Sixth Schelule of the constitution, have been associated with the Planning process co-ordinated by the Development Commissioner, Hill Areas and approved by the Hill Planning Broad.

Inspite of the well meaning schemes for tribal welfare, there appears to be a glaring gap in between the schemes and actual development. Due importance has not been given about the application of appropriate technologies to check enviromental degradation. Deforestation is rampant in tribal areas. Chemicals are not used as they should be. Of late most of the industrial establishments are located in tribal areas. The tribal people are living with the serious hazardous health condition. Extension of modern infra-structural facilities to the tribal areas does not serve the actual purpose unless their attitudinal changes are tuned with the modernism. For instance the tribal people construct their houses without windows and ventilation. A hearth inside the tribal house burns almost the whole day and night causing pollution. Most of the tribal families do not have pit latrines. People having platform type houses especially hill tribes, keep their domestic animals under the platform and foul smell vitiates the entire atmosphere. Superstitious beliefs are playing a significant role in their life. I am tempted to put a few lines from the eminent tribal academicain, Dr. D. Doley Professor of Sociology Department, Dibrugarh University testifying an insider's view of the tribal problem vis-a-vis the development planning. "It is necessary to state that the process of economic development involves concomitant economic development in the cultural system of a given society. It must be assumed that economic development cannot take place without changes in the cultural systems. Thus while we talk of various types of economic parameters for development of the tribal communities of Assam, we must also make necessary efforts to induce their cultural changes in favour of economic growth." (Problems of Economic Development Among the Scheduled Tribe Communities of Assam – A Sociological Analysis-Bulletin of Tribal Research Institute, Assam, Guwahati, Vol, No II, 1984)

PART II- SCHEDULED CASTES OF ASSAM

Unlike the scheduled tribes, the scheduled castes are not concentrated in specified pockets and they are interspersed. Therefore the strategy for their development till 1976-77 was merged with the strategy for general category of people. It may be mentioned that, by the large, the entire scheduled caste poputation in Assam is part and parcel of the main stream of the total poputation of the state. Besides, unlike other states of the Indian Union, the Scheduled castes of Assam are not experiencing the rigours of untouchability which is the main criterion of inclusion of a community in the Scheduled caste list. But they are not extremely backward. Although agriculture is the sole means of livelihood of most of the rural scheduled caste people, yet the overwhelming majority of the villages are not self-sufficient in respect of paddy. Agricultural lands per familly are totally insufficient. The reason for this is that traditionally, the main profession of the scheduled castes was not agriculture rather fish catching and selling was the main profession of most of the scheduled castes. Till Independence this was the position. The forefathers of the present generation did not care to occupy agricultural lands and they were satisfied with the fulfilment of the bare minimum needs. Thus acute poverty condition prevails. As per 1991 Census 47.22% of the total wokers among scheduled caste populations are engaged in agriculture againt the state's total percentage of 52.90. Again the percentage of agricultural labourers is more among the scheduled castes which is 13.44% against 12.09% of the total population of the state.

Due to lack of sound agricultural base the scope of economic development has been hindered. About 50% of the scheduled castes are in perpetual state of indebtedness which can be attributed to the age old deficit economy accelerated recently by lack of employment opportunity, loss of traditional fish catching and selling business and social disabilities like shyness of contact and age old inferiority complex of underestimating their capabilities. The Assam Indebtedness Relief Act 1975 is still to make visible impact in this regard.

Next to agriculture, the rural scheduled caste people have had to depend upon fishing particularly by the Kaibartas, Namasudras and Jalkeots. Pottery and goldsmithy are the important occupation

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Next to agriculture, the rural scheduled caste people have had to depend upon fishing particularly by the Kaibartas, Namasudras and Jalkeots. Pottery and goldsmithy are the important occupation

of the Hiras and Banias recpectively. But of late occupational mobility has been observed among the groups and agricultural activities become the accepted profession of the scheduled caste communities living in rural areas. But as mentioned earlier, the scheduled caste people had to face lot of problems in the changing profession. As agriculture was not their traditional occupation, the people lack necessary skill in agriculture and as they are possessing lands with less fertility, the output is very less. They possess mostly marshy and high lands and donot have sufficient resources to improve the lands. The economic condition of the non-agricultural scheduled caste communities is no better. The Banias, goldsmithy by traditional occupation, donot get enough to maintain their families as the local people no longer use the ornaments made by the people of this community.

The urban dwellers like Bansphors, Muchis, Bhangis (Mehtars) and Maharas have to switch over to other professions because of the changing socio-economic situation. Machine made cheaper articles are becoming popular and the scheduled caste people who used to produce bamboo and cane items of day to day use like 'Dala', 'Pachi', 'Kharahi', 'Jakoi' 'Dhari' etc. can no longer get purchasers because of changing cultural pattern and availability of cheaper plastic items. The studies conducted by research organisations point out that a famous traditional institution of the Kaibartas of Kamrup district, popularly known as 'Kamrupiya Dhulia' (Drum players of Kamrup district) is fast disappearing because of the society's apathy towards this institution. Formerly Dhulia (Dhak) formed essential part in the soico-religious occasions.

Some of the scheduled caste groups of urban areas who were not the autochthones of Assam, are engaged in various occupations such as leather work, washing clothes, sweeping and scavenging etc. These occupations are in unorganised sector. The groups which are engaged in carrying scavenging, sweeping, flaying, tanning, have been relegated to very low economic social status. Majority of them have very little assets and they suffer from the dual handicap of social disability and economic deprivations.

Although not to that extent which is prevalent in some other states of the Indian Union, some kind of disguised untouchability still prevails in group actions especially in rural areas. Because of the lesser numerical strength and because of the assimilative character, the scheduled castes can hardly assert themselves in

getting the benefits provided by Government. Poverty, malnutrition and consequent indebtedness are the salient socio-economic constraints inherited by the scheduled castes from their forefathers and these problems still remain unsolved even inspite of the implementation of the Special Component Plan within the State plan.

The author of this paper had conducted an in-depth study on the socio-economic condition of the Kaibartas of Assam during 1988-89 and the findings appeared to be dishearting. The Kaibartas, till about two decades back, had fishing as a major source of income and most of the Kaibartas depended solely on fish trade. But today the situation underwent metamorphic changes. The fishermen from other states have snatched the age old trade from the Kaibartas and for this state of affair the local fish Mahaldars are largely responsible. Even those who are clinging desperately to this traditional business inspite of the odds, are suffering from 60:40 syndrome, i.e. the major share of the catch is to be given to the 'Mahajans' (financiers). Further the poor fishermen are indebtors to the 'Mahajans' who belong to both scheduled caste and non-scheduled caste. This indebtedness is a never ending affair and the poor fishermen have no alternative but to bow down to the whims of the Mahajans. The fishing sources like rivers, beels are not accessible to the local fishermen as the same are auctioned to the middlemen who engage the non Assamese (Bihari) to transact the dealings. Consequent upon degradation of the traditional income sources and non-availability of fresh avenues, the time worn economic backwardness has been further aggravated.

The above facts are some of the stark realities which prompted the planners to do something for this hapless section of the society. Accordingly amounts were quantified in the Fifth Five Year Plan for the socio-economic upliftment of this section of population. But mere quantification of certain amounts in selected heads of development appeared to be inadequate and in order to provide more economic support, a new strategy was evolved during the Sixth Five Year Plan. A seperate Sub-plan known as Special Component Plan (S.C.P) for the welfare of the scheduled castes was formulated. For implementation for the S.C.P schemes, funds from four sources have been earmarked. These sources are:

1. Flow from State Plan
2. Flow from Central Sector and Centrally Sponsored Schemes.

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The author of this paper had conducted an in-depth study on the socio-economic condition of the Kaibartas of Assam during 1988-89 and the findings appeared to be dishearting. The Kaibartas, till about two decades back, had fishing as a major source of income and most of the Kaibartas depended solely on fish trade. But today the situation underwent metamorphic changes. The fishermen from other states have snatched the age old trade from the Kaibartas and for this state of affair the local fish Mahaldars are largely responsible. Even those who are clinging desperately to this traditional business inspite of the odds, are suffering from 60:40 syndrome, i.e. the major share of the catch is to be given to the 'Mahajans' (financiers). Further the poor fishermen are indebtors to the 'Mahajans' who belong to both scheduled caste and non-scheduled caste. This indebtedness is a never ending affair and the poor fishermen have no alternative but to bow down to the whims of the Mahajans. The fishing sources like rivers, beels are not accessible to the local fishermen as the same are auctioned to the middlemen who engage the non Assamese (Bihari) to transact the dealings. Consequent upon degradation of the traditional income sources and non-availability of fresh avenues, the time worn economic backwardness has been further aggravated.

The above facts are some of the stark realities which prompted the planners to do something for this hapless section of the society. Accordingly amounts were quantified in the Fifth Five Year Plan for the socio-economic upliftment of this section of population. But mere quantification of certain amounts in selected heads of development appeared to be inadequate and in order to provide more economic support, a new strategy was evolved during the Sixth Five Year Plan. A seperate Sub-plan known as Special Component Plan (S.C.P) for the welfare of the scheduled castes was formulated. For implementation for the S.C.P schemes, funds from four sources have been earmarked. These sources are:

1. Flow from State Plan
2. Flow from Central Sector and Centrally Sponsored Schemes.

3. Special Central Assistance, and
4. Institutional Finance.

Suitable sectorial plans based on grass root study have been chalked out and income generating schemes have been incorporated. In Assam the outlay ratio was less than 60 percent. The Working Group on the Development of the scheduled castes contituted during Seventh Five Year Plan observed, "Some of the Departments avoided strenuous exercise of earmarking fund especially for the development of the scheduled castes." The working group had termed this action as "attitudinal problem lacking proper orientation." The main argument put forwarded for such action was that a large portion of the total State plan outlay was in indivisible sectors like Power, Irrigation, Road, Transport etc. But there are scheduled caste villages which are by and large, exclusive and beneficiaries in blocks could be easily located in such areas. The 'Cluster cum Saturation Approach' started during the Sixth Plan has much relevance even in the Assam situation. Incidentally it may be mentioned that in a particular scheduled caste inhabited area two or more sub-castes live together. Thus we find the Kaibartas and Banias, Hiras and Kaibartas, Namasudras and Hiras live side by side indicating a harmonious living of more or less similar socio-economic standard.

Although statutory provision of 7 percent reservation of vacancies for scheduled castes is under implemention, yet the position of unemployment has not improved much. The main constraint here again is the overall socio-economic backwardness of the people. It is not uncommon to find roster vacancies reserved for scheduled castes lying unfilled for years due to non availability of suitable educated and experienced scheduled caste candidates. Unless the general economic backwardness is removed, the economy of the scheduled castes will always remain at a considerable distance from the take off point. Raj Bahadur, the honourable representative of the then Central Province and Berar in the Constituent Assembly rightly remarked, "To ask for representation, however, on class or caste basis in the service is to remedy that disease only superficially. But we have got to cure the disease from its very roots." Today considerable changes have been noticed and the 'great traditions' are in a mood to help the 'little tradition' to move ahead and the Government at the centre as well as in the states have taken suitable measure in that regard.

TABLE - 1

Name of the tribe A - Plains B - Hills	Total Population	Male	Female	P.C. to total S.T. Population	P.C to total Plains and Hills tribes A-Plains B-Hills	P.C. to total State population
A–Boro Kachari	6,10459	3,08,768	3,01,691	45.41	37.99	4.17
Miri	2,59,551	1,31,764	1,27,787	19,31	16.31	1.77
Kachari Sonowal	1,98,630	1,02,547	9,60,72	14,77	12.36	1.36
Rabha	1,38,630	71,497	67,133	1031	8.63	0.95
Lalung	95,609	48,397	47,212	7.11	5.95	0.65
Deori	2,30,80	11,901	1,11,79	1.72	1.44	0,16
Barmans of Cachar	1,32,10	6,761	6,449	0.98	0.82	0.09
Mech	2570	1276	1294	0.12	0.16	0.02
Hojai	2298	1135	1163	0.17	0.14	0.02
Total-A	13,44,026	6,84,046	659980			9.18
B- Mikir	1,77,194	90355	86839	81.83	11.03	1.21
Dimasa	38,342	20711	18631	18.17	2.45	0.27
Other Tribes (Naga, Kuki, Hmar, Mizo, Khasi, Pawi Lakher, Garo Man (Tai Speaking synteng)	46083	24541	21545			
Total – B	262622	135607	127015			1.80
Total A + B	16,06,648	819653	786995			10.98

TABLE - II

Sl. No.	Name of Scheduled Castes	Total population	Total P.C. of literacy	Male literacy	Female literacy
1.	Banshor	6,093	15.16	23.13	4.74
2.	Bhuimali, Mali	22,175	26.54	35.73	16.16
3.	Brittial Bania or Bania	28,087	38,95	50.46	25.73
4.	Dhupi or Dhobi	20,801	30.12	37.28	21.21
5.	Dugla or Dholi	4,013	14.98	21.99	7.03
6.	Hira	32,624	27.40	38.74	15.32
7.	Jalkeot	2,537	26.33	35.21	14.40
8.	Jhalo Malo	32,978	15.25	25.36	5.86
9.	Kaibarta or Jaliya	2,94,809	30.38	39.90	20.35
10.	Lalbegi	45	33.33	40.74	22.22
11.	Mahara	899	13.62	19,67	6.54
12.	Mehtor or Bhangi	7,296	14,49	21.86	5.18
13.	Muchi or Rishi	40,774	12,77	18,76	5,36
14.	Namosudra	300813	21.33	30.65	11.19
15.	Patni	85,910	31.88	41.10	22.22
16.	Sutrodhar	32,703	26.27	37.54	13.74
		9,12,557	25.8	35.00	15.7

Note – State P.C. of literacy - 28.72 Male – 37.19, Female – 19.27

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Total-A	13,44,026	6,84,046	659980			9.18
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16.	Sutrodhar	32,703	26.27	37.54	13.74
		9,12,557	25.8	35.00	15.7

Note – State P.C. of literacy - 28.72 Male – 37.19, Female – 19.27

TABLE - III

Sl. No.	Name of the tribe	Total P.C. of literacy	Male literacy	Female literacy
1.	2	3	4	5
1.	Barmans of Cachar	30.45	39.97	22.56
2.	Boro, Boro Kachari	20.51	29.73	11.06
3.	Chakma	23.48	38.94	6.38
4.	Deori	27.72	39.58	15.10
5.	Dimasa Kachari	18.84	27.36	11.62
6.	Garo	22.89	31.36	11.62
7.	Hajong	10.88	14.98	5.03
8.	Hmar	44.40	56.90	31.66
9.	Hojai	27.72	36.56	19.09
10.	Kachari Sonowal	27.33	35.36	18.77
11.	Khasi and Jayantia	18.27	20.65	15.42
12.	Any Kuki Tribes	28.51	36.54	19.43
13.	Lakher	1.00	1.00	–
14.	Lalung	21.43	31.47	11.14
15.	Man (Tai speaking)	7.98	13.70	2.11
16.	Mech	30.58	39.66	21.64
17.	Mikir	13.18	21.09	4.95
18.	Miri	18.20	28.54	7.54
19.	Any Mizo Tribes (Lushai)	57.95	63.44	51.92
20.	Any Naga Tribes	15.51	22.55	8.33
21.	Rabha	22.24	31.23	12.66
22.	Pawi	16.67	25.00	–
23.	Synteng	4.91	5.35	4.58
		26.02	34.62	17.66

* Paper presented on the Two Day Seminar on 'Problems of ST/SC Communities of Assam' conducted by the North Eastern Regional Insititute of Management, Guwahati and sponsored by the Govt. of India, Ministry of Rural Areas and Employment (Department of Rural Development and Directorate of Panchayat and Rural Development, Govt. of Assam, on 18-19 December 1997 at Janata Bhawan, Guwahati.

ACCULTURATION, ASSIMILATION AND RETRIBALISM RELATING TO THE ETHNIC GROUPS OF ASSAM

INTRODUCTION

Before discussing the issues on acculturation, assimilation and retribalism syndrome in respect of the ethnic groups of Assam, it is relevant to present a pen picture of the tribals of Assam, as the tribal situation in Assam possesses unique features like two categories of scheduled tribes with two separate plans viz, Tribal Sub Plan for the plains tribes of 21 plains districts and a Hill Plan for the two hills districts. There are 23 numbers of major scheduled tribes, 9 in the plains district and 14 in the two hills districts having distinctive culture, language, religious belief and practices, folkways, legal system etc. and at various stages of development socially, educationally and economically.

As per 1971 census the total scheduled tribes population of Assam was 16,06,648 constituting 10.99 percent of the total population of the State. The Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Amendment) Act 1976 specifies the following tribes in the Scheduled Tribe list of Assam.

A. In the Autonomous Hill Districts

1. Chakma, 2. Dimasa Kachari, 3. Garo, 4. Hajong, 5. Hmar, 6 Khasi, Jayantia, War, Bhoi, Lyngam. 7. Any Kuki tribes. 8. Any Mizo (Lushai) tribes, 9. Man (Tai speaking). 10. Lakher, 11. Mikir. 12 Any Naga tribes, 13. Pawi, 14 Synteng.

B. In the Plains Districts

1. Barmans of Cachar, 2 Boro Kachari, 3. Deori, 4. Hojai, 5. Sonowal, Kachari, 6. Lalung. 7. Mech, 8. Miri. 9. Rabha (Table 1)

It may be mentioned that Mikirs prefer to call themselves Karbis while the Miris and Lalungs prefer the names Misings and Tiwas respectively as the people consider that Mikir, Miri and Lalung were the names given by the Assamese people and they do not carry the real meaning of their ethnic origin.

Besides, the above mentioned tribes, there are quite a good number of ethnic groups who are demanding scheduled tribe status as they claim to possess the ethnic characteristics. They argue

Table 1 : Literacy rate among the Tribes of Assam

Name of Tribes	Male	Female	Persons	P.C. to S.T. Population	P.C. to State Population	Percentage to Literacy		
						Male	Female	Total
Plain Tribes								
Boro Kachari	308768	301691	610459	45.41	4.17	29.73	11.06	20.51
Miri	131764	127787	259551	19.31	1.77	28.54	7.54	18.20
Kachari Sonowal	102547	96072	198619	14.77	1.36	35.36	18.77	27.33
Rabha	71497	67133	138630	10.31	0.95	31.23	12.66	22.24
Lalung	48397	47212	95609	7.11	0.65	31.47	11.14	21.43
Deori	11901	11179	23080	1.72	0.16	39.58	15.10	27.72
Barmans of Cachar	6761	6449	13210	0.98	0.09	39.97	22.56	30.45
Mech	1276	1294	2570	0.12	0.02	39.66	21.64	30.58
Hojai	1135	1163	2298	0.17	0.02	36.56	19.09	27.72
Hill Tribes								
Mikir	90355	86839	177194	81.83	1.21	21.09	4.95	13.18
Dimasa Kachari	20711	18631	39342	18.17	0.27	27.36	11.62	18.84
Other tribes*	24541	21545	46086					
Total	**819653**	**786995**	**160664**		**10.99**	**34,62**	**17.66**	**26.02**

Source : Census, 1971

**This includes tribes like Naga, Kuki, Hmar, Mizo, Chakma, Khasi, Hajong, Pawi, Lakher, Garo, Synteng etc.*

that they could not get opportunity to represent their cases before the Kaka Kalelkar Commission which was examining the cases of ethnic communities to be included in the Scheduled Tribe list. Among these mention may be made of the claims of Tai Ahom. Chutia. Moran, Matak, Koch Rajbongshi, Tea and Ex-tea garden groups (99 sub-groups) The Buddhist communities viz.. Tai Phake, Tai Aitonia (Man Tai speaking), Tai Turung, Tai Khamyang. Tai Khamti and Dowania are also claiming Scheduled Tribe status. The Singphows are also demanding similar status. It may be pointed out that the Koch Rajbongshis were able to obtain the status of Scheduled Tribe (plains) through several ordinances but due to the absence of a bill in this regard passed in the parliament, their status is hanging in balance.

As per 1991 census the total population of scheduled tribes of Assam is 28.74,441 (male : 1461560 female : 1412881) constituting 12.82 per cent, male 12.54 per cent, female 12.14 per cent of total population of the State. In rural areas they constitute 13.94 percent of the total rural and in urban areas the percentage is 3.90 percent of the total urban population.

The percentage of literacy of the scheduled tribes of Assam according to 1991 census was 49.16 percent (excluding population of 0-6 age group), male 58.93 per cent and female 38.98 percent. In comparison with 1971, the percentage of literacy being 26.02 for the scheduled tribes, there is tangible improvement in the two decades. It is interesting to nor that out of the 23 districts, 14 districts of Assam have exceed the State percent of literacy. In 12 district has the highest scheduled tribes are literate. Dibrugarh District has the highest scheduled tribe literacy. Table 10.01 shows the tribe wise percentage of literacy as per 1971 census (1991 tribe wise census figures are not available).

Another interesting feature of the tribal people is that each ethnic group has its own language/dialect and people of almost all the groups speak Assamese language. Inter community transactions, by and large, are done through this language.

The language wise distribution of Scheduled tribe population as per 1991 census is shown in table 10.2. It would be relevant to compare the figures of language speakers (Table 10.3) among the tribes as per 1971 census.

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Table 2 Frequency of Language speakers among the Tribes of Assam

Name of the Language	Male Female	Persons	
Boro/Bodo	599636	584933	1184569
Deori	8058	78977	15955
Dimasa	43252	41402	84654
Garo	58216	56563	114779
Hmar	9894	9160	1904
Mikir/Karbi	181776	173256	355032
Koch	3,596	3609	7205
Kuki	8020	7,189	15209
Lalung	16442	16191	32633
Lusai/Mizo	1416	1303	2719
Miri/Mising	194797	186765	381562
Rabha	56835	55589	112424
Rengma	70491	65414	135905

Source :Census 1991

Table 3 : Language speakers among the tribes of Assam

Name of the tribes	Speakers of Language	Total population
Boro/Bodo	5,33,713	6,10,459
Deori	12,190	23,080
Garo	76,004	9,139
Hmar	1,04,836	5,380
Khasi	20,082	6,487
Kuki	5,098	13524
Lalung	9,954	95,609
Lushai/Mizo	4,001	711
Mikir/Karbi	1,91,354	1,77,194
Miri/Mising	1,77,226	2,59,551
Rabha	32,400	1,38,630
Dimasa	33,507	39,342

Source :Census, 1971

ACCULTURATION

The term acculturation was first used by Bowell (1880) to signify the change from a purely traditional to a modern way of life. It is a "transfer ofcultural or social elements from one society

to another" (Moore, 1965). Through this process of social change, certain changes voluntarily or involuntarily occur in a society but, by and large the core of the culture remains intact. The changes in most cases are superfluous. The process however, has both positive and negative aspects. Socio-political, environmental and planned development factors play decisive role in bringing about changes. "The capacity for culture is essentially a capacity for learning an arbitrary, traditional way of life through social communication and for changing this way of life when environmental or social circumstances require" (Fischer, 1973).

The history of Assam bears testimony of the merger of little traditions with great traditions undergoing the process of acculturation and assimilation. The process was slow but accommodative. Some of the ethnic groups like the Tai Ahom (Tai Shan) is a classic example of acculturation and assimilation. The Moran, the Matak, Koches also followed in the same path forming a major chunk in the great Assamese society in the distant past. There were tribes who preferred to shift their abode into the remote hilly and inaccessible riverine areas. The process of acculturation was accelerated when the British occupied Assam as per Yandaboo Treaty on 24th February, 1826. The inflow of people from other provinces continued unabated and the social and economic life of the indigenous people was largely affected. There was practically no resistance from the local non tribal people but the tribals like the Kachari, Khamti, Singphow revolted against the administration. The unchecked inflow of emigrant Muslims threatened the very existence of the indigenous tribals and the then Chief Minister of Assam Gopinath Bordoloi chalked out the concept of Tribal Belts and Blocks preventing the emigrants from influencing the life and culture and de-stabilising their economy. The inner line system also known as 'Line System' was introduced for that purpose. The British administration adopted a paternalistic approach and the tribals were protected in their 'excluded' and 'partially excluded', areas. After Independence. development of tribal people was designed as per "panchasheel" formulated by Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru and the tribals were allowed to develop according to their genious. But when we speak of development or modernisation, we have in mind the total process of the Society. "It is sometimes used to connote a process, sometimes the product of process. It is frequently employed as a purely descriptive term

to characterize several types of changes: but it also functions in many contexts as a ulogistic level" (Nagel, 1967). Thus development is applicable in all aspects of a society. Here lies the danger of losing the traditional traits of the simple societies through the process of assimilation or integration.

The post Independent national reconstruction process through the planned development could not keep the tribals aloof in their hitherto secluded areas. The plains tribes particularly the Sonowal Kacharis of upper Assam, Lalungs in the plains district of Nagaon, Barmans of Cachar district, the Boro Kacharis of Kamrup, Goalpara, Darrang districts could not check the process of acculturation and assimilation. Thc Sonowal Kacharis and Lalungs were mostly assimilated to the fellow Assamese way of life of the plains districts even before Independence. It was not uncommon to find non Sonowal titles like Bora, Saikia, Hazarika etc. suffixing their names. They become disciples of the famous Auniati Satra (Vaisnava Monastery) of Majuli. There is visible change in the material culture. Reference of traditional clans was made only in marriage, as clan exogamy was still is the rule. The four types of marriage viz., Nowa Dhowa or Bor Biya. Homdiya, Gandharba (elopement)and Churchuriya or Rabha Sarakai Diya as the names indicate signify the assimilative trend. However, Gaa Dhan (bride price) a typical tribal tradition, is in vogue especially in the Gandharba form.

Although Vaisnavism takes deep root among the Sonowals traditional Bathow Puja (Worship of Lord Siva) is observed with sacrifice of animals. Popularity of Haidang song on the occasion signifies their unassailable connection with the traditional Kachari culture. Unlike the cognate tribes like the Boro Kacharis and Dimasas, the Sonowal Kacharis observe the Assamese fairs and festivals like other fellow Assamese neighbours. But the traditional touch, here and there cannot be ruled out.

Another example of assimilation is the Barmans of Cachar, a plains tribe of Barak valley. The Barmans are a part of the Dimasa Kacharis and history of Assam is replete with reference of their migration from North Cachar hills to the plains of Cachar. In other words, the Dimasa Kacharis who lived and are living in the plains of Barak valley are known as Barmans. "In the plains the Dimasa were known as Barmans who had assumed the system of wearing sacred thread like the Brahmans and the Kshtriyas"

(Bhattacharjee, 1977). They are affiliated more to the Khatriyas of Hindu caste hierarchy than to the traditional Kacharis. "In all probability when Dimasas, who on shifting their capital from Maibong in the North Cachar Hills migrated to the plains of Cachar, had come into contact with the Hindu people and the Brahmanical priests, the idea that they were the descendants of Bhima, the second Pandava, who was a Kshatriya and whose place was next to Brahmins in the Hindu caste hierarchy, might have been injected to their mind. This ultimately led to the acceptance of Hinduism and to declare themselves to be Kshatriyas by wearing sacred threads by the male members and by performing the religious rites of the Hindus" (Bordoloi and Sharma Thakur, 1988).

But traditions die hard and like the Dimasas the Barmans scrupulously maintain the unique two tier clan systems. i.e. male clan (Semphong) and female clan (Julu) numbering forty and forty two respectively. The clans are exogamous. A token bride price (Kalti) system is prevalent. Dresses worn by the Dimasas are also the dresses of the Barmans but use of such dresses is generally confined to the aged persons.

Another characteristic feature is that Barmans do not prefer widow remarriage which is almost a universal tribal social pattern. They have also given up their traditional dance and music. The traditional 'Khram" (drum) is replaced by Manipuri 'Khol', 'Suphiu' (flute) by modern Manipuri flute. The Barmans, however, do not observe the *Bihu* festivals due to the influence of the Bengalis (Hagjer, 1974). The Barmans speak Bengali when they talk to non Barmans but in their day to day life they speak Dimasa language. The bachelors' dormitory (Nodrang) is now a forgotten institution due to spread of education. Similarly shifting cultivation is not resorted to as they are plains dwellers.

The Lalungs (now they are known as Tiwas) a plain tribe of Nagaon and Marigaon districts, are also an accultured ethnic group. Vaisnavism has appealed to the psyche of the Tiwa', so much so, a few villages near Barapujia Brahmaputra and Raha upgraded themselves to the status of saru Koch discarding the habit of taking pork and rice beer. In general the plains Tiwa cannot be distinguished from those of non tribals in respect of material culture. The Namghar culture is also entering in to the Tiwa villages. The traditional culture, however, is not extinct which is reflected in certain socio-religious beliefs and practices. The institutions of

Rajas (Poali raja) has survived and every year the Raja (Gobha raja) is honoured publicly. The annual famous Jon Bila Mela near Jagiraod held in January provides traditional barter facilities. But today, the mela is an all community affair. Lord Mahadeo is the supreme deity and there are thans (public worshiping place) where Pujas are held with sacrifice of fowls and animals. 'Zu" (Rice beer) is an important item in their festivals.

Change is the constant of culture. Thus, changes have been noticed particularly in material culture among the tribes. more particularly among the plains tribes like Boro Kachari, Rabha, Deori and Mishing, But these changes have not affected the core of the cultures of these tribes. For instance the Brahma section of the Boro Kachari devotedly follow the teachings of Kalicharan Brahma and they perform Hom Yajna in the Vedic style. Even then for all practical purposes they are accultured and there is no vertical division of the community. One will not be surprised to find a sizu plant and Jatrasi representing Bathow in the courtyard of a Brahma.

The Rabha, particularly Pati Rabha of Boko and South Goalpara areas are Hinduised and they call themselves Vaisnavas. The conversion of a sizeable section of the tribe to Christianity is another phenomenon reacting sharply to the preservation of the traditional socio religious rituals. The Pati Rabhas observe the Rangali Bihu (spring dance festival) and Bhogali Bihu (harvesting festival). It is interesting to note that the Pati Rabhas observe "Langapuja" (worship of Lord Mahadeo). Thus inspite of large scale borrowing of non tribal cultural traits the Pati Rabhas are not distanced by other traditonalists like the Rangdani, Maitori, Totlia etc.

The Miris, also known as Mishings, a riverine tribe of upper Assam are also largely accultured although they have been able to preserve most of the traditional cultural traits unimpaired . However, changes are noticed in respect of religious beliefs and one may be enthralled to hear the rhythmical renderings of Mising intonation of Shri Sankardeva's verses of the Kirtan in the tongue of an elderly Mising. Dur to large scale contact with the non Mishings the material culture also undergoes changes. Whenever a suitable highland is available a Mishing constructs an Assam type house. Modern dresses are becoming popular especially among the educated and young sections of the people. The women folk,

however, are experts in weaving and they weave their own clothes. Inspite the changes all around and acceptance of some modern items of material culture, the Mishings are maintaining the core of their culture intact. A few villages near Bokakhat have lost most of their traditional base including the language.

The above characteristics are more or less applicable in case of the Deori, a riverine tribe who can be called "Saktas" (Worshipper of Lord Mahadeo and Parvati). Due to long association with the non Deori population, it was not unnatural to find non tribal elements particularly in respect of material culture. The Tengapania section has lost the language while the Dibangia and Barganya sections have maintained the same. They also know the Assamese language very well.

Another change is noticed in respect of health care and traditional medicine. The Misings as well as the Deoris no longer depend upon traditional medicine. The people are becoming more health conscious and MBBS doctors are welcome in the Mising and Deori villages.

The hill tribes like the Karbi, Dimasa, Rengma Naga etc. are maintaining their culture more or less intact although the acculturation process among these tribes cannot be under-estimated. There are Karbi villages in or near Guwahati extending upto Sonapur who are called Amri Karbis and their hill brethern call them Dumrali. This section has lost most of the traditional traits including the language. Unlike the hill Karbis, they are wet paddy cultivators.

There are non scheduled Buddhist ethnic groups like the Tai Khamti, Tai Phake, Tai Aitonia etc. who are living in the plains districts of upper Assam maintaining most of their traditional characteristics but they too, are incorporating items of modern living into their cultural milieu. Each of these groups has maintained its languages although Assamese is widely used as contact language.

RETRIBALISM

Retribalism can be defined as an effort to revive the lost socio cultural and linguistic characteristics of the social groups which were abandoned due to various factors in recent past. Government policy decisions, preservation of special characteristics

of ethnic communities by way of reservation of seats in Parliament/ Assemblies, reservation facilities in respect of employment, free studentships and allied facilities extended to the scheduled tribes, coupled with emergence of new leadership among the non scheduled ethnic groups, overall economic backwardness, feeling of inferiority complex, political manoeuvrings and others are the salient features for the growth of new trend of tribal revivalism. Thus, there are demands for inclusion of the community in the Scheduled Tribe list of Assam from the Ahom, a totally assimilated ethnic community who ruled over Assam for six hundred years, Koch Rajbongshis also an assimilatied ethnic community, Chutiyas who were tribal people during the pre Independence days are largely assimilated (the deoris, a priestly section of the Chutiyas who have been recognized as Scheduled Tribe plains), T. a and Ex-tea garden communities who were brought t· Assam f.r tea plantation purposes by the Tea companies during pr. Independence days from Bihar, Orissa, Choranagpur, Telengana, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Bengal etc. Morans and Mataks were rulling in upper Assam areas even before the advent of the great Sukapha, founder of the Ahom Kingdom and their demands are under consideration by the Government of India. Incidentally, it may be mentioned that the case of Koch Rajbongshis has had been considered favourably by passing Ordinances but bereft of Parliament's approval, the community is yet to be enlisted through the Presidential proclamation.

Besides there are various other groups who were completely assimilated viz., Saranias, Chaodangs, Bakalials partially assimilated or accultured like the Halams, Amri Karbis, Banais, Maghs who are also claiming Scheduled Tribe status. These groups are trying to assert their separate indentities by enlisting themselves in the Scheduled Tribe list of Assam. These groups had already been assimilated into the Assamese society by accepting life and culture of the indigenous Assamese people. Except the Tai groups, Magh and Bodo Kacharis ofKarbi Anglong district, almost all the groups claiming Scheduled Tribe status have lost their language. The tea and ex tea garden groups have a sizable population and they have accepted Assamese culture and language to a considerable extent. However, they are maintaining some of the main traditional traits of their culture. In fact all the above mentioned communities seeking Scheduled Tribe status have had certain traditional socio-religious elements.

Conclusion

Assam may be called a mini India which is testified by the existence of 18 scheduled languages as recorded in the 1991 census. These are :

Languages	No. of Speakers
1. Assamese	12958088
2. Bengali	4856537
3. Gujarati	5484
4. Hindi	1035474
5. Kannada	545
6. Kasmiri	88
7. Kankani	609
8. Malayalam	3575
9. Manipuri	126987
10. Marathi	1533
11. Nepali	432519
12. Oriya	140782
13. Punjabi	14289
14. Sanskrit	7
15. Sindhi	852
16. Tamil	1770
17. Telegu	22816
18. Urdu	3935

Besides there are as many as 68 scheduled language in Assam. This multilingual and multiethnic characteristic is a unique feature. Till the sixties of this century, acculturation and assimilation process emboldened the growth of a greater Assamese Society and there was a healthy growth of unity in diversity. But the demand for autonomy by some of the scheduled tribes and retribalism effort of the non scheduled ethnic groups has cut at the root of the Assamese nationhood. State formation beginning with the creation of Autonomous State/Autonomous District may ultimately lead Assam into smaller States and smaller nationalities. Already mistrust, disbelief and bickerings have cropped up even among the scheduled tribes as proposed offering of Scheduled Tribe status to new non scheduled groups, which once opted for non inclusion in Scheduled Tribe list or whose demands fell flat before the Kaka

Kalelkar Commission or whose traditional characteristics could not justify for inclusion in the Scheduled Tribe list might., it is feared, currail the existing benefits enjoyed by the scheduled tribes, particularly plain tribes.

Therefore more intensive study could throw light on this burning problem so that all the ethnic groups can develop according to their genious and maintain their separate indentities while preserving the multilingual and multiethnic character of Assamese nationality.

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TRIBAL ELEMENTS IN ASSAMESE CULTURE

It is a truism to say that Assam is a meeting place of many races, cultures, languages and religions which have largely moulded a unified cohesive cultural identity known as Assamese culture. Due to constant interaction and cultural adaptation of multiple ethnic groups, a symbiotic culture was developed. Kabiguru Rabindra Nath Tegore has expressed this symbiosis in the following stanza.

'Hethaai' Arya, Hethaai Anaarjya,
Hethaai Dravira Cin;
Sak Hun Dal Pathan Mugal
Ek Dehe Holo Lin.'

(Here (in India) the Aryans and non Aryans, the Dravidians, the hordes of Sakas and Huns, Pathans and Mughals have marged into a single identity). Similar homogeneity is noticed in case of Assam too. In the hoary past people belonging to Austric family of languages entered the North-East Region from South East Asia through Burma (Mynmar). They were followed by a group of Mongoloid people who were speakers of the Tibeto Burman or Siamese Chinese families of languages. These races along with their languages and cultures have intermingled linking together through blood, language and culture. Historical and Antiquarian studies and empirical researches conducted by various eminent ethnographers indicated that a group of people speaking a branch of the mMonkhmer language were the earliest settlers in what constituted the undivided Assam. They were followed by the great Bodo people from the North Eastern direction. Then came the Aryan migrants from the middle Gangetic plain. The Koches who were a powerful Boro group ruled for a little more than a century in the Western part of this region towards the early part of the sixteenth century A.D. Today a substantial portion of the Assamese population belongs to this community and many Assamese cultural elements are enriched by the total cultural assimilative character of the Koches. The cult of the Mother Goddess Kamakhya developed in this region from the Koch king Naranarayan and his able brother Chilarai's patronage. The

incorporation of this Goddess in the Tantric form of Hinduism took place in the distant past. The 'Hevajra Tantra' and the 'Kalika Puran' composed before 1000 AD contain ample references about the existance of the 'Kamakhya Pitha'. Perhaps this single deity worshipped in the shape of pudendum of the great goddess Parvati is considered as one of the fiftyone pilgrimage centres of the Sakti cult throughout length and breadth of India.

The characteristic socio-cultural and political features of Assam have in fact evolved with contribution of all autochthonous who preferred to make Assam their homeland and have largely merged their distinct identities into common Assamese nationhood. In the late medieval period the Bodos along with the Austric and Aryan migrants of the valley formulated a unified and integrated cultural pattern called Assamese. Mongolian elements were intrinsically woven the linguistic pattern. Acharya Suniti Kumar Chatterjee observes. "This can be synthesis of culture and fusion of races in the formation of the great nation which is characterised like a cutgem by many facets among which the North-Eastern Frontier facet is the most remarkable."[1]

Assam has as many as twenty three major tribal groups, nine in plains and fourteen in the two hills districts and the tribal elements in Assamese culture particularly of those belonging to the scheduled plains tribes like Bodo Kacharis, Rabhas, Mishings (Miris), Lalungs (Tiwas), Deoris, Sonowal Kacharis; scheduled hill tribes like Mikirs (Karbis) and non scheduled ethnic groups like Tai Ahoms, Tai Khamtis, Chutias, Morans, Mataks and Koch Rajbangshis in respect of socifacts, mentifacts, agrifacts and artefacts, are conspicuously noticable. Dr. P. C. Choudhury rightly opines, "It is due to the Admixture of these elements and mutual influence of one upon the other that the Assamese culture though fundamentally allied to that of India, has retained its separate entity with local variations."[2]

It is often argued that caste based social divisions were created by the migrant Hindu groups of the Gangetic valley. But it is now a settled historical - truism that the Mongoloids came to this part much early than the migrant Aryans. The history of Assam is replete with instances that the early rulers of Assam

(then Kamrupa/pragjyotishpur) were Indo-Mongoloids. Thus the Varman, Sala Stambha, Pralambha and Pala dynasties who ruled Assam during 436 A.D. to 1048 A.D. had maintained contact with the Hindu kings of North India. 'So much so that the famous Chinese traveller Hiuen-T-Sang mentioned Bhaskar Burman of Assam as Brahmin king. The kings offered land grants to the Brahmins and people of other castes in their kingdoms[3]. Prof. Annada Charan Bhagawati observes, "It must be emphasised that in the emergence of caste based Hindu social order the Mongoloid rulers made signal contributions. For instance the Koches who established a kingdom in the lower Assam region by sixteen century made a significant contribution in forming the Assamese Hindu Society.[4]"

The broad Hindu social spectrum as seen in Assam is largely moulded by conversion of animistic tribal groups to the Hindu fold. The Bodo Kacharis, Rabhas, Lalungs, Mechs, Hojais, Mishings, Sonowal Kacharis, Barmans of Cachar and Deoris (all scheduled tribes plains); the Karbis and Dimasa Kacharis (Hill tribes); the Tai Ahoms, Chutias, Morans, Mataks, Chaodangs, Koch Rajbangshis (all OBCs) constituted the bulk of Hindu population by conversion and sanskritisation. Thus many of the Assamese peasantry who are branded as non tribals, have had tribal cultural elements in the distant past.

The Kirata (Bodo, Koch, Mech, Rabha, etc.) elements in Assamese culture have been emphasised by ethnohistorians. Acharyya Suniti Kumar Chatterjee who made an indepth study of the Kiratas in his famous book Kirata has observed "Assam was the great reservoir of the fourth element in the formation of the Indian people in the Kirata or Mongoloid. She was the oldest route for our cultural connection with the great country of China and possibly the art of preparing silk and silk cloth came to India from China through Assam[5]." The Eri and Pat weaving is the most glaring items of tribal elements in our culture without which Assamese identity will be extinguished.

In respect of language the language of Bodo Kacharis upon the prevailing language structure of Assam is note worthy, although the Aryan Hindus had a strong background in the making and developing of the Assamese language. Before the advent of

the Aryans the unwritten Bodo language was widely prevalent in Assam. But in later period the Bodo language could not compete with the written language of the Aryans. Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee aptly summarises this Bodo phenomenon in his Kirata Jana Kriti: "The great Bodo Tribe would appear to have been established over the valley of the Brahmaputra fairly early to have extended into the North and East Bengal and into North Bihar. The North Assam Tribes of the Abors and Akas, Daflas and Miris and Mishings appear to have come later and to have established themselves in the mountains to the North of the Brahmaputra plains already in occupation of the Bodos and by some Austric and possibly also Dravidian tribes which preceded that Mongoloid Bodos in this tract Bodo and Austric and Dravidian with Aryan speaking elements from Bengal and Bihar and with Siamese-Chinese section of the Mongoloid in their Thai tribe of the Ahoms finally becoming transform to the Aryan Assamese speaking of the valley."[6]

Dr. Bani Kanta Kakati, one of the pioneers in the linguistic analytical studies has mentioned elaborately about the tribal elements in Assamese language from different angles viz. phonological, morphological and lexical. For instance the Assamese earthen jar called 'Tekeli' has been named after Bodo Kachari word 'Tingkhili' and Garo word 'Tikli'. Assamese word 'Dalang' (bridge) has its root in Bodo Prakrit 'Daalaang' and'Jalang'. 'Aapaa' a Kamrupi equivalent of the" Assamese word 'Loraa' (boy) has its root in Kachari 'Aaffa' and Chutia 'Aappa'.

Various authors dealing with the linguistic research have opined that Assamese language has a good number of Bodo words. Dr. Pramod Chandra Bhattacharyya, who conducted an indepth study regarding the close affinity of the Bodo and Assamese languages has said that there are at least twenty per cent words in Assamese language which have tribal origin. In this way Assamese language has at least twenty percent words of tribal origin.

Pundit Kaliram Medhi, in his well documented book Assamese Grammar and Origin of the Assamese language has emphasised that there are many tribal elements in Assamese language. The Tibeto-Burman and Tai or Thai elements are quite visible. In respect of glossarial affinities the Assamese word 'Aai', Bhutia's 'Aai'.

The Assamese word 'Aappa' meaning boy (in lower Assam) is derived from Bhutia word 'Aappa', Koch word 'Aafaa', Garo word 'Aafaa' and Chutia 'Aappaa'. The Assamese word 'Aalahi' (guest) has its origin in Mikir's 'Aalahi Arleng'. Similarly 'Kerep'(care) in Assamese came from Mikir's similar word. The Assamese word 'Khang' (anger) bears similarly with that of Chutiya's Khang' and Garo's 'Khaaonanga'. 'Jaangfai', a traditional Assamese ornament comes to the Assamese vocabulary from Tai Khamti's same word. Again the name 'Chaaodang',a small community which was in charge of punishing offenders during Ahom rule is still used. 'Laaopani' (fermented liquor) in Assamese comes from 'Laao' a Tai Ahom word, Hiloi (Gun) is a Tai Ahom word. The Assamese words 'Baralaa'(widower, unmarried) and 'Penglaai' (jest) have their roots in Koch's 'Baarlaa'and 'Penglaai having similar meaning. 'Daarlaa' and 'Penglaai' having similar meaning. 'Dong' (irrigation channel) has its origin in Kachari 'Dong', Mikir's Dong and Garo's 'Dongge'. The Chutia word 'Dekaagu', (a young man) has entered in the Assamese vocabulary as Deka bearing same meaning.

The Kacharis and Chutias 'ruled over Assam before the advent of the Ahoms and they left traces of their rule by naming rivers, mountains and places etc. Thus we find Kachari names of rivers Daiyang, Dikrai, Dikrang, Dikhow, Digaru, Diju, Dipila, Dikrang, Diphu, Dibru, Dimow, Dihing etc. Chiring Chapori, a place name of Dibrugarh district, is a Chutiya word. Dimapur, Darrang are Kachari place names used even at present.

The Ahoms who ruled in Assam for about six hundred years have left traces of their rule by naming some prominent Physical features. In this way the present day Assamese place names like Namdang, Namti, Namrup, Namchai had their origin from Ahom word 'Naam' meaning water. The Ahom word 'Ti' signifies place. Thus place names like Tingkhong, Tiplai, Tipam, Tipuk, Tiok,Tingrai, Tihu, Tirap, Tipling are the gifts of the Ahoms.

The Mikirs (Karbis) also contributed certain names to the Assamese vocabulary. In Mikir language 'Laang' means water. Thus we have place names after Mikir's 'Laang' like Lamding, Lanka, Langcholiate, Langhing, etc.

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The Bhutias also gave place names to Assam such as Tangla (Bhutia 'Tsanglaa'), 'Laamaabaari' ('Laamaa' means road). Bengbari in Darrang has its name from Bhutanese 'Beng' meaning platform or 'Chang'.

In respect of religious beliefs and practices there are tribal elements which deserve notice. Saivism was in practice as far back in the early part of the first millennium A.D. Some authors even trace the existence of Siva worship'in Assam earlier than that. The Kalika Purana however, mentions that king Naraka had introduced the cult of mother goddess Kamakhya into Kamrup. Before Naraka, Lord Siva was the guardian deity in the province of Assam. Even during the reign of Naraka worship of Lord Siva was not abandoned. "Sambhurantar guptah Sa Me Puri"[8] Even Today Lord Mahadev is the supreme god among many ethnic groups. (Bodo, Lalung, Deori, Rabha, Mikir etc.) Bathowbrai, Baliababa and Faa Maahaadeo are worshipped by the Bodos, Deoris and Lalungs respectively as the most benevolent deity. The Sakta section of the population offer sacrifices of goats, ducks, pigeons, buffalo etc. to goddess Durga or Kali which is an Indo Tibbetan culture. The Bodos had established a township at Simaluguri hillock which later on came to known a Charaideo. They also established township like the Brahmapur -Balampur - Balam, Haalaalaam -Helem, Biswakarmapur -Bispur-Bihpur - Bihpuria, Bodojyoti -Basdati -Badati, -Bahalaali -Bihali etc. On the southern bank of the river Brahmaputra the township got its name changed into Brahampur and the township on the bank of the river Dhansiri was named Lakhindrapur, later on changed into Dimapur.[9]

In the rural areas of Assam magico-religious beliefs and practices are prevalent. The magical beliefs are what James Frazer calls contagious and sympathetic and these were handed over to the indigenous populations by the tribals. The Bura Dangaria, Jal Devata, Jal Kunwari, Bira, Pisas are appeased with pujas by both tribals and non-tribals. Tree worship (custom of planting a plantain/ betelnut tree during purification rite of puberty attainment of a girl which represents a husbarnd) is a tribal tradition scrupulously followed by non tribals even today. Similarly Sizu plant representing Bathow in the Bodo pantheon, is also used by the rural non tribal

people in the form Sal Kunwari (a variety of Sizu plant) to avert evil effects. Dak Purusha enjoins.

Griha Chari Suke Duaara Mukhata. Basaa Sizu Aani Ruibaa Sakata. (Basa or Sizu plants should be planted in the four corners of the house as well as in front of the door).

Assamese menu contains certain tribal ingredients such as 'Kalakhar' (Alkaline prepared from banana stem), 'Kharisaa' (prepared from bamboo shoot), cane shoot locally known as 'Batgaaj', 'Kaanhudi-Khaarali' prepared out of mustard seeds and 'kaalaakhaar', varieties of herbs, roots, creepers like 'Vedaailataa', 'Miriaaloo', 'Laai', Lafaa', 'Baabori', 'Chukaa' (also known as 'Tengaa Paaleng'), 'Khutaraa', 'Chungaapitha', 'Chungaa-Chaaol', 'Tilpithaa' etc. Use of fish in the meals by the caste Hindus is borrowed from tribal food habit. 'Fish eating is probably a pre-Aryan custom and in Assam it might have been borrowed from the Mongolian people[10].

The habit of chewing raw betelnut with betel leaves is characteristic of the people of North East. Betel leaves and nuts occupy an important item in the socio-religious ceremonies of Assamese people. Scholars are of the opinion that this practice has come from the Austrics. "In India the custom of chewing unripe betelnut exists only in Assam. The FatehaI-ibriah' states that the people of Assam ate pan in large quantities with unripe supari unshelled. The Yogini Tantra says that women of Assam would always be chewing betel nut- 'Tambulasah Sada Bhabit'. Arecanut and betel leaf, Tamul pan as these are called in Assamese have a definite place in many religious and ceremonial functions."[11]

The Assamese social life bears testimony to the existence of ample tribal elements. The' Joron' ceremony of a formal marriage in Assam contains certain items such as a pair of fish, one pair of coconut, vermilion, bunch of betel leaves and nuts, mustard seeds, Matikalai (Maahar Daali) raw turmeric etc. which have tribal origin. likewise 'Dara Aagosaa' (putting blocks on the path of groom while proceeding to the bride's' place on the marriage day and demanding token amount), 'Lakhimi Anaa' (carrying the first bundle of harvested paddy to home ceremonially) offering

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betel leaves and nuts as the first item to entertain a guest etc. are now part and parcel of Assamese culture.

Mongolian origin can be traced in respect of household bamboo, wooden, iron etc. implements like 'Kharaahi' 'Paachi', 'Chaaloni', 'Chepaa', 'Jaakoi', 'Juluki', spade, iron blade for ploughing; 'Kaanchi', 'Moi', 'Ruwaa', 'Maarali' etc. The names of varieties of paddy like Ahu, Saali, Johaa etc. are also Mongolian origin.

Assamese head dress, Gaamochaa, Japi, weaving of Endi and pat clothes, the looms, art of preparing indigenous dyes, rearing of cocoons etc. are the gifts from tribals.

Various scholars are of the opinion that the Assamese word Bihu got its name from 'Bisu' or 'Baisaagu' although some other scholars opine that Bihu originated from the word 'Visuva'(vemal equinox) or 'Visuvant'. But certain features of the Bihu lead us to believe that Bihu as it is observed today has close connection with the Bihu festivals of the tribal people. For example spreading of garlic water around the house on the first day of Bohag Bihu bears similarity with the belief regarding playing the 'Chatraawali' tune in the flute during first day of Baisagu festival of the Bodos. The purpose of both is same i.e. to avert danger of serpents for the year. The belief that one must take varieties of products like 'Kaath Aloo', 'Moaa Aloo', 'Miri Aloo' or 'Ranga Aloo' and sesame products during Magh Bihu or 'Domaahi' indicates that the practices have been transferred from the tribal to the non tribal during the process acculturation or assimilation.

Above is a brief pen picture of the the tribal elements in Assamese culture and the entire gamut of the tribal elements could not be covered in this short paper. It is admitted that Assamese culture contains sizeable tribal elements and the synthesis thus created is the characteristic feature of the Assamese life and culture preserved through the ages.

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SOCIO-CULTURAL CONSEQUENCES OF TRIBAL DEVELOPMENT : WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE SCHEDULED TRIBES OF ASSAM

INTRODUCTION

To fulfil the constitutional obligations of bringing the scheduled tribes and scheduled castes into the developmental level at par with the rest of the people, steps were undertaken from the beginning of Five Year Plans with a two pronged policy viz. (i) Protection and promotion of the interests of the scheduled tribes and scheduled castes through judicial and administrative measures, (ii) formulation and implementation of development schemes to bring these sections of people into the level of other economically well off sections of people. As the scheduled tribes have their own traditional pattern of living which is in clear contrast with the rest of the people, the general plan could not cater to the needs and aspirations of these people. In this backdrop some special measures had to be evolved and as a result the Tribal Sub-Plan Concept (TSP) gained urgency during the Fifth Five Year Plan and the same has been continued over the years to be nodal instrument of development of tribes and tribal areas.

Assam possesses quite a good number of scheduled tribes and the T.S.P. schemes have been implemented through 27 Nos. of development departments of the state. There are altogether 23 Nos. of major tribes, both hills and plains in Assam. Out of these nine ethnic groups viz. Boro-Kachari, Miri (Mishing), Sonowal Kachari, Rabha, Lalung, Deori, Barmans of Cachar, Mech and Hojai are found in the plains areas and they are categorised as plains tribes. Rest fourteen groups are concentrated in the two hill districts namely Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills. The hill tribes constitute mainly Karbi, Dimasa Kachari,

Any Mizo tribes, Chakma, Any Kuki tribes, Pawi, Hmar, Lakher, Garo, Any Naga tribes, Khasi and Jaintia, Hajong, Maan Tai Speaking and Synteng.

As per 1971 Census (1981 Census was not'held in Assam) the total scheduled tribe population of Assam was 19,19,947 constituting 10.99 percent of the total population of the state.

The T.S.P. approach of tribal development has three broad aspects viz. (1) Integrated Tribal Development Projects (ITDPs) comprising generally administrative units like Sub-divisions/ districts/ talukas having 50% or more scheduled tribe population. (2) M.A.D.A. pockets of tribal concentration having a total population of 10,000 or more and S.T,. population of 50% or more. (3) Primitive Tribal Group Pockets. However during the 7th Five Year Plan clusters, having total population of 5000 and 50% or more S.T. concentrations were also included.

As regards funding' the schemes four sources have been utilised. These are—

(a) State Plan

(b) Special Central Assistance of the Ministry of Welfare.

(c) Central and Centrally Sponsored Schemes.

(d) Institutional Finance.

The schemes under T.S.P. include family beneficiary schemes in various sectors like agriculture, horticulture, minor irrigation, veterinary and animal husbandry, fisheries, co-operation, cottage industries and sericulture. Funds are also allocated for infrastructural sectors like large and medium industry, irrigation and power, mining and roads. Under social service sectors funds are earmarked for drinking water supply, education, health etc.

Above is a bird's eye view of the T.S.P. concept which has been enunciated for alround development of the scheduled tribes. But inspite of laudable schemes, there appears a backlash of development basically in the socio-cultural life of the tribes. The aim of this article is to study the impact of certain

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development schemes undertaken for the socio-economic development of the scheduled tribes of Assam on the socio-cultural life of the tribes.

TRIBALS AND THEIR TYPICAL LIFE STYLES

The tribes have their own mode of living amidst nature and they have unfathomable socio-religious attachment to their territories in which they live. Nature bestows on them an idyllic environment in which they have been brought up and naturally the tribes hesitate to accept the new innovations which we may call development but to most of the tribals a social crisis phenomenon. Outwardly one may get the impression that the tribals are happy with a motorable road inside the territory or a dispensary within easy reach. But very soon they realise the evils attached to these. The question is whether development measures should or should not be extended to the tribal areas. The intention is never to keep aloof the tribals from the developments that take place outside their territory and "leave alone" theory is outmoded in the present day context. But it should be our endeavour to see that while making new innovations into the socio-cultural fabric of the tribal society we should be cautious. Generations have passed in a particular setting with a set cultural pattern and close attachment to the objects of nature such as the forest, rivulet, cremation/burial grounds, the spirits underlying trees and shrubs, the animals and birds, the social taboos, do's and don'ts et al. The unsophisticated tribal people apprehend that new innovations may rob them of the traditional treasures and the value system. They ponder, will the authorities be able to provide them similar natural and cultural setting if displaced or if the habital is molested with the powerful bull-dozers? Will the ancestors be pleased in the offering in a place far away from the place of death? In the tribal setting the medicine man is an important man and he is approached for healing the ailments. Will he be able to get the herbs and shrubs in a foreign setting? Where will the youths get the natural urge to ventilate their sentiments amidst lofty mountains, dense forests

and gurgling water of a hilly stream? While creating new innovations the authorities should consider the vital aspect of availability of cultivable land in the new area where the displaced persons are rehabilitated. The effected people often argue, will the authorities be able to provide suitable alternative cultivable land? It is observed that lands provided by the authorities are not of that standard which their fore-fathers over generations have meticulously planned and developed. As the suitable cultivable lands are already under occupation, the displaced persons get the second or third graded cultivable waste lands. Moderm infrastructural facilities may be extended to them in the new site plan but if the lands and environment become unsuitable, if the facilities go against the prevailing tribal traditio and social behaviour, the new site or for that matter entire. development efforts become a bane rather than a boon for the tribals. These are some of the observations based on field studies which deserve cool calculation before embarking new innovations in tribal areas.

Furthermore, the confidence of the unsophisticated tribal people has been shattered in a new setting when they find that they have to maintain an artificial life.The contrasts of regulated life make them unhappy Whenever and wherever a new project is started, the affected and displaced persons are mostly tribal as they live in secluded areas far from the madding crowd and the project authorities in search of vast areas prefer those areas for various reasons. The pollution, environmental and social is not taken care of. The resources including environmmet which have been sustaining the tribal ethos at elementary level of living have been converted into treasures of national importance. The tribal sentiment is greatly aroused by the naked display of riches by new corners to the project site who have no knowledge about the psyche of the local people. Even the authorities appear to be unconcerned about this when posh institutions with modern facilities are established for the children of the employees in the project while the affected and displaced persons do not even get the minimum elementary educational facilities, let alone facilities for quality education. What is more the local people including

the tribals who may not be dispaced, feel the pangs of high rise of essential articles overnight as the neo rich officials of the project purchase the locally produced food items by paying unreasonable demand prices without thinking for a while the impact of their purchasing spree on the poor tribal people, who till the establishment of the project could get thing at the prices suiting to their economy. Prices of all the items go up and because of this temptation the villagers sell the protein rich items sat the local 'hats' (weekly marketing centres) depriving the children who need these most.

Not only that some of the poor tribals try to imitate the living pattern of some earning employees causing much damage to the family pattern and socio-religious organisations. The young boys become spend thrift as the modern food items in the growth centres beckon them.

Perhaps the most serious demage caused by the new innovations is the spread of individualistic ideas among the people. The money economy has affected the core of the culture. Tribal people have had the glorious tradition of cooperative living and most of the tribes have traditional social institutions for performing social welfare activities. But as most of the half educated young boys are employed as fourth grade staff, the youths do not have time to.offer voluntary service to individual families at the time of distress. These vital social aspects are forgotten while formulating schemes for tribal development.

PANCHAYATI RAJ AND TRIBALS

The Panchayati Raj system is introduced in the tribal areas for effecting a participatory system in the democratic polity. In this sphere also the hopes and aspirations of the tribals have received a jerk because democracy is in their blood and in the new system they do not find the real spirit behind the system. Further Panchayat Raj institutions are part of the formal system and have to function in accordance with certain Acts and Rules. One thing the tribes dislike is the hierarchical system in these institutions and these are responsible to the district or state level

authorities. No doubt representatives of the tribal people are taken in these institutions but they get little scope to express their feelings. Due to the super imposition of a formal system the traditional system of settling disputes, role of the Gaonburah (village headman) in decision making have been undermined. Like other non-tribals the tribal people have to depend upon the institntions in the urban areas for almost everything concerning their life. As is well known the tribes prefer a community life and even individual family problems are solved through the efforts of the elderly persons of the village jointly. But today the people are facing difficulties as the authority of their age old traditional institutions is being' challenged by the neorich/ and neo literates among them and development agencies in charge of development from outside. New tribal leaders are now trying to get upper hand in the society who constitute mainly the Lower Primary School teachers, petty contractors, fair price shop owners, Gram-Sevak, Secretary of the Co-operative Societies etc. Thus as a coherent community, the tribals are experiencing backlash of development. Most of the new tribal leaders develop vested interests in collusion with the high ups at district or state level. Individualism has cut at the roots of the old unsophisticated and community minded tribal life which is the outcome of the entry of money economy into the tribal scene. The self contained simple societies have suffered from the malaise of social disorganisation. They are unable to check the confluence of powerfull sources.

As mentioned above the tribal people prefer to work in a spirit of co-operation in all walks of life. Perhaps it is not an exaggeration when we say that the modern idea of co-operation has been emulated from the tribals or rural societies. The present day co-operative societies functions in a round about way with complex administrative structure.

COOPERATIVE CREDIT SYSTEM AND THE TRIBALS

A study was made by the Tribal Research Institute, Assam entitled 'A study on the working of the Gaon Panchayat Level Cooperative Societies in the Tribal Sub Plan Areas and

LAMPs in the Hill areas of Assam and it was reported that the G.P.S.S are not centrally located in the tribal areas and because of the distant factor most of the tribal shareholders cannot come to the cooperative societies in time. This happens particularly in the summer season when the tribal people remain extremely busy in agricultural activities. The roads in most cases are muddy and the tired cultivators prefer to remain in the family doing odd jobs at home.The purchasing power of the poor tribal cultivators is not considered and as they cannot lift the stipulated quota at a time by paying cash and as all the required items of the villagers are not readily available in the co-operative societies, the poor villagers have no other alternative but to go to the village Mahajan's shop. Thus the same old story is repeated i.e. the villagers are not freed from the clutch of the Mahajans. In fact co-operatives are formed to give relief to the indebted cultivators, but the very aim is frustrated.

The farmers need generally five types of credit such as long term, medium term, short term, consumption and social purpose loans. But the societies extend only short term loans. Unless consumption and social purpose loans are provided the perpetually indebted tribal people will never be relieved from their debt, a phenomenon passing through the generations.

So far as marketing aspect is concerned the societies are required to procure paddy as the agent of the "Statfed" and Apex Marketing Society but also to purchase whatever surplus agricultural produce the members might be having and also purchase other commodities like Endi Cocoon, items of handicrafts, items of other cottage industries, textiles woven locally by the womenfolk etc. The tribal people are simple and straight forward and when the managers of cooperatives fail to turn up with the truck to lift the products of the villagers from the weekly hat or a growth centre nearby, the faith on co-operative societies is shaken. The Mahajans get the opportunity to lift the products. The poverty stricken tribal people cannot be expected to carry back the items to their homes and dispose the same at the price offered by the Mahajans.

The Cooperative societies are supposed to maintain tractors, irrigation pumpsets, pest control implements etc. ready for the use of shareholders. They are also expected to maintain agro service centre for repairing the agricultural implements purchased by the tribal people at subsidy or on loan. But no society performs these functions seriously. The result is that the villagers are compelled to accept the services of local Mahajans who are ready to help them, of course not without getting the 'pound of flesh'.

In the hill districts of Assam, Large Areas Multipurpose Co-operatives Societies (LAMPs) are functioning by and large, satisfactorily. Till the commissioning of LAMPs-in the hill districts, public distribution system was functioning half heartedly and in an unorganised way paving the way for the private traders and money lenders to do all sorts of malpractices. The LAMPs did a marvellous job to eliminate the middlemen and private traders even in inaccessible hilly areas spiralling prices of essential commodities were controlled. Peoples' confidence on cooperatives was rejuvenated.

However, the success story of the LAMPs is not without some blemishes. Due to faulty planning a cooperative mill under Rongkhong LAMP of Karbi Anglong district of Assam, established at a cost of 13.72 lakhs had to be closed because of non availability of sufficient raw materials. Raw materials for a small or medium sized mill are available and the LAMPs could have satisfied with a small mill. The shareholders, who are tribals do not understand the technicalities. They want the things at prices which are reasonable to them. When the co-operatives fail, naturally the confidence of the tribal villagers is badly lost.

Sometimes a peculiar situation arises when certain villagers become eligible for loans while' some other villagers in the same locality are refused loan by the co-operative societies on the ground of non-possessing transferable rights over their lands.The Tribal Research Institute, Assam renamed in later 1990 as Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled

Castes,had completed an exhaustive study on the Problems of Land Alienation and Indebtedness Among the Tribes of Assam and the Report amply brings out the sad plight of the poor tribal villagers. It was found that the tribal people living in the northern belt of Kokrajhar district of Assam have no proven titles on land as the land holding being forest reserve. When some of the villagers living just a few yards away from a forest reserve are eligible to get loans and subsidies and the tribal people living inside the forest areas as forest villagers are deprived of similar facilities,the latter group suffers from inferiority complex. They feel ignored and neglected which cause immense harm to the socio-political fabric of a society. The dimension of this problem has been exposed in another study entitled 'A Study of the Forest Villages of Assam Inhabited by Tribals ' conducted by the Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled Castes, 1990. The Report indicates how the peoples' aspirations have been tantalised by on ambitious Forest Village development scheme launched in 1984-85 only to be abandoned midway. Under the scheme efforts were made to provide certain basic amenities in the tribal forest villages. In fact some of the villages had received the benefits while most other tribal villages did not receive. The unhealthy scheme did more harm than good at least in the sociological perspectives. There was not even scope to patch up differences in the subsequent schemes as no such scheme was launched after that year.

DEVELOPMENT OF INDUSTRIAL INFRASTRUCTURES IN TRIBAL AREAS AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Whenever any medium or big size industry or Irrigational Project starts, the first casualty is the tribals and scheduled castes as they live in far flung areas surrounded by wide spaces which are suitable for such industry or project. Perhaps there is no alternative because suitable sites for heavy industries or big projects may not be that easy to obtain. It is true for the greater interest of the nation some people have to sacrifice their assets i.e. lands which is again a state property given on lease. The tribals do not grumble over this. What they want is a fair deal

in respect of rehabilitation and other compensation.It is desirable that the tribals should be included in the decision making body while selecting a site for any Industry or project as they are required to sacrifice their most valuable assets i.e. lands. The educated youths who would have been in command in the area selected for an industry or project would have been in command in the area selected for an industry or project would have got the chance to co-operate with management in the matter of displacement and rehabilitation. The educated youths could be expected to have taken interest in the project in the wider context of their area and the district.The project authorities, are not taking much interest in this aspect. The feeling developed among the youths would have contributed largely towards efficient running of the project.

Here is another example of negative side of development in the tribal inhabited areas. A study was conducted by the Tribal ResearchInstitute, Assam in respect of the functioning of the Dhansiri Irrigation Project. It is a major Irrigation Project located at the famous Bhairabkunda, a place of pilgrim in the border area of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, about 20 Kms North East of Odalguri a .sub-divisional headquarter town in the district of Darrang, Assam. The project authorities acquired 1184 Bighas (390.72 acres) of various categories of land such as periodic patta land, annual patta land and "Tauzi Bahir" lands. Sixty two numbers of tribal families were affected due to the acquisition of land: As no suitable alternative lands were provided, 11 Nos. of tribal families were compelled to shift to some other place as the remaining lands also proved to be uneconomic. Fifty one numbers of families remained near the Project site and out of these 2 Nos. of families became landless and rest 49 Nos. of families had lands ranging from 2.5 acres to 5 acres.

Compensation for the acquired lands was received by the members of one village only (Rowta Pathar). The families of other 2 Nos. of tribal villages namely Tamulbari and Bonda Para, objected to the lower fixation of compensation rate and the matter remained with the Guwahati High Court for years.

One can imagine the plight of these poor cultivators during these years. Only a few families of Rowta Pathar village could afford to purchase land or get the mortgaged land released. Majority of the families spent the amount of compensation in the day to day consumption articles. Thus the project could not do anything tangible to remove the problem of irrigation in respect of the tribal people, rather it created more problems for the tribal people. The economy of the villagers deteriorated to great extent. The design of the canal was defective and due to the elevation of canal banks the major areas of cultivable lands in Tamulbari village became unproductive. The tribal people viz. the Boro-Kacharis and the Rabhas' considered the project as enemy of the people. They were annoyed because of the time lag of 4-6 years between the acquisition and payment of compensation. The people lost peace and happiness. Festivals were curtailed and the displaced persons had to leave the ancestral property with tearful eyes. The people had emotional and socio-religious attachment with the fields, forests and faunas. They had their ancestors buried/cremated in the river banks. The project authorities could provide only cash compensation or such other facilities but they were not in a position to provide the socio-religious compensation. This phenomenon had completely crippled the initiative and drive of the people.

Another example of adverse effect of development activities on the tribal habitat is the Nagaon Paper Project, H.P.C. Ltd., Jagiroad in the district of Nagaon, Assam. A study was conducted by the Tribal Research Institute, Assam on the Displacement of Tribals, due to the establishment of Nagaon Paper Project, H.P.C. Jagiroad in two tribal inhabited villages namely Deosal and Taghetia. It was reported that 18 Nos. of families of Deosal and 17 Nos. of families of Tagheria were effected due to acquisition of land for the paper mill. Altogether 58.52 acres of cultivable land and 23.38 acres of Basti land were acquired from 79 tribal families. It may be mentioned that the said lands were acquired during 1971-86 and till 1986 the displaced persons were not getting the compensation as the

effected villagers filed a civil suit against the authorities on the ground that they were not paid the actual and reasonable value of the land acquired.

The authorities did not consider the socio-economic aspect in this case as the effected villagers spent sleepless nights on two accounts. Firstly they lost the ancestral property and secondly they were not getting the compensation. Further as compensation money was not paid immediately after acquisition of land, the people, who were already indebted to Mahajans were compelled to borrow money from Mahajans to run the day to day affairs curtailing expenditures in socio-religious occasions. They lost all interest in the development that took place in their surroundings and in fact the amenities provided to the employees went in sharp contrast vis-a-vis the prevailing tribal economy.

The Report further elaborated that the compensation in most cases were not used for acquiring assets of permanent nature as the amount of compensation was inadequate to purchase plot of land with the same amount.

The paper mill authority (H.P.C. Ltd.) did not have a full fledged scheme of rehabilitation for the displaced persons. The authorities, however, provided employment to 55 Nos. of land affected persons in semi skilled posts like Peon, Crane Operators, Khalasis, Tcchnicians etc.

CONCLUSION

Sometimes the welfare schemes of the tribals go against the traditions and customs of the people and the schemes, by and large, do not serve the purpose. A case in point is the model village at Bijoypur under Murkongselek Jonai Tribal Development Block of Dhemaji district of Assam (old Lakhimpur district). The Miris (Mishings) a plains tribe of Assam, live in platform type houses raised about 5' above the ground. The block authorities built three room neat houses, of course in platform type. The tribals however, did not use the houses as main houses as they are not habituated to live in small walled apartments. It may be mentioned here that joint family structure is the

characteristic feature of Mishing cultural life and one may find as many as 40 persons living in big hall type house with small improvised partitions. Besides they offer oblations to household deities and "Meram" (fire place) has socio-religious significance. Here lies the need of tribal orientation training of the officers engaged in tribal welfare, otherwise there is risk in dealing with the socio-cultural life of the tribals casually with a routine system of allocation of fund, fulfilment of stipulated target etc. Perhaps it will be relevant here to conclude with the observations of late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in respect of tribal welfare activities undertaken by Government and other agencies. "The most critical input for tribal development is the quality of administration. The socio-economic conditions of the tribals vary considerably from one area to another and from one community to the other. Administrative conventions evolved overlong periods with past with reference to local situations have been superseded by uniform procedures creating adverse effects on the tribal population. The super imposition of general administrative structure, evolved for advanced areas, on the simple tribal areas has resulted in considerable confusion. There is over specialisation, avoidable duplication, lack of co-ordination and diffusion of responsibility..... The simple tribal situation needs a simple administrative structure within the comprehension of the people."

It is an admitted fact that best arrangements and planning get spoiled by bad masters who are trusted for implementation. The schemes for tribal development are meticulously planned but the desired result is not obtained because of half hearted attitude of some of the officials who are entrusted to do the job in the tribal areas. It has been observed that most of these officials go to the field with their superficial knowledge or no knowledge about the life and culture for whose development they have been deputed. Very often this half knowledge or lack of knowledge creates more problems. Dr. B. D. Sarma opines, "But what is worse by and large, postings in tribal areas are regarded as punishment postings with the result that the quality of personnel in these areas is generally indifferent. There is

considerable exploitation by petty officials with the resultant lack of confidence in the local administration. Selection of right type of personnel is necessary to improve the quality of administration." Article 275 (1) specifically provides for bringing up the level of administration in tribal areas. But not much attention has been paid.

This single factor i.e. selection of right type of personnel for tribal development will go a long way towards achieving the desired goal of bringing the tribal communities into the mainstream of life.

Development of the tribes needs to be done cautiously keeping always in view the typical tribal charactertistics, their value system, modes and morals etc. Emphasis should be laid on overall socio-cultural development and not merely on material progress.*

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AREA RESTRICTION– THE CONSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINT OF TRIBAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE AUTONOMOUS DISTRICT COUNCIL OF KARBI ANGLONG

In the constitution (Scheduled Tribe) Order 1950 and in the Copstitution (Scheduled Tribe) Amendment Order 1976, the Boro Kacharis have been shown as the major scheduled tribe of Assam. As they are mainly concentrated in the plains districts of Assam, they have been scheduled in the category "in the State of Assam Excluding Autonomous Districts." But there is a sizable section of Boro Kacharis in the Sixth Schedule Areas which is not considered as scheduled tribe. The 'Kachari Samaj' of Sixth Schedule Areas include, besides the Boros, the Lalungs (Tiwas), the Meches and the Rabhas who are scheduled tribes in the plains districts of Assam.

Demographically, the Boro Kacharis form the second largest group in the autonomous Karbi Anglong district, next only to the Mikirs (Karbis). The area restriction, puts a hindrance to the Boro Kacharis in their getting as scheduled tribe status in the hill districts. The 'Kachari Samaj' of Karbi Anglong district has been representing its case for removal of area restriction to the Ministry of Home Affairs/Ministry of Welfare, Government of India, since 27th March, 1978. The matter was raised in the Lok Sabha by Hon'ble member Shri George Fernandes on 3rd November, 1982. The honourable member of the Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Shri R. C. Chiten Jamir also took up the matter personally with tile Union Home Minister. But no decision in this regard has been taken as amendment of Articles 342 and 342(2) of the Constitution of India is involved.

In this paper an effort has been made to present a pen picture of the Boro Kacharis of Karbi Anglong district based on field observations vis-a-vis their demand for inclusion of the plains tribes in the list of scheduled tribe (hills) of Assam.

In order to have a clear picture of the non-scheduled tribes in the autonomous districts of Assam, a retrospective look into the creation of the Sixth Schedule areas and consequent publication of two separate lists of scheduled tribes for the state of Assam, is necessary.

The Constituent Assembly devoted considerable time into the subject of giving special treatment to the tribes of Assam. The distinguished members expressed in unequivocal terms about the need for an autonomous arangement for the tribes of Assam. The discussion centered round the hill tribes by– passing the tribes living in the plains districts. Naturally, Hon'ble member Shri Dharanidar Basumatary opined "one has to admit that there is much scope for tribal development for the so called autonomous districts where there will be tribal councils and so forth. But I am not happy about tribals in Assam who are in the plains and the tea gardens. There are millions of them outside the autonomous districts. What will be their fate?"[1] However, plains tribes have been included in the Presidential Orders 1950 in the category 'Scheduled Tribes in Areas other than the Autonomous Districts' and they are enjoying all the benefits that are meant for scheduled tribes.

A problem arises regarding the socio-political status of the plains tribes who are living In the Sixth Schedule Areas. There are sizable numbers of Boros in the autonomous districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills. Although they are not scheduled tribes in these two districts, they are enjoying educational and economic benefits. In addition they enjoy the facilities of reservation of posts in the Autonomous District Council as per executive order of the Government of India. They have voting rights and elect executive members to the District Council. The Boros, however, are not content with these concessions and they are insisting on political rights. In other

words they are demanding removal of area restriction clause in the State of Assam, so that they will be in a position to send their representatives to the Legislative Assembly/Parliament. It may be mentioned that the matter was raised in the Constituent Assembly by Hon'ble member Jai Pal Singh of Bihar to which Hon'ble Dr. B. R. Ambedkar replied; "supposing a Member of a Scheduled Tribe living in a tribal area migrates to another part of the territory of India which is outside both the scheduled area and tribal area, will he be able to claim from the local Government within whose jurisdiction he may be residing, the same privileges which he would be entitled to when he is residing within the scheduled area or within the tribal area? It is a difficult question for me to answer. If that matter is agitated in quarters where a decision on a matter like this would lie, we would certainly be able to give some answer to the question in the form of some clause in this Constitution. But so far as the present Constitution stands, a member of a Scheduled Tribe going outside the scheduled area or tribal area would certainly not be entitled to carry with him the privileges that he is entitled to when he is residing in a scheduled area or tribal area. So far as I can see it will be practically impossible to enforce the provisions that apply to tribal areas or scheduled areas, in areas other than those which are covered by them."[2]

Reacting to the setting up of the Autonomous District Council arrangement, Kuladhar Chaliha, another honourable member from Assam in the Constituent Assembly expressed 'unhappiness' over the special arrangement for the hill tribals as according to him the autonomous arrangment will create problem in future. In his own words– "I think we are heading to a difficult situation and if the tribes caused disturbances to us we have to thank ourselves. But there is one redeeming feature and that is paragraph 21 of the Sixth Schedule which reads:

"Parliament may, from time to time by law amend by way of addition, variation or repeal any of the provisions of this Schedule and when the Schedule is so amended any reference to this Schedule in this Constitution shall be construed as a

reference to such schedule as so amended."[3]

While discussing the political safeguards to the scheduled tribes, Rohini Kumar Choudhury. Hon'ble member of the Constituent Assembly pinpointed this particular problem arising out of area restriction. He observed "now in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills District as also in the Mikir Hills, a portion of Nowgong and Sibsagar districts there is a large population which does not belong to the tribal denomination and if Article 149 stood as it did originally, great harm would have been caused to these non-tribal people of these areas. In Article 294, clause (6), it is stated "no person who is not a member of scheduled tribe of any autonomous district of the State of Assam shall be eligible for election to the Legislative Assembly of the State from any constituency of that district. That is to say if any portion which has a large population of non tribal people is included in the Autonomous District, that large portion of non-tribal people will be entirely disenfranchised. In that case it is meaningless to have any right or franchise if it does not take along with it the right to stand for election."[4]

In the light of the above background let us discuss the demand of the 'Kacharis Samaj' of Karbi Anglong district, particularly of the Boro Kacharis, regarding removal of area restriction of the tribal people of the State. Demographically the Boro Kacharis form the second largest ethnic group in the Karbi Anglong district. There are 28265 numbers of Boro speaking persons (1971 census) in the Karbi Anglong district (1981 census was not held in Assam and 1991 tribewise Census figures are not available yet). These Boro speakers are spread in the areas of 4 Police Stations viz., Baithalangso. Howraghat, Bokajan and Diphu Police Stations as shown in the table below:

TABLE 1

Boro Speaking population of Karbi Anglong Autonomous District (1971 Census)

Sl. No.	Name of the District	Name of Police Station	Total Population (Boro *speakers)*	Male	Female
1.	Karbi Anglong	Bailhalangso	3922	1928	1994
2.		Howraghat	18953	9794	9159
3.		Bokajan	127	66	61
4.		Diphu	5263	2709	2554
		Total	**28265**	**14497**	**13768**

The estimated population calculated at 2.5 % annual growth rate will be 56303 in March 1991.

There are altogether 13 Scheduled Tribes in the Karbi Anglong district as shown in the table overleaf

The hill tribes together constitute *55.3 %* of the total population of the district. Thus the tribes in the Karbi Anglong district mean the above mentioned 13 numbers of tribes only, while the Boro Kacharis are included in a special category known as 'Plains Tribes Living in the Hills' with third category status. They enjoy educational and economic concessions as well as special privileges in the matter of employment in public services as per Government of Assam's Memo NO.TAD/Pt/9/ 55. dated 27.12.60 repeated in Memto No. AAP 114/57/Pt/I/ 149, dated 1.10.62 under the head 'Concessions to Scheduled Tribes living outside regarding reservation in posts. preferential treatment in settlement of contracts, permits, fisheries etc.

TABLE 2

Showing Scheduled Tribe Population of the Karbi Anglong district (1971 Census)

Sl. No.	Name of the Tribe	Total population of the tribe	% to the total ST population in the district
1.	Mikir (Karbi)	1.72.845	82.29
2.	Dimasa	14.797	7.04
3.	Garo	9.080	4.32
4.	Khasi and Jayantia	4.763	2.27
5.	Chakma	246	0.12
6.	Hajong	384	0.18
7.	Hmar	13	0.01
8.	Any Kuki tribes	5.397	2.83
9.	Man (Tai speaking)	964	0.45
10.	Any Mizo (Lushai)	347	0.17
11.	Any Naga tribes	46	0.02
12.	Pawi	6	0.01
13.	Synteng	611	0.29
	Total	**2.10.039**	**100**

The Memos inter alia contain– 1. "Scheduled Tribes living in the Autonomous District and Part B Tribal Areas (NEFA) and the Scheduled Tribes living in the plains districts of the State when they live in the plains districts and hill districts respectively, should be given the general educational and economic concessions as well as special privileges in the matter of employment in public services to which they would have been entitled as scheduled tribes, if they were living within their specified areas. They would not however be entitled to any special representation in the State Legislature and in Parliament associated with their residences in such plains or hill areas."

2. "In pursuance of the above decision the scheduled tribes of the Autonomous Districts and N.E.F.A. living in the plains districts

and the scheduled tribes in the plains districts living in the Autonomous Districts should be entitled to the concessions mentioned in OM No. ABM 18/56/14, dated 11th August, 1956 and No. ABM 18/56/90 dated 2nd February, 1960 regarding settlement of contracts, permits etc. They will also be entitled to the same benefit of reservation in all services and posts in connection with the affairs of the State of Assam as provided for the scheduled tribes."

The Government of Assam reiterated their above decisions tn their letters No.TAD/ST/279/82/16, daled 24.12.82. The para 5 of this letter contained "For the purpose of giving these economic, educational and employmenl benefits, 'hill tribes in the plains' will be considered against quotas, If any, reserved for scheduled tribes (Hills) while the 'plains tribes' in the hills will be considered against quotas, if any, reserved for scheduled tribe plains."

The Kachari Samaj of Karbi Anglong district feels that due to the area restriction, the Boro Kacharis, Lalungs, Meches of Karbi Anglong district have been relegated to the third graded citizens hence they are taking up their cause with the Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Welfare, Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and even with the Prime Minister and the President of India, since March 1978. The matter was raised in the Lok Sabha in August, 1967. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Orders (Amendment) Act of 1976 also could not do much in this regard. The matter remains unsettled till today and the 'Kachari Samaj' feels that ceratin decisions of the Karbi Anglong District Council hurt their sentiment and ego, being a major tribe in the State of Assam. For example they refer to the Executive Committee Resolution regarding settlement of land. This Land Settlement Policy of the District Council aims at protecting the land interests of the indigenous tribal groups living within Karbi Anglong district. The policies adopted under the Mikir Hills District (Transfer of Land) Act, 1959 are as follows:

(1) 'In the matter of settlement of land in Karbi Anglong the first preference shall be given to the bonafide Scheduled Tribes of the district'.

(2) 'The second preference shall be given to the Scheduled Tribes coming from the other Autonomous District namely North Cachar Hills'.

(3) No settlement of land shall be made with any non tribal coming to the district after 15th August, 1947 and all such non tribals coming after the above date and occupying land without any authority shall be evicted forthwith.

(4) The District Council may in special cases relating to the victims of unusual natural calamities such as floods, earthquakes etc. who are in the occupation of land in the district, order settlement of land with the affected non tribal people on the recommendations of the Deputy Commissioner after due enquiry.

(5) Waste lands in the district which are suitable for wet paddy cultivation after proper reclamation are, however, reserved for the people belonging to the scheduled tribes of the district only.

With their limited resources, the District Council Authorities have provided the infrastructural facilities and such other benefits as approved for the 'plains tribes living in the hills' subject, however, to the availability of fund. To study the position, we visited Boro Kachari inhabited villages of Langhin Tiniali of Karbi Anglong district and a few specimens of our field study are presented below :

The Dankachinthu Suba, a Boro village lying at a distance of 9 kms from Langhin Tiniali has 16 families. A P.W.D. road connects the village with the Langhin Tiniali, a growth centre on the Diphu-Nagaon highway. Most of the families are poverty stricken as agricultural lands are insufficient and the villagers are not entitled to cultivate waste lands. Five families possess 10 bighas of land each, eight families have 0-4 bighas of land

each including homestead land, while 3 families are landless. None of the families could procure C.I. sheets as roofing materials. The District Council has provided pipe water facility in the village. Other facilities like veterinary dispensary, leprosy centre, a 30 bedded hospital etc. are in a central place of the village. The Dankachinthu HE school is situated close to the village. There are 2 graduates, 6 HSLC passed boys and 5 college going boys in the village. Female education, however, is lagging behind.

In contrast, the socio-economic condition of the Taradong village is far from satisfactory. The village is situated at a distance of 4 kms northeast of Dentaghat. It is not connected by an all weather road. Educational facilities are also inadequate. The students have to walk all the way to Saamelangso Venture H.E. school. Only one household in the villalge possesses 40 Bighas of land and the rest of the villagers do not possess any land. These families eke out their livelihood by serving as day labourers. Till the time of our survey (September. 1989) there was no H.S.L.C. passed boy or girl in the village. Health and veterinary facilities are available at Dentaghat but due to non-existence of road, the villagers are not in a position to avail themselves of the opportunities.

The socio-economic condition of Birupara Barokachari village is no better. It is situated at a distance of 2 km from Sonarijan village on Langhin Tiniall– H.P .C. road (Chari Anglong). The village is approachable through an irrigation embankment. Infrastructural facilities are grossly inadequate in this village. The nearest H.E. school is at Langhin Tiniali about 6 kms from the village. Similarly for medical facilities the villagers have to walk the distance to Phulani. 10 kms from the village. On an average each household possesses 4-5 bighas of land each which includes homestead land. There are 8 H.S.L.C. passed students and out of them five are employed as L.P. school teachers. one as *Khalasi* and another as a peon in a local office. There are no college going boys and girls in this village.

The District Council authorities at Diphu have extended infrastructural facilities to the Manikpur village which is inhabited by 65 Boro Kachari families. The Manikpur Jaipong P.W.D. road serves the villagers. There are pipe water facilities. Electricity lines pass over village but due to poor economic condition no household has electricity connection. The Langhin Tiniali HE school and the 10 bedded dispensary cater to the educational and health needs of the villagers.

CONCLUSION

The Boro Kocharis of Karbi Anglong district constitute the second largest ethnic group. Although they form the largest plains tribal group of Assam, yet due to area restriction they are not treated as Scheduled Tribe in the' Autonomous districts. The 'Kachari Samaj', a socio-cultural organisation of the non-Scheduled Tribes in the Karbi Anglong district is trying to get the area restriction clause removed, so that they can enjoy the political right i.e., to contest in the Legislative/Parliamentary elections as Scheduled Tribe hills. The area restriction creates an artificial barrier among the ethnic groups and removal of the same will not make any gulf of difference in the socio-political life of the major group i.e., the Karbis.

The founding fathers of the Indian Constitution envisaged the Sixth Schedule arrangement for the North Eastern tribes, particularly hill tribes keeping in view their simple and unsophisticated way of life and comparative isolation and backwardness. But today the situation no longer remains the same and perhaps a time has come to examine whether the old paternalistic care is necessary. In this context the Convention no.107 of I.L.O., 1957 of indigenous and other tribal and semi-tribal population laid down "the member states should enable such populations to pursue their material well being and spiritual development in condition of freedom and dignity of economic' security and cultural specificities which hinder them from

benefitting fully from the rights and advantages engaged by other elements of population and also help the process of integration of such populations into the national community."[5]

Dr. B. D, Sharma rightfully opined "it has perhaps become necessary to revise the list of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes with area specific scheduling where : appropriate and necessary",[6]

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NEHRU'S VISION OF TRIBES AND TRIBAL WELFARE

Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru was a great visionary with a real zeal for upholding the cause of the downtrodden, especially the tribes. His missionary approach towards tribal welfare can be gauged from his visit to different tribal groups such as Nagas and other tribes of the North Eastern Frontier Agency, Bhils of Western Region and Gonds of South Central Region even before he became the Prime Minister of India. He himself said, "I have always long before I became Prime Minister felt very strongly to the tribal people of this country. This feeling was not the curiosity, an idle observer has for strange customs, nor was it the attraction of the charitably disposed who want to do good to other people. I was attracted to them simply because I felt happy and at home with them.I like them without any desire to do good or to have good done to me.[1]" Thus he loved tribals and visited the far flung tribal villages not with a glory of a saviour but' with a sincere feeling of friendship devoid of any curiosity for the exotic way of life of the tribals. He observed, "I approach this simple folk in a spirit of comradeship and not like someone aloof who had come to look at them, examine them or make them conform to another way of life,"[2]

Nehru's new deal for tribal India was reflected in his tireless effort to incorporate various constitutional safeguards for the Scheduled Tribes, He felt the term Adivasi, which was challenged by various scholars, ,was not derogatory in as much as the core of the so called civilised people contained the basic ingredients of tribals. "I have not been able to solve this puzzle. In my opinion all of us are Adivasis. I do not like this distinction. We are all Adivasis. Yes, there may be some differenres. In our country there are different kinds of castes. These several castes are prevalent, whether they call themselves'Brahmins, Khatriyas, they are all Adivasis. We have to abolish all restrictions of high and low,"[3]

The tribal-non-tribal differences were created by vested interests creating a barrier of national integration, brotherhood and

cohesive attitude. Nehru did not like the prevailing attitude of superiority scrupulously maintained by certain sections. According to him, the distinction of tribal and non-tribal may be characterised in terms of habitation, i.e, hills and plains, The topography, food habits, dress and living conditions may create distinction. But there is no qualitative difference. There are tribal people who show high degree of proficiency. He opined, "I am not at all sure which way of life is better ours or theirs. But in some ways I am quite certain their's is better. There is very great to learn from them especially in the frontier areas. They are people who sing and dance and try to enjoy life not like people who sit in stock exchanges and shout at each other and call that civilisation."[4]

Nehru's appearance in the tribal domain is unique in the sense that till his visit to Bankipur Congress session as a delegate he was not conversant with the peasant and tribal scenario. He was totally ignorant of labour conditions in factories or fields and his political outlook was entirely bourgeois.Nehru's attitude towards the peasantry changed when about two hundred Kisans marched fifty miles from the interior of Pratapgarh district to Allahbad to apprise the leaders about their pitiable plight. The peasants could impress Nehru to visit Pratapgarh and Nehru experinced a new India. In his own words in the autobiography, "A new picture of India seemed to rise before me, naked, starving, crushed and utterly miserable and their faith in us,.casual visitors from the distant city embarrassed me and filled with a new responsibility that frightened me"[4]. Thus a socialistic of mind came to the forefront and Nehru marched forward. In 1927 Nehru represented the Indian National Congress as a delegate to the Congress of Oppressed Nationalities at Brussels. It was a journey towards socialist humanism which encouraged him to travel more extensively throughout India. In his own words, "1 was again on a great voyage of discovery and the land of India and the people of India lay spread me:"

Nehru's love and affection towards the tribal people grew from year to year which is testified in his efforts to release the legendary freedom fighter Rani Gaidinlieu from jail. It was Nehru, who adored her with the title 'Rani'. His participation in the All India Trade Union Congress at Jharia in 1928 enabled him to get a first hand knowledge of tribal life and culture and tribal backwardness. All these opportunities were utilised for formulating

an integrated development plan for tribals in later years of independent India.

As first Prime Minister of India, Nehru was determined to improve the socio-economic condition of the tribals which he experienced during his sojourn to the areas of Bhils,Santhals. and Gonds in connection with the freedom struggle. His expericnce of the tribes of North East India constituted a separate segment in his plan of action for tribal uplift. Dr Verrier Elwin, the German'born Indian Anthropologist who gathered vast first' hand experience of the Indian tribal scenario, provided the necessary background to Nehru for formulating a clear cut tribal policy. The tribals of the North East got due recognition in the Nehruvian scheme. "The North East border area deserves our special attention not only of the Government but to the people of India. Our contact with them will do us good and will do them good also. They add to the strength, variety and cultural richness of India. As one travels there, a new and vaster picture of India comes before the eyes and the narrowness of outlook which sometimes obsesses us, begins to fade away. One feels that India is not just one particular part which we might know intimately but something infinitely more, a meeting place of all manners or races, languages and cultures."

Renowned Anthropologist like Prof L P Vidyarthi,Dr B K Roy Burman eulogised the contribution of Nehru towards the backward communities. especially tribals and appreciated his great capability to understand tribal problems in their proper perspective. Vidyarthi observed, "On many occasions one is vividly remained of the manifold images of this great national hero. He in fact regarded the tribal people as a significant matrix of Indian civilisation and discovered many virtues among them, To sum up it has been rightly said, Nehru loved the tribals and they loved him." Prof B K Roy Burman who has spent most of his academic career in tribal studies spoke highly of Nehru's love for tribals. "Nehru's arrival on the tribal scene was a milestone in an intellectual, moral, effective, long march through many terrains. It was a journey towards socialist humanism, commitment to carry on relentless struggle not only for national freedom but also against oppression everywhere. Nehru's approach to the tribal problem is to be understood against this intellectual, moral, effective landscape traversed by his restless spirits".

Nehru's interface with the tribals on one hand and Social Anthropolgists on the other crystalised into the famous tribal policy known as Panchaseel for tnbal development. These five principles are : (1) People should develop along the lines of their own genius and we should avoid imposing anything on them but should rather try to encourage in everyway their traditional arts and culture. (2) Tribal rights in land and forests should be respected. (3) We should try to train and build up a team of their own people to do the work of administration and development. (4) We should not over administer these areas or overwhelm them with a multiplicity of schemes. We should rather work through and not in rivalry to their own social and cultural institutions. (5) We should judge results not by statistics or the amount of money spent but by the quality of human character that is evolved.

Nehru's Panchsheel for tribal development was a pathfinder and the present tribal uprising in many parts cf the country could have been avoided had those been scrupulously implemented in their letter and spirit. Following Nehru's philosophy, the Ministry of Home Affairs and presently the Ministry of Welfare have undertaken various tribal development schemes but due to shortcomings in the implementation stages, the overall tribal development fell much short of Nehruvian ideology which was reflectcd in the reports of the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Government of India. The Dhebar Commission and the Shilu Ao Committee also recommended special schemes for tribal development in line with the Nehru's ideas.

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THE SIXTH SCHEDULE AND APPREHENSION OF IDENTITY CRISIS AMONG THE KARBIS OF ASSAM – A FEW OBSERVATIONS.

The write up, as the title indicates, has been divided into two parts viz. The Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India and the identity crisis of the Karbis. The Sixth Schedule guarantees all kinds of protection to the hill tribes and the identity crisis emerges due to the illegal and fraudulent activities perpetrated by the trespassers, both tribal and non tribal and the inaction or in appropriate measures on the part of the concerned authorities. In order to have a clear grasp of the problem in true perspective a peep into the formation of the special protective measures under the Sixth Schedule is relevant.

The sixth Schedule areas in Assam were constituted only with two autonomous hill districts namely the Karbi Anglong and North Cachar hill districts. Under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule the District Councils in respect of all areas within their jurisdictions have the power to make laws regarding allotment, occupation, use or setting apart of land other than a reserved forest for the purpose of agriculture or grazing or for residential or other non agricultural purposes and regulation of jhum land. The prevailing laws in the plains districts of Assam are not applicable in the Sixth Schedule areas unless these are adopted by the District Councils. The state legislature cannot pass any law in respect of land policies of the District Councils The Mikir Hills (Land and Revenue) Act of 1953 has provided the District Council authority with the recognition of rights over land, settlement and assessment of land and other ancillary matters. Another law namely the Mikir Hills District (Transfer of Land) Act of 1959 provides that no land under the jurisdiction of the District Council authority shall be sold, mortgaged, leased, bartared, gifted or otherwise transferred to a

non tribal or by a non tribal to another non tribal except with the previous permission of the Executive Committee of the District Council (Sec 3). The rights already acquired by any person prior to the enforcement of the Act shall not be affected.

A RETROSPECTIVE VIEW OF THE SIXTH SCHEDULE

The special treatment of the hill communities dates back to the sixties of the 18th Century when the East India Company was entrusted with the 'Superintendence of all laws and collection of all revenues'. The North East region was brought under the British supervision in matters of trade and commerce. Because of rich natural resources the region attracted special attention of the British authorities of Bengal particularly from the date of grant of the Dewani of Bengal to Robert Clive in 1765. Captain David Scott was sent to the Garo hills in 1815 who submitted his report in 1816. The British administrators passed the Scheduled Districts Act in 1874 and a Chief Commissioner was appointed for Assam in that year. In fact the Scheduled Districts Act may be treated as mother of the Sixth Schedule as special administration was recommended under the Act for "those remote and backward tract of provinces of British India which had never been brought within or had from time to time been removed from the operation of the general acts and regulation and jurisdiction of ordinary courts" . The Chief Commissioner of Assam was empowered to exclude any part of Scheduled District from the operation of the Act. Later on in the Montagu Chelmsford Report of 1918 opined that "there was no material on which to found political institutions". The Government of India Act 1919 incorporated the recommendations of the said report and empowered the Governor General in Council to declare any territory in British India to be a 'Backward Tract' under Section 52 A(2) of the Act. As per the provisions of the Act the Governor General in Council declared the following tribal areas as 'Backward Tracts'

1. The Garo Hills district.
2. The British portion of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills District other than the shillong Municipality and Cantonment.

3. The Mikir Hills (in Nowgong and Sibsagar districts)
4. The North Cachar Hills (in Cachar district).
5. The Naga Hills district.
6. The Lushai Hills district.
7. The Sadiya Frontier Tract.
8. The Balipara Frontier Tract
9. The Lakhimpur Frontier Tract.

The Sixth Schedule was enacted to administer these territories which were non regulation areas and brought under simplified judicial and administrative procedures of a special law. This special treatment continued till passing of the 1935 Act. The tribal people of these areas enjoyed security of land and freedom to maintain traditional life and culture and customary practices. However some changes were made in the Government of India Act 1935 and accordingly these areas were designated as Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas. The Mikir Hills were brought under Partially Excluded Areas as the Mikir Hills in Nagaon and Sibsagar districts contained sizable non tribal populations. The administration of these Partially Excluded Areas was vested in the Council of Ministers, subject however, to the Governor exercises his individual judgment. This arrangement of Provincial Government continued till 1937. The Cabinet Mission 1946 recommended special attention for those areas in the Constituent Assembly.

After Independence the Sixth Schedule was constituted as per recommendation of the North East Frontier Tribal and Excluded Areas Sub Committee of the Constituent Assembly of India. The Committee favoured autonomous administration enabling the hill tribes to maintain their traditional socio religious beliefs and practices, customs and traditions, modes and morals. The autonomous system would protect the tribals from exploitation of the people from advanced areas. It was intended to bring the simple unsophisticated tribals to the mainstream in a phased manner. Development programmes should be implemented in these areas in such a manner so that the tribal people should feel pride to become citizens of India.

FEAR OF IDENTITY CRISIS OF THE KARBIS

Inspite of the well meaning protective measures under the Sixth Schedule, the problem of alienation of tribal land and indebtedness continues although in a disguised form. Despite the Transfer of Land Act of 1959 and Regulation of Money Lenders Act of 1953 surreptitious transfer and lease of land is continuing. There is not much problem in respect of jhum lands as there is community ownership of such lands and authority of the village Council still prevails. But problem arises when the tribal villagers have switched over to wet paddy cultivation and the District Council, too, allowed individual ownership in the lands where settled wet paddy cultivation is practised. It is true the ownership of land remains with the villagers but the actual tillers are non Karbis and the lion's share of the produce is enjoyed by the non Karbis. Initially the Karbis welcomed the non Karbis particularly the East Bangal (Bangladeshi) refugees to perform the difficult jobs like cutting jungles, tilling of lands and they maintained a cordial relationship with the immigrants. But as time passed more and more outsiders poured into the interior most areas and the Karbis became apprehensive of losing valuable agricultural lands.

Incidentally the problem of identity crisis of the Karbis has an intimate connection with similar crisis in the plains districts of Assam leading to a six year unprecedented students' movement to drive out illegal foreign nationals especially of Bangladeshi origin. In fact the Karbi problem is, by and large, the offshoot of the serious problem of infiltrators in the plains districts of Assam and in this backdrop an analysis of the influx of foreigners' issue is relevant

The influx of illegal foreign nationals particularly East Pakistani settlers dates back to the year 1931 when eight lakh immigrants came to settle in the unclaimed waste lands of the plains districts. The immigrants had occupied government land as well as lands belonging to the indigenous people. Initially the indigenous people did not resist as there were enough waste lands, but when the flow of immigrants continued unabated and large scale occupation of lands of indigenous people took place, there was unrest among the local people. Conflict took place between immigrant settlers and local people. Government had to intervene and as a result the famous 'line system' was introduced in Nowgaon

district. It may be mentioned that sizable portion of erstwhile Nowgaon district came under the jurisdiction of the present Karbi Anglong district. According to the 'Line System' boundaries were demarcated beyond which the immigrants were forbidden to have any possession of land. The system had not much tangible effect as the lands of immigrant settlers increased substantially from 481 thousand acres in 1930-31 to 5967 acres in 1940. There was further increase of the lands of immigrant settlers and the figures touched 14,669 thousand acres in two decades i.e. 1930-50 in the Assam Valley.

The problem of losing karbi identity even under the well protected umbrella of the Sixth schedule may be viewed from the immigration of local tribal people from Assam particularly Bodo Kacharis who migrated to the Karbi Anglong district after Independence and began to settle permanently. Of late the Bodo Kacharis are demanding hill tribal status under the Sixth schedule and the matter had been taken up by the Bodo leaders of the plains districts. As per 1971 Census there are 28,265 Bodo Kacharis in the Karbi Anglong district spread over four police stations viz Baithalangso P.S. (3922), Howraghat P.S (18,953), Bokajan P.S. (127) and Diphu P.S. (5263).

The abnormal decennial population growth rate in Karbi Anglong district is causing anxiety among the Karbis. The growth rate of population of Assam and Karbi Anglong district has been shown below :

	1951-61	1961-71	1971-91
Assam	34.98	4.95	53.26
Karbi Anglong	79.21	68.28	72.79

It has already been mentioned that East Pakistani immigrants were occupying lands in Karbi Anglong district when a part of Nowgong district came under the Karbi Anglong district. Naturally sizable immigrants permanently settled in the hill district and thus we find a very high growth rate during 1951-61to 1971-91.

The karbis are a simple folk and they maintain cordial relation with other ethnic groups. There were enough virgin lands inside the inaccessible forest areas and the immigrant settlers

occupied those lands. Being shifting cultivators the Karbis were not versed in wet paddy cultivation. Berides the needy rural Karbis were unable to realize the gravity of the situation arising out of immigrant settlers. The Mikir Hills District (Transfer of land) Act 1959 had ample provisions to safeguard the land interest but due to various socio psychological factors like ignorance, lethargy, chronic indebtedness the problem remains unsolved. " Taking advantage of the loopholes in the Transfer of Land Act also the ignorance of the tribal people, the non tribal immigrants especially those of East Bengal (Bangladesh) have already become the virtual owners of land under permanent cultivation, although lands are still in the names of the tribal people"[2].

Under the traditional Khoi Bandhak system prevalent among the Karbis, the non tribal cultivators enjoy the benefit of land owned by tribals by paying a negligible cash per Bighas as rent of the mortgaged land for a period of five years. The lands are supposed to be reverted to the owners after the stipulated period of contract. But the economic condition of the Karbis is so pitiable that they are hardly able to get out of the clutch of the non tribals. As the cash is received in advance the villagers spend the same in non productive socio-religions occasions. The practice helps the owner of the lands to lead a leisurely life. The prevailing rate of Khoi Bandhak is Rs 150.00 per Bigha for 5 years. The Act passed by the District Council has a glaring loophole as the above mentioned contracts are not considered as illegal in the eye of the law. " The political elite do not seem to have taken note of how the tradition is being replaced by callous law of cash transactions and how the operation of money economy has been corroding the tribal economy."[3]

The above traditional transactions help the non tribal cultivators to develop intimate personal relation with the owners of land. They extend help to the owners with cash and kind at the time of need. The owners cannot displease their so called well wishers and in this way the contract continues year after year.

The above pen picture clearly indicates the gravity of the problem of losing Karbi identity in the near future. The problem should be tackled from the grass root level and unless some pragmatic measures are taken to improve the pitiable economic condition of the Karbis and unless they shake off their lethargy

keeping in view the impending danger, the fear psychosis will continue to haunt leading to a grave situation. The rural people should be motivated to realize the impact of liberal contracts made with immigrant settlers. Unless they realize that the traditional system is being circumvented by some unscrupulous land hungry people under dubious method, there is no hope of getting relieved of the quagmire of the fear psychosis of losing identity in their own land inspite of the protection under the Sixth Schedule. Community ownership has to be revitalized, if necessary in a modified form by organizing co-operative societies. Indepth survey should be conducted to find out outstanding debt of each family and measures should be evolved to provide cash for debt redemption. The traditional system should be restructured in such a way that modernization becomes a boon in the socio cultural pattern. Mr. Mohan Singh observes, "The tribal societies, particularly in the North East have been fortunate in having been able to retain and improve some of the traditional customs which helped them to enjoy a democratic social life. The process of modernization certainly calls for some changes. .....It is however, necessary to safeguard the main contents of the customs and traditions which have contributed to a healthy growth of the society. The most practical course is to modify these customs to the extent required to meet the demands of modernization. It is not proper to completely destroy or uproot the wholesome customs of any particular community by transplanting other laws and rules never followed by them before. The change must be in spirit of the ancient tradition of the race or tribe".[4]

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PROBLEM OF LAND AMONG THE PLAINS TRIBES OF ASSAM

The Plains Tribes of Assam, as the name Indicates are concentrated in the plains areas of Assam. There are ten such autochthones of Assam who possess diverse socio-religious characteristics and are at various levels of economic development. They belong to different ethnolingual groups. Considered to be the Mongolian origin, they are supposed to have entered into the Indian Territory through Yunnan in the South West of China and Upper Burma. Extending along the entire plains ranging from far more Hinduised section of the Sonowal Kacharis living extensively in the plains areas of Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat and Lakhimpur Districts, the Miris (Mishing) and the Deoris of the riverine areas of the Brahmaputra Valley with their traditional socio-cultural life being unimpaired by the widespread contact with non traibals, the Rabhas of Kamrup, Goalpara, Darrang and Sonitpur Districts and Lalungs (Tiwas) of Nagaon District to the far more advanced and conscious section of the Boro Kacharis of Kamrup, Goalpara, Darrang and Sonitpur Districts, the plains Tribal communities constitute an important segment of the Assam population. Probably a few demographic information about the plains tribes will be relevant here which are shown in the tabular form bellow :–

Plains Tribal Population of Assam, Census, 1971

Sl. No.	Name of the tribe	Total Population	Male	Female	P.C. to S.T. Popula	P.C. to total State population
1.	Boro-Boro Kachari	610459	308768	301691	45.41	4.17
2.	Miri	259551	131764	127787	19.31	1.77
3.	Kachari Sonowal	198629	102547	96072	14.77	1.36
4.	Rabha	138630	71497	67133	10.31	0.95
5.	Lalung	95609	48397	47212	7.11	0.65
6.	Deori	23080	11901	11179	1.72	0.16
7.	Barman of Cachar	23210	6751	6449	0.98	0.09
8.	Mech	2570	1276	1294	0.19	0.02
9.	Hojai	2298	1135	1163	0..17	0.02
10.	Hajong	387	228	159	0.03	0.00

(1981 Census was not held in Assam)

With this introduction let us enter into the most vital problem i.e., Land of the plains tribes. More than 90% of the plains tribes depend upon agriculture as the main sourse of living but surprisingly the problems of agricultural land is acute. Whenever we enquire about the felt needs of these tribals the first in the list appears land. In fact economic development of these tribals rests upon sufficiency of land for agricultural purposes.

For our purpose in this paper the tribes living within the 19 Nos of I. T. D. Ps of Assam are taken into consideration as bulk of the plains tribes are found within the framework of these I. T. D. Ps. Probably it will not be irrelavant here to present a few data about the I. T. D. Ps which are shown in the Table 2.

TABLE-2

Table showing the areas, population and P. C. of tribal population to total population, in the I. T. D. P. areas of Assam.

Sl. No	Name of the I.T.D.P.	Area in Sq Km	Population 1971 Census		Precentage of tribal population to total population
			Total	Tribal	
1	2	3	4	5	6
1.	Kokrajhar	2428	3,73,611	1,90,969	51.1
2.	Dhubri	81	32.497	16,517	50.8
3.	Goalpara	541	1,41,770	73,536	51.9
4.	Borpeta	396	1,20,031	60,170	50.1
5.	Nalbari	377	1,48,354	75,807	51.1
6, 7	Gauahati	753	1,89,046	91,717	48.5
8.	Morigaon	393	1,02,845	53,745	52.3
	Nowgong	81	34,148	15,654	45.8
9.	Mangaldoi	655	2,09,482	1,09,125	52.1
10.	Tezpur	155	63,048	38,219	60.6
11. 12.	Jorhat } Majuli }	343	83,078	48,386	58.2
13.	Golaghat	176	25,145	15,664	62.3
14.	Sibsagar	75	18,595	11,377	61.2
15.	Dibrugarh	278	55,292	33,123	59.9
16.	Tinsukia	83	28,537	14,766	51.7
17.	North Lakhimpur	641	1,02,232	64,638	63 2
18.	Dhemaji	2133	2,13,310	1,29,195	60 6
19.	Silchar	64	14,034	7,155	51.0
	Total	9655	19,55,055	10,49,763	53

Among the plains tribes about 55% of the households possess land between one hectare to 5 hectare while about 41% households possess land below one hectares. The remaining 4% households possess land five hectares and above. This is shown in the tabular form below :

TABLE-3

Number of S. T. households by size class land

Size Class of land possessed (in hect-ares)	Number of household	Total land posse-ssed.	P. C. to total house holds	Total No. house-hold in the ITDPs	Total land posse-ssed.	P.C. to total house holds.
Below 1 Hect	74246	37327	41.39	156824	74349	44.70
1 Hec to 5 Hect	97951	193313	54.60	182480	342149	52.00
5 hec and above	7198	49229	4.01	11590	77663	3.30
Total	179395	279869	100.00	350894	494161	100.00

(Source- Bench Mark Survey Universal, Govt. of Assam, 1978)

Problem of land among the Plains tribes is becoming acute day by day. There are good number of households which have to depend upon share cropping as they have negligible land or no agricultural land at all. The share cropping pattern is not same in all the plains tribal areas. Generally the owner of the land allows the needy fellow villagers to utilise certain plots of land in lieu of half the harvested crops. The contract is made for a limited period but the share cropper, who is also known as Adhiar (sharing half or 'Aadha' in Assamese) wants to keep the land eternally. The Adhiar Act tries to protect the share croppers but the relation between the share cropper and the owner of land is so intimate, that the Adhiar seldom tries to assert his right. The most tragic part of the deal is that the land in which the adhiar tills the land, once belonged to him but due to economic hardship the same was

sold to the owner of the land at throw away prices. In the I. T. D. P. areas of Assam out of 1.79 lakh scheduled tribes household 0'32 lakhs household i.e. 18% are engaged in share cropping. The position is shown in the tabular form below :

TABLE -4

No of households and area under share cropping among the plains tribal people of Assam in the I. T. D. P. areas

Total No of household enganged in share cro-pping (hectares)	Area undr share cropping (Hectares)	Average area of share cropping (Hectares)
32,000	24,937	0.78

(Source- Bench Mark Survey of Govt. of Assam, 1978)

In the plains tribal areas land alienation and indebtedness are the two major problems. The problem is so deep rooted that all the tribal development programmes with an agriculture based economy are handicapped by the induction of this age old economic constraint . The land hungry village tribal as well as non tribal Mahajans are keeping the poverty stricken tribals under their clutch for generations. The Bench Mark Survey conducted by the Government of Assam in 1978 revealed a distressing picture so far as land alienation is concerned. Most of the scheduled tribes living within the ITDP areas of Assam are protected under the Assam Land and Revenue Regulations (Amendment) Act, 1947. But still the problems could not be solved. Again an amendment of the said act had to be brought in the year 1964 wherein it was specifically mentioned that notwithstanding anything cntrary in any law, usage, contract, agreement, no person shall acquire or possess by transfer, exchange, lease, agreement or settlement any land in any area or areas constituted into belts or blocks in contravention of the provisions of the sub section (1). From the commencesment of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation (Amendment) Act, 1964 no document evidencing transaction for acquisition or

possession of any land by way of transfer, exchange, lease, Agreement of settlement shall be registered under the Indian Regulation Act 1908 if it appears to the registering authority that the transaction has been effected in contravention of the provisions of sub-section has been efected in contravention of the provision of sub section (2). Inspite of these measures, alienation of tribal lands falling under the tribal belts and blocks continued which will be testified by the findings of the Bench Mark Survey.

TABLE-5

Number of households transferred land to non tribals during last 10 years and from last 10 to 30 years in the I.T.D.P. areas.

	Total No. of households	No. of households transferred land to non-tribals during last 10 years		No. of households transferred land to non-tribals during last 10-30 years	
	No of	P.C. to household	No. of total	P.C. to households	total
Scheduled Tribes in the I.T.D.P.	1,79,395	13029	48.78	10,173	49.33

In the plains tribals areas land alienation takes place in a surreptitious way. The village Mahajans play major role in this regard. The modus operandi of the Mahanjans is almost similar in the entrire tribal inhabited areas. When a member of the tribal community experiences acute financial hardship, he naturally approaches the local Mahajan for some cash or kind. In lieu of the favour thus obtained he offers a piece of agricultural land as mortgage to the Mahajan for a stipulated period. During the period of mortgage the owner of the land is deprived of cultivating his land. The Mahajan who transacts this unholy affair virtually become the owner of the land during the period of agreement. The rate of interest in such deals is excessively high. Generally 3 mounds are charged as interest for every one hundred rupees given on loan. One mound by local practice is equal to about 38 Kg. Thus if the price of one mound of paddy at current price is say Rs. 80/- the

interest for 100/- comes to Rs. 240/- P.A. The poor tribal people who take loans on such terms hardly have the capacity to repay the loan along with interest. Sometimes they pay the interest but their principal remains unpaid. The tribal economy is so much shattered that there is no end of their felt needs and even when the old loans remain outstanding, they again approach the Mahajans for further loan on similar terms. In this way the loan outstanding goes on increasing and the poor loanees have no other alternative but to alienate a piece of paternal land. A time comes when the poor cultivators have to part with the land. The land alienation and indebtedness go hand in hand in the tribal areas. Where there is indebtedness there is land alienation.

In order to free the tribals from the clutches of the Mahajan the govt. of Assam had passed a few legislations namely Assam Money Lenders Act 1934, The Assam Debt conciliation Act 1936 and the Assam Rural Indebtadness 1975. Yet the gravity of the problem of indebtedness remains as it was a few decades ago. The age old poverty and ignorance of the tribals are not less responsible in this regard. The table below shows the position of indebtedness among the tribes within the Tribal Sub-Plan Areas.

TABLE - 6

No. of S.T. Households indebted to money lenders, land lords, traders etc. in the T.S.P. areas of Assam.

	Money Lenders	Land Lords	Traders	Total
19 I.T.D.P. Projects	36444	-	29	36473

The Table above shows that money lenders have a roaring business in the tribal areas followed by a negligible number of traders. It may be noted that the above Bench Mark Survey figures show only the informed figures. The tribals generally feels shy to mention about their indebtedness and hence it is difficult to measure

the gravity of the situation from the figures submitted to casual enumerators.

The problems has its multidimensional aspects and the solution too, should be of the similar pattern. There are certain basic characteristics governing the tribal economy. These can be broadly categorised as extreme dependance for livelihood on the primary sector, low participation rate in the tertiary and secondary sectors and chronic indebtedness. But the root cause of deteriorating tribal economy is indebtedness where the land is involved. Unless this root cause of tribal indebtedness is removed the problem of land among the tribal will not be solved.

We therefore, suggest the following remedies. What is probably most desirable is the formation of local capital among the tribals. The idea of small savings should be instituted in the minds of the tribals. There is good scope for the small saving organisation to utilise the weekly 'hat' days for deposit mobilisation scheme. The local unemployed tribal youth may be utilised for this purposes on commission basis.

Co-operatives if properly organised, can play significant role in ameliorating the poor economic conditon of the tribals.

Influx of large number of non-tribal immigrants should be stopped.

The tribals should be educated through the audio-visual aids about the existance of prevailing law prohibiting the disposal of their lands in any form within the tribal belts and blocks.

Popular literatures in tribal languages or dialects should be brought out in this regard.

Unholy alliance between the officials responsible for registering documents and the non tribals should be checked.

There should be proper machinery to look after the implementation of the provisions of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation 1886 as amended upto date in sprit and action.

Local tribal leaders should be enlightened about the magnitude of the problems.

The triblals spend coonsiderable amount of money in socio religious occasions which are too many. Avoidable expenditures in such ceremonies should be checked.

Most of the tribals do not have periodic patta; (record of right). Many even do not possess annual "Parra' to attain eligibility to get loans. Thus cheap institutional credit facilities should be extended considering the special needs of the tribals.

It is very often complained that the benefits to the tribals are grabbed by a few unscrupulous tribal as well as non tribal leaders in collusion with the officials. Tribal welfare should be vested upon those dedicated persons who have the guts to face the odds and who cannot be easily tempted with pecuniary gains or political power.

THE FOREST-HUMAN INTERFACE

The symbiotic relation between forests and human beings has its origin since man's existence in the world throughout the various evolutionary stages. From hunting and food gathering stage to the present highly sophisticated human civilisation, the linkage between forests and human beings is uninterrupted, although mode of utilisation of forest resources has undergone tangible changes over the millenniums and centuries. Forest products including animals, birds and reptiles have sustained human beings through the ages. Without forests, green pastures and animals, which are part and parcel of forests, there will be no human race. It is said at the dawn of history about 91.6% of the Indian sub continent was covered by dense of forests. Gradually the forest cover depleted. The status of forests in India underwent drastic changes with the entry of the Aryan population. Large tracts of forests were cleared for agricultural operations. That was the beginning which culminated in large scale destruction of forests for human habitation and agricultural activities in the millenniums thereafter.

The utility of forests, was, however, recognised officially during the Maurya period when a separate Forest Department was created Sri A.K. Srivastava in his book Restructuring Forest Eco System has mentioned five phases of forest use and in all these phases, the interface between forest and human beings is well illustrated. The first phase extended for a period from 2000 BC to 300 BC and the forest use during the period was limited to hunting, collection of herbs, roots for modification and performing religious activities centering animistic beliefs and practices. The second phase continued from 301 BC to 650 AD. Which was characterised by hunting, domestication of animals and grazing and clearing of forest for agricultural operations viz. shifting cultivation. Hunting, continues to occupy the prime place in the third phase from 651 AD to 1700 AD side by side with the shifting cultivation. The phase was also characterised by cutting trees and clearing swamps for agriculture and settlement purposes. Forest

produce came to be treated as a good source of revenue by the powers that ruled. The fourth phase from 1701 AD to -1850 AD experienced large scale cutting of valuable trees as industrial activities started. Timbers were needed for ship building and allied activities and railway sleepers. Trees were also used for various day to day use besides hunting and agricultural activities. Forests continued to be the milch cow for the Government. The fifth phase from 1851 AD to 1947 fell within the eventful years of two great world wars requiring large scale forest materials as well as forest lands for strategic situations. Sal, Teak, Deodar etc., valuable trees were cut for furniture and household appliances. Bamboo plantations were cleared for defence establishments. Diversion of forest lands for non-forest purposes took place. This phase was also characterised by commercial use of forests. Thus pressure on forests and forest produce increased manifold causing sharp depletion of forest cover.

Environmental concern has been expressed in ancient religious epics and texts. 'The Agni Mahapurana' is replete with examples of dependence between man and nature. The 'Charak Sanghita' also mentions that nature is totally connected with human body. 'The Arthashastra and the Manusmriti' also emphasise upon maintaining environmental purity while building cities. The 'Ishoponishad' enjoins that this universe is meant for right and purposeful use for all men and nature. Forests provide both direct and indirect benefits to mankind. In appreciation of the benevolent role of the forests, there are good many verses in the Hindu religious texts such as the 'Puranas' which have relevance even in this millennium also.

Perhaps following this great tradition, the kings planted trees in the roadsides while the tradition is scrupulously followed even to this day in the shape of 'Seuji Saptaah' and planting trees by dignitaries on special occasions. Men, throughout the ages are cutting trees ruthlessly without any concern for environmental hazard leading to the consequences of the human beings. Very often we forget the sacrifice of the nature and other objects of nature meant for the general well being of human beings.

The interdependence of forest and men has suffered a great deal when men started senseless cutting of trees for their immediate gains. The life style of the present generation of people, industrial expansion, population explosion, pollution et al. put heavy pressure on forests, and thousands of hectares of forest land have been indiscriminately cut to meet the requirement of men. In India, during the last decade'(1980-90) 91,710 Sq. km i.e., 2.79 percent of forests have been cut. The estimated per minute destruction of forests comes to 2500 hectares leading to snow balling effect on power shortage and eco imbalance. Thus human beings today are in a vicious circle. Trees are essential for development activities while development activities are causing depletion of forest cover. A Report of the National Agricultural Commission indicates the shortage of timber and other forest products during the period 1980-2000.

Thus pressure on forests products increased manifold causing sharp depletion of the forest cover. At present the total land under forest in the State of Assam is 19,84,449 hectares and 25.27 percent of the gross geographical area of which 3,36,853 hectares are in the hills and 16,47,596 hectres in the plains districts. The percentage of forest cover falls far short of the national norm of 33.3 percent. One of the major causes of the depletion of the forest cover in Assam is the prevalence of shifting cultivation (jhum) which is widely practised in the North Cachar Hills and Karbi Anglong districts. As per the State Forest Department's Report (1991) 58000 tribal families are practising jhum and 898 sq. kms of the hill forests are burnt annually.

The serious shortage of forest products has affected the people particularly rural and tribal people, adversely who use firewood for cooking and collect house building materials. The National Commission on Agriculture has highlighted this position in its reports. It was found that the demand for firewood in 1980 was 184.00 MCM which increased to 202.00 MCM in 1985 and it has further increased to 225 MCM in 2000. While demand for firwood increases along with the growth of population, the production decreases as more and more encroachment on forest land takes place. The report also points out that due to non

availability of adequate firewood many tribal and rural people in various parts of India are resorting to use of cowdung as fuel and every year an estimated 190 million tonnes of cowdung are burnt for day to day cooking.

The increased pressure on forests has adverse effect on environment leading to health hazards as the quantum of Carbon Di Oxide will outweigh the Oxygen component. Both flora and fauna will have adverse effect. Already some species of animals and birds are on the verge of extinction in some parts of the North east. The depletion of forests and consequent shortage of forest produce have adverse effect on the socio-cultural life of the people. History is replete with examples as to how social values, norms, traditional beliefs and practices have undergone metamorphic changes due to the change of life pattern from food, gathering/ hunting stage to settled agricultural and industrial economy.

Forests and tribals are inseparable identities. Forests not only provide shelter to the tribes but these are the sources of various food items like herbs, roots, creepers; honey, animals and birds, fodder for cattle, house building materials etc. Certain trees are considered as totemic objects which are treated with high respect and taboo to the society concerned. A good number of clan names are associated with trees. Again, some portion of the forest are earmarked as burial or cremation ground which are considered as sacred.

The magico-religious beliefs, folklores. myths and legends of the ethnic communities are closely releated with forests. The involvement of the tribal people with the forests is so deep and intimate that detachment of the people from the forest habitat may cause serious adjustment situation leading to social unrest.

Shifting cultivation is the way of life of the tribal people living in the two hill districts of Assam. Due to heavy pressure on land the jhum cycle (leaving away a particular jhum site after a year's cultivation for another plot and returning to the original jhum site after seven to eight years) was limited to 2/3 years and the District Councils in order to wean away the people from the wasteful system, offered lands for wet paddy cultivation. As the

Karbis, Dimasas, Zemi Nagas and Kukis are not accustomed to wet paddy cultivation, they leased out those lands to non-tribals in lieu of a fixed amount and resorted to the old system of agriculture.

Most of the tribal people are pile dwellers and they have an age old sentimental attachment to the forests. In order to minimise the dependence on forest, Government has made attempts to establish model villages but the tribal people do not like to abandon the traditional mode of living in platform type houses built with materials collected from forests. Acts and Rules may be framed in such a way so that the psyche of the people is also satiated. The Forest Policy of1894 is one such piece of legislation which went against forest tribal inter relationship. The post independence Forest Policy of 1952 could not do much better.

The Forest Policy 1988 can be called a landmark for the forest villagers. The Policy provides for granting of certificates to the lawful settlers which could be used for getting loans and other benefits from various authorities. These certificates are to be treated as akin to revenue pattas conferring all rights except the right of transfer and sale. It was a long felt need of the forest dwellers which will go a long way to remove the present not so congenial relation between the forest villagers and the forest authorities, thereby improving the forest-human inter relationship which is the sine qua non for successful joint forest management concept.

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SOME REFLECTIONS ON ENDOGENOUS ARRANGEMENT OF LAND IN TRADITIONAL TRIBAL SOCIETIES

The Sixth Schedule Areas of Assam namely Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills districts are the abode of quite a few traditional Tribal societies where endogenous arrangement of land is maintained scrupulously. The tradition bound societies whether in plains or in hills, have inseparable linkage with the forests and in olden days agricultural land was generally equated with forests. Thus forest and tribals are inseparable entitles and this has been recognised by the authorities. The cultural ethos of the tribals are intricately attached with the forests and any infringement of this may lead to disapperance of some rich socio-cultural values. Without any fear cf contradiction we may perhaps opine that tribal tradition is moulded centering round forests. The tribal people consider the forests as their home-a 'sanctum sanctorum'. It has been observed that names of clans among many tribes are associated with certain trees and other objects of nature which are again linked with forest. Forest is considered as abode of deities. The Boro Kacharis consider the 'Sizu ' plant (Eupho bia splendens) as their supreme deity, Bathow. The Baisagu festival of the Boro Kacharis is terminated at Garjasali with a community prayer. The Deori construct their 'Than' (place of worship) in the forest. The Miris (Mishing) believe that spirits which they call 'Uie', are the guiding factors of their life and the forests and the lonely places are their abode. The 'Langapuja' of the Rabhas is performed to appease the supreme deity 'Mahadev' inside a forest near the village. The Tai Phakes worship 'Chao-chi', the benevolent deity in the deep jungle where elderly male persons take part.

The forests and the forest products; particularly herbs, leaves, flowers have sufficient socio-religious significance. Certain shrubs, thorny leaves and branches of specific trees bear magico-

religious meaning. All the tribes use the thorny leaves to chase away evil spirits. Some herbs and root products used as intoxicant for rice beer are collected from forests. Similarly certain trees are earmarked for the main post of a house and using the tree for other purposes is taboo. Most of the tribes used indigenous dyeing for their clothes, and the surrounding forest provided the ingredients. The Tai Phakes of Upper Assam prepared excellent dyes out of 'Rompat' (a wild plant grown in the foothill areas). 'Tumkao' (a kind of creeper), 'Tepu' (an indigenous tree) and Ton Myot (a kind of creeper).

Forests provide the venue for the observance of certain important socio-religious ceremoines of almost all the tribes. Folk tales and myths prevalent among the tribal people reflect their close forest association. The Boro Kacharis worship the 'Sizu' sapling which is planted in their courtyards representing their supreme Lord Bathow Brai i.e. Lord Mahadev. The tribals consider forests as their saviour and they naturally want some control over the forest lands. In this backdrop the endogenous management of land by the tribals have had much relevance.

In Assam the age old traditional attachment of the tribe particulary plains tribes, towards forest has been considerably eroded due to establishment of reserve forests. In the hills, however, some control over forest, is found to be continued. Although most of the festivals of the plains tribes, too, are closely linked up with forests and their myths and legends, folkways and traditions mould largely around forests, yet they have no control over the forests. The Forest Regulations (National Forest Policy of 1952) curtailed almost all the traditional rights of the forest dwellers over the forests. Only limited concessions are given to the tribals without any authority to express their opinion over forest management.

In the hill districts of Assam the position however is different. Probably Sixth Schedule type of administration has much to do with the changing situation prevalent among the tribes of this area. Besides the agricultural system has its role to play. The tribes in the hills still practice Jhum cultivation and each individual family gets its allotment of agricultural land in the Jhum site from the village chief according to the needs of the family. The right of

ownership rests with the individual families. Before allotment the individual families select their respective sites and clean the jungles. Boundaries of the plots are determined by putting some marks in the trees or putting cross like bamboo structurte. Cultivation is performed for continious 2/3 years and after that the lands are allowed to remain fallow for another 5/6 years. In the intervening period the traditional mutual ownership rests with the families upon whom the Chief allotted the lands originally. At the end of the jhum cycle the families again return to their original land.

Lot of discussions have taken place regardirg the jhum system of cultivation and many scholars have opined that the system should be replaced with terrace and wet paddy cultivation. But whatever the demerits, the tribes in the hills still practice the jhum cultivation. The forests of the jhum sites provide the people with edible roots, herbs and creepers. Forests are the venue of individual as well as community hunting. They kill wild animals in the forests with bows and arrows and firearms. They relish the meat of the wild deer and meat of animals have socio-religious significance. Fish forms the special delicacy particularly dry fish. Fishes are caught in the rivers and beels inside the forests. The Dimasa Kacharis of North Cachar Hills consider forest as their friend, philosopher and guide and any interference in their free use of forests is not tolerated.

Shifting cultivation is practised by the Karbis of Karbi Anglong district but wet paddy cultivation is also gaining some ground among them. The Karbis prefer to live on the hill tops which are mostly inaccessible and they cultivate the alloted forest lands. They generally do not live in compact areas and naturally Karbi villages are smaller in size. Along with shifting of farm land, shifting of village also takes place. Like the Dimasas they also determine the boundaries of their jhum lands with markings in the trees or by planting bamboo posts. Karbi village is always near the jhum land and whenever a new jhum site is selected the entire village moves to the new site. It may be mentioned that a Karbi village is always named after the village headman and the post of a headman is coveted one. It is observed that oftentimes rivalries grow between the Gaonbura and another aspirant for the post and

the latter generally shifts to a new place along with his followers and establishes a village. He also becomes the headman of that village. Sometimes a village is shifted due to the fear of haunting the village by evil spirits.

Another example of endogenous management of land can be cited from the Hmars, a small tribal community of North Cachar Hills district of Assam. The land belongs to the whole community and the village council distributes the same to the individual families as per requirement of the families. The ownership right of the individual families is, however, restricted. Each family posseses the land till it uses the same. The village council allots land to the families of a village at the beginning of the month of January. Cleaning of the jhum sites is done by individual families while sowing is done on community basis. The whole agricultural operation is completed on a musical note as sowing and singing go together. A piece of jhum land is generally cultivated for 2/3 years and an average family cultivates 2 to $2\frac{1}{2}$ acres of land in a year. The period of jhum cycle is shortened due to shortage of suitable jhum land.

The Kukis of North Cachar Hills also practise jhum cultivation. There are altogether 37 Nos. of Kuki tribes and except the Rangkhols, all are ruled by hereditory chiefs. Each village has a hereditary chief who possesses unlimited power and who is supreme in his own village. It is the duty of the chief to select the jhum sites and decide when and where a village has to be shifted. Each cultivator has to give a share of the produce in the jhum land to the chief and the quantity depends on the quality of jhum land allotted to him.

The allotment system of land among the Rargkhols is different. Among them the village headman (Kalim) selects jhum lands. Unlike the Kukis, Rangkhol villages are not administered by hereditary chiefs rather the village administration is entrusted to a group of officials elected by the people. The disputes, if any, over land, however is settled by the 'Kalim'.

Usufructuary rights over land are enjoyed by the Rengma Nagas, who are a small section of the indigenous people of Karbi

Anglong district. The jhum lands among them are settled against individual families and the individual families own the land till they use the plots of land.

Along difficult Barail ranges of North Cachar Hills district there are about 20 Nos. of Zeme Naga villages. The cultivable patches in the Barail ranges are very limited and these are not found in compact areas. Because of the peculiar terrain, the Zeme villages have an abnormally large territorial jurisdiction. In between Zeme villages there may be small patch of jhum land and another patch of such land may lie at the end of the village. Thus allotment of land to individual families in a particular village jhum land may not be possible. Here also the village council plays a significant role. The council headed by the village headman called 'Matai' selects the jhum site and allots land to individual families. The Kadeipeo" or the land owner is an important office bearer in the village council and he yields much power.

The Zeme land ownership system is in clear contrast with the prevailing system among the neighbouring hill tribes. They have three types of land i. e. land owned by the 'Kadeipeo' or the land-lord; land owned by the six clans and land in the possession of the community as a whole.

As mentioned earlier the Kadeipeo is a very influential person more or less akin to a chief and the Zeme Nagas perhaps, are clinging to this institution to preserve the traditional linkage with the chieftainship. The post is hereditary. Each village may have one or two 'Kadeipeos" whose land extends to the entire village and some areas in the neighbouring hills. Tbe 'Kadeipeo' allots home sites to the villagers and no tax is charged for such land. For jhum sites allotted to the individual families each family is required to deposit a basketful of paddy (approximately 5 kg) per annum

Another characteristic feature of Zeme land management system is the existence of clan land which, however, is another name of community land restricted to the members of a clan who possess exclusive right over these lands. These are private lands which are demarcated by some natural boundaries, usually a big tree, a stream or a hillock.

Generally, community lands are reserved for exclusive common purposes like disposal of dead. grazing of cattle, organising community festival etc., but among the Zemes there are cultivable community lands which are common property of all the families of a village and crops are produced in these lands.

The village council's role in effective land management is appreciated by the Zeme Nagas. Whenever any family falls short of cultivable land in the vIllage, the same is allowed to cultivate jhum land lying within the jurisdiction of a neighbouring village under the overall control of the village council. Thus a healthy transition from feudalistic possession of land to democratisation of land holding appears to be the characteristic feature of the Zeme land ownership system. This egalitarian outlook of the village elders has cemented the bond of kinship ties.

What emerges from the above discussion is that self management of land and forest falling within the jhum cultivated areas has been scrupulously followed in the tribal areas in the hills. Although considerable changes have taken place in respect of jhum cycle, the traditional practice of land management is still followed. The individual families possess only usufructuary rights over their lands while the headman of a village or the village Council distributes lands to the individual families on the basis of needs of individual families.

Some tradition bound societies (Zeme Nagas) still adhere to the age old practice of hereditary ownership of land ('Kadeipeo'). But prevalence of such a system does not adversely affect the' society. In fact a healthy co-existence between landlordship and community ownership prevails. However, landlordship as found in the tribal society (Zeme) in the sense it is understood in the common purlance, is absent.

The topography and the environment of the hills are such that the tribals living in the hills innovated the jhum system in the hoary past and the same is practised with traditional fervour even today. The mythologies, folk beliefs and many socio-religious institutions of the people are interwoven with the pattern of agriculture and much of these valuable traditions will be lost if these people are forced to give up the jhum system.

In the plains of Assam there is no longer the endogenous arrangement of land among the tribal and the tribal habitations are such that the same cannot be done. Because of this most of the folk ways and traditions of the plains tribes are gradually disappearing. Experience shows that even the tribal forest vIllagers have no access to the forests which was once their abode, and also the abode of their deities. For fear of punishment the villagers avoid the forest most of which are Reserved Forests. Thus for instance, there is no charm in the 'Gajai' festival of the Sonowal Kacharis as deep foretst are fast disapparing in the areas.

Endogenous management of land is gradually disappearing even among the hill tribes owing to the spread of market economy and growth of individual property concept among the people. Whether we like it or not this will happen, of course, at the cost of a traditional valuable value system. Some major tribal beliefs and practices, myths and folklore will vanish along with it. Most of the tribal people in the hills are facing scarcity of agricultural land and the people too, are discouraged to practise jhum cultivation. The inevitable change of the pattern of agriculture will surely come as per the needs of the changing social 'Situations, but efforts should be made to preserve the rich cultural tradition as the plains Lalungs (Tiwas) have done in Nagaon district in preserving the 'Raja' institution whicn had lost the traditional meaning long back.

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AN OVERVIEW OF THE ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY ON THE PLAINS TRIBES OF ASSAM IN THE PRE INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

Assam is the abode of numerous populations of divergent ethnic affiliation possessing different social structures and cultural ethos. While ethnographic study on the life and culture of various ethnic groups of India like the Oraons, Mundas, Santals, Hos, Birhors, Kols, Baigas, Bhils, Saoras, Todas etc. was undertaken even before the nineteenth century, the colourful ethnic groups could draw the attention of the professional and non professional ethnographers only since the early part of the nineteenth century. Assam in those days virtually represented the North Eastern India and thrust was given primarily to the hill tribes living within the jurisdiction of present Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and two hill districts of Assam viz Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills. Ethnographic accounts, notes were prepared by the Bristish Administrative Officers, American Missioneries, Explorers, Armymen and Tea Planters. These pioneer 'ethnographers' took interest in the 'peculiar' customs, traditions, religious beliefs and practices, modes and morals of the hill dwellers and made records of the impression of their visits to the far flung inaccessible and hostile tribal areas. People outside Assam came to know about the tribal people of Assam since the publication of the history, antiquity, topography and statistical figures of Eastern India by Montgomery Martin in 1838; A Descriptive Account of Assam by William Robinson in 1841, Travels in Assam by major John Butler in 1855, Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal by E.T. Dalton in 1866, Tribal History of Eastern India by E.T. Dalton in 1872. Before that Buchanon Hamilton of the Indian Medical Service surveyed the tribal areas in Assam in 1810. Similarly Colonel Pemberton gave us valuable information about the life and culture of the Assam tribes in his account in the year 1830. Thomas Cooper, a traveller, Grey, a tea planter, Nicholas

Krick, a Missionary, Needham, Robinson and Wilcox, administrators, Waddell, a medical officer wrote exhaustive accounts about the tribes of Assam, while discharging their official duties. These Reports and Accounts however were sometimes sweeping and not without personal business. But it must be admitted that these forerunners did a yeoman's service in so far as in ethnography of the Assam tribes is concerned and their contribution helped the later ethnographers and social Anthropologists to undertake systematic scientific study of the tribes.

The local historian of the nineteenth century dwelt upon ethnic life and culture in a nutshell. Thus Haliram Dhekial Phukan's exhaustive socio-cultural history of Assam entitled Assam Buranji written in 1829 contained very little about the tribes of Assam. In the chapter 'Jati Bibhag' he mentioned "Mikir O Kachari, O Garo, O Lalung O Miri Ei Koi Ek Parbatia Jati Nam-danite Bistar Basati kari Ase, Taherder Madhye Keh Keh Purbiya Rityanusare Devapuja Kare, Keh Keh Hindu Dharmasray Kariya Hindur Devata Puja Kare. Ata Eba Sarania O Asaranio Ei Dui Prakar Kahe". (P.90). Again "Ahom Kachari, Lalang, Mikir prabhiti Parbatia Jatira Asurik Mate Sungdeo Puja Kare"[1].

Meaning

The Mikirs, Kacharis, Garos, Lalungs, Miris live extensively in the foothills. Among them some worship their traditional deities while others worship Hindu Gods and Goddes. Thus they are divided into two-Sarania and Asarania. The hill tribes like the Ahoms, Kacharis, Lalungs, Mikirs worship Sungdeo (Somdeo?) according to demonic tradition.

It may be noted that all the plains tribes of today (nine in number) including the Ahoms who are categorised under the other backward classes were then treated as hill tribes and in their cases the process of Hinduisation was at a low key. The Buranji, however, gave us a vivid account of the mythical and folk origin of the Chutiyas and Kacharis. Not much could be derived from the description about their socio-cultural characteristics. The references could however throw much light for the later souvenir writers. In the chapter 'Raj Bibaran' the author mentioned about the Chutiyas as ''Subansiri Nadir Nikat Swarnagiri Parbate Satghar Chutiya

Silo. Tahardiger Keh Raja Silona, Kebol Bihbar Name Ekjan Pradhan Chutiya Silo.[2]"

About the Kacharis Dhekial Phukan began with a subhead 'Kachari Rajar Katha'. "Kachari Raja Purbe Bhimsenar Birje Hirambir garbhajat Ghatatkaser Santan Silen[3]". Meaning: Originally The Kachari King was born out of the wedlock of Ghatatkoch and Hirambi (Hirimba?) in the family line of Bhimsen.

The concept of plains tribes has developed recently more particularly after Independence. Before that the hill tribes and plains tribes were discussed together. But as early as 1838 Montgomery Martin in his 'History of Antiquities, Topography and Statistics of Eastern India' described about the socio-cultural life of the Kacharis and Rabhas. In Vol V in the chapter on Rangpur and Assam Montgomery wrote, "The Kacharis form a tribe of which a few families are settled in two Eastern divisions of this district and a great many in lower hills of Bhutan and Assam. The customs of the Kacharis a good deal resemble those of the Rabhas but they have made some more progress in the arts. Part only indeed use the plough and part still adhere to the hoe; but they have not only some men of letters, that is, who can read and write, but also merchants, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, coppersmiths and carpenters and every woman weaves. Their manner of eating and drinking is the same with that of all the Pani Koch and they burn the dead.[4]" Details about marriage, property and inheritance, rerligion etc. were also incorporated.

Montgomery also described about life and culture of the Rabhas briefly. "The Rabhas are divided into two kinds- the Patis and Rangdanis. The former, who are the most numerous have adopted the language of Benglal and cultivate with the plough, the latter retains their original language"[5].

In 1841 William Rabinson in his ' A Descriptive Account of Assam' mentioned about the Kacharis and Miris with some details." "The Kacharis are a laborious and hardy race and possess considerable physical strength. Their superiority to the Assamese is in a grerat measure attributable to their style of life. They are

not trammelled by the prejudices and useless observances of the Hindus and live freely and fully on animal food and drink as much spirits as they can afford. They are not so cleanly in their habits as the Hindus are, but seem better versed in domestic economy taking special care to have abundance of provisions. They are in general neat in their architecture although their poultry and all their livestock rest under the same roof with themselves.[6]" In small paragraphs Robinson described about the food habits, marriage system, fairs and fastivals, religion and death rites. About the Miris he wrote, "The chief seat of the Miris appears to be the low hills North of Banscotta and Lakhimpur from whence they have spread themselves out into the plains at the foot of the hills and emigrated in large numbers throughout Assam. The Abors look upon them as their dependents and have generally exacted from them a heavy tribute; to escape which, the latter have removed in large numbers into the plains of Assam ----- . The manners and customs of the Miris are wild and barbarous but they have also many redeeming qualities. They are labourious and highly industrious people. They are expert marksmen and bows and arrows are their only weapons. Their language is a dialect of that of the Abors and appears in all essential points the same. The Miris in the plains employ themselves chiefly in growing opium and as they always cultivate new lands, their fields in general yield them large returns. They seldom use drugs themselves, but they make a very large profit by bartaring it to the Assam for grain and other necessaries. The Miris in general rear a great number of pigs and poultry and live comparatively in a very expensive style."[7]

A. J. Moffatt Mills in his 'Report on the Province of Assam' 1853 also wrote a brief account of the Miris whom he pronounced as 'Meris'. "The Meris near Luckhimpoor are not mixed with Abors and the Abors beyond the Dihang and upto the Dibang are unmixed with Meris but the latter carry on a considerable trade with the former exchanging the products of the plains for canoes and large timbers"[8]

E.T. Dalton in his Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal compiled under the auspices of the Asiatic Society in 1866 dwelt

upon the characteristic features of the Miris, Kacharis, Lalungs, Chutiyas, Rabhas, Mech and other tribes although in a nutshell, In group I Section 5 he described about life and culture of various tribes. About the Miris he wrote, '' The Miris of the plains are offshoot from the Abors and claimed by people as runaway slaves but there are various clans of them differing in external appearance and some of these clans have been settled in Assam for ages. They however, keep much to themselves leading rather a nomadic life living in houses on stilts built on the precarious banks of the Brahmaputra and its estuaries or affluents and cultivating the alluvial flats of that river." [9]

The said monograph presented a clear pen picture about the Kacharis. "The Kacharis are one of the most numerous and widely spread of the tribes of the Eastern Frontier "[10]. In this chapter a detailed picture of the Kachari locality, extent of their conversion to Hinduism, origin of the name Kachari, affinity with the Chutiya religion, priesthood, marriage system, exorcism, deities, witchcraft, festivals, food habits etc. was presented.

About Lalungs Dalton could not give us details. In general view, Section I - population of the Assam Valley mention of Lalungs as a tribe of Assam was only made. ''It is un likely that all the Lalungs are Chutiyas." [11]

Dalton opined that the Rabhas were a section of the Kacharis having close affinity with the Garos. ''The Rabhas and Hajongs of Goalpara district are also branches of the Kachari race and connected with the Garos ..... The true Rabha customs with the exception of their laws of inheritance, marriage resemble those of the Goros". [12]

After annexation of Assam as per the Yandabu treaty the Provincial Government of Assam made serious effort for preparing ethnographic accounts on various tribal communities especially on the hill tribes. Very little was done in the areas of plains tribes. Hodgson wrote about the Meities of Manipur in 1908. Major Play fair's monograph on the Garos appeared in 1909 while Gardon's monograph on the Khasis was published in the early part of that Century. J. H. Hutton, J. P. Mills dwelt at length about the Naga

groups. The hitherto untouched communities like Lushais and Lakhers were researched by Lt.Col.J.Shakespear and Col.N.E.Parry respectively.

Plains tribal study started when the Missionaries and British administrators like Rev. Endle and E.M.Gait took up studies on plains tribes. Rev. Endle prepared a well documented monograph on the Kacharis while E.A.Gait published the History of Assam in 1905 where in details of plains tribes were incorporated. Gait described about the Kacharis as earliest known inhabitants of the Brahmaputra Valley. "It appears from the records (Buranjis of Ahom) that a line of Chutiya kings ruled the country east of the Subansiri and the Disang with the exception of a strip to the South and South East where several small Bodo tribes enjoyed a precarious independence. They survived, however, as a separate nation until the early part of the last century." [13] Gait's writing did not contain much Anthropological account on the Rabhas, Deoris, Miris and Lalungs. Gait had also mentioned about the Chutiyas as a plains tribe, although today they are included in the list of Other Backward Classes. "Their language which is still known to the Deoris or priestly section of the tribe is unmistakably Bodo. They worshipped various forms of Kali with the aid not of Brahmans, but of their tribal priests or Deoris." [14]

About Mech, a plains tribe of Assam Gait opined, ''There seems, however to be nodoubt that the true Koches were a Mongoloid race, very closely allied to the Meches and Goros..... In former time the Koches and Meches freely intermarried but the conversion of the former to Hinduism has now caused the practice to be discontinued." [15]. Similarly no detailed account about the Sonowal Kacharis except a reference in connection with the discription of Matak Chief Bor Senapati's ability in administration. "He derived his revenue from a poll tax of three rupees per head in the case of Morans and Kacharis, two rupees eight annas for Bihis or Gold washers and two rupees for ordinary Assamese." [16]

The foreign rulers in pre Independence period had to face serious odds from the Khamtis, Abors, Singphos, Daflas etc and much time was devoted in containing these communities. More

attention was drawn by these communities while the plains tribes did not create much trouble. Naturally the accounts, tour notes etc. of the British administrators did not include elaborate information about the plains tribes. However some information could be found in Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India (1903). About the Miris Grierson wrote " The Miris occupy the hills to the west of Abors and extend to about 98° North latitude. They have also been settled in the Assam valley for a long time. They were pushed down by the Abors and these Miris are generally believed to have been slaves to that tribe. In the Assam valley they were conquered by the Ahoms. According to Mr. Needham the Miris who reside on the banks of the Brahmaputra, Dihang and Dibang rivers in the neighbourhood of Sadiya call themselves Mishing. The Assamese Miris are now found in Darrang, Nowgong and above all in Sivsagar and Lakhimpur. There were only 35,510 persons in 1891 and in 1901 their population increased upto 40,472."[17]

Grierson described about the Bodos with sufficient details " Bodo or Bara is the name by which the Mech or Mes and the Kacharis call themselves. Like other tribal names in Assam, the name probably once meant a male member of the tribe. A Kachari or Mech will call himself a Bara Fisa, a son of Baras. The Bara folk who live to the west of Kamrup district are called Mech by their Hindu neighbours. This word is probably a corruption of the Sanskrit Mlechehha which corresponds to the original meaning of our word 'Welch' i.e. foreigner or stranger. Those of the Bara who live in and to the East of the district of Kamrup are called Kacharis pronounced Kosari by the Hindus. It is said that the name Kachari originated in the fact that some 200 years ago the Raja of Hill Tipperah when giving his daughter in marriage to the Raja of Maibong in the present North Cachar gave her as dowry the Surma Valley in what is now known as District of Cachar"[18]

According to Grierson Mech had some differences with the Kacharis, "The Meches donot admit any relationship with the Bodos of Kamrup and Darrang but it is doubtful if they are really a distinct tribe. Hodgson in his essay on the Kocch, Bodo and

Dhimal tribes has given a Bodo grammar and vocabulary and distinctly states that Mech and Bodo are the same.

As a matter of fact the term Mech is at the present day confined to the speakers of plains Kachari or Bara who dwell west of the Darrang and Nowgong"[19].

In respect of Lalung, not much ethnographic account is found in the monumental work of Grierson. "How the Lalungs came to their present site or when is not known. They are not mentioned by the Ahom historians nor in the account of the Koch Kingdom. In Nowgong they are said to have a tradition that they came from Jaintia Hills while some of the Lalungs in the latter District say that their ancestors immigrated thither in the reign of Jaintia Raja U, Mon Gohain"[20]

About the Rabhas, Grierson quoted EA Gait "The Rabhas who are also known as Totlas or Datiyal Kacharis are found chiefly in Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and in Garo Hills. In lower Assam it is asserted that they are offshoot of the Garos while in Kamrup and Darrang it is thought that they are Kacharis on the road to Hinduism. The Rabhas consider themselves superior to the Kacharis and have as a rule abandoned their dialect in favour of Assamese"[21]

About the Deoris, Grierson wrote "The Deoris who are the levites of the tribe (Chutiyas) are less than four thousand in all. they are secluded people in the Lakhimpur and Sibsagar Districts of Upper Assam. whose principal settlements are on the Majuli Island in Sibsagar and on the Dikrang river in North Lakhimpur. They have preserved the language, religion and customs which we may presume have descended to them with comparative little change from a period anterior to the Ahom invasion. The original seat of the Deoris was in the region beyond Sadiya,[22]

The above pen picture of plains tribes was drawn mainly on the basis of actual experience among the tribes. Besides in most cases the ethnographers had to depend on interpretors as the tribes in those days were illiterate and they avoided querries from foreign persons. Today the socio-cultural life of the plains

tribes have undergone metamorphic changes. The tribal elites have undertaken indepth research and new thinkings have been incorporated into the writtings of the pre-Independance ethnographers. But it must be admitted that the research done by the erstwhile administrators cum writers has contributed immensely towards a more authentic and scientific study of the plains tribes. who are still lesser known outside the boundaries of the undivided Assam.

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SOME TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS OF THE KARBIS, MISHINGS, DEORIS, LALUNGS (TIWAS), SONOWAL KACHARIS OF ASSM

A. Traditional Institutions of the Karbis.

The Karbis constitute the major ethnic community in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam. Socially they belong to the Mongoloid group. They are mainly found in the Karbi Anglong hill district of Assam. Some Karbi villages are also found in North Cachar Hills district and Kamrup, Nagaon and Sonitpur districts. As per 1971 Census the total population of the Karbis was 1,77,194 and constituted 1'21 per cent of the total population in the state of Assam in 1971 and 11.83 of the total tribal population of the state. As 1981 Census could not be conducted in Assam, the projected population of the Karbis in 1981 would be 2,41,000 calculated on the basis of average annual growth during the decade 1971-81. The people are maintaining their socio cultural tradition intact, although some superfluous changes are noticed here and there. The traditional institutions of the Karbis are :

'Me' It is a traditional village council composed of all the elderly male members of a village. It is presided over by the Gaonbura or the village headman (Saarthe). All the village disputes which are not of serious nature are settled by it. It is the council which decides if the village is to be shifted to a new jhum site. The council also makes allotment of jhum sites to the families of the village.

'Jirkedam' Another traditional institution of the Karbis is the 'Jirkedam' or 'Farla'. It is a bachelor dormitory which plays significant role in the socio-cultural life of the people. The dormitory is constructed in a central place of the village. All the unmarried boys of a village above the age of 10 are members of the dormitory. The office bearers are designated as a Kleng Serpo (King or Chief), Klengdun (Chief minister), Suderkethe (Commander), Sudersu (prince designate), Barlanpo (surveyor), Motan Are and Motan Ar be (guides), Chengbruk Are and Chengbruk

Ar be (small drum), Than Are and Than Ar be (convenors), Me Apai (fire keeper) and Lang Apai (water keeper).

The members of a dormitory extend help to the needy families in matters of constructing or repairing a house, hervesting paddy, etc. Of late due to rapid expansion of education the functional aspect of dormitory is at a low ebb.

'Kerung Amei'- It is an economic institution based on fellow feeling and co-operation. Kerung Amei is the traditionally maintained grain bank which is established to help the poor families during the lean months of the year. Three types of grain banks are found to be prevalent among the Karbis.

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

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

The third type of grain bank is confined to the aged male members of a Karbi village. An assigned plot of land is cultivated by all aged persons of the village and the product is kept in a store constructed specially for the purpose. The bank serves as the co-operative credit society of the villagers. The paddy thus collected is sold when price of paddy goes up in the market and sale proceeds are given to the needy families on loan to be repaid with cent percent interest.

Mutual help is the primary objective of such an institution. Besides, such banks protect the poor Karbi families from the clutches of the greedy village Mahajans.

B. Traditional Institutions of the Miris (Mishings).

The Miris, popularly known as Mishings are a riverine plains tribe found mainly in the Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat and Sonitpur districts of Assam. This ethnic group surrounded by other non tribal populations has maintained most of their traditional socio-cultural traits intact. As per 1971 Census there were 259551 Mishing souls. The projected population of the Mishings as in March 1987 is 416493 (1981 Census was not held in Assam). Like all other tribal communities, the Mishings too, possess certain well defined traditional institutions which play significant role in the socio-religious life of the people.

'Kebang; - It is a village panchayat consisting of the village elders which is supreme in all socio-cultural and religious matters within a village. The Kebang congregates in the house of the Gaonbura , the village headman, or in the 'Morung' (Bachelors' dormitory) on specific occasions. The Gaonbura presides over the Kebang. Complaints ranging from petty cases like theft, assult to elders or quarrel among the villagers regarding property, etc. are brought to the notice of the Kebang which delivers judgement and punishes the offenders. The judgements are of course, delivered after hearing both the parties viz. the complainants and the offenders. Punishments depending upon the nature of offence range from imposition of fine in cash or kind (rice beer) to bodily thrashing and even excommunication. The Kebang inflicts severe penalty to the persons indulged in adultery or such other immoral acts. The incestuous couples are given the severest punishment. In bygone days such offenders were thrown to a river from a hilltop tying them in a bamboo cage called 'Dirdang'.

'Bane Kebang' Above the Kebang, there is a 'Bane Kebang' to decide cases involving two or more villages. In Bane Kebang elderly villagers from several villages assemble together and decide cases. The final judgement is always delivered by a jury consisting of selected elderly persons. The Gaonbura of the village where the Bane Kebang is convened, presides over the sitting. The decision or judgement delivered by the Bane Kebang is final and the parties involved must abide by it.

'Murang' - Like most of the hill tribes of Assam the

Mishings too had in the past an institution known as 'Murang' (Bachelors' dormitory). Besides acting as a training institute the Murangs performed the role of protecting the villagers from enemies. Today living in the plains amidst the non Mishings, the people do not feel the necessity of traditional Morung and thus it has been replaced by a public hall. During festivals the Morung gets new lease of life when the youths gather there to chalk out festival programmes.

Mimbir Yame - This is a benevolent institution formed by the young men and women. Unmarried boys and girls above the age of 12-13 years become the active members of this body. Discipline and tribal ethics are taught to the members by some officers specially trained for the purpose. The members of Mimbir Yame render help to the needy villagers in erecting a house, weeding paddy, etc. They get nominal remuneration for their service which is used while celebrating 'Porag' festival.

Rikbo Ginam and Daglik Alik' Co-operation and fellow feeling are the salient features of the Mishing community life. In fact before the turn of this century the villagers used to live like one family and problems of individual families were considered as common problem of the villages. In those days, youth organisations and institutions like 'Rikbe Ginam' and Daglik Alik had great relevance. The young boys and girls used to gather in their respective 'Morungs' after dusk and learnt many indigenous skills and trades. But due to opening up the far-flung Mishing villages to the outside world and consequent extension of modern infrastructural facilities, dormitories disappeared as these were felt not necessary in the present day context. Now the traditional institutions are disorganized although some of the old co-operative activities are still performed with the traditional fervour . Whenever a family wants manpower to construct or repair a house, to transplant and harvest paddy or to conduct a feast in a festive occasion like marriage, death ceremony, etc. the headman or woman of a family formally invites the young boys and girls for such work and the youths perform the assigned duties. The family is required to serve Apong (rice beer) and other eatables, preferably cooked rice and vegetables. If the family is poor, the youths are satisfied with 'Apong' only.

C. Traditional Institutions of the Deoris.

The Deoris , a plains tribe of Assam. are basically a riverine tribe found in Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat and Sonitpur districts of Assam. Their economy is based on agriculture and rice is their staple food. As per 1971 Census, 23080 persons returned as Deoris. The percentage of literacy is 27'72%. The estimated population worked out at 3'5% increase per year comes to 41421 in March 1988.

'Sariya Mata'

Co-operation is the salient feature of he socio-cultural life of the Deoris. It is the duty of each family to help the fellow villagers in time of need. The Deoris possess a benevolent institution called 'Sariya Mata. When any family wants to construct or repair a house or solemnize a marriage ceremony, it prays for help from fellow villagers. There are two sets of Sariya Mata – one for males and the other for females. In certain occasions only females are invited to help the individual family which is known as Maiki Sariya Mata. Similarly when only male persons are invited to help a family it is known as 'Sariya Mata'. In lieu of the service the host family has to entertain the members of the 'Sariya' with a feast which invariably includes rice beer.

'Morungghar'

In the distant past the Deoris had a training cum recreation center for the unmarried adolescent boys known as 'Morung ghar' . Besides guarding the village the Morung members learnt various indigenous skills of cottage industry products. They learnt to play various musical instruments and the members served the needy families in various activities like harvesting, constructing or repairing a dwelling house, etc. Today there is no necessity of guarding a village and due to spread of money economy the corporate life is fast disappearing. The youth club has replaced 'Morung ghar'. The boys gather at the 'Morung ghar' after dusk and learn various skills of the abjects of indigenous material culture. Of late the Clubghar is used for holding the assembly of the village elders. The 'Clubghars' are also the venue for the night school and library.

'Mel'- Every Deori village has a traditional Panchayat

called 'Mel'. It is constituted with all the elderly members of a village. The Gaonbura or the village headman, presides over the sessions of a 'Mel'. The 'Mel' decides disputes of all kinds and imposes punishment to the offenders. Without prior approval of the 'Mel' no community socio-religious festivals can be undertaken.

D. Traditional Institutions of the Lalungs :

The Lalungs also known as 'Tiwas' are one of the major plains tribes of Assam whose concentrations are mainly found in the districts of Nagaon and Morigaon in Central Assam. They are also found in Nartiang Elaka of Jowai Sub Division of Jaintia district of Meghalaya. A few Lalung villages are found in Dhemaji Sub Division of Lakhimpur district, Titabar areas of Jorhat Sub Division of Jorhat district and Sonapur areas of Guwahati Sub Division of Kamrup district. The hill Lalungs are found in the hilly areas of Karbi Anglong district and they are maintaining the traditional Lalung culture intact. According to 1971 Census there were 95609 Lalungs in Assam. The estimated population as in March 1987 is 162760 (1981 Census was not held in Assam). According to 1971 census the percentage of literacy among the Lalungs was 21.5 (male 31'5%, and female 11'3%).

'Khel' The traditional village council of the Lalungs is called 'Khel'. The structure of the 'Khel' is somewhat different from the village councils of the other tribal communities. The Lalungs have a social grouping called 'Khuta'. A 'Khuta' is in fact, an extension of a family. Following the genealogy, each family of a certain clan forms a social grouping called 'Bangsha' or 'Khuta'. It may be noted that no family in a village can thrive without affiliating itself to a 'Khuta' whether solemnizing a marriage ceremony or observing a death rite, the Khuta plays an important role in such occasions.

The Gaonbura or the village headman presides over the sitting of the 'Khel'. In selecting the headman due importance is given to the integrity and capabilities of the person. The 'Khel' also selects the 'Giyati' (priest) to preside over the religious occasions. The 'Zolo' (an expert in folklore and religious matters) and the 'Barik' (liaison official between the Gaonbura and the villagers) are selected by the 'Khel'. It may be noted that although the Gaonbura's decision in respect of all matters concerning the village is final, nevertheless in the religious sphere the decision of the Giyati is final and the Gaonbura never interferes .

'Samadi'- Among the hill Lalungs each village has a 'Samadi' where as the institution of Samadi has not much significance among the plains Lalungs. There are very few 'Samadis among the plains Lalungs. It is a platform type house without walls and erected in a central place of the village. Only male persons are, eligible to become members of a 'Samadi'. The Samadis act as training centers where the unmarried youths learn music and art. They practise various kinds of handicrafts and while sleeping at night maintain vigil over any possible attack by enemies. The young members of a 'Samadi' are to be formally invited to socio-religious occasions like marriage, death rites, etc. and they remain in charge of the reception. Success of a function largely depends upon the role played by the members of a 'Samadi'.

E. Traditional Institutions of the Sonowal Kacharis.

The Sonowal Kacharis, one of the major plains tribal groups of the Brahmaputra valley are a cognate group of the great Bodo Kacharis. They are mainly found in the plains areas of Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur districts of upper Assam. Some Sonowal Kachari villages are also found in Sibsagar and Jorhat districts of upper Assam. They are an assimilated and accultured people and typical tribal institutions are almost non existent. Agriculture is the sole economic pursuit of the people and paddy is widely grown. As per 1971 Census the total Sonowal Kachari population in Assam was 1,98,619 (male 1,02,547 female 96,072). The estimated population in 1987 worked out at annual national growth rate is 3,44,393.

Every Sonowal Kachari village has a Gaonbura who with the help of elderly male members of a village decides petty disputes and inflicts punishment on the offenders. As already mentioned the Sonowal Kacharis are assimilated people and Panchayat system has been introduced in these villages and all development activities are done through the Gaon Panchayat. However the Gaonbura still plays an important role in socio-religious matters and he is honoured by all.

INDIGENOUS HEALTH PRACTICES AND SYSTEM OF CURE AMONG THE TRIBES OF ASSAM PLAINS

Health in the tribal context can be viewed in the cultural as well as organisational level. To understand health these two important aspects should be taken into consideration, although scholars lean mostly upon other aspects like economic, religion and customary laws prevalent among the ethnic groups. The tribal people, nay the people in general, consider health as a natural condition.

The World Health Organisation defines health as a state of physical, mental and social condition of the people. Mere absence of disease or disability does not indicate a sound health. The thirtieth World Health Assembly held as early as 1977 recommended a level of health that will permit people to lead a socially and economically productive life. The emphasis here is on social and economic well being which ensures physical health. Mahler (1979) opines that social and economic well being could only be ensured when the people will be provided with modem health care facilities. It is not enough to leave the people on the mercy of natural, socio-cultural and economic situation.

There are multiple factors like poverty and malnutrition, economic deprivation, poor educational status, unscientific housing, uncongenial environment, unemployment, under employment, acculturation and assimilation among the tribal people, particularly tribal people whose economic condition is far from satisfactory. Besides, the tribal people are coming into contact with non tribal urban dwellers like traders, government employees, social reformers, missioneries, researchers etc. The stable physical and social environment including nutritional standard and the traditional way of life of the tribal people have been considerably disturbed. The Bhore Committee (1946) recommended primary health care for the backward people with emphasis on control of communicable diseases, population control, maternal and child health thereby increasing their resistance to hitherto unknown diseases not directly related to the traditional social and economic life.

After Independence, Government of India enunciated the National Health Policy in 1983, but the tribal people, by and large, still depend on the traditional health care system, as the well meaning health schemes were not properly implemented suiting to the socio economic condition of the tribal people. Due to lack of holistic and well coordinated approach and due largely to the lack of knowledge of the way of tribal life, the health scheme could hardly deliver the goods.The prevailing traditional practices which had much relevance in the tribal milieu were bypassed. Leiban (1973) opined that status of health and welfare of a tradition bound society varies with environment.Health needs vary from community to community. Even the sub-groups may not have similar health problems which are faced by the community at large.

In this backdrop let us examine the health seeking behaviour and indigenous system of cure of the diseases among the plains tribal communities of Assam. There are nine plains tribal communities in Assam viz., Barmans in Cachar, Boro Kachari, Deori, Miri (Mishing), Rabha, Sonowal Kachari, Lalung (Tiwa), Mech and Hojai spread over twentyone plains districts of Assam. As per 1971 Census, their total population is 13.44 lakhs and constitute 9.19 percent of the total population of the State (1981 Census was not held in Assam). As per 1991 Census, the total Scheduled tribe population of Assam, both hills and plains, is 2,87,4441.

The tribal way of 'art of healing' has a long story extending from pre-historic to modem times. Diseases were and still are, attributed to wrath of spirits and deities and malevolent influence of stars and planets (Park and Park, 1977). The tribal people do not usually consider to be sick unless and until they feel incapable of performing the day to day chores traditionally assigned to the respective age and sex in their culture. In other words, withdrawal from agricultural activities is an index of threat to health. Thus the concept of health in the tribal societies is more a functional than clinical. That is why a Boro or a Mishing having scabies or itches considers himself capable of perfoming normal daily work and these ailments are generally not considered as diseases. An occasional headache, stomach pain, loss of appetite, weakness,

rheumatic pain etc. are not taken seriously as symptoms of diseases or ill health. A rise in the abnormal temperature of the body is not to be taken seriously by the self or members of a family. If, however, anyone shows some attention one may do so at the cost of being humiliated.

The nutritive value of the local food and drink is known to the people. Similarly, most of the tribal people are aware of the health hazards arising out of drugs, opium and ganja etc. But such health care generally has nothing to do with objective and scientific evaluation of the health and diseases. A Mishing or Rabha or Tai-Phake woman recognises nutritive value of forest leaves, wild roots and herbs and wild mushrooms which she collects and serves to the members of the family. Similarly, a Boro or a Rabha unhesitatingly consumes curry preparations of snails collected from the fields. Endi cocoons are also a delicacy to most of the tribal people. But when a rural non tribal woman living in the same environment does not recognise the inherent food value in the local roots and herbs, the unmatching contrast in the varied concept of health for each group of people is noticed.

The tribal people have their own views regarding the health concept. Unlike the non tribals, particularly the urbanites, sanitation is not considered as a contributing factor for deteriorating health of the members. Thus a Mishing or a Deori or a Rabha may be committing or omitting certain acts which may be considered to be the cause of certain diseases to the individual or to the household. This individual lapse or defiance of aproved social norms may also cause some affliction for the entire members of a village, clan or the larger cognate group, It is more applicable in the case of spreading Smalll pox or such other epidemics to the family or the village as a whole. In our field studies we have not come accross any group of tribal people who associate certain diseses or epidemic with insanitary condition of community living. A non tribal urban dweller may be surprised to find the cows and bullocks just underneath the platform house of the Mishing or the Deoris, the riverine tribes of upper Assam. At the same time, the visitor will be equally surprised to find glistening metal or alluminium utensils, neatly mud and cowdung mixed plastered yard, healthy teenaged

girl with a child fastened in her back and cleanly attired ladies. Those who use earthen or brass pitchers for carying or storing water take meticulous care in cleaning them. How the acts of personal hygiene or keeping the household clean are correlated to their personal and community health and how their lack is directly related for certain diseases both at the individual and community level is not formlulated in their concept of health.

The socio-religious beliefs and practices of the tribal people play significant role in ensuring health, prosperity and protection to the community. The spirits of ancestors are to be appeased, otherwise they will bring miseries to the members of a famlily by way of causing epidemics to both men and cattle.

Magico religious beliefs, taboos, witchcraft are also potent agents of ill health in a tribal setting. Mystical powers like evil eye, evil mouth, evil touch are also believed to be the agents of diseases. Soul loss is another phenomenon among certain tribes and sudden stage of coma of a man is considered as soul loss. The soul of a dead man, particularly of a suicide person, may play truant quite whimsically. Such soul of unnatural death may be enticed by a sorcerer resultillg in sickness which, however, can be cured by a witch or a magician. If the soul can not be re-callcd and reinstated within a short time, the soul loss may result in death of the victim. Among the Tai-Phake, a non scheduled Buddhist ethnic group of upper Assam, re-calling of the soul is practised when the people get sufficient indication that the death is not a natural one, rather it is caused by'some evil spirits. This they ascertain from the suddenness of the death. The circumstances, i.e. the place the dead man visited last is also taken into consideration. There are places like cremation ground or place not frequented by people which are believed to be the abode of the evil spirits and if a person falls ill after visiting the above mentioned place, it is believed that he or she is influenced by the spirits. To recall the soul, the Tai-Phakes observe a ceremony called Hon Khowan.

The Lalungs (Tiwas) of Nagaon, Marigaon and Karbi Anglong districts observe pujas to appease various malevolent deities and spirits who are believed to cause diseases and epidemics. The Tiwas of Nagaon and Marigaon, like other plains tribes also

treat diseases with locally available herbs, roots and creepers. The people seek relief from epidemics and natural calamities by observing Barat (penance) puja on the fullmoon day of Pausa or Magh (December/January). Maral Puja is observed in the backyard of a house when a member of a family suffers from chronic illness. The courtyard is cleaned and seven circles, representing the planetary system.-are made with charcoal powder, turmeric and rice powder. An egg is placed in the centre of the circle. Betel leaves and nuts are placed on the lines of the circle and in between the lines earthen lamps are placed. The Deori (priest) chants mantras while breaking the egg. Black colour of the yolk indicates a negative effect i.e., the patient will not survive. Towards the end of the puja the sick person is bathed on that place with magical waters.

Tne Mishings, a riverine tribe of upper Assam districts, believe that diseases are caused by spirits (Wii). Thc soul (Yaal) of a diseased person is believed to be carried away by the Oupams and the Mibu (expert in the traditional lore and folk beliefs) can only recall the soul by performing certain magico religious rites. When the Yaal crosses five rivers of the world of death, the Mibu has to make very strenous effort to bring back the soul. The Mishings call this soul recalling ceremony as Yaal Minam. When the soul of a sick person intends to leave the body then the Yaal of the patient appears before the Mibu in a dream and the Mibu accordingly informs the concerned family about the impending happening. Due to large scale contact with the non tribal people, the Mishings have acquired many traits of indigenous treatment which are practised by the rural Assamese folk. Thus popular local products like Amlakhi (Embilica officinalis), Doron Saag, (Leucas Linifolia spreng), Manimuni (Centella asiatica L.) are used to get relief from acidity, indigestion, constipation and loss of appetite. Fruits like Kordoi (Averrhoea carambola), Dupar Tenga (leafy vegetables), Bhekur Tita (Solanum indicum L.), Silikha (T. Chehula Retz) are considered as effective medicine for Hepatitis (Jaundice). Similarly Mahaneem (Mella azardirachta) and Bahak leaves (Adhatoda vasica Nees) are used to cure Small Pox and

Chicken Pox. For small cuts and bruices the juice of arum stem (black variety) and Narji (Marigold) flowers are applied in the effected part. Bhimkal (banana) and Olkachu (a variety of arum), black berry (Suzyciumcumini L.), Matikaduri (Alternanthera Sessilis) are used to get relief from Dysentery and Diarrhoea. Roasted turmeric is inhaled for minor ailments like headache. Bangali Era stem is used as toothbrush when anyone suffers from toothache. Usc of raw turmeric (Curcuma domestica valeton) for suspected bone fracture is common not only among the Mishing but also among most of the tribal folk.

The Deoris, another riverine plains tribe of upper Assam districts namely Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Tinsukia, Jorhat, Dhemaji and Lakhimpur, also believe that priests, old men and women having knowledge of the traditional lore and soothsayers are able to bring back soul of a sick person by offering oblations to the deities and spirits. They know the abode of the evil spirits. The soothsayers (Mangalati) can cure diseases like Arthritis, Rheumatism etc. by uttering mantras. Dambarudhar Deori illustrates a few such mantras in his book 'Deori Sanskriti', which could cure pains of joints and other parts of a body (Deori, 1964).

Spirits and malevolent deities live in jungles, riverside and in cremation ground. Burha Dangaria, Jalsaai, Thalsaai, Saru ai, Bor ai, Apeswari etc. haunt the unwary villagers who fall ill instantly. These spirits and deities are worshipped in riverside and in places not frequented by the villagers. When a person suffers from chronic fever, Dysentery, and swelling of the abdomen, they offer puja to Jalsaai and Thalsaai Dangarias. Burha Dangaria puja is observed when a person suffers from high fever along with severe headache and become restless. For chronic bowl disorder and blood vomiting Rangason deity is worshipped. A Rahu fish is essential for this puja. A pig may be a substitute also. The worship of Sun God (Saayaayaa) heals the cataract of the eyes and other optical problems. Similarly to get relief from paralysis, Apeswari Sabaah is perfomed. No sacrifice of pig or fowl is necessary for such Sabaah.

The Boro Kacharis who live mostly in Kokrajhar, Darrang, Bongaigaon, Dhubri, Goalpara, Sonitpur and Kamrup districts, have

their own beliefs and practices regarding health care.Deodhani's (possessed girl or women) services are indispensable for relief from various diseases and epidemics. The evil spirits Maadaai brings various maladies to the people. Endle (1975) narrates his experience among the Boro Kacharis in the following words. 'It has repeatedly fallen to the lot of the writer when entering a Kachari village to find out one or more of its inhabitants prostrate with Malarial fever of a virulent type, and on asking what was wrong, the reply has very commonly been' Maadaai Hamdong' i.e., an evil spirit has got hold of me".

The Rabhas of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Dhubri districts believe in the destructive power of various malevolent deities and spirits who cause diseases. They believe that the evil effects of these agents of death could be eliminated by mantras and magical powers. The Bira or Paaghon,Jakhini, Kesakhaiti and Kali are believed to be the killers. They create all the health problems to the Rabhas. The services of Kabiraj or Sadhaks are requisitioned to chase away the spirits. They also give talisman to the Bira victims. When a pregnant women suffers from acute pain or when the delivery is unduly delayed, they worship Jakhini, a female malevolent spirit. For speedy delivery a mixture of the leaves of Jakhini Haathaalata, sprouts of Aihati, one or two chillis or pipli seeds is given to the expectant mother. In case of stomach pain, three dozes of this mixture give quick relief. As preventive measure of probable epidemic and natural calamity, the Rabhas worship Khoksi or Baikho, Langa Burha. Kali 'Bagheswari. Paora Deo etc. Sacrifice of pig or fowl is a must in such pujas (Opler, 1963 ; Khare, 1963).

Conclusion :

The tribal people in the plains districts of Assam have their own perception of health and health related practices. Adaptive knowledge of the environmental situation enables them to withstand health problems. The people have acquired the curative knowledge of roots, herbs, creepers and indigenous vegetables by their trial and error method. They are not health concious nor they had developed any scientific notion regarding causation of various

diseases. Magico religious beliefs play a significant role in the health care system of the tribals. Of late due to large scale contact with the non tribals, some unknown diseases have crept in for which there is no indigenous treatment and the people are seeking help from professional physicians. Besides due to consumption of adultereted food items and cheap confectionary articles particularly by the young folk, the indigenous cure of the diseases becomes ineffective. The doctor's role in a tribal setting has certain limitations as the tribal people have their own perception as to how the doctor must diagnose and treat them. The doctor performs his role more effectively if he has some; idea of socio-cultural, cognitive and effective health perception of the patient.

Indigenous health care system has been largely effected due to the State's commercial exploitation of flora and fauna in the tribal areas. Besides, increasing needs of house sites for the tribals and large scale felling of trees are causing irrepairable damage to the traditional source of herbal medicine. The mantra and herbal therapy requires multifarious local herbs and roots which are fast disappearing. The poor tribal people very often depend upon the traditional health care facilities as these are less costly. A need based systematic research may be undertaken for generating information on indigenious health practices among the tribal people.It is more important in view of emergence of new diseases due to ecological. imbalance being regularly created. There is need for documentation of pharmaceutical properties of indigenious herbs and efficacies also. The role of the traditional physician also cannot be overlooked because health care in the tribal setting not only constitute medical care but overall integrated development of the society-cultural, economic, educational and political. In the changing situation, the tribal people have to be adopted with medical services and while doing so it is equally necessary to go into the socio-cultural dimensions of tribal health. ldlofirchow, a Generan medical expert rightly opined that medicine is a social science".

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PROBLEMS OF MARKETING AMONG THE PLAINS TRIBES OF ASSAM

The plains tribes of Assam are valley dwellers and they are found in the far-flung forest and riverine areas of eight plains districts of Assam, They are settled 'cultivators and their cropping pattern varies from tribe to tribe. The riverine tribes like the Mishings and the Deoris depend mainly upon 'Ahu' and mustard seed cultivation for their sustenance, as the areas of their habitation are flooded by the river Brahmaputra and its tributories, annually. Rest of the plains tribes, namely, the Boro Kacharis, the Rabhas, the Barmans of Cachar the Sonowal Kacharis, the Lalungs, the Mech, etc. produce 'sali' as major crop. They also produce Ahu and mustard seeds as subsidiary crops.

The production and distribution processes of the tribals have certain typical characteristics. Among the plains tribes, although lands at present are held individualy i.e, by the head of a family, still certain indistinct traits of traditional system of joint ownership is visible.

The people possess a technolagy which consists of the cultural knowledge, the information about manufacture and use of tools, extraction and refinement of locally available raw materials, etc. handed down from generation to generation.

Organised labour or co-operative farming in their typical tribal form is still found among the plains tribes. In every traditional society the need to organise people's labour is felt and this egalitarian process is jealously guarded. The plains tribals of Assam, too, organise their work by making a division of labour and forming units of production.

Economic exchange through reciprocity is a special trait among the people, It is to be noted that reciprocity, which till recently was an important economic trait, is fast disappearing from among the plains tribes due mainly to the entrance of non-tribal traders in the tribal areas. Further, reciprocal exchange is a two-way traffic and sometimes this is delayed due to laxity on the part of one

party. In due course reciprocity becomes the casualty in the face of hard economic life of the people.

In or near the tribal villages in the plains areas of Assam, weekly hat (markets) are located. Although markets are regularly held in the heart of the tribal areas, this does not mean that the tribals exhibit a market economy. The trditional market (hat) satisfies social, economic, religious and political needs of the tribals, in econoimic terms it does not regulate the economic affairs of the people. It must, however be noted that in those days tribals living in the remotest parts of the areas havc come to know about modern money.

Money economy has eaten into the vitals of distribution vis-a-vis social obligation among the plains tribes, But some kind of redistribution is seen among them when the kin groups contribute their mite in socio-religious ceremonies of their kin members. But existence of a 'hat' in the vicinity has affected this vital traditional system. Thus 'hats' are playing significant role in the changing pattern of the socio-cultural life of the tribals.

In the plains tribal areas the commodity and labour market growths have certain characteristics. It is seen that the commodity market growth precedes the growth of the labour market.

The striking change in their society is the transition from production for self-consumption to middlemen oriented production for exchange. As a consequence, many producers are alienated from their means of production. Thus a labour market emerges. The growth of the commodity market, in other words, the development of growth centres, is the logical consequence of this separation effected between the producer and his means of production. This process is simultaneous. In the realm of agriculture which is the major means of livelihood of the tribals, the process helps in the differentiation of the peasantry (labour market) with the commodity market.

Another phenomenon in respect of market in the plains tribal areas is the higher rate of growth of labour market in contradistinction with the growth of commodity or capital market. This has happened due mainly to the increasing demographic pressure. The land man ratio has been deteriorating without a

compensating increase in land productivity.

It may be noted that trading facilities in the tribal areas of Assam are extremely limited. Due to the rising population pressure, the small farmers utilise their land for subsistence farming. Most of them are forced by circumstances to shift from cash crops to foodgrains. For their cash needs there is no alternaive but to enter into labour market. The labour market in the far flung tribal areas is extremely limited and the condition of the landless and poor tribal cultivators can better be imagined then described.

II

A case study of two Bodo-Kachari villages in Goalpara District of Assam.

The Tribal research Institute, Assam conducted a survey during 1977-78 in two Bodo-Kachari villages of Goalpara District of Assam to study the impect of enforcing liquor prohibition among the Bodo-Kacharis and the field survey was made jointly of myself and Sri M. C. Saikia, District Research offier, of the Institute. While collecting information for the study we also had surveyed the marketing problems and prospects of the tribals of these two villages. Some of the information presented here are taken from that report. The two villages under study are Ghilaguri and Baragari under the Dotoma.T. D. Block. The former village is lying at a distance of about 4 k.m. east of Dotoma Tribal Development Block H. O. while the latter is situated at a distance of about 2 k. m. south west of the block H.O. The Ghilaguri village has 106 households with a total population of 632 while Boragari has 862 souls spread in 141 households.

While visiting the tribal villages in order to collect various information, I have experienced this state of affairs in case of almost all the plains tribs. It is reported that about 50% of the tribal families do not possess more than 8 bighas of agricultural lands. Intensive cultivation had to be resorted to.

It may be noted that the increased participation of the tribals in the labour market is necessary to meet their cash requirements which are increasing day by day. Cash is required in

the tribal areas mainly to cater to the rising needs of consumption of non-agricultural goods like salt, kerosine, gur, yarns, tea, dress materials, house building materials etc. Cash is also required to meet the expenses of socio-religious obligations. K. Bharadwaj dwells at length on this aspect of tribal economy in the broader Indian perspective . This circumstantial involvement has a great bearing in the commodity market. The tribal people producing good agricultural crops are compelled to sell those in the post harvest 'hat' days in lieu of cash and in the lean months buy inferior food materials from the 'hats' endangering their health. In this connection the problem of land alienation and indebtedness which cuts at the root of the present day plains tribal economy has much relevance. It is, therefore, evident that the plains tribals under increasing population pressure are speedily shifting their compulsive involvement from the commodity market to the labour market. Furthermore the marketable surplus of the tribals diminishes while population increases.

The Datama weekly 'hat' situated at a distance of about 4 kilometers from Ghilaguri and 2 kilometers from Baragari village is the only place of business transactions for the Boro- Kacharis of both the villages. It was observed that the weekly market is practically a debt-redemption centre. The villagers coming to the market with cart load or cycle load of paddy, mustard seed and arecanut returned home with some minor purchases like half a litre of Kerosine oil, 1/4 of a soap ball, 1/4kg. of tabacco, 2 kilo of molasses, a few exercise books, 1/2 kilo of pork, a cotton blouse or an ordinary dhoti etc. without any amont of cash worth mentioning. On enquiry it was revealed that the villagers had disposed of their marketable surplus to the Marowari or Bengali mahajans in lieu of the cash which they borrowed in the lean months or at the time of distress. The modus operandi of these mahajans is that they give money to the needy villagers who have to repay the amount in kind just after the harvest. The rate usually charged by these money-lenders is one maund of paddy for every Rs. 20.00 lent out to the borrowers. It may be noted that the prevailing price of paddy at the market is Rs. 35/38 per maund (37 kg. approx) whereas the producer who has to sell his surplus to the mahajans

as per verbal contract gets Rs.20.00 per maund of paddy. Further, the cultivators sell out their standing crops such as wheat, arecanut and other horticultural crops even at the flowering stage. The villagers need cash to meet their multifarious needs like expenses for marriage and death ceremonies, festivals, housebuilding materials, yarn, dresses etc. The mahajans supply the cash whenever the villagers approach them. Under the circumstances they cannot demand a fair or reasonable price and they are always at the mercy of the mahajans. Even if somebody is lucky to avoid the mahajans, he also does not get a fair price for his produce. Small businessmen purchase their produce at wholesale rate elsewhere. Thus the commodity market cannot and will not cater to the needs of the villagers unless they are relieved from the ageold indebtedness. Agricultural labourers are increasing in numbers in both the villages. We came across cases where cultivable lands have been found to be practically nil with only half a bigha of basti land per family. In certain cases this basti land too is not available and the families are living under the mercy of the fellow villagers.

The table indicates that in Ghilaguri village there are as many as 20 landless families accounting for 18.8% and in Baragari village the number of landless families is only 3(2.1%). On the other hand there are 42 families (39.60%) in 'Ghilaguri and 56 families (39.70%) in Baragari village which are having lands above 8 bighas. From among this category of families there are a few

TABLE

Land holding pattern of the individual families of Ghilaguri and Boragari villages

(In Bighas)

Name of the village	Land less	0-1/2	1/2-1	1-3	3-5	5-8	8 and above	Total
Ghila-guri	20 (18.8%)	Nil	9 (8.4%)	24 (22.6%)	4 (3.7%%)	7 (6.6%)	42 (39.6%)	106
Bara-guri	3 (2.1%)	5 (3.5%)	10 (7%)	29 (20.6%)	21 (14.8%)	17 (12.5%)	56 (39.7%)	141

households in each village which are having more than 20 bighas of land. The number of families possessing 20 bighas of land are 15 and 12 in Ghilaguri and Baragari villages respectively. It may be noted that the possession of more land does not give us any impression of a sound economy as these families are suffering from chronic indebtedness. The economic condition of the intermediate families (i.e. families having 1 to 8 bighas of agricultural land is pitiable. Such families in Ghilaguri and Baragari villages are 35 (33.20%) and 67 (47.5%) respectively. These families are self-sufficient with food for only about six months of a year. Thus a good number of the male members of this category have to earn their livelihood by serving as day labourers. The landless persons earn their livelihood by working as gricultural labourers. The usual rate is Rs. 4.00 to Rs. 5.00 with one meal supplied free of cost by the employer.

Conclusion

'Hats' are the centres of economic activities in the plains tribal areas. These hats, many of which are developed by the plains tribals themselves, are multipurpose trading centres or in other words, tribal version of departmental stores. But it has been seen that the business transactions in these hats which are situated in the farflung areas, are practically under the control of non-tribals. The traditional tribal self contained characteristics coupled with the phenomenon of chronic indebtedness hinder the tribal from getting a fair price for their products The situation can be mitigatedif consumption loans as well as small scale industrial loans can be extended to tribals by the financial institutions. Besides, non-tribal traders in these hats may be subjected to a licence by the competent authority. A regular system of inspection may be introduced to bring their activities under administrative control.

The hats are centres of many undesirable activities like gambling and vending of illegal suprious drugs. Hence there should be suitable regulation placing curbs on undesirable activities. The tribals may be allowed to have an effective say in the management of the hats.

Auctioning the hats is prevalent and almost in all cases the well-to-do non-tribals win the bid, Although the revenue derived from this source is small, the economic danger caused to the tribals in the process cannot be underestimated. Some kind of preference for the tribals may be stipulated, if necessary, by amending the byelaws.

The pricing policy should be such that the tribals get a fair return. It is essential to protect the tribals from the vagaries of market by guaranteeing minimum price for their, produce which should be fixed taking into consideration the effort involved. Any enhancement in the different components of cost which are outside the control of tribals should be shared by the concerned institutions.

The Assam Government reorganised the Co-operative credit structure by restructuring the credit setup through the implementation of the Panchayati Raj Act, 1973. Thus 664 Gaon Panchayat level Co-operative societies have been formed and the plains tribal areas too came under the jurisdiction of the set up. The aim of setting up co-operatives was to arrange package of services under one set up where the producers will have a say. Another aim was to bring the rural growers out from the clutches of the vested interests and provide necessary finance. But there is probably no other better organisation than the co-operative society to cater to the needs of the tribals. The Co-operative societies will serve the tribals effectively if the same are established in or near the hat with a complex constituting a godown, a commercial bank, a post office and such other ancillary services. Instead of functioning as Institutions, the co-operative societies should play the role of an instrument of service to the tribal communities.

Marketing in the tribal areas is a seasonal phenomenon. Thus the need for a sizeable amount of money is felt by the co-operatives at certain specific periods. Credit for marketing finance may be provided to the co-operatives in the tribal areas by the Central Co-operative Banks and the Reserve Bank of India at a concessional rate of interest. The office-bearers should be well-acquainted with the tribal life and culture, their needs and aspirations and income and expenditure pattern.

Tribals are simple folk and their simplicity is taken advantage of by unscrupulous traders. Besides, illiteracy is rampant in the tribal areas and they are scared by the punitive measures in case of default. They do not have time and money to visit the co-operative society often for their credit. Therefore simple procedures based on trust may be devised.

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THE MATRIX OF ASSAMESE CULTURE

Assam, with the vast expanse of valleys and picturesque hills presents a unique panorama with twenty three group of scheduled Tribes, besides a good number of non-scheduled ethnic communities having diverse cultural traits, languages, dialects, folklores and belief and at various stages of development -socially, educationally and economically. Article 342 of the Constitution of India provides for scheduling of tribes in the States and the Union Territories. So far Assam is concerned the list of the Scheduled Tribes was notified on April 6, 1950 vide Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order 1950 with 14 tribes in the Autonomous districts including 37 sub-tribes under any Kuki tribes and 9 tribes in the plains districts. The list was revised and modified by the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Lists (Modification) Order 1956 on October 29, 1956. According to this notification twelve tribal communities of North East Frontier Agency (NEFA, presently Arunachal Pradesh) were included in the Scheduled Tribes list of Assam. The list of the Scheduled Tribes in Assam was again modified by an Act of the Parliament in 1976 and delisted all the 12 tribal communities of NEFA which were included in the list of Assam tribes in the Modification Order of 1956. Because of this modification, the original list of the Scheduled 'Tribes of Assam under the Constitution (ST) Order 1950 and the existing list of ST notified under SC and ST Orders (Amendment) Act. 1976 have become similar in all respects.

The list of Scheduled Tribes of Assam which is in force at present includes the following communities: In the Autonomous Districts (Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills District) (1) Chakma, (2) Dimasa Kachari, (3) Garo, (4) Hajong, (5) Hmar, (6) Khasi, Jayantia, Synteng, Pnar, War, Bhoi, Lyngam (7) Any Kuki tribes including Biate, Biete, Changaon, Chouglori, Doungel, Gamalhou, Gangate, Guite, Hange, Haokip, Haupit, Haolao, Hengna, Hongsuagh, Hrangklogwal, Rongkhol, Khelma:;, Khawchung, Khawathlang, Khothalong, Jongbe, Kholhou, Kipgen,

Kuki, Lengthang, Lhangum; Lhoujem, Lhouvun, Lupheng, Mangjel, Misdo, Riang, Sairhem, Seluam Singson, Stthou, Sukto, Thado, Thomgngen, Uibuh Vaiphei, (8) Lakher, (9) Man (Tai speaking), (10)Any Mizo (Lushai) tribe (11) Mikir, (12) Any Naga tribe (13) Pawi, (14) Syntheng.

In the State of Assam excluding autonmous districts the Scheduled tribes are: (1) Barmans of Cahcar, (2) Boro, Borokachari, (3) Deori, (4) Hojai, (5) Kachari Sonowal, (6) Lalung, (7) Mech,(8) Miri. (9) Rabha.

According to 1971 census the total number of ST population in Assam was 16,06,648 constituting 10.98 per cent of the total population of the State. The population increased to 28,74,441 constituting 12.87 percent of the total population of the state during the next two decades (census 1991). The tribewise figures of 1991 census are yet to be published and for all practical purposes the figures of 1971 census and also the estimated figures are taken into consideration. The total population of the nine ST communities of Assam in the plains districts was 12,44,026 while the population of the fourteen communities in the two hills districts was 2,62,622. The plains tribal population constituted 9.18 per cent and the hill tribals in the two autonomous hill districts constituted 1.80 per cent of the total population of the State. Among the plains tribes Boro and Boro Kacharis are the largest group; while the Hojais are the smallest. In the hills, the Mikirs are the largest group. The next largest group is the Dimasa Kachari.

The sex ratio among the different tribal communities of Assam is also uniform. The average number of female per 1000 males is 958. It appears that the number of females in almost all the tribal communities except three, namely Hojais, Meches and Syntengs are less than that of males. Among the Garos and the Hajongs the number of females per 1000 males is as low as 750 and 700 respectively.

Although the Boro Kacharis are the largest group among the plains tribes, and even plains and hills combined, nevertheless they constitute 45.41 per cent of the total plains tribal population, 37.99 percent of the total plains and hills tribes and 4.17 percent of the total population of the State of Assam (197.1 census). Among

the plains tribes the Miris, also known as Mishings, constitute the second largest group. Their percentage to the plains tribal population, plains and hills tribal population combined and the State total population is 19.31,16,31 and 1.77 respectively. The Rabhas, Lalungs, Deoris, Barmans of Cachar, Meches and Hojais each constitutes less than one percent of the total population of the State.

In the hill areas the Mikirs (Karbis) constitute the largest group, 7.38 per cent of the total hills tribal population, 11.03 per cent of the total tribal population of hills and plains combined and 1.21 percent of the total population of the State. The Dimasa Kacharis constitute 14.98 percent of the total population in the hill area and 0.27 percent of the total population of the State. The remaining 12 hills tribal communities constitute 17.58 percent of the total hill tribal population, 2.86 percent of the total tribal population of the State and 0.31 percent of the total State population.

The percentage of literacy of the Scheduled Tribes of Assam was 26.02 against the State percentage of 28.72 (Census 1971). As per 1991 census the percentage of litracy of the Scheduled Tribes of Assam is 49.16 (male by 58.93 and female 38.98) against the State's percentage of 52.89 (male 61.87 and female 43.03).

The tribal languages of Assam are included in non-scheduled language category which includes.68 languages. The language-wise table of non-scheduled language as per 1991 census shows that among the plains tribes the Boro Kacharis constitute the highest speakers with 11,84,569 followed by the Miris/Mishings 3,81,562, Rabhas 1,12,424, Lalungs 32633 and Deoris 15,955. Among the hill tribes the Karbis constitue the highest mother tongue speakers with 3,55,032 followed by Dimasas with 84,654. Although a major tribe of Meghalaya, the Garos have large concentration in the two hill districts of Assam and their speakers of mother language constitute a sizeable figure of 1,14,799. Similarly there are quite a good number of Khasi language speakers in Assam, mostly in the two hill districts and the figures comes to 29,384.

Almost all the ethnic groups belong to the Mongloid racial stock and speak Sino-Tibetan or Tibeto Burman language. Eminent literateurs and authors like Dr. Bani Kanta Kakati, Dr Birinchi

Kumar Baruah, Dr Promod Chandra Bhattacharyya, Dr Nirmal Prabha Bardoloi, Sri Mohini Mohan, Brahma et. al. have elucidated the valuable contributions of the ethnic groups towards Assamese culture, language and socio-political life. The tribes also had been benefitted by the cultural exchanges and till the sixties of this century there was a coherent and a corporate Assamese culture emboldened by an intercultural mix of tribal and non-tribal traits. For instance the prestigious weaving culture of the Assamese women, irrespective of tribal or non tribal, the food habits largely based on indigenous roots, herbs, creepers, the dress pattern, musical instruments, the hospitability, arts and crafts etc. which are part and parcel of the culture have largely been moulded by traditional tribal ingredients of various ethnic groups. Till the middle of the sixties of this century a detribalisation effort was growing, but due to various socio-political pulls and pressures the effort was put to a halt. Instead the concept of retribalism or ethno-centricism got the upper hand leading to the formation of states, autonomous districts and the demand for statehood. Perhaps no serious soul searching has been made and we feel there is still time to make good the loss. The academicians can play a big role in this regard. We can start from the scratch i.e. the young boys and girls" should be taught about the life and culture of various ethnic groups' and the text books should contain lessons on ethnic groups. Let us take a pragmatic approach rather' than spending money on seminars, or in publishing voluminous books on tribes. Let the school curricula contain monthly compulsory schedule for visit to the inter-tribal communities.

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PROPERTY RIGHTS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO INHERITANCE RIGHTS OF WOMEN IN THE BORO KACHARI SOCIETY OF ASSAM

The Boro Kacharis, a plains tribe of Assam, concentrated mainly in the lower Assam districts are a partrilineal and patrilocal society. Agriculture is the sole means of livelihood for the large majority and naturally land including home stead land is considered as the most valuable property a family can proudly possess. The father is the head of the family who owns and controls the property. After his death the property is owned by his wife who generally empowers the eldest son to manage the day to day affairs. All the married sons get equal shares of property while the unmarried ones, if any get double the shares. If any son lives separately during the lifetime of the parents, then he is not eligible to get any share of the parental property. The daughters do not inherit any paternal property. The articles received as dowry by the daughters-in-law are owned by the couple but the same cannot be disposed without the consent of the daughter-in-law. After separation those articles can be taken by the concerned women to her new establishment.

The house, agricultural implement, heirlooms, etc. are owned by the eldest son who takes much pain to manage the household including the maintenance of widow mother, unmarried brothers and sisters. The sale proceeds of agricultural products and amount received from brothers serving outside go to the common fund of the family and the amount is shared equally by the brothers. Women folk earn money by selling Endi Chadars and Poultries etc. and the amount thus received is spent mostly in purchasing yarn. The amount is also spent to tide over the family crisis.

Widow remarriage is prevalent which is known as "Dhokaa". The widower may come to live with the widow and becomes joint owner of the widow's property. But he cannot dispose the property without his wife's consent.

The Boro Kacharis have a written code of customary laws knows as "Pandulipis". The villagers abide by the rules of the "Pandulipis" which contain rights and duties of the members, do's and don'ts and atonement proceedings etc.

The status of women in Boro Society can neither be called high nor low. They are not status conscious and participate in all activities alongwith men. The menfolk also treat them equally.

PART-I

INTRODUCTION

The Boro Kacharis, the major scheduled plains tribe of Assam, is a branch of the Bodo group of the Indo Mongoloid family. They belong to the Assamese Burmese linguistic section. They are mainly concentrated in Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Darrang, Sonitpur, Goalpara, Dhubri and Kamrup districts. A sizeable section of the Boros is also located in the Karbi Anglong hill district. They are characteristically Mongoloid in appearance. E. A. Gait observes, " The Kacharis are believed to be very closely allied to the Koches and also so far at least as language is concerned, to the Chutiyas, Lalungs and Morans of the Brahmaputra Valley and to the Garos and Tipperas of the southern hills. Having regard to their wide distribution and to the country over which Bodo languages of a very uniform type are still current, it seems not improbable that at one time the major part of Assam and North East Bengal formed a great Bodo Kingdom and that some, at least of the Mlech mentioned in the old copper plate inscription belonged to the Kachari or some closely allied tribe."[1]

The total population of the tribe as per 1971 census (1991 tribewise figures are yet to be published, 1981 census was not held in Assam) is 6,10,459 which accounts for 45.4% of the state's total tribal population. The percentage to the total population of Assam is 4.40.

As per language wise distribution of 1991 census, there are 11,84,569 (male 5,99,636 female 5,84,9337) Bodo/Boro speakers in Assam.

The livelihood pattern is characterized by preponderance

of agricultural occupation. They produce both Ahu and Sali paddies and are very much prone to the adoption of improved techniques in production process. The indigenous method of irrigating paddy fields is a unique contribution to the present day as more or less similar irrigation system is adopted by the Government. Rev. Endle, who had an indepth study on the Kacharis opined "The people are skilful in construction of irrigation canals and earthwork embankments for diverting water from river beds into their rice fields and their efforts in this direction are very largely aided by their closely clannish organization. In this way it will be obvious that the Kacharis have a highly efficient and very inexpensive 'Public Works Department' of their own".[2]

The Boro society is divided into several exogamous clans called 'Aari'. They have as many as twenty three 'Aaris' namely Swargiary, Basumatary, Mosahari, Khakhlari, Ouari, Goyari, Narzary etc.

Every village has a Gaonbura who presides over the village council. He is assisted by two office bearers known as 'Haalmaji' and 'Douri'.

Descent is traced through the male lines. All the male members of a family enjoy the copercenary right unless one goes out of the family during the lifetime of his father with the intention of living separately from the bonds of the joint family. On the event of dissolution of the joint family the unmarried brothers get double the family property than the married brothers.

The Boros are primarily monogamous. There is, however no bar in reserting to junior livirate marriage. But in no case senior levirate marriage can take place. The usual practice of contacting a marriage is by negotiation (Haathaa Chuni). The traditionalists follow this practice. But marriage by servitude (Chaaodang-Jagarnaai) also takes place in special situation. Of late marriage by elopement or servitude is fast disappearing and "Haathaachuni' becomes the popular practice. The followers of Brahma religion take recourse to 'Hom Yajna' ceremony.

The religious philosophy of the community centers round the worshipping of P[illegible]w Brai who is analogous to Lord Siva of the Hindu Trinity. The S[illegible]u plant (Euphorbia Splendens) is regarded

as representation of 'Baathow'. They also worship various other dieties during a year. The followers of Brahma religion prefer Vedic rites (Hom) and avoid sacrifice of pigs, fowls etc. But culturally both the sections do not differ from each other.

Both cremation and burial are practised but cremation has come to be normal practice in these days. The purification ceremony starts on the tenth day which is called 'Dasa' or 'Dahaar'. The final sraddha ceremony is held on the twelveth or thirteenth day or long there after.

Thw Boros have their own language which is recognized as medium of instruction for Bodo students from primary to degree level. They, however, do not have any script and Devnagari script is used.

PART – II

PROPERTY AND INHERITANCE RIGHTS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO INHERITANCE RIGHTS OF WOMEN

The Boros like all other tribal people possess two types of property viz permanent property and temporary property. The former category includes mainly land, including homestead, agricultural, waste lands and forests. The ornaments, family heirlooms, neolithic celt, manuscripts, idols, etc, are also included in this category. The temporary property includes house, agricultural and weaving implements, dress, utensils, cattle, poultry etc. However, categorization may differ from tribe to tribe. Among some ethnic groups land, house, ornaments fall in the permanent category which all other articles of day to day use are considered as temporary property.

The Boro society, by and large, was a closed society, at least till the Independence of India. The extension of infrastructural facilities like construction of roads, coupled with general mobility and social intercourse with the people of diverse cultural background have brought material as well as psychological changes to the Boros living in the far flung areas. In order to meet the complex social situation arising out of socio-ecconomic changes it was felt imperative to bring certain changes in the prevailing customs and practices.

The Zonal council composed of adjacent villages met to discuss the situation and traditional laws were given community recognition by constituting written codes known as 'Pandulipis'. Thus 'Pandulipis' of North Goalpara cover the Boros for Dhubri Sub-division (now district), Kokrajhar district and Lakhipur Thana areas of Goalpara district. The 'Pandulipi' of North Kamrup areas serves the Boros of that area. The 'Pandulipi' of erstwhile Darrang district has jurisdiction over Boros of present Darrang and Sonitpur districts. There is a separate Pandulipi for the Boros of Guwahati Thana areas. In South Kamrup particularly the Boko Thana areas there are sizeable Boro population and to cater to the needs of the Boros of that area a separate 'Pandulipi' has been sanctioned, The 'Pandulipi' of Goalpara Sub-Division has jurisdiction over the Boros of Eastern Part of Goalpara Sub-Division, Besides, there is a Pandulipi for the Barmans of Cachar district. Originally the language and script of the Pandulipis of Cachar, Tripura and North Bengal wwas Bengali, while Assamese script and language was used for the Pandulipi of Boro Kachari of Brahmaputra Valley. Since the Pandulipis are not coordinated homogenous sets of law, they differ in context and application from area to area. However, the basic issues pertaining to inheritance of property, succession to office of socio religious and socio- political nature and liablility of atonement on commiting unnatural and unsocial offences, are more or less identical.

The Boros are patrilineal and patrilocal and the line of descent is traced through the father who is the head of the family. All the male members of a family enjoy the copercenery right unless one makes his own after marriage. The eldest male member assumes the charge of the household on the death of the father and discharges his responsibilities in consultation with his mother and other male members. The family debt, if any is dischargable from the income of the family. On the event of dissolution of the joint family the unmarried sons are entitled to receive double the share of the family property. The eldest male member also gets a preferential share in view of his assumption of family liability.

There is a thin matrilineal link in the Boro Kachari society when a widow becomes the owner of all properties belonging to

her husband. The widow may, agree to become a wife of a widower following the 'Dhoka' system. On the event of becoming a 'Dhoka' a widower delinks all connections with the family of origin and comes to live with the widow permanently. If, however, the widower dies after the marriage the widow's property does not go to him nor the family of origin of the widower can claim any share of the widow's property. The property goes either to the former husband's close relative or to his sons.

During marriage, the villagers of the bride's family receive certain amount from the groom which is known as 'Maalsaa'. Consequent upon sudden demise of the husband, the parents of the girl have to return the Maalsaa to the parents of the deceased husband which is known as 'Khaalaar Gathaainaai'.

If the groom could not pay the bride price at the time of marriage and if the girl dies leaving behind a female child, then the bride price amount is to be received by the bride's mother's brothers which is knows as 'Maamaai Maaraa'.

In case of a single daughter in a Boro family, the parents resort to probationary marriage known as 'Saamdaang Jagarnaai'. A boy is selected by the parents of the girl who is required to stay in the would be bride's house for a year performing all the activities meant for male members. In lieu of his services during the probationary period he is eligible to receive food and lodging facilities only. If the parents of the would be bride are satisfied with the performance of the probationer would be son-in-law then he is formally given the status of son-in-law. He is entitled to be the owner of the family property after the death of the parents in law.

After the death of the head of the house, the mother takes charge to run the household but generally the eldest son is allowed to manage the day to day affairs. Sale proceeds of excess paddy, vegetables, Endiyarn and cloth etc. are common income of the family and the eldest son who remains in charge of the family bears the expenses of the family members. If there is any balance, the same is shared by the brothers. In such a joint family, if any brother of the eldest son, spends certain amount from his share to meet the urgent expenses, the other brothers have to repay the

amount to the incumbent with interest.

The dowry articles or marriage gifts given to the girl by her parents are considered as couple's property.

If any brother of a joint family is unable to discharge his family duties due to his pre-occupation in public service, then he has to provide one worker to perform his activities in the family. The expenses of the worker are to be borne by the concerned brother out of his share received from the common earning of the family. Similarly a service holder is required to pay certain amount to the common fund of the family. Income from trade and commerce of a family goes to the family coffer.

The sons are not eligible to receive any share of the property if they prefer to have their own establishment during the life time of the parents.

The above pen picture in nutshell pinpoints certain basic characteristic of Boro property and inheritance rights. Perhaps no other ethnic community possesses such well defined written documents concerning rights and duties of the family members. The Boro written code contains rights of inheritance of widows and single girl which are a kin to the matriarchal and matrilineal rights.

PART – III

SOCIAL STATUS OF BORO WOMEN VIS-A-VIS PROPERTY AND INHERITANCE RIGHTS OF BORO WOMEN

The dictionary meaning of the term status is state, condition or standing. In popular parlance status means position or rank in relation to others. It may also mean a rank in hierarchical order. Thus status may have various meanings which may vary from country to country, people to people or ethnic groups to ethnic groups. Status depends largely on the qualities or attributes which are considered essential in a particular society. The status of women in the tribal society may be considered in this perspective.

In tribal societies division of labour between the sexes is scrupulously maintained. Certain spheres like child rearing, food gathering, cooking meals, various agricultural and allied activities, fishing, weaving, preparing rice beer, firewood collection, laundering

etc. are more or less exclusively meant for the women folk. The menfolk, except in urgent necessity hardly trespasses into the domain of the women. The menfolk do not think that they are a superior lot. Likewise the womenfolk develop no complex that they are neglected. The sexes are not status conscious and there is mutual cooperation between the sexes in each other's activities.

Status has a wider connotation among the tribals. A husband consults his wife in family matters and the wife too offers suggestions which are approved by the husband. The exclusiveness in certain affairs does not debar tribal women from exercising their authority in wider family affairs. Certain issues like whether the children should be sent to high schools or engaged in household activities, which boy should be a match for the marriagable daughter etc. are decided by the women which are generally not vetoed by their husbands. The womenfolk never grumble because they are not allowed to attend the Village Council as members. Evans Pritchard observes, 'Looking at her social position from outside and from our point of view we may say that she has an inferior position and she is not resentful on account of it. She sees herself as different from man and as having a social status different from him, but if we may state her attitude in our won way of looking, it is for her less a matter of level than of differnce of status. Primitive women do not see themselves as an under priviledged class against a class of men with whom they seek to gain social equality. They also never heard of social equality and also they do not want to be like men".[3]

In the above backdrop let us consider the social status of the Boro women. Among the Boros particularly in negotiated marriage, the opinion of the girl is given due regard and parents do not give consent to the marriage, unless they are satisfied that the proposed groom is really worthy. Folk songs prevalent among the Boros reveal this high position of a bride.

'Daaokhaa Haabnaai No Yaa Olaai
Silaa Haabnaai No Yaa Olaai
Aangkhou Daa Bilaai Aafaa Gosaai'

Again

'Maayo Baathri Nu Naayaao
Mousou Goli Naayaao
Mousou Goli Nayaao
Aaangkhou Bilaai Hara Aafaa Gosaai'[4]

Meaning : Oh, father, do not arrange my marriage with a family having a house where crows and kites enter. Oh father, arrange my marriage with that family which possesses a granary and cowshed.

The Boro Kacharis of Goalpara district follow a traditional practice while selecting a bride. The relatives of the groom place a pair of silver bangles in the roof of the 'Barghar' of the bride and if the bangles are not returned within a week, the boy's family proceeds to finalise the details of the marriage. The Boros of Kamrup and Darrang district place a pair of locally brewed rice beer bottles in the roof of the 'Barghar' of the bride.

Like most other tribes, the Boro Kacharis have also the bride price system which mat vary from Rs. 101.00 to 1001.00. Of late, the educated sections do not like the bride price system. Yet a token bride price (Joraa Khaa Khaa Khanaai) containing two silver coins, one pair of betel leaves and nuts and a locally woven towel has to be given to the bride's parents at the time of marriage.

Besides the bride price, the boy's party has to pay certain amount (Maalsaa) to the village fund. The amount is nominal (Rs. 5.00 to Rs. 15.00). In addition the boy's party is required to pay Rs. 2.50 to the village elders which is known as 'Baari Haagaa'.

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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND FOLK DEITIES OF THE BORO KACHARIS, DEORIS, MISHINGS, RABHAS, TIWAS (LALUNGS), SONOWAL KACHARIS AND BARMANS OF CACHAR

A-RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND FOLK DEITIES OF THE BORO KACHARIS

INTRODUCTION :

The Boro Kacharis constitute the largest plains tribal group of Assam who belong to the great Bodo group of the Indo Mongoloid family. They are mainly concentrated in the Kokrajhar district and Odalguri Sub-division of Darrang district of Assam. Sizable Boro Kachari inhabited areas are also found in Goalpara, Kamrup and Sonitpur districts. In the hills districts, some Boro Kachari pockets are traced in the Karbi Anglong district. As per 1971 census the total population of the tribe was 610459 accounting for 45.4% of the total State Plains tribal population (1981 Census was not held in Assam). In the said reference year their percentage of literacy was 20.5% (male 29.73% and female 11.06%) against State's total percentage of literacy of 28.72.

Their main source of livelihood is agriculture which is also their economic base. Rice is their staple food. They build their houses on mud plinth and locally available house building materials like thatch, Ekra, Bamboo, Timber etc. are used for construction of their dwellings.

Boro Kachari villages are generally interspersed with non Boro villages and culture contact takes place. But inspite of the age old contact the people are maintaining their traditional culture in-tact. They have been able to preserve their language i.e. Bodo, which is recognized as an Associate Official language in major Boro inhabited areas of Assam.

Religious Beliefs and Deities :

'Bathow Barai' representing Lord Siva is the Supreme deity of the Boro Kacharis. He is also known as 'Sibrai'. The Sizu Plant (Euphorbia spendens) represnts 'Bathow'. Every Boro Kachari household plants a Sizu sapling in the altar of its northern corner of the courtyard. An earthen platform is constructed and in the middle the Sizu sapling is planted. The altar is properly fenced with bamboo slices. Along with the Sizu sapling, 'Jãtrasi' saplings (indigenous herb) and 'Tulsi' saplings are planted 'Mãinao' also called 'Buli Buri' is considered as the goddess of wealth. Besides these the Boro Kacharis worship various other deities such as 'Agrang, Khoilã, Khãji, Rãjkhandra, Rajputhur, Burã Ali, Ali Burah, Asu Mainao, Sali-Mainao Bagraja, Basumati, Choudri etc. Some of these deities are benevolent and a few are malevolent. It is believed the malevolent deities bring calamities and they have to be regularly appeased with sacrifices of fowls and rice beer offerings. 'Asu Mãinao' and 'Sali Mainao' are considered as benevolent deities. Their worship ensures bountiful crops. 'Bathow' is worshipped by sacrificing fowls and offering rice beer during 'Baisagu' festival held in April.

In the northern part of Kamrup and Darrang districts the Boro Kacharis observe a symbolic marriage of Lord Siva and Parvati in the form of 'Rãona' and 'Raoni'. This is called 'Phulsihãbã' or 'Putalihãbã'.

One of the major festivals of the Boro Kacharis is the Kherai, a religious community festival held in the month of Kartick (October-November). This is the time when the people complete the transplanting of paddy operations and festive mood synchronising the Autumn season starts. 'Bathow' and 'Mainao' the supreme deities are propitiated during this occasion. It is believed that the 'Bathow' blesses the people with a prosperous life and the 'Mãinão' brings bountiful harvest for the people. The formal offerings start with different dance sequences accompanied by tunes of musical instruments like the 'Kham' (drum) Jotha (bamboo made musical instrument) and 'Siphung (flute), 'Douri' and 'Doudini' or Deodhani who is believed to be possessed by the supreme deity and while in state of coma tells the future condition

of the villagers plays a significant role during the puja. She moves round the altar of the 'Bathow' and yields a sword and a shield in her hands. The Ojha (medicine man) guides the activities of 'Douri' and 'Doudini'. It is reported that dance sequences numbering twenty are performed for 3 days and nights to appease various deities mentioned above. Doudini demonstrate three stages. Alongi Khangnai i.e. charming process by the 'Ojha'. In the second stage she falls into a trance and brings out voices of deities. Her dances depict the symbolic destroying of the evils in third stage.

The occasion of 'Kherai' is utilized for offering oblatious to the paternal forefathers. It is believed that if the presiding deity is worshipped with sincere devotion, peace and progress will prevail. The festive mirth and merry makings get boosted up at the rhythmical beating of drums accompanied by 'Bagrumba' dance of the damsels.

The 'Kherãi' festival may be observed several times a year and each 'Kherãi' has its own significance. Thus 'Darshan Kherãi' is observed in Kartick (October-November). 'Umrao Kherai' in Ashar (June-July), Phaoja Kherai' in Magh (January-February) and 'Noaoni Kherai' or family Kherai in any time of the year.

The Boro Kacharis offer oblations to Lord Mahadeo on the occasion of marriage particularly 'Hãthã Chuni' type of marriage.

Every new birth is solemnized by offering a cock or a hen to the household deity.

The converted section (to Christianity) i.e. the non traditionalists who are the followers of the Guru Kalicharan Brahma perform 'Hom Jagnya' according to Vedic rites like other Hindus. Pigs, fowl or rice beer are not used in their socio religious ceremonies.

B. RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND FOLK DEITIES OF THE DEORIS

Introduction :

The Deoris are one of the four divisions of the Chutiyas who were once a reigning power but relegated subsequently to

the position of other Backward Classes. The divisions are Hindu Chutiya, Ahom Chutiya, Borahi and Deori. The last named division has been able to preserve its traditional religious beliefs and practices in tact inspite of socio-cultural and political ups and downs through the decades.

The original abode of the Deoris was on the banks of the river Dibong, Tengapani and 'Patorsãl' which was within the jurisdiction of Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh and Dibrugarh district of Assam. Their present habitations are spread in the riverine areas of Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat and Sonitpur districts of Assam. As per 1971 Census the total Deori population was 23080. The estimated population of the tribe in March 1987 is 37028 (1981 Census was not held in Assam.) They are Mongoloid people and the Mongolian characteristics are visible among them even today.

They are riverine people and naturally they prefer to live in platform type houses raised about 5 feet above the ground. A typical Deori house can accommodate more that 10 persons.

Their-economy is based wholly on agriculture and rice is their staple food. Besides paddy they produce mustard seed, sweet potatoes, pulses and a few varieties of winter crops. For their meat supply the Deoris rear fowls, pigs, ducks and goats. The flesh of other animals are scrupulously avoided. Ricebeer (suze) is prepared in every household and the same is served to all irrespective of age and sex. It is considered as the most valuable item for entertaining guests.

The Deoris have three main divisions viz. Dibangia, Borgonya and Tangapaniya. The former maintains the traditional language where as the other two sections have forgotten their language. They speak Assamese fluently.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND DEITIES :

All the three sections of the Deoris are still maintaining their traditional beliefs and practices. Some influence of Vaisnava preachers is visible among some Deori families but the trend towards adherence to the traditional beliefs is still prominent. The Deoris worship Lord Siva and godess Parvati as chief deities.

The Dibangias call the supreme deity as "Kundi Mama' 'Kundi' is identified as Lord Siva and 'Mama' as Parvati of the Hindu pantheon. Another name of the chief deity is 'Gira Girãchi'. 'Pisã Demã' or 'Balia Bãbã' and 'Pisasi Dema' or 'Kesaikhati, the son and daughter of 'Gira Girachi' are two other important deities of the Deoris. They also worship 'Gailurung Kundi' as Lord Ganesh and 'Kunwar Kundi' as Lord Kartick. The common place for worship among the Borgonya and Tengapaniya, sections is known as 'Than' while the Dibangias call it 'Midiku'. The puja paraphernalias include flower, sacrificial dao, piece of sandal wood, copper plate, 'Argha' bell, trident, conch, basket made of brass, copper utensils, canopy etc. The priestly functionaries include "Bor Deori' or 'Baderi'. 'Saru Deori "Bor Bharali' Saru Bharali' "Keluã', 'Borã', 'Barik', and 'Randhani' or Ladani' These office bearers are essential in the "Than Pujas and their offices are hareditary.

In addition to the above mentioned major deities the Deoris offer oblations to a good number of household deities. Some of these are 'Bakanmak, Miruchi, Kin, Dua Chitere, Bura Dangaria, Mora, Chakchik, Achira, Chanyan, Gharardeo, Yanterba, Jiomidi, Manchiba etc. They believe that if these deities are worshipped regularly then peace and plenty will prevail. Sacrifices are offered in the name of these deities.

Deori puja cannot be performed without sacrifice of animals, fowls, pigeons etc. The presence of 'Bor Deori' or head priest is essential in the pujas. Locally made rice beer is not offered to the deities but consumption of the same after the puja is not forbidden. Wednesday is the most auspicious day for worship and Pujas are performed either on Wednesday or Sunday.

Of late some of the Hindu gods and goddesses have entered into the fold of the Deori pantheon. Thus some Deoris observe Durga Puja, Saraswati Puja, Janmastami etc. along with the non Deoris. The Deoris are basically worshippers of Sakti and Hindu goddess Durga is accepted by them.

The Deori festivals have close relationship with the "Than' Puja and in fact without worshipping their supreme deities in the 'Than'. Deori festivals cannot be started. Thus two major festivals during a year i.e. Bohag Bihu or 'Bohagiya Bisu' and Magh Bihu

or 'Magiya Bisu' must be preceded by the "Than puja. The Bihu Pujas have considerable socio-religious significance and detailed arrangements have been made much ahead. Sacrifice of goat is must in the Bihupuja. Once in every four year a white buffalo is sacrificed which is considered as a substitute for the traditional human sacrifice of olden days.

The first day of the 'Bohagiya Bisu' is dedicated to the cows and bullocks. On this day every household observes 'Suwasani Puja'. The headman of each household prays before the household deity in the 'Suwasani' room for welfare of the members of the family. On this day puja is performed in the 'Than' also where all the villagers gather. The 'Bor Deori' offers prayers inside the 'Than'. Goats, ducks, fowls are sacrificed before the 'Than' and after the puja all the villagers partake of the feast prepared out of rice, vegetables and meat offered to the deity.

'Than' puja is also observed during 'Magiya Bisu' held on the Sangkranti day i.e. the last day of the month of Paus or the first Wednesday of the month of Magh (January). The Bor Deori offers puja to the deities and on this occasion fourteen fowls have to be sacrificed.

C. RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND FOLK DEITIES OF THE MIRIS (MISHINGS)

Introduction :

The Miris, popularly known as Misings, constitute the second largest group of Scheduled Tribes (plains) of Assam. They are mainly found in the riverine areas of Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat, and Sonitpur districts of Assam. There is no exclusively compact area for the Mishings as their villages are generally surrounded by Deori villages and villages of non tribal. Living in the plains of the Brahmaputra valley for centuries this colourful ethnic community has been able to maintain its traditional socio-cultural traits unimpaired inspite of the changes that have taken place in the socio-religious and political life of Assam. The Miris in the past had close linguistic and cultural affinity with the Adis, Pasi Minyongs and Padams in the hills now falling within the

jurisdiction of Arunachal Pradesh. They prefer to call themelves Mishings. 'Mi' means man and 'Shing' means water or river. Therefore Mishing means the populations living by the side of river or water. Even today most of the Mishing villages are found by the side of the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries.

They belong to the Tibeto Burman family of the Mongoloid group. They are simple and straightforward and visitors are pleased at their hospitality. They grow Ahu paddy in large quantities as most of their lands are not suitable for Sali paddy cultivation. During summer they have to encounter the severe flood and they are learning to live with flood.

The Mishings live in platform type houses. A typical Mishing house is cometimes as much as 25/30 meters in length accommodating 30/40 persons.

Rice is their staple food and they relish the Ahu rice which is produced locally. Meat and fish are taken when available. Fowl and pork are their delicacies. 'Apang' (locally brewed rice beer) serves as a food as well as drink for every body, young or old. It is also considered as the most prestigious item for entertaining guests. The Mishing women are expert weavers and they weave clothes for all the members of the family.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND DEITIES :

The Mishing religion can broadly be called as a conglomeration of animistic beliefs and supernaturalism. Hindu deities have also found a place in the religious sphere of the Mishings. They believe that spirits which they call 'Wie' are the guiding factors of their life. Spirits are believed to be found everywhere in thick jungles, fields, riverside etc. Unless these spirits are worshipped regularly, sickness, misfortune, even death may cripple the society. The 'Mibu' (the village priest who is an expert in folk religion and mythology) is the only person, who can appease these spirits. Pigs, fowls, 'Apong' etc are offered to these spirits. Whenever any misfortune occurs the villagers consult the 'Mibu' who with his supernatural power of finding the cause of illness or misfortune is in a position to prescribe suitable healing measures.

Mishing "Wies' are of various kinds such as 'Urom wie'

the spirits of the ancestors who are to be appeased by sacrificing two or three large pigs and supplying Apang'.The 'Yãlos' (Souls) of unnatural and premature deaths are not entitled to receive ceremonial offerings. Occasional offerings of fowls, pigs and 'Apang' etc. are made to the spirits underlying thunder, lightening, storm, drought etc. These spirits are called 'Taleng Wies' which are worshipped on individual as well as community basis. 'Dabur Wies' on the other hand, are the spirits which cause flood and natural calamities and diseases. 'Dabur 'Wies' if worshipped regularly, bring peace and prosperity to the villagers. The individual families, however, perform 'Dabur Wies' at an interval of three to five years. The venue of the 'Dabur Wies' is generally the out skirt of a village. Before the start of the puja the youths of the village 'chase away' the evil spirits from the houses by beating the platform and other places of the houses of the villagers. Entry to and exit from the village during 'Dabur Puja' is strictly prohibited. Similarly all approaches to the village are barred so that the spirits cannot enter the village. The people believe that 'Chedi Melo' and 'Donyi Polo' worshipped during Dubur bring health and happiness for the people.

'Gumin Wies' are considered as benevolent spirits of a family which are worshipped along with the worship of other spirits. In some villages 'Gumin Wies' are worshipped at an interval of five years or so.

The Mishing religious rites are perfromed by the 'Mibu' who is believed to possess super natural powers. A 'Mibu' has to observe certain rules of diet and behaviour from his early childhood. The post is not hereditary neither it is restricted to the members of a certain clan.

Most of the Mishings prefer to introduce themselves as Hindus and they are the followers of the 'Bhakatia' Cult doctrine having Mishing and Vaisnavism cum Tantricism mingled together. The 'Bhakats' of this cult are generally old persons who owe allegiance to the 'Satras' (Vaisnava monastary). They preside over the religious ceremonies. They are assisted by junior Bhakats called 'Sãdhus'. They however, are not entitled to play active role in certain religious rites like 'Dabur Wie'. The role of the 'Mibu' has been

considerably minimized by the "Bhakats'. It may be mentioned that Mishing "Bhakatia Pantha" contains elements of Tantricism because recitation of verses from the 'Kirtana' (a holy book written by Sri Sri Sankardeva) or the 'Bhagawata' and propitiation of the spirits by offering rice beer, meat etc. go together.

They also perform 'Bor Sewã' where it is believed, Lord Siva is worshipped by the elderly people at dead of night. It is strictly a closed door function of worship and entertainment.

The Mishings also observe 'Sarag Puja' in the month of Choitra (April) at an interval of five years. The head of the family offers oblations to the 'Chedi Melo and Donyi Polo' for welfare of the family. Pig is also sacrificed and the family observing the puja undergoes 'genna' (taboo) for five days.

During 'Porag' festival held in the close of Ahu cultivation the Misings worship 'Chedi Melo and Donyi Polo'. The 'Morung' (old dormitory now a community hall) is given a new look. A 'Mibu' is elected who is able to make contact with the spirits. He conducts the dance which continues for 3 days and on the oncluding day the proceedings come to an end with a prayer dance know as 'Ponu Nunam'.

Malevolent deities 'Uram Kusag' are also appeased during 'Amrok. festival held in August/September. Food prepared out of harvested crop is offered to the ancestors.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND FOLK DEITIES OF THE RABHAS

Introduction :

The Rabhas, a plains tribe of the Brahmaputra valley, are mainly concentrated in the plains districts of Goalpara, Dhubri, Kamrup, Nalbari, Barpeta,Darrang and Sonitpur. They belong to the Mongoloid stock and constitute a major segment of the Bodo linguistic group. The society is structured one. Rev. Endle in his book 'The Kachari' referes to seven divisions or sub tribes of the Rabhas viz. Randania, Maitoria, Pati, Koch, Bitlia, Dahuriya and Sangha. E.A. Gait, however, traces five 'sub groups' of theRabhas such as Rangdani, Pati, Maitory, Dahuri and Kachari. Among these

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groups Rangdani, Pati and Maitory used to enjoy superior status compared to other subgroups like the Dahuris and Totlas. The Pati section is mostly concentrated in the southern bank of the river Brahmaputra. Acculturation process is more visible among them who have lost their dialect.They speak Assamese. The Rangdanis, too, are found in the Western Goalpara on the south bank of the river Brahmaputra. Although Maitory Rabha villages are found interspersed with Rangdani villages yet their main concentration is traced in Western Meghalaya. The villages of Dahuri and Totla sub groups are located in North Goalpara and North Kamrup areas.

As per 1971 Census the Rabhas had a total population of 138630 constituting 8.63% of the total plains tribal population of Assam and 0.63% of the total state population. Their percentage of literacy is 22.24 against the State's percentage of literacy of 28.92 (1981 Census was not held in Assam).

The typical Rabha dwellings have four units centering round a courtyard and these are constructed on mud plinth. Their economic basis is agriculture. Following the traditional method they produce Sali, Ahu paddies along with pulses and mustard seeds in their fields. Rice is their staple food. Dried fish and pork are their delicacies. Rice beer is consumed by all irrespective of age and sex. The Pati Rabhas who were initiated into Vaisnava religion avoid pork and rice beer

The Rabha women are expert weavers and they weave cloths not only for themselves but for the menfolk too. They possess the art of indigenous dyeing.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND DEITIES :

The Rabhas are basically animists and Saktaism has penetrated deep into the magico religious belief system of the tribe. The Pati Rabhas, however, are the followers of Mahapurushia Vaisnav Dharma propounded by the great religious reformer of Assam Shri Shri Sankardev. In this article we will restrict our discussion to the traditional religious beliefs of the Rabhas as found today.

The Rabhas consider 'Baikho' or 'Khoksi' as the supreme

goddess who bring prosperity for the community if she is regularly worshipped. The community worship for the 'Baikho' is observed during 'Baisakh' or 'Jeth' (May-June) every year. Formerly this Puja continued for seven days but presently the period has been curtailed to three days. Pork and rice beer are profusely consumed during these festival days. Only healthy and big pigs are sacrificed before the goddess. It is believed that there will be luxurient growth of the crops if the pigs sacrificed before the goddess are strong and stout. A legend about the origin of the 'Khoksi' is as follows,

Once two sisters named Topke and Naisone went to catch fish in a beel with their 'Jākoi' (bamboo made fishing implement). Every time they applied the 'Jākoi' only a piece of stone appeared in the 'Jakoi'. The two sisters out of curiosity kept this piece of stone in the 'Khāloi' (a bamboo made appliance used for keeping the catch during fishing operation) and returned home. When their father enquired about the fish the daughters requested their father to peep into the 'Khāloi'. "Khokdur Chani' the father considered the piece of stone as a boon and kept it in the granary. He offered puja before it and in course of time all his desires were fulfilled. The villagers gathered and began to worship the stone as 'Tangra Singra' (supreme deity). The Rabhas believe that 'Khokdur Chani' in course of time became 'Khokshi' or 'Khoksi'. In order to indicate the superior status among the deities she is also referred to as 'Baini Kho' i.e. superior female deity.

Originally 'Khoksi' Puja was conducted by the members of four main class viz. 'Churchung, Pām, Rungdong and Tengtang'. The ritual part was perfomed by the members of "Churchung' clan. The clan members of 'Pam' supplied the puja paraphernalias. The Rungdong clan members prepared ricebeer and other offerings while members or 'Tengtang clan played bellmetal musical instruments (Kanh) during the Puja.

In some villages a Phallic symbol is assigned to the goddess and a flat stone represents the deity. Khoksi' is believed to possess four different shapes viz. (1) 'Daduri (2) Susari (3) Nakati and (4) Tamai.

LÃNGÃ PUJA :

The Rabhas worship Lord Siva as 'Langa Burha' who is considered as the most benevolent God. This puja is observed in the month of Jeth (May-June) before starting the agricultural operations. During this puja Lord Siva is worshipped for a bountiful crops. It is believed that God "Langa' will protect the people from the natural calamities and epidemics. Formerly 'Langa' puja was observed in all the Rabha inhabited villages but at present such puja is observed in the Rabha villages of South Kamrup and Goalpara areas only. The Puja is held in 'Langamar' i.e. parmanent place of worship attached to the village. The essential puja items are a pair of red fowls, rice beer, betel leaves and nuts, fruits, a garland of Tulsi leaves, rice cakes, an earthen lamp, incantations, oil and vermilion etc. The items are collected on community basis. Besides, every household offers certain Puja prasad. On the previous day of the puja, the Deori family invites the deity which is known as 'Jagowa'.

Next day all the villagers gather at the 'Langãmar' where the Deori offers oblations to the deity. He sacrifices the pair of fowls and offers the heads and blood to the deity. Ricebeer ('Chakani mad)' and other items prepared out of dried rice are also offered. A boat (Hãwãl) made of banana stem is dedicated to the consort of Lord Siva. As soon as 'Langa' worship is over ceremonial oblations are offered to the goddess. The boat is carried to the nearest river or stream and after placing a chicken and an egg along with other puja articles inside it is allowed to float down stream. After this the participants return to the 'Lãngãmar' and partake rice and meat which marks the end of the ceremony.

'GHAR GOSANI'

The Rabhas worship goddess 'Thanehari' as house hold goddess. There are various legends regarding this household deity. This deity is worshipped in Luki Bekeli and other surrounding Rabha inhabited areas of Kamrup district. The main post lying towards eastern direction of the 'Dangghar' (this house is constructed following east west direction with door towards north represents the deity.) represents the goddess There is no definite time for the puja. Generally she is worshipped on the day of starting harvesting

operation and other festive occasions. She is also worshipped on the day of partaking newly harvested rice. The essential items of puja are one duck, some rice, rice powder, betel leaves and nuts, earthen lamp etc. The head of the sacrificed duck is offered to the deity. It is believed that 'Ghar Gosani' maintains peace in the househod if puja is offered to her regularly.

In some other areas the 'Ghar Gosani' is worshipped as goddess Lakshmi by placing a flat stone in the altar. A section of the Rabhas of Goalpara worship the 'Ghar Gosani' as Rontãk or Rontuk'. 'Rontãk' is a pair of earthen pots filled with rice. These are kept in a hanger in the North Western corner of the Dangghar. On both sides of the 'Rontãk' the traditional family weapons like sword, shield etc. are placed. A trident is also placed above the 'Rontãk'. On the day of Puja the 'Rontaks' are decorated with creepers. The priest spreads powdered rice over them. An egg and a pair of betel leaves and nuts are offered to the deity. Along with this puja a pig is sacrificed in the name of 'Hãdãtãr' and 'Bidatar' and two fowls are sacrificed to appease the assistants 'Houli and 'Gaulãk' Rice beer is offered to Rishi (Lord Siva). This puja continues for three days and villagers are entertained in a feast.

KALI PUJA

In order to avert epidemic and other natural calamities the Rabhas worship goddess Kali of course in their own typical tribal method.

Rupahi or Pãorã Deo

The younger sister of goddess Kamakhya is worshipped by the Rabhas as 'Pãorã Deo'. A bamboo about 20/25 feet in length specially procured for the occasion represent the deity. The ceremony starts on the first day of Baisakh (14th April) in the courtyard of the 'Deori' (priest). The puja items include rice beer, a pair of pigeon, bananas, Mugdal, milk, oil, vermilion etc. After the puja the 'Pãorã Deo' is taken round the village and the villagers offer oblations to the deity. On completion of the round, the Pãorã' is placed vertically in a beel or a water logging area. The people believe that worship of 'Pãoraã' relieves them of the evils.

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'LÃKHAR DEO OR GARAKHIÃ DEO'

In order ot have a trouble free year for the cattle, the Rabhas worship 'Lakhar Deo' or 'Garakhia Deo' puja. Opinions differ regarding the presiding deity of this worship, While a sizeable section of the Rabhas consider Lord Mahadeo as the presiding deity, another section of the Rabhas worship 'Bishahari' daughter of lord Mahadeo as the 'Lakhardeo'. In a simple ceremony the cowherds propitiate the goddess with sacrifice of fowls or birds caught in the field. If birds are not found insects may be sacrificed before the goddess.

'GOHALI DEO'

Every year on the 'Sankranti' of the month of Choitra (13th April) synchronising with the Assamese Garu Bihu, the Rabhas perform a puja in front of the cowshed for the welfare of the cattle. Rice beer is essential for this puja. An altar is made in the courtyard and a fowl is sacrificed in the name of the 'Gohali Deo'

BAGHESWARI' OR LAMPETI'

'Bagheswari' also called 'Lampeti' is considered as the daughter of Lord Mahadeo. 'Bagheswari' taking the shape of tiger attacks cows and bullocks in the jungle and therefore the Rabhas offer puja to her in the month of 'Magh' (January-February), Fagun' (February-March) or in Jeth (May-June).

'DHARMA'

This is a benevolent deity of the Rabha pantheon who is worshipped for maintaining family peace. Dharma is propitiated on the day of partaking newly harvested rice in the month of 'Aghon' (December-January) or Magh (January-February). Simple puja items such as sweets, earthen lamp, flowers, prasad and one white fowl are necessary for Dharma puja. The elderly male person of a household performs this puja (generally on Tuesdays or on Saturdays). Some Rabhas do not observe the detailed ceremonies. A white fowl is flown away in the name of Dharma on the day of partaking newly harvested rice.

KECHA KHAITI PUJA

Goddess Durga or Bhagawati is worshipped as Kechã Khãiti during Bohag and Jeth (April and May). Some Rabha families observe this puja during 'Lãngã' puja. It is a community worship held on the bank of river. For this puja a boat about 6' in length is prepared from the stems of banana trees. The womenfolk prepare varieties of rice cakes. Rice beer is also essential item for this puja. 'Hãul Kheda' (driving away the evil spirits from the village) forms an important part of the puja which is performed by the young boys. Taking long bamboo pieces in hands the young boys in groups visit each household and drive away the evil spirits symbolically by beating the walls of the household. They also collect unripe fruits, rice, eggs etc. After making a round in the village the 'Haul Kheda' party comes to the venue of the 'Kecha Khaiti' where puja is in progress. It is believed that evil spirits are brought near the 'Kesakhaiti' who is supposed to take charge of them. Then a procession of the young boys led by the priest along with the boat mentioned above proceeds to the river bank where the 'Deori' performs the puja. Lord Mahadeo. Lord Biswakarma and goddess Chandi are worshipped on the river bank. No sacrifice is performed, instead a duck or a goat is placed in the boat which is allowed to float downstream after the puja. The participants do not partake of the prasad instead the prasad and other puja paraphernalias are placed in the boat. The Rabhas believe that henceforth evil spirits will not haunt their villages as they were chased away formally.

'MAROI PUJA'

Maroi or Manasa puja is observed by the Rabhas to relieve them of the fear of serpents, epidemics and other natural calamities. Maroi' is also worshipped for fulfilment of desires. Manasa puja can be observed at any time of the year but generally the fifth day of the new moon of the month of Sravan is considered as the most auspicious day for Manasa worship. It may be mentioned that 'Manasa' is worshipped by the non tribals surrounding the Rabha villages, Although the presiding deity i.e. goddess Padmawati is common for both Rabhas and non tribals, some difference can be observed in the puja system of the Rabha.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND DEITIES OF THE LALUNGS

Introduction

The Lalungs, a plains tribe of the Brahmaputra valley prefer to call themselves as Tiwas. They belong to the great Bodo race into which tribals like Boro Kacharis, Rabhas etc. are included. Their concentrations are mainly found in the district of Nagaon in cental Assam. Sizable Lalung villages are also found in theKarbi Anglong hill district of Assam. Due to topography and ecological variation the socio cultural life of hill and plains Lalungs differs. The Lalung villages of Nagaon and other plains districts are not exclusive areas. They are interspersed with non Lalung villages. Most of these villages are connected with the district head quarter by motorable roads.

As per 1971 Census the total population of the Lalungs was 95609. Their percentage of literacy in 1971 was 21.5 against 26.03 for all the tribes of Assam. (1981 Census was not held in Assam).

Agriculture is the sole means of livelihood for both plains and hill Lalungs. The hill Lalungs, however, still practice Jhum or shifting cultivation.

The pattern of a plains Lalung house is almost similar to that of the Boro Kacharis'. They construct their houses on plinth. The hill Lalungs construct houses on mud plinth but the over all pattern is not similar with that of the plains Lalungs.

Rice is their staple food. Meat, fish and eggs are included in their menu. Fowl and pork are their delicacies. The Lalungs take locally brewed rice beer (Zu') in their day to day life. Rice beer is also an essential item in certain religious ceremonies. In the plains consumption of rice beer is not encouraged and tea has replaced rice beer in many families. The hill Lalungs, however, still prefer 'Zu to tea.

The plains Lalung women wear dresses similar to those worn by other rural Assamese women. Similarly the dresses of the menfolk are similar to those worn by non tribals. The dresses of the hill Lalungs are different from those of their plains

counterpart. A hill Lalung man puts on a narrow strip of cloth called 'Lengti. A 'Tangali' forms essential part of a male dress where embroidery works are done on both ends. The men of status keep both ends of a Tangali longer. The menfolk wear 'Nimãi Chola' i.e. shirts woven locally by the womenfolk, 'Turbans are worn by the elderly Lalungs. The womenfolk use Mekhelas over their breasts which extend a few inches below the knees. Now a days they use blouse also. A chadar is used over the body.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND DEITIES

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

The Lalungs consider Lord Mahadeo as their supreme god and all worships begin with a prayer to Lord Mahadeo.

The common places of worship are 'Barghar' and 'Thanghar'. The converts have their 'Namghar'. Every 'Khuta' or 'Bangsha' has a 'Barghar'. The 'Barghar' has two altars, one for the main deity and the other for ancestors. Pujas are held in the 'Barghars' where 'Gharburã' and Hãri Kunwari' perform the religious rites. The Barghar is considered as a very sacred place by the Lalungs. If any member of Khuta proceeds to a distant place he offers prayers at the altar of the 'Barghar' before leaving for the place.

The Lalungs have a multifarious male and female deities which are to be regularly propitiated by offerings and sacrifices. Lord Mahadeo is their supreme god. All worships begin with a prayer to Lord Mahadeo. Besides Mahadeo, they worship 'Ganesh',

Parameswar', Badarmaji', 'Bãolakong' and 'Kuber' as benevolent male deities. Among the benevolent female deities mention may be made of 'Ai Gosani', Lakhimi, Padumi, 'Kalikã', 'Kamakhya', 'Saru Ai', 'Bor Ai', 'Aakari', 'Jagatjuri, 'Kani Adheli' etc.

The place of worship for each 'Bangsha' is called 'Barghar'. The altar is made in front of the post of god ('Mindaine Thuna) which lies near the main post of 'Barghar'. In the altar one auspicious arrow (Zela) and one sacrificial dao (Langkhur) are placed. Besides 'Barghar', 'Thans' (public worshipping place) are constructed for each village or a group of villages. A 'Than' is a big hall constructed in an out of the way place near the forest. The 'Deori' (priest) presides over the religious rites. There may be different 'Thans' for different male and female deities. Thus ; Thãns' are found in the names of 'Mahadeo', 'Kesai Khati', Bhagawati', 'Sani' etc. Sacrifices of goat, fowl, duck pigeons formed essential part of the puja.

Today considerable changes have taken place in the mode of 'Than' worship. Sacrifices are rarely resorted to. 'Mah Prasad' (mug, gram, banana, etc.) is offered as 'Naibedya' before the deities particularly 'Ganesh'and Lakshmi'. This is happening due to the influence of the Mahapurushia Vashnav religion which is gaining some ground among a certain section of the Lalungs. The converted Lalungs do not maintain a 'Barghar' nor they take rice beer or pork. 'Namghar' (the famous Vaisnava insitution of Assamese non Lalungs) occupies an important place in quite a number of Lalung villages of the plains. Thus today there are two broad religious divisions among the Lalungs, the traditionalists and the reformists or Vaisnavites.

Besides the above mentioned pujas, the Lalungs ovserve 'Deo Sewa', 'Kalika puja', 'Bhakat Sewa', 'Aai Bhagawati', 'Jangkhang puja,' 'Hogora puja', 'Mal puja', 'Rati sewa', Maroi puja' etc. in a year.

'Deo sewa'– It is normally observed in Kartick-Aghon (October-November) when new arecanuts are ready for offering to the deities. This is observed praying for self sufficiency with the bare necessities.

'Kalika Puja' – 'Kalika' is worshipped in order to get an

increased yield of the crop as well as to improve the health of the people. Two tortoises and one fowl are sacrificed to appease goddess Kamakhya.

Bhakat Sewa – Every 'Khuta' observes 'Bhakat Sewa' in the month of 'Aghon' (December-January). The 'Gharbura' offers prayers to the presiding deities of the 'Bangsha' with betel leaves and nuts. The 'Bhakats' or elderly persons of the clan pray to god and to the ancestors to bless the villagers with peace and happiness throughout the year.

'Ai Bhãgawati' – The Lalung womenfolk worship this goddess in the month of 'Jeth (May-June) for general welfare of the villagers. Mug, Banana etc. are offered to the deity in a raft made of banana stem. After the prayer the raft is placed in the downstream of a river. Formerly 'Deodhani' dance was part and parcel of the worship but now-a-days such dance is rarely performed.

'Than Puja' – 'Than' pujas are community worships where members of one or more villages participate. There may be separate 'Than' for individual god or goddess. During puja sacrifice of birds or animals was a must but now-a-days sacrifice is rarely done. 'Nibut' or 'Naibedya' is offered which contains grams, bananas, betel leaves and nuts etc. The Lalungs consider the 'Mahadeo Sal Than' and 'Basundhari Than' of Sahari Manza of Nagaon district as 'Sanctum Sanctorum' Goddess Durga is worshipped in these Thans' The Deosal Than' of Gobha Mauza and 'Kumoi 'Than' of Manaha Mauza are the important centers of Sakti Worship. Lord Mahadeo is worshipped in these 'Thans'.

Jangkang Puja – It is an annual worship observed mainly by the hill Lalungs to appease the goddess of wealth. The Puja is an occasion of great fun and feast where young boys and girls dance merrily with the tune of 'Thurang' (small drums).

Sani Puja – This is observed in 'Jeth' (May-June) to drive away the evil spirits from the village. Eggs form essential item for offering to the deity. It is held in an out of the way place.

'Hogora Puja'–It is observed as Basanti Puja mainly by the Lalungs of foot hills area as an annual religious festival in the Bachelors' Dormitory (Samadi). It may be noted that 'Samadis' are fast disappearing from among the Lalungs and as a result 'Hogorã Pujã' is also disappearing in the plains. The puja is observed for flourishing crops and the same is concluded by planting trees.

Mal Puja – Till recently the Lalungs-used to perform Mãl Puja in 'Jeth' and 'Aãhar' (June-July) to get relief from epidemics and such calamities. The puja starts on Tuesday and the four 'Buras' (priests) i.e. 'Loro'. 'Forongãi', 'Koroimaji' and 'Gharbura' perform the religious rites. 'Mal' means bamboo and wooden posts designed specially for the occasion. A place is selected for the puja which is called 'Mãlsasã'. There are two kinds of 'Mals' – 'Bor Mal' and 'Saru Mal'. The 'Mals' are decorated with flower designs. As soon as the puja ends, the selected persons proceed to different directions of the village carrying 'Mals' on the shoulders. They make a 'Hoi Hoi Ou' sound constantly and beat the roof of the houses. The families pay due regard to the 'Mals' by offering eatables and 'Zu' to the carriers. In the evening all the groups gather in the outskirt of the Mal village and plant the 'Mals' under a tree. After that they return to their respective homes. On the following day all the villagers gather in the 'Mal Sasa' and conclude the ceremony with a feast.

'Rati Sewã' : This religious ceremony of the Lalungs is confined to the aged villagers who perform the same in a special house called 'Sesang Ghar'. 'Rati Sewa' is observed half yearly or annually for the general welfare of the villagers. But as per demands of individual households it may be observed several times. The deities worshipped in the 'Sasangghar' are not definitely known but references are made to 'Purna' Sankar Guru', 'Kalmatri', & 'Thalmatri', 'Avayamatri' etc. Recitations are made in the name of 'Ramdeo' also. There is no image of any deity in the altar. One earthen lamp in the altar is the symbol of the diety. According to the nature of the offerings 'Ratisewa' may be divided into two parts viz. 'Bor Sewa' and 'Aaroiya Sewa'. If pigs and fowls are sacrificed in the name of the deities then it is known as

'Bor Sewa' If on the other hand only a fowl is offered, then it is known as 'Aaroiya Sewa. Dried rice powder 'Sandah' (special delicacy of rice powder), boiled rice, curry prepared out of banana sprouts, fish or pig or fowl are offered in 'Rati Sewa'. 'Zu' (ficebeer) forms the most essential item of 'Rati Sewa'.

Besides the above mentioned worship the Lalungs observe certain individual household worships like Bãra Janiyã Bhakat Sewa' 'Na Janiya Bhakat Sewã' and 'Sat Janiyã Bhakat Sewã' is a costly affair as in this Sewa twelve Bhakats of different clans are to be invited and a feast with a pork has to be arranged.

Some families observe Moral puja in the rear courtyard of the house when chronic illness prevails in such families. In the courtyard seven circles are made with charcoal powder turmeric and rice powder. In the center of the circle an egg is placed. Betel leaves and nuts are placed in the lines of the circle and in between the lines earthen lamps are placed. The entire circles appear to represent nine 'Grahas' (planetary system) with Sun in the center. The Deori chants 'Mantras' and breaks the egg in the centre of the circles. If the colour of the yolk is black then it is considered as ominous. At the end of the puja the circles are erased and the affected person is bathed on the place with magical water.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND DEITIES OF THE SONOWAL KACHARIS

Introduction :

The Sonowal Kacharis form the third largest plains tribal group of Assam. Their main concetration is in Kakapathar, Dangari, Dhala and Doomdooma areas of Dibrugarh district. A few Sonowal Kachari villages are found in Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Jorhat districts also. They belong to the great Bodo group and are a cognate group of the Bodo Kacharis, Dimasas and Barmans of Cachar.

Opinions differ regarding the origin of the term Sonowal.

Some authors opine that the Kacharis who worked with gold (Son) were known as Sonowals. Traditionally the Sonowals were experts in collecting gold particles from the sands of the river Subansiri, a tributary of the river Brahmaputra.

The Sonowal Kacharis have, by and large, accepted the Assamese way of life and culture in respect of pattern of house, dress, food habits etc. They have completely forgotten their own language and speak Assamese.

According to 1971 the Sonowal Kacharis constitute the third largest plains tribal group of Assam with a total population of 198619. The estimated population as in March 1987 is 3,18,717 (1981 Census was not held in Assam).

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND DEITIES :

The Sonowal Kacharis are the devout followers of Mahapurushia Vaisnav Dharma. Among the villagers there are two broad religious divisions mainly Saraniya and 'Bhajaniã'. All the people above the age of sixteen may be regarded as 'Saranias' and those who are on the other side of the fifties follow the rules of Dharma thus upgrading themselves to the rank of 'Bhakats' The Bhakats have various grades and the senior may be a 'Medhi'.

It may be noted that Vaisnavism has not stood on their way to the ovservance of some of the traditional religious beliefs and practices. They worship Lord Siva and observe 'Bathow Puja'. Sacrifice of animals forms important part of this puja. A special song called 'Hãidãng' is sung during this puja. This puja is observed at the 'Bathow Sal' of Dangari.

The Sonowal Kacharis offer oblations to certain household deities also. Some of the household deities are "Bura Poha, Sarogdeo Puja, Pir Diya, Morak Diya, Lakhimi Sabah etc. The people believe that worship of these deities bring peace and happiness to the families.

The 'Namghar typical Assamese congregational hall, have found place among the Sonowal Kacharis too. Some of the important religious ceremonies observed in the 'Namghar' are– Janmastami, 'Tithis of Sri Sankardev and Sri Madhavdev, 'Sengali

Masor Sabah'. (Garakhia Sabah'), Lakhimi Sabãh) and 'Norasiga Sabãh'. Besides, the Sonowals observe 'Gati Giri Bhoj' 'Gajai Bhoj' for the general welfare of the villagers. These are held in the forest or on the bank of a river. In order to contain any probable epidemic in the village they observe 'Aai Sabah'. "Apeswari Sabah' at Namghar to appease the female deities. 'Mah Prasad' and fruits, betel leaves and nuts are essential items for their religious performances.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND DEITIES OF THE BARMANS OF CACHAR

The Barmans of Cachar as the name indicates is the major traibal group of Cachar district of the Barak Valley of Assam. They are ethnically Dimasa Kacharis living under the separate nomenclature viz Barmans in the plains of Varak Valley. Various scholars have tried to explain the origin of Barmans in Cachar. But it has been widely accepted that Dimasas who believed to be the descendants of Bhima, the second Pandava and who wear sacred threads like the Kshatriyas following the Hindu religious tradition are called Barman. On the other had the Kacharis claiming to be descendants of Hidimba are known as Dimasas. To day the Barmans of Cachar have very little Dimasa traditional traits. Linguistically they belong to the Tibeto Burman groups.

The 1971 Census recorded 13210 Barmans in the district of Cachar. Their estimated population in 1987 is 20819 (1981 Census was not held in Assam). They maintain a high percentage of literacy which is 30.45 against the state percentage of literacy of 28.7 (1971 Census).

They are patrilineal and patrilocal people.Traditional marriage system is just disappearing and preponderance of negotiated marriage is the characteristic feature. However, bride price system is still prevalent in a limited scale. Monogamy is the prevailing practice. Widow remarriage is not in vogue.

The peculiar clan system, 'Patri matri' i,e, existence of male clan and female clan which is seen among the Dimasas, is also traced among the Barmans too. These clans are exogamous.

There are 40 numbers of male clans (Semphong' and 42 numbers of female clans ('Julu') among the Barmans.

The design of a Barman house is almost similar to that of the house of Bengali people who are living surrounding Barman villages. Houses are constructed on mud plinth and these are sufficiently big with spacious compound all around. Thatch is used as. roofing purposes. The well-to-do families, however are using C.I sheet and timber posts.

The traditional institution of Gaoburah is fast losing ground. The government Gaonbura and other office bearers recognized by Govt. are playing singnficant roles.

Agriculture is the major means of livelihood. They produce Sali and Ahu paddy in their fields but majority households do not prossess sufficient quantity of land for the over flowing families. Mustard, sugarcane, sweet potatoes, cotton etc are also grown.

Rice is the staple food of the Barmans. Fish forms an important item in their menu. Dry fish is their delicacy. Pork is not taken but mutton and flesh of fowls, pigs etc. are not avoided.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND DEITIES :

The people are devout Sakta Hindus and all the deities are worshipped by fellow Hindus have found their place in the Barman pantheon. Unlike most of the plains tribes, services of the Brahman Priests are indispensible in their socio religious festivals. We have already mentioned about the origin of the Barmans and in that connection it has been stated that Barmans of Cachar have had very close inter ethnic relation with the Dimasas. The History of the Barmans is the history of the Dimasas and in this backdrop any discussion on Barmans will automatically have some references to the Dimasas. The Kachari king Lakshmichandra and Kirtichandra embraced Hinduism and accepted the Brahmans as royal priests. The Dimasas accompanying the king from Maibong (in N.C. Hills) to Khaspur had accepted the King's religion in toto. Thus no tribal system of worship is noticed among the Barmans. However the Barmans still consider the traditional God Lord Siva or 'Sibrai' who is also the most benevolent supreme deity of the Dimasas.

SOCIAL STATUS OF THE KARBI WOMEN AS REFLECTED IN THE SOCIO-CULTURAL LIFE AND LEGENDS OF THE KARBIS.

Introduction

The Karbis (also known as Arleng, meaning, man) are a distinct hill tribe of Assam concentrating mainaly in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam. A few Karbi villages are also found in the North Cachar Hills, Jorhat, Nagaon, Kamrup, Darrang and Sonitpur districts of Assam. According to 1971 Census (1981 Census was not held in Assam) the total Karbi population in Assam is 1,77,194, Male 90,355 female 86,839. The total percentage of literacy is 13.18, Male 21.09, female 4.95 against the State percentage of literacy of 28.72, male 3 7.19 and female 19.27.

Various authors have studied the socio-cultural life of the Karbis and in view of that, detailed account of their socio-cultural life is avoided in this paper. The main thrust, therefore, will be on social status of the Karbi women as reflected in the socio-cultural life and legends of the Karbis.

The data presented here are mainly based on secondary sources. Observations made during occasional visits to Karbi villages are also taken into account. The status of women who have been converted into Christianity is not brought within the purview of the present paper as this section constitutes a microscopic minority.

The dictionary meaning of the term status is state, condition or standing. In popular parlance status means the position or rank in relation to others. It my also mean a rank in the hierarchical order. Thus the word status may have various meanings and it may vary from country to country, people to people or tribe to

tribe. Status depends largely on the qualities or attributes which are considered essential in a particular society. The status of an individual in tribal society may be considered in this perspective. In the tribal society division of labour between the sexes is scrupulously maintained. Certain spheres like child rearing, food gathering, cooking meals, various agricultural and allied activities, weaving, preparing rice-beer, firewood collecting laundering etc. are exclusively meant for the women-folk. The menfolk, except in dire necessity hardly trespasses into the domain of the women. Similarly there are specific activities for the menfolk like hunting, ploughing, wood work, metal work, stone work, house building etc. where the women help with their mite. The menfolk do not think that they are a superior lot and likewise the women folk develop no complex that they are neglected. The sexes are not status conscious and there is mutual co-operation between the sexes in each other's activities. Thus status has a wider connotation among the tribals. A husband takes suggestion from his wife in family matters and the wife too decides matters which are approved by the husband. The exclusiveness in certain spheres does not debar tribal women from exercising their authority in the wider family affairs. Certain issues like whether the children should be sent to school or engaged in household activities, which boy should be a match for the marriageable daughter etc are decided of ten times by the women which are generally not vetoed by the men. The womenfolk never grumble because they are not allowed to attend the Village Council ('Me') or they have to make separate arrangement for the feast in the 'Rongker' festival. They do not feel ignored. Evans Pritchard (1965, 51-52) observes, "Looking at her social position from outside and from our point of view we may say that she has an inferior position and she is not resentful on account of it, she sees herself as different from man and as having a social status different from him, but if we may state her attitude in our own way of speaking, it is for her less a matter of level than of difference of status. Primitive women do not see themselves as an under privileged class against a class of men with whom they seek [illegible] in social equality. They also never heard of social equality and also they do not want to be like men".

In this back drop let us examine the case of the status of Karbi Women in a patriolocal and patrilineal setting. Patriliny is a pseudonym of male dominance. In such a social system women do not inherit property and after marriage the bride goes to live with her husband. There are other restrictions such as women cannot be members of the village council and in certain socio-religious occasions women's participation is taboo. But they are allowed to possess personal property like ornaments, clothes etc. The menfolk in no circumstances can dispose of the property of the womenfolk without latter's permission. Even then the Karbi women do not feel that they possess an inferior status. The husband consults his wife in all matters of mutual interest and wife's opinion is respected. Karbi women are not status conscious and they are happy with the status they possess. The respect shown to the Karbi women by the menfolk can be seen from their culinary habit. Although in certain festivals women are forbidden from taking food sitting together with the men, yet in their day to day life both men and women eat together (Lyall, 1908,13)

A Karbi widow is allowed to remarry and generally the younger brother of the husband marries her. Divorce or separation is a social indicator of powerlessness among the women. In this regard also Karbi women do not suffer from social disability or misdemeanour as divorce is very rare in the society. A Karbi woman is always conscious not to hurt the conjugal sentiment of her partner and the husband too, considers the marriage bond as something sacred. The woman takes care to maintain the conjugal peace and harmony. The legend of Harata Kunwar (Lyall, 1908,63) amply testifies it. When Harata Kunwar desired to marry one of the beautiful daughters of the Sun god who came to bathe in a ghat near the habitat of Harata Kunwar, the four of them who were already married replied, "How is it possible that any of us should stay here and be your wife? We have each of us husbands already". The youngest one, although engaged to the son of the king of winds had to agree to the proposal of Harata Kunwar thereby relieving the married sisters from the humiliating position. The eldest daughter advised Harata Kunwar, " Harata Kunwar, you would not listen to our instructions, therefore, we are leaving

our youngest sister here with you, but be careful not to grieve or trouble her. Donot make her cook or serve up: moreover touch not her hand or her foot."

Very often we measure the tribal ethos, their modes and morals, attitude towards life with our own standard. We try to adduce status which militate against the cultural ethos of the tribe. The Karbi boys and girls sing and dance together, work in the jhum land together and mix freely in all socio-religious occasions, yet they maintain their cultural norm of marriage exogamy in toto. Under no circumstances endogamy is tolerated.

Another distinguishing feature is that Karbis are monogamous and rarely a second wife is taken during the life time of the existing wife. Similarly bride price system which is prevalent among most of the tribes, is conspicuous by its absence in the Karbi society. Some scholars opine that the service rendered compulsorily by the prospective groom in the would be father-in-law's house for a year or so amounts to bride price. Whether bride price or not a girl's position is always higher. When a boy decides to marry a girl he has to send his father a close relative to the girl's house for making a formal demand along with a golden ring and a gourd of rice beer. It may be noted that after marriage the wife continues to use the surname of her father whereas the children are required to use the title of their father.

The Karbi women are expert weavers. They weave clothes not only for their use but for all the members of the family. The people are proud of their traditional attire and the womenfolk definitely earn a prestigious position. In the story of the Demoness (Rong Bong Terang, 1978, 10-11) Arlengpi appears to be an ideal Karbi woman. Her devotion to her husband is reflected when she refused to accompany the demoness in the guise of sister in law of Arlengpi without giving a finishing touch to the cloth of her husband which was urgently needed. Although Arlengpi was subsequently killed by the demoness yet she appeared again as a spirit to rescue her husband and the family from the clutches of the demoness.

The reasonably high status of the Karbi women can be traced from the most important role played by 'Uchepi' (female

diviner) in the Chomangkan festival of the Karbis. (Bordoloi, 1982,12-24). Uchepi is generally an old woman who is proficient in the tribal lore of the Karbis. In Chomangkan festival (death ceremony of the Karibis) her role is that of an expert and without whom the major religious ceremony cannot be held. Right form the 'Ruh Kehum' (bringing back the soul of the deceased from the cremation ground to the house of the deceased) to 'Nonker' (part of the Chomangkan ceremony held o n the fourth and final day) the Uchepi plays an active role. Only the Uchepi can invoke the spirit of the dead and she alone is eligible to cook 'Anjam' (food specially cooked for the deceased) to be offered at the cremation ground. In addition, her main role is to sing melancholy songs describing the past activities of the deceased. She wails all the time while singing and the whole atmosphere is surcharged with cremation ground's calmness.

Among the Karbis the maternal uncle plays a distinct role in the socio-religious ceremonies signifying a high position of the womenfolk. In other words the clan members of the women have some control over the members of the women's relatives from their husband's side even after marriage. Thus the maternal uncle or a person belonging to mother's clan of the wife of the deceased is eligible to bring the cowrie (soul) from the cremation ground (Tipit) to the house of the deceased. The respectable role of the womenfolk of the Karbis is noticed when they play active role in finding clues to the feigned death of the soul brought from the cremation ground in the shape of a cowrie. The womenfolk have a place of honour in 'Rongketon' procession to the cremation ground which takes place on the third day of Chomangkan. They offer 'Harlang' (ricebeer), betel leaves and nuts to the deceased and take their seats in the front row. Again it is the 'Uchepi' (Bordoloi 1982,27) or an elderly woman who is entrusted with the task of finding out the success story of the Chamangkan. She does it with the help of some bamboo pieces thrown around the cremation ground. The 'Uchepi' or an old woman also plays another significant role while determining the cause of death. She carries a small 'Bong' (empty gourd) wrapped in a cloth to the cremation ground which is again taken back to the house of the

of the tribal people are suffering from poverty and malnutrition, diseases; and infrastructural health facilities are far from adequate. Perhaps it is time to have a co-ordinated approach to utilise the tribal way of curing disease with that of modern medical treatment. There is need for sponsorship of more purposeful and planned research in the field of tribal health.

Health Seeking Behabiour

Zola (1975), Muchanic (1978) and Rosenstock (1960) have identified a number of variables to the health seeking behaviour of the individuals. The common ones being the life style of the person, seriousness of the condition. the tolerance threshhold of the patient, the frequency of recurrence, financial demand, availability to treatment resources and above all the cultural pattern of the community. Thus the health seeking behaviour depends on the number of factors and the dimensions are both wide and variable.

Perception of Health

Since the health seeking behaviour of the individual/group depends, by and large on the value given to the health and the life style of the individual, it is natural to note that not all view health in the same way. The concept of health as "State of complete physical, mental and social well being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" is too ambitious to be achieved in any situation. The meaning of health differs depending on whether one is rich or poor, town and country dweller, a cultivator or a white collar executive.

The acquisition of health knowledge starts with the socialisation of the child. The sources are multiple and varied. Initially it depends on the member of the family. Learning of health at this stage is more habitual than rational and gets affected either adversely or favourably by his peer groups and enviromental influence.

Like health, the perception of illness also varies. Illness is viewed from a larger social perspective. When a tribal suffers from illness it may not only mean curing the disease but the illness has its multifaceted effects- like economic loss, physical suffering or mental strain or all combined depending on socio-economic-cultural

background.

Before analysing the cause-effect relationship of a tribal's attitude towards health, it would be worthwhile to have an understanding of the tribal situation. Basically, the tribal people prefer a calm and quiet life in a serene natural atmosphere. It may be hilly top, a foot hill or a riverine area without much modern infrastructural facilities. Another characteristic feature is the self-reliance arising out of ecological adjustment to the environment.

As regards geographical aloofness, of late this is fast disappearing because of gorvernment's tribal welfare policy and most of the tribal areas are now contact areas i.e. non-tribal development agencies-both government as well as voluntary, have penetrated into the tribal areas and the typical tribal isolation has been found to be gradually broken down. Yet tribals still prefer to live in small homogeneous groups. Poverty, malnutrition, economic disabilities like land alienation and indebtedness are the common features in the tribal inhabited areas. Age old poverty makes the people unfastidious and the day-to-day life of a tribal generally centres around food quest. They believe that man's life is entirely controlled by a super power and each tribal group has a specific deity who is believed to be the creator, protector and benefactor of the people. There are lesser deities and spirits surrounding their major one and these also influence the people considerably. The inhospitable ecology and their exposure to adverse natural situations and ignorance of modern amenities make them strong and self reliant to withstand pitfalls of life. They thus possess a natural protective mechanism against diseases and economic hardships.

The social control based on traditions, modes, morals, mythis and magic and on an inherent inbuilt authority on the head man of the village is relatively more rigid which help the tribal people to sustain itself inspite of the adversities in life. With the passage of time this inbuilt social control mechanism has been rudely affected leading to conflicts which hiterto were unknown among them. The disease, health and health seeking behaviour of the tribal people have to be considered in the above context and thus a holistic attitude has to be undertaken. There are 23 Nos. of tribal groups in Assam and bulk of them live in the plains. The socio-cultural pattern

varies from area to area, from tribe to tribe. Thus the tribal thealth has to be viewed in two dimensional angles; viz., Area specific and Culture spacific. What is applicable in the two hill districts, the same may not suit in plains areas. The Boro Kacharis, Mishings, Lalungs (Tiwas) Sonowal Kacharis, Rabhas live in plains interspersed with non-tribal villages and the health care facilities of these people donot materially differ much from those of the non tribals. But in case of Karbis, Dimasa Kacharis, Zemi Nagas, Kukis of the two hill districts the perceptions of health and health care facilities differ considerably with those of the tribes in the plans.

Cause of Disease

The cause of disease among the tribals is largely attributed to :

A. Supernatural

1. Wrath of the deities, malevolent spirits
2. Soul loss due to the evil actions of the spirits
3. Contagious magic-sorcery, evil eye
4. Defying prevailing social norms and breach of taboos.

B. Physical

1.Food
2. Exposure to heat,sun,rain
3. Overwork
4. Natural calamities

As mentioned earlier the tribal people live in natural surrounding and the objects of nature like hillock, a rivulent, a stream, a large stone, a Banyan tree, birds and animals have symbiotic relation with the people. Thus when a person is detached from nature, he suffers from illness and meets accidents. In order to maintain a balance and harmony with nature, rituals are performed which have positive healing affect on the body.

By and large, the tribal people donot take selective nutritious food keeping in mind about the positive influence on health but they have a strong sense of negative effect of certain food items. Their food and cooking process are extremely simple and the traditional food items without any mill made spice or oil contribute

largely towards general good health. Locally brewed rice beer is consumed as beverage by all irrespective of age. The educated sections are trying to give up this habit and tea is used sparsely. Milk, as a nutritious item is taken by youths but the adult people, by and large, avoid this item. The Dimasa Kacharis of North Cachar Hills district of Assam consider it a sin to take milk because by that action the calves are considered to be deprived of their due share. They also donot rear cows for milk.

Diagnosis :

As regards diagnosis of the disease the tribal people follow a simple method of diagnosis which centres round invocation of disease causing spirits by the *Shamans/Ojhas* or the magicians to help them to make the diagnosis. Generally fowls are killed to observe the cause of disease. Omens play significant role in diagnosing a particular disease. Similarly uncommon vehaviour of animals, birds, pets, premature flowering of certain trees, overgrowth of fruit trees, unnatural increase of appetite etc, are some of the symptoms of the diseases or possible diseases.

Co-operation is the salient feature of the tribal way of life and same is reflected in the health care system as well. The group or the villagers in general help the individual to decide regarding the type of treatment to be undertaken. Although disease and treatment apparently appear to be individual family affair but in fact all the villagers consider illness as a common illness of the village and efforts are made to cure the disease on community basis. The trend, today, however, is towards individualism because of spread of education, modern infrastructural facilities, audio-visual media, entry of middlemen in the tribal economy and consequent competitive character. But it must be admitted that with development the simple tribal folk are getting more exposed to exploitation which would-adversely affect their health and nutritional status. In the backdrop the recent interest of health personnel in the sioco-cultural factors in causation of disease process has much relevance. It has been realised that diseases are not only due to physical, chemical or bilogical processes but also due to a number of socially and culturally determined factors.

WOMEN IN TRIBAL DEVELOPMENT IN ASSAM – CONDITION AND MEANING OF THEIR INVOLVEMENT

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According to the 1971 Census (1981 Census was not held in Assam) the scheduled tribes of Assam constituted 10.99 percent of the total population of the state. A clear cut differentiation of the tribes into hills and plains has been made on the basis of topography and typical socio-cultural pattern of the ethnic communities. More than 92 percent live in rural areas (1870683 persons out of a total of 1919947) and they are almost entirely dependent on agricultural economy. The scheduled tribes are at various stages of development and development schemes have had to be formulated according to the special needs and aspirations of these communities. In order to remove the backwardness (the tribal people do not consider themselves backward and we the so called urban oriented modern people, heaped upon the adjective on them) measures were adapted from the beginning of the planned economic development.

The original design of planning for tribal development based on the basic premise that the scheduled tribal people would be benefitted by the general development programmes with certain supplemental benefits for the tribal people. Subsequently it was felt that the existing supplementation had to be geared up in view of the total inadequacy of infrastructural facilities in the tribal areas. Besides, studies revealed that the intended benefits did not percolate to the deprived sections as desired. In this backdrop the planners wanted to include some more special programmes for the weaker

sections like the marginal farmers and agricultural labourers, Special schemes for drought prone areas were also undertaken. But tribal development had a break through only after the formulation of the Tribal Sub Plan beginning with the Fifth Five Year Plan. The Sub Plan for tribal regions is the plan within a bigger plan i.e. State plan. Tribal Sub Plan caters to the special needs of the tribal people and fulfills the necessity of an integrated area approach of development strategy. Resources come from various sources like the State Plan's share for TSP, Central Sector outlays, special central assistance and institutional finance. Three broad areas of operation of the TSP are :

1) Areas of tribal concentration of 50 per cent and above.
2) Areas of dispersed Tribal population below 50 per cent and .
3) Areas of extremely backward and isolated smaller communities.

Vast numbers of development schemes for tribals were undertaken over the years with increased quantified budget. In spite of the well meaning schemes the goal for achievement of a fair deal on equal terms for the tribals in all spheres of social life remained unfulfilled. The tribes preferred to have a peaceful life in their natural setting. Their wants were limited. But main-streamers zeal to bring these unsophisticated people to the planned development, unfortunately had caused dis-equilibrium in the socio-economic area, so much so that most of the ethnic groups today are trying to assert their separate identity. 'Proto nationalism' or 'infranationalism' to quote Dr. Roy Burman raises ugly heads. Dr. B.D. Sharma opines "The achievements fall too short of expectations and are rather inadequate compared to the task ahead for securing members of these communities a place of equality in the national economy particularly in the context of the emerging situation in which the relative position of these communities in the national economy has not improved, nay, has deteriorated especially for the scheduled tribes .....Even after formulation of workable strategy there are various lapses in their follow up

over a period of time and even simple operational details remain unattended not for years but from one plan to another.

It is an exasperating experience to witness the monotonous routine year after year - review of situation, identification of problems and proposed action plan without moving forward in any real sense"[1]

In this backdrop an effort has been made in the present paper to examine the role of womenfolk in tribal development. While discussing the role of tribal women certain factors have to be taken into account such as :

1) Societies attitude towards women
2) Legal status of women
3) Adjustment of women in a changing socio-psychological milieu.
4) Present role played by women folk in the development activities.
5) Non tribal's attitude towards tribal women's participation in developmental effort.

While explaining the cause of dissatisfaction in the existing tribal development planning the tribal elites opined that the planning process did not give due stress on the role of women in tribal development. Women in tribal societies occupy an honourable position enjoying considerable freedom in the day to day life. The tribal scene is not polluted with vices like adultery and mal-treatment. Purdah and bride burning are not existant in tribal societies. Child marriage is unknown and widow remarriage is practiced without any social stigma. The tribal women contribute in a large measure, towards agricultural production, besides cooking daily meals, weaving cloths for all the members of a family, collecting roots and creepers, fire wood and fodder from the forests and such other odd jobs. They however, have little say in the socio political or socio religious matters effecting the community. They form the bulk of the labour force and have minimum job opportunities due to the illiteracy, shyness, social taboos and drudgery of house hold works.

Women are considered as partners in the day to day life.

The head of the family performs the important activities in consultation with the wife. One significant factor works towards this attitudinal behaviour. The male ego willy milly surrenders to the regenerating process. Although in certain spheres the women are debarred from playing active role, they, however do not grumble for that as they accept the position as traditional arrangement for the smooth functioning of the society.

The tribal scene is fast changing along with the change of time. No longer the tribal women remain passive on-looker and today they openly criticize the illegalities in respect of tribal development programmes. But only a few literate women appear to be vocal as the male suppression, although covertly, still continues. Women representatives in the Project Implementation Committees of Integrated Tribal Development Projects and Sub Divisional Tribal Development Boards are inadequate. It is a truism that if proper amenities and free hand are given to the womenfolk they will be able to play very constructive role. Let us cite one example how the tribal womenfolk play dominant role in the development process.

The Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled Castes, Guwahati (erstwhile TRI) had conducted a survey on the impact of total prohibition on the Boro-Kacharis of two villages of Datama T.D. Block of Kokrajhar district namely Baragari and Ghilaguri villages. It was found that inspite of the existence of Assam Liquor Prohibition Act 1992 and State Prohibition Council, illegal rice brewing was practised in both the villages. Illegal brewing of rice beer in Baragari village was unchecked. The male folk by and large, encouraged the trade but the women folk opposed it tooth and nail. They mustered strong under the banner of Barshijhara Mahila Samity and almost put an end to the illicit brewing of rice beer as well as the surreptitious trade. The people outside did not know that the womenfolk could perform such a miracle in a male predominant tradition bound society. Neither the society got any commendation from the authorities. Thus female factor in the tribal development did not get due share. If properly oriented the womenfolk can eradicate much of the corrupt practices by acting as watch dogs. The Mahila Samities in most of the tribal villages are almost defunct. There is enough scope for

utilising such samitis as catalytic agent. The existing male superiority attitude has to be replaced by a symbiotic relationship between the sexes. It is equally true that outwardly the virile male ego with superior physical strength tries to control the women but inwardly women are respected and honoured. "The virile sex in their heart of hearts know, nay, fully realise that without voluntary participative co-operation by women, mankind can hardly hope to survive .....Willy nilly the male ego surrenders to a regenerative process, yet outwardly he pretends to be superior and undisputed master in an egotistic tussle between the vying sexes"

Inspite of heavy financial outlay in the tribal development in the series of Five Year Plans, the cut off point in the poverty line has not shown drastic downward trend. Working under the guide line of the Planning Commission's formula of poverty line (Rs. 6400/- as the household income in the rural areas and Rs. 7300/- in the urban areas) during 7th Five Year Plan, some more ST families are expected to be brought above the line. In order to achieve this objective, the entire approach to tribal development has to be remoulded. It is to be noted that the social customs, some of the cultural and religious practices with the extravagant financial component work as impediments to the economic development. Here the planners and those responsible for implementation of tribal development schemes perhaps can not help as these fall largely within the broad parameter of 'develop according to the genious' theory. Traditions die hard and the people are not ready to minimize the expenditures on fairs and festivals, and on 'pujas' and 'prasads'. Sometimes the family expenditures are carried to such an extreme that the family is burdened with debt leading to alienation of valuable agricultural land. The children and the women have to bear the sufferings of the aftermath of such extra-vaganza. The role of the womenfolk in such situations is passive as they cannot go against the decisions of the menfolk. The educated boys and girls in most cases are also inactive as they dare not stand against the age old social prejudices, beliefs and practices, taboos and myths. As a result Government aids, subsidies, grants become the casuality. In order to maintain the

social prestige most of the villagers spend money in larger quantities than their resources. It is therefore, no wonder to find a tribal family to become totally exhausted of food items well before the next harvest, due to performances of lavish religious functions."

Tribal women can exert their influence in a vital sphere i.e. education. As per 1971 Census the percentage of tribal female literacy in 17.16 which is below the State's female percentage of literacy i.e. 18.6. It is observed that where women are freed from drudgery or social bondage and where there is reasonable improved economic standard the womenfolk can devote much time for educational improvement of their children. This is applicable in the case of tribal urban dwellers and tribal Christian converts. For example the Hmars have a female percentage of literacy of 31.66 (1971 Census) and Any Mizo Tribes have 51.92. The lowest percentage i.e. 2.11 is found among the Man Tai speaking group followed by 4.95 percent among the Karbis. The mothers of economically sound and Christian convert families realize the importance of educating their children and they do not have much financial worry. They relieve their children from the daily chores like tending cattle, scaring the crows from the spread out paddies in the courtyard, caring the small babies when the parents are away in the fields and forests.

Of late due to opening up of the tribal area and due largely to the initiation of development activities in those areas, the tribal environment has undergone tangible changes. Superfluous changes have been introduced into the periphery of the cultures leading to a complexities hitherto unknown in tribal setting.

A tribal family is part and parcel of a wider kin group forming a village. Naturally the pattern involves a feeling and brotherhood. Egalitarianism is the characteristic feature in such societies. The traditional production and consumption pattern have been moulded to suit the needs of the day to day consumption as well as the demands of the socio-religious ceremonies of the community at large. Whether it is 'Poraag' or 'Ali Aye Lrigang' festival of the Mishings, 'Kherai' festival of the Boro-Kacharis, 'Bohag Bihu' festival or final purification ceremony of the Deoris

or 'Chomangkan' festival of the Karbis, the expenditures in such occasions cross the limit escalating the debt position of the poor tribal families.

Development of the ethinic communities following the general strategy therefore has not borne any tangible result because the indigenous socio- cultural pattern varies from tribe to tribe and involvement of the people in the welfare activities is not voluntary. In the above mentioned festival occasions the womenfolk play active roles not only in singing dancing and merry-making but also in brewing the much needed rice beer. The womenfolk particularly the educated women can stop this huge expenditure.

As in the case of the Barshijhara Mahila Samiti of Kokrajhar district the Mahila Samitis of all the tribal communities can contribute immensely by visiting the weekly hats which is the center of gambling and transaction of illicit liquor. These two evils are also responsible for the prevailing poverty-condition and development schemes will be purposeful only when these social evils are uprooted from the societies. Women can play a decisive role in this regard and viable Mahila Samitis formed in each tribal village will be able to relieve the poverty stricken tribals.

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CHANGE OF TRADITIONAL DIATARY HABIT AND ITS IMPACT ON TRIBAL HEALTH AND ECONOMY

The tribal people have had their traditional food habits and collection of an adequate food supply gets the prime importance on the time and energy of the people. The character of the food quest, too, goes a long way to determine the nature and amount of their supplementary occupations. The food supply largely depends on geographical conditions like soil, climate, vegetation etc. Thus, tribal food quest have five distinct characteristics. These are food gathering, plant cultivation, domestication of animals, hunting and fishing.

Till Independence the tribal people of Assam resorted to by and large, crude method of obtaining food by simple collection of roots, herbs and creepers from the jungles and by sowing and transplantation of one or two varieties of paddy, sesame and mustard seeds. Arums were largely grown. Fishing was regularly done while hunting was performed on limited occasions. Forests and beels were easily accessible to them and no restriction was imposed by the state. Mutuality and inter and intra village cooperation contributed immensely for a peaceful and happy life. The corporate life helped in selecting the food for human consumption, food for animals, stimulants, narcotics etc. depending upon seasons, natural calamities, digestive system. Thus the riverine tribes like the Mishings and the Deoris of upper Assam districts grew mainly Ahu paddy and mustard seeds, the Karbis, Dimasas, Rengma Nagas produced crops, taking recourse to shifting cultivation, while the Boros, Rabhas, Tiwas, Sonowal Kacharis produced Sali crops. Rice is their staple food and the people used to take rice two to three times a day. Pigs and fowls were reared for the meat supply. Most of the tribal people avoided milk. Tea habit was not developed. Some people particularly the elders took red tea with salt. Ricebeer prepared locally, substituted tea and it formed a prestigious item for entertaining guests. Ricebeer also

acted as a food as well as a beverage. This food item served the purpose of stimulant also. The ingredients were locally available.

Meat and fish formed part of their meals and only local leafy vegetables and spices were used in the curries. Thus except salt the people did not purchase other edibles such as mustard oil, sugar etc. Preserved meat and dry fish constitute important items in the tribal menu and the people possess the required knowledge of preservation method.

Till the sixties of this century the tribal people particularly those living in the far flung difficult areas scrupulously maintained their traditional food habits. These areas were not provided with the infrastructural facilities like motorable roads, dispensaries etc. But soon these areas had the taste of development under the scheme Tribal Development Blocks. Flow of non tribals into these areas brought changes in the traditional socio-cultural life of the tribals. Money supply into the hands of tribals had unwholesome effect on the traditional pattern of life. Due to lack of sufficient knowledge of the way of life of the tribals, the developmental schemes could hardly satisfy the felt needs of the people. The people were trained rather compelled to abandon their traditional practices where as modern system appeared to be like round cork in a square bottle. The neo rich among them had no problem as they could gather sufficient wealth. Daily food articles like dal, vanaspati, biscuits, mustard oil etc., were available in the local grocery shops. The poorer section too, had to change their food habits. The audio visual media too, had played its role. The school and college going boys and girls preferred modern food items and gradually traditional diatary practices gave way to modern food habit. The first casualty was the health of the tribal people. It is common knowledge that substandard goods have a flourishing market in the far flung villages and unscrupulous traders cheat the illiterate rural people. The World Health Organisation in its 30th Health Assembly held as early as 1977 recommended a level of health that will permit people to lead a socially and economically productive life without effecting the traditional practices of food and health. Mahler (1979) opines that social and economic well being of the tradition bound people could only be ensured when

there is a co-relation of modern and traditional health care facilities. Leiban (1973) also had subscribed similar view. He opined that the status of health and welfare of a tribal society varies with environment. Food habit also has close link with the overall health of a community and it is not proper to completely do away with the traditional diatary practices while introducing modern life style.

The traditional square meals of the tribal people constitute rice and boiled vegetables with chillies, salt and fish or meat curry. In between the meals the elderly and young people take locally brewed rice beer. Boiled eggs are taken when available. This diatary system provides ample strength and vitality. On festive and special occasions they prepare rice cakes and other delicacies of fish and meat. The casual visitors are entertained with rice beer or red tea mixed with salt and boiled eggs while the close relatives share the meals. Oil is rarely used. Cartain leaves are used as spices and the womenfolk are experts in selecting the edible leaves. Cane and bamboo sprouts are collected for side dishes.

The above pen picture of the traditional diatary practice is almost extinct even in the remotest tribal villages. This has happened due largely to the extension of infrastructural facilities, spread of education, employment opportunities and non availability of indigenous leaves and herbs locally. The people do not have easy access to the forests and the state Government have put ban on entry of the tribal people in the reserved forests. It may be mentioned that the tribals have symbiotic relation with the forests and the ban largely hampered the overall life pattern of the tribal people including the nutritional standard. The Bhore Committee (1946) which went into the study of impact of social change among the tribal people due to implementation of various developmental schemes recommended primary health care for the backward people without disturbing the traditional social and economic life as concept of health among the tribal people is more a functional than clinical.

The nutritive value of the traditional food and drink is known to the tribal people. A Mishing or a Rabha or a Tai Phake woman recognizes the nutritive value of forest leaves, wild roots, herbs,

mushrooms which she collects and serves to the members of her family. Similarly, a Boro or a Rabha unhesitatingly consumes curry preparations of a local variety of snails. Endi cocoons form a delicacy to most of the Tribal people. Tribal delicious dishes include bamboo and cane sprouts.

Another visible effect of change of traditional food habit is the incidence of hitherto unknown diseases among the tribal folk. The life style changes and the younger sections are reluctant to stick to their traditional food items as their taste changes. They prefer to spend much time in educational pursuits. Some are employed in government or private offices. Still some others are busy in business and other money earning avocations. Flow of cash into the tribal people encourages the villagers to go for modern culinary practices. The net result is the the loss of robust health which was the characteristicfeature of the tribal people. No more the people depended upon the traditional health care facilities. Till a few decades back, an MBBS Doctor or a trained nurse was a rare sight inside a tribal village, but today, the professional physicians almost totally outmanoeuvred the local medicine man or Ojha. Formerly, locally prepared rice beer was used to cure stomach pain and allied diseases. Among the Mishings the first item of food/ drink given to a new born baby is one or two drops of rice beer. But today, these practices are fast disappearing.

But inspite of the changes a few house-holds in each village who are below the poverty line, are still adhering to the traditional diatary habit.

Change is the constant of culture. No society is expected to remain static. In case of tribal society, however, the change brings more constraints than comforts as the tribal economy is primarily based on agriculture and acute land problem cuts at the root of the viable tribal economy. The state has to play a positive role in this regard. A need based systematic research may be undertaken for generating information on indigenous food and health practices among the tribal people. It is more important in view of emergence of new diseases due to consumption of cheap sub standard food items which are easily available in the local grocery shops and village hats and also due to ecological imbalance

being regularly created. There is a need of documentation of indigenous roots, creepers, herbs and their efficacies also. In the changing world the tribal people have to be provided with modern facilities, but while doing so, it is equally necessary to go into the socio-cultural dimensions of tribal health and nutrition.

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B. RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND FOLK DEITIES OF THE KARBIS

Introduction

The Karbis are a distinct hill tribe of Assam who are concentrated mainly in the Karbi Anglong district. Although mentioned as Mikirs in the Constitution Order, the people prefer to call themselves as Karbis. They also call themselves as Arleng which literally means man. They are a Mongoloid people an d belong to the Tibeto Burman group. Karbi settlements are also found in the North Cachar Hills District, Kamrup Nagaon and Sonitpur plains districts of Assam. As per 1971 census the total population of the Karbis was 1,77,194, males 90355, females 86839. The estimated population in 1981 (1981 census was not held in Assam) is 2,41,000 calculated on the basis of average national growth during the decade1971-81.

Magico-religious beliefs and practices play a dominant role in the Karbi society and every object of nature is believed to be influenced by super natural power. Right form birth till death the Karbis perform various worships. Besides offering prayers to the gods like the Sun, Moon, fire, water, offerings are also made to various objects of nature like hillocks, forests, streams etc. Every puja has its own place and manner of worship. There is no definite month or date for the pujas.

Both community and household pujas are observed by the Karbis. 'Sojun' worship for Lord Indra is observed on community basis. This is called 'Rok Apirthat'. 'Rongker' is another important community worship performed by the Karbis before starting the agricultural operations. Women do not take part in this puja. 'Rongker' is observed by the people of more than one villages. This is held in the trijunction of the road outside the village. Pigeons, goats and fowls are sacrificed to appease the deity. A goat is sacrificed in the name of 'Arnam Farow' and offering of pigeons and fowls is made for the regional deities 'Arnam'. The meat of sacrificed goat is taken by the participants along with rice beer and cooked rice. The priest (Habe) is required to observe certain taboos. Rongker is observed mainly for flourishing agriculture. The

deity is prayed not to cause any epidemic and to protect the villagers from the furies of wild elephants and tigers. Rongker may be of various kinds such as Rek Rongker, Rekpi Rongker, Wofong Ronker, Ajo Rongker, Piroda Rongker etc. depending upon manner, place and aim of worship. It was reported that in the past human sacrifice was performed during Ronger worship, but no longer the practice is invogue. Wofong Rongker is observed once in three or five years. Animal sacrifices are made in the name of Lakshmi Kakur on the second day of the festival. Piroda Rongker is observed during day while Ajo Rongker can be performed only at night.

There are various other worships performed in a Karbi village to appease the presiding deities of household, natural objects, the Sun and the Moon etc. These are Peng, Hemphu, Pirtu, Dara, Lumki, Sojun, Daikhrai, Aawara, Rita Arnam, Sameme, Than Arnam, Rong Arnam, Murti, Chek Aama etc. Peng is the deity of warfare and the Karbis worship him by offering goats and fowls when occasion arises.

The Karbis believe that 'Mukrang' is the creator and Hemphu is the presiding deity of the households who is also considered as the main god. 'Hem' means house and 'phu' means grandfather. 'Rasinja' is considered as the female deity who is responsible for bringing timely sunrays and rain. She is also considered as the agent to cause war and bring peace. She is believed to be the sister of 'Mukrang' and wife of 'Hemphu'. A puja is held in her honour on the first day of the year by offering red fowls, 'Harlang' (rice beer) and boiled rice kept in a bamboo pipe. Before the, onset of the agricultural operations 'Mukrang', 'Hemphu' and 'Rasinja' are worshipped with meat, cooked rice and water kept in different bamboo pipes. It may be mentioned that the Karbis have no images for the deities, instead three altars are prepared and in front of the altars bamboo tridents are planted.

Sajun (Lord Indra) is worshipped on the full moon day in an open space outside the house. Local vegetables and creepers are essential items. 'Mehek Hanthu' and 'Han Sangbi' creepers are essential items for this puja. Arrangements have to be made much in advance. A platform type structure is made with branches of 'Fongrong' trees and in the platform an altar for Lord Indra is

made. In the main altar an insect known as 'Kumji Kumbong' a crab, one fish (senga Mas in Assamese) and few small bushes are placed. An image of paddy stalks is made and bow and arrows are placed in the hands. A few small altars are also made on the ground for various deities. A white fowl is tied in the altar for sun God. The priest (Habe) purifies the main altar with rice powders and after that formal worship is performed with betel leaves and nuts, rice powder etc. A pig is sacrificed in the name of 'Barithe', the main god of the occasion. For lesser deities like Harata fowls are sacrificed. In the meantime experts determine the welfare of the family by observing the lung and heart of the sacrificed pig. Similarly fate of the standing crops is determined by observing the nature of death of the sacrificed fowl.

When an auspicious journey to a distant place is intended, 'Hemphu' is worshipped in the courtyard of the person who wants to undertake the journey. An altar is made in the courtyard with a bamboo trident attached to it. A 'Harbong' (small gourd container) is placed near the trident. One egg, one brass ring and a coin are placed in the altar. Near the altar a brown fowl is placed. Rice, rice powder, 'Tulsi leaves' are offered to the deity by a priest while chanting mantras. The fowl is sacrificed before the deity.

After the harvesting operations the Karbis worship Goddess Lakshmi. It is called 'Sakeroy'. Newly harvest paddy is ceremonially taken on this occasion. The head of the household makes necessary preparations ahead by collecting fowls, pigs etc. Newly harvested rice is kept ready for the occasion. On the stipulated day the villagers gather at the house where the ceremony is arranged. Before partaking of the food, the head of the house offers a portion of the feast to the main post of the house which represents Goddess Lakshmi. Before and after the festival songs and dances are performed in the courtyard which is known as 'Hasaketan'. The dance performances conclude before close of the night.

The Karbis believe that 'Kase' and 'Kabe' the two daughters of Hemphu are the presiding deities of crops grown in high land and water logging low lands respectively. Once famine occurred in the Karbi villages and the Karbis prayed Hemphu to

relieve from the miserable condition. Lord Hemphu was kind enough to send his two daughters 'Kase' and 'Kabe' to ameliorate the sufferings of the Karbis. But as the luck would have it the two daughters were swallowed by a great fish while crossing a river. One Karbi was informed in his dream that the two sisters could be relieved only when fishes were caught for consumption. Thus the Karbis released 'Kase' and 'Kabe' by catching the fish. They believe that the goddess of rain 'Hai 'causes rain when puja is offered to the deity with sacrifice of brown or white fowls. The 'Kathar' (priest) sings songs of 'Hai' and 'Long' and it is believed 'Hai' weeps which is converted into rain.

'Sabin Alun' (Karbi Ramayan) is a new addition to the Karbi religious belief and the Hindu God Ram occupies a place in the Karbi pantheon. It is believed the Karbis had to take shelter under various Hindu kingdoms in the past and thus Hindu God Ram got a place in this religious belief . For the welfare of new born baby the Karbis worship 'The Kar Kibi' and 'Klongkor Akhekar Kiti' deities. Similarly when the umbilical cord of the new born child dries up the Karbis observe 'Hemfuma Karang' worship.

The Karbis believe that the spirits of the dead have a distinct abode of their own which is known as 'Chom Arong' or 'Yama Arong'. This particular place of the spirits is believed to be located on a hill known as 'Lang Serve'. The popular belief prevalent among the Karbis regarding the spirits is reflected in their death ceremony known as 'Chomangkan' which is the most elaborate and expensive ceremony of the Karbis extending a period of four days. Chomangkan ensures permanent abode for the spirits of the dead.

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Marriage

Among the Karbis monogamy is the prevailing rule but polygamy is not frowned upon. But in all cases clan exogamy has to be strictly adhered to otherwise the couple will face social wrath of excommunication, which is rather a severe punishment. They also allow the widows to remarry and the unmarried younger brother of the deceased husband is required to marry the widow of his elder brother. Under no circumstances the elder brother of the deceased husband can marry the widow of the younger brother. Cross cousin marriage is in vogue and mother's brother's daughter is considered as suitable match. Although the procedure is long drawn and expences are on higher side the Karbis prefer arranged marriages. Brides are also selected by the prospective grooms and they are accepted by the parents provided clan exogamy is maintained. Marriage is solemnised at the girl's house and after the arrival of the groom's party question answer session starts between the boy's and girl's parents or elders. This is a formality and after a few minutes of discussion, the girl's parents agree to hand over the daughter to the groom. If the wedding is an 'Akejoi' (not agreeing to stay at the bride's house after marriage) one, the girl goes to live in the groom's house the next day and if the marriage is 'Akeman' (lucca wedding) one the groom stays in the father in law's house for a year or so as per agreement made on the day of marriage.

Bride price system is not invogue among the Karbis.

Divorce is rare in the society and if there is any, the same can be effective only when the village council accords approval.

Agriculture, Food and Drink

The primary occupation of the Karbis is agriculture. They are shifting cultivators. Besides paddy, maize, cotton, ginger, other seasonal crops are also grown in the Jhum lands. Jhum lands are cultivated for one or two years and after that new cultivated for one or two years and after that new jhum lands are selected. This is wasteful system of cultivation and the District Council at Diphu

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tries utmost to discourage the people in this method of cultivation. But it is a difficult task to wean the people away from shifting cultivation as socio-religious factors are inseparably associated with jhuming. In the plains portion of the Karbi Anglong district and also in the areas where wet paddy cultivation is possible, the Karbis are not resorting to shifting cultivation.

Most of the families rear cows, goats and fowls. Buffaloes are found in a few families only. Milk is not taken. Rice is their staple food. The women folk collect wild roots, tubers, creepers which the people take along with rice. Dry fish is their delicacy, pork and chicken are also favourite items. They relish locally brewed ricebeer called 'Harlang'. Rice beer is also required to entertain guests. It is an essential item in the socio religious occasions.

Status of Women :

Status of women in Karbi society is high. At marriage, the girl's opinion is taken before accepting the proposal from the groom's side. In the daily walk of life women take equal part with males.

There are, certain taboos in respect o f women which, however donot suggest an inferior status of women. A woman is not allowed to partake food with male. They are not allowed to attend the village council for any trial. In the Rongker festival, the presence of women is taboo.

Religious beliefs :

The Karbis follow a crude form of Hinduism. Animistic beliefs are still in vogue in their society. They worship various deities and 'Arnamkethe' is their supreme God. He is a household God and offerings of pigs and fowls are made once in three years. It is believed offering of pigs and fowls to the God relieves the people from diseases and other natural calamities. Peng, Hemphu, Mukrang, Rek Anglang, Arnam Paro are other household deities. These deities are invoked and worshipped for a happy and prosperous life in this world. They are propitiated to avert misfortune and natural calamities. Besides there are multifarious deities and spirits

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exempted from paying interest. There are four office bearers for the smooth functioning of this bank. A store keeper is also appointed who keep the records.

There is a variation of such a grain bank. Some youths form an association and clean certain jhum lands. They cultivate jointly in this field and the paddies are given on loan to the needy villagers at 50% interest to be returned in kind after the harvest. They also exempt the widows and invalid persons from paying interest. They also sell their excess paddy to the well-to-do families at 10% less than the market price. The amount thus collected is spent in village development schemes.

Still there is another grain bank run by the elderly male villagers. A plot of land is earmarked for the bank which is cultivated jointly by the members of the grain bank. The grains are sold in the market and the money is kept in a bank. Any villager can take loan in cash from this bank at an interest of 100% to be repaid in kind after harvest.

Such type of traditional institutions serve useful purpose to :

1. emiminate the greedy village Mahajans.
2. to strengthen the bond of unity and brother hood among the villagers.
3. to improve the living standard of the people.
4. to generate a feeling of co-operation rather than conflict.

Bachelors'Dormitory Jirkedam :

The Karbis call their bachelors dormitory as 'Jirkedam' or 'Farla'. All the young boys above the age of 10 are members of this dormitory. Opinions differ regarding the eligibility of membership of a dormitory. Dr. Bordoloi, opines that only the young boys can became members, while Dr. G.C. Medhi imforms us that an adolescent girl is allowed associate membership in the village dormitory provided her elder brother is not a regular member. Such a female member is called 'Marpi'. The leader of the girl members is attached to the leader of the boys. Thus the associate

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The members of jirkedam help in transplanting paddy seedling and' perform various social services like harvesting of widows' and invalid persons jhum crops, roofing the houses of the widows and infirm villagers and helping families in the socio-religious occasions. The members of the dormitory do not charge anything for their services. They play active role in the 'Chomangkan' and 'Rongker' festivals. Of late due to spread of education and acculturation process tangible changes have crept in its constitution as well as in functions.

THE DIMASA KACHARIS

Introduction

The Dimasa Kacharis of North Cachar Hills District are one of the important hill tribes of Assam. The Dimasas belong to that group of Indo Mongoloid people which, besides Dimasa includes Tiprasa, Tiwasa, Moran, Sonowal, Boro, Mech, Rabha, Garo, Hajong, Chutia, Koch, Kiratas etc. They are also known as 'Dilaosas' (sons of the great river).

According to 1971 census there are 39,344 Dimasa Kacharis in Assam. They constitute 18.17% of the total scheduled tribes population of the Autonomous Hill District of Assam. The percentage of the Dimasa Kacharis to total scheduled tribes population of the state is 2.4.

There are a few tangible socio-cultural economic and political characteristic features of the Dimasa Kacharis which are not generally found among other ethnic groups of Assam.

The cultural ethos of the Dimasa Kacharis are largely influenced by the Hinduisation process since the time of Maharaja Krishna Chandra (1780-1813 A.D.) During Krishna Chandra's time the Dimasa codification of the social rules were given effect to.

Divorce is very rare among them and can be effective only when approval of the 'Kumang' is obtained. The 'Kumang' is assisted by the elderly village women.

Religion :

The Dimasa religion centers round propitiation of a member of deities and evil spirits. The benevolent deities are 'Sibrai', 'Deo Raja', 'Naikhu Raja', 'Waa Raja', 'Ganyung' 'Braiyung' and 'Hamiadao'. 'Sibrai' is considered as the supreme God. The people believe that natural calamities, epidemics and other unnatural events in a village are caused by evil spirits. The spirits influence the 'Jhum' site also. Hence evil spirits are to be worshipped regularly. Besides there is a clan deity or the ancestral God of a village who is worshipped annually by the 'Khumang'.

The Gods had their own jurisdictions in earlier days. The traditional Dimasa principality had 12 specific geographical areas earmarked for 12 deities and each such area was called as 'Daikho', Each Daikho had a priest called 'Zonthai' selected from a male clan, 'Hojaisa'.

Nodrang (village Dormitory) :

In the olden days all the hill tribes had bachelor's dormitory which served as a recreation cum training centre for the youths of a village. The youths also acted as defence personnel as inter tribal feuds were common in those days and attack on the enemy villages was done at night. But today, dormitories by and large serve as training centers where the youths learn arts and crafts, music and dance etc.

The 'Nodrang' of the Dimasa is such an institution which is constructed in a central place of the village. The unmarried young boys spend their leisure hours after dusk. It also serves as a guest house for the casual visitors to a Dimasa village. Today, however, the functional aspects of 'Nodrang' have almost lost their original meaning due to spread of modern education among the boys and girls.

Taboos :

The Dimasas observe certain taboos in respect of village administration and in their day to day life. A woman in the Dimasa

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Traditional Institutions :

Corporate living is the characteristic feature of the Dimasa mode of life and this is seen in various spheres of their daily life.

Salis :

The 'Salis' or Village Councils play significant role. Inter and intra village disputes are settled in the Council which is headed by the Kunang. The Kunang is assisted by 7 office bearers like 'Dilek', 'Daulathu', 'Habaisagao', 'Pharai', 'Mantri', 'Hangsebukhu' and 'Jalairao', The 'Kunang', by virtue of his position wields much power and authority. The North Cachar Hills District Council entrusts the 'Kunang' with the duties of collecting taxes, maintenance of birth and death registers and records of areas in a village.

Nodrang :

Another traditional social institution is the 'Nodrang' or bachelor's dormitory. Besides other roles mentioned above, the members of a 'Nodrang' render social service in the village. They help the needy and helpless villagers in planting, harvesting of paddy, roofing houses etc. The youth organization conducts the annual harvest festival i.e. 'Bushu. The young girls who are not members of the 'Nodrang', also join the boys. Two office bearers are selected from among the youths. The leader of the boy is called 'Nagahoja'. While the girls leader is known as 'Malahaja'. The corporate functioning helps the youths to stand on their own legs in future conjugal life.

Hangsao :

The youths of a Dimasa village perform welfare service

Kadepeo's lands include lands of entire village including lands of adjacent hillocks. The Kadepeo charges one basketful of paddy as annual revenue for the jhum lands owned by individual families.

The lands owned by the six clans are for exclusive use of the members of the clan.

Community jhum lands are the property of all the villagers and each family has right on such a land.

Religion :

Although a section of the Zemes of North Cachar Hills District has accepted Christianity, yet the larger section of the Zemes still follow the traditional system of worship. Tingwang is their supreme God. He protects the people from epidemics and other natural calamities, Sukprai is the benevolent deity of crops. Offerings of pig, fowl are made to their deities. Outsiders must not visit a house when the pujas are performed. Besides they observe Genna (taboo) on the fullmoon day. They enjoy complete rest on the Genna day..

Traditional Institution Morung :

Unlike most of the hill tribes, the Zemes possess a bisexual dormitory. Each Zeme village has separate dormitory for young un-married boys and girls called Hangseuki and Leoseuki respectively. The Hangseuki serves as a training centre for the boys as they learn the art of wrestling, fighting, hunting, dancing, singing and handicrafts. They also help the villagers in times of need. "Bordoloi opines, " The boys' Morung is the best school for practical life of the Zeme boys. The Morung life make them self reliant, disciplined and also instills in them a sense of service to the corporate body".

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Religion :

Although a section of the Zemes of North Cachar Hills District has accepted Christianity, yet the larger section of the Zemes still follow the traditional system of worship. Tingwang is their supreme God. He protects the people from epidemics and other natural calamities, Sukprai is the benevolent deity of crops. Offerings of pig, fowl are made to their deities. Outsiders must not visit a house when the pujas are performed. Besides they observe Genna (taboo) on the fullmoon day. They enjoy complete rest on the Genna day.

Traditional Institution Morung :

Unlike most of the hill tribes, the Zemes possess a bisexual dormitory. Each Zeme village has separate dormitory for young un-married boys and girls called Hangseuki and Leoseuki respectively. The Hangseuki serves as a training centre for the boys as they learn the art of wrestling, fighting, hunting, dancing, singing and handicrafts. They also help the villagers in times of need. "Bordoloi opines, " The boys' Morung is the best school for practical life of the Zeme boys. The Morung life make them self reliant, disciplined and also instills in them a sense of service to the corporate body".

THE KUKIS

Introduction :

The Kukis are one of the major hill tribes of the North Cachar Hills District of Assam. The term Kuki includes a group

tribes. Their villages are interspersed with populations of other ethnic groups. As many as thirty seven ethnic groups are included under the generic name Kuki. As per 1971 census the total population of the Kuki tribes is 13,524.

They live on hill tops. Houses are arranged in two rows with sufficient space in between.

All the Kuki tribes except the Hrangkhols have their traditional hereditary chiefs, These chiefs are supreme in their respective villages. The chief selects the jhum lands and without his consent a village cannot be shifted form one jhum site to another. For the services rendered by the chief each cultivator is required to share certain quantities of rice depending upon the jhum land he possesses. Besides, if any villager kills an animal, a share has to be offered to the chief. The chief is assisted by a few office bearers. Today, however, the powers of the chief have been curtailed drastically.

The Hrangkhals, on the other hand, maintain a democratic tradition and a Hrangkhal village is administered by a group of officials.

The Kukis are patriarchal people and descent is traced through the male line only.

The people eke out their livelihood from their jhum lands. Wet paddy cultivation is also practised whenever such plots are available. The Kukis are good horticulturists and pineapples, lemons, ginger etc., are grown abundantly in the terrace. Black pepper, coffee, cashewnut are also grown in a limited scale.

They are famous for bamboo and cane products. The women are expert weavers and cloths of the family are produced in their looms. They rear pigs, cattle and poultry of local variety. Pigs and fowls are required for their socio-religious festivals.

Each Kuki group has a number of clans which are exogamous. Although clan exogamy is the rule, variation is also tolerated. Inter tribe marriage within the broad Kuki groups is allowed. Polygamy is not prevalent among the groups. There are stray cases of marriage by capture but majority of the marriages are solemnized after negotiation between the parties. A feast is

arranged by the parents of the girl on the marriage day. Bride price is charged at a minimum of Rs. 50.00 and maximum of Rs. 500.00 depending upon the economic condition of the groom. If the groom is unable to pay the bride price, he is required to stay in the father in law's house and help the parents of the girl in their day to day activities. He is not forbidden to co habit with his wife.

Levirate is in vogue in the Kuki society. Widow re-marriage is also allowed after the period of mourning only. A widower on the otherhand cannot remarry within three years of the death of his wife.

All the Kuki tribes except the Hrangkhols bury the dead. The Hrangkhols on the other hand cremate their dead bodies. They believe that after death the soul rests in a place called Itikua. The souls of persons killed by wild animals, however cannot go to the Itikua. They rest in a place called shora kua.

At present almost the Kukis profess Christianity.

THE RENGMA NAGAS

The Rengma Nagas constitute one of the major Naga tribal groups of Nagaland. In Karbi Anglong district they have established twelve villages. The estimated population of these twelve villages will be about 4300.

Rengma villages are arranged in two rows having sufficient space in between the rows. Every village has a headman who is called as Songpegyu. Another office bearer, who is also a medicine man is called pethinyu and these office bearers along with the village elders decide the disputes of the villagers in a Village Council.

They live in platform type house and each house has apartments for different members of a family.

There is preponderance of nuclear family among the Rengma Nagas. They are patriarchal people and the sons only inherit property.

Like other hill tirbes the Rengmas also practice jhum cultivation. They grow rice, maize, cotton, chillies, ginger and other

winter crops in their jhum sites.

The women are expert weavers and most of the clothes are woven locally. They know the indigenous method of dyeing yarn. There are certain taboos in connection with birth of a child. The parents of the child observe Genna for nine days continuously and during these days co-villagers do not even talk to them. Another nine day Genna is observed in case of death. During Genna no member of the family of the deceased should work or leave the boundary of a village. During the Genna days food is offered to the deceased which is preserved for offering to the dead on the expiry of genna i.e. 10th day. It is believed that the soul leaves the body of the dead only on the 10th day. A feast is also arranged on this day and all the villagers are entertained.

There are eight exogamous divisions among the Rengmas namely Kenpumyu, Keurjuyu, Resobinyu, Jisen beinyu, Sabinyu, Nyen thanyu, Nangdunyu and Henbunyu. Violation of clan exogamy rule leads to excommunication from the clan.

Marriage by service is the prevailing practice. The would be groom has to serve his in laws for a year before marriage. The would be groom may stay either in his own house or in the house of the would be father in law. He, however cannot co-habit with his would be wife. If a boy develops liking for a girl and if she belongs to a different clan then a formal proposal from the boy's side is made. If the proposal is accepted by the girl's parents, a day is fixed for sempon ceremony in the girl's house where the boy's parents offer a longdao (Nze Ketang) and a spear (Nye) to the girl's parents. The actual marriage jankhim takes place after one year. On the marriage day a mock fight takes place at the girl's house and the boy's party forcefully takes away the girl.

The Rengmas are monogamous but polygamy is not frowned upon. Divorce is very rare in their society. Widow remarriage is allowed provided the customary clan exogamy is adhered to. The younger brother can marry the widow of the elder brother. The cross cousin marriage is not prevalent in the Rengma society.

At present the people have embraced Christianity and old animistic beliefs are fast dying out.

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At present the people have embraced Christianity and old animistic beliefs are fast dying out.

Like other hill tribes the Rengma Nagas too, have dormitory for the unmarried boys which they call Rensi. It provides a shelter for the boys at night. They learn various skills of handicrafts, music and dance in this Rensi. The boys render free labour to the needy families specially to the widows and infirms.

THE HMARS

In Assam the Hmars are mainly concentrated in the North Cachar Hills. There are a few Hmar villages in Cachar District bordering N.C. Hills. This small ethinic groups with only 5380 persons (1971 census) generally live on the hill tops. A Hmar village is surrounded by a bamboo fencing and approach to a village can be made through a bamboo gate. Hmar houses are built on wooden platform about one to two feet above the ground. They manufacture most of the items of material culture with bamboos and canes. Hmar cane headgear is a speciality used mainly by a victorious Hmar.

They eke out their livelihood from the jhum lands as well as from the kitchen gardens. Rice is their staple food. Pork and chicken are their delicacies. Zu (Rice beer) is taken in festive occasions. Besides, Zu forms a prized item for entertaining guests and friends.

The Hmars prefer joint family system. But nuclear families are also found among them. They are patriarchal people and the sons inherit property. Unlike most of the hill tribes, the Hmars allow the youngest son to inherit the paternal property. In some clans, however, a variation is noticed where the eldest son only inherits father's property. They have twelve clans like pangamate, Rengsate, Pazamate, Phenate, Khawbreng, Lung thraule, Lungtao, Leiri, Zole, Ngurte, Khelte and Khawlhring.

The village chief is called Lal. There are two other office bearers namely khawnbawl upa and khawnbawl. The chief, along with these office bearers and village elders decide all the disputes in a Council. The fee for accepting a case in the Council is a pig which is called Salam. This pig is shared by the members of the council. Every order of the chief is carried to the common villagers

by his assistant known as Tlangsam. His additional duty is to look after the village dormitory also.

Monogamy is the prevailing practice. Clan exogamy is not strictly followed. Bride price is charged at the time of marriage and it ranges from Rs. 200.00 to Rs. 500.00. The youngest daughter fetches more bride price.

Divorce is allowed in consideration of money. In case of the bride, the parents have to return the birde price. Similarly the groom has to pay a lump sum money to the bride as compensatin if he seeks divorce.

Widow remarriage is also prevalent among them.

The Hmars generally prefer negotiated marriage. The Christian Hmars, however follow the rules of the Church.

As regards religious belief it is found that most of the Hmars have accepted Christianity. Churches have been constructed in their villages where regular prayers are held.

Among the Hmars burial is the prevailing custom. The purification ceremony is observed within a year after the death. On this occasion cooked food is offered to the dead at his grave.

The Buonzawl or village dormitory of the unmarried boys is constructed in the hill top. It is a platform house with a sigle entrance. All the unmarried boys above 15 years become members of the Buonzawl. The leader of the boys is called Valupa. These boys learn various skills in the dormitory. Besides, they render help to the widows and poor families in various ways. Among the Christians this Institution is fast disappearing.

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ANNEXURE-1

(TABLE-I) Showing Population and Percentage of the Scheduled Tribes of Assam, Census 2001

Sl. No.	Name of Tribe	Total Persons	Male	Female	Percentage of the total ST.	Percentage of literacy		
						Total	Male	Female
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1.	Boro Kachari	1352771	682710	670061	40.88	51.48	59.81	43.00
2.	Barmans of Cachar	15877	8024	7853	0.48	56.15	61.32	50.87
3.	Mishing (Miri)	587310	299790	287520	17.76	49.12	5842	39.43
4.	Deori	41161	20809	20352	1.24	65.46	72.72	58.03
5.	Rabha	277517	140614	136903	8.39	56.37	64.33	48.20
6.	Lalung (Tiwa)	170622	85964	84658	5.16	51.53	59.77	43.17
7.	Karbi (Mikir)	353513	180136	173377	10.68	42.95	51.25	34.31
8.	Dimasa	110976	56876	54100	3.35	49.14	57.28	40.58
9.	Sonowal Kachari	235881	119470	116411	7.13	70.52	76.22	64:66
10.	Mech	8997	4597	4400	0.28	70.97	76.09	65.64
11.	Hojal	1882	932	950	0.06	63.07	70.49	55.79
12.	Garo	21112	10739	10373	0.62	40.06	44.44	35.52
13.	Khasi	12722	6354	6368	0.38	27.55	28.61	26.49
14.	Any Kuki Tribes	28273	14666	13607	0.85	65.24	70.43	59.65
15.	Man, Talspeaking	739	375	364	0.02	67.50	72.27	62.63
16.	Any Naga tribes	21,706	11,077	10,629	0.66	47.09	55.51	38.32
17.	Any Mizo tirbes	2957	1504	1453	0.08	62.80	67.55	57.88
18.	Hmar	14460	7429	7031	044	72.03	76.17	67.65
19.	Hajong	256	139	117	0.01	44.53	56.03	29.91
20.	Chakma	2478	1329	1149	0.07	15.13	24.07	4.79
21.	Lakher	11	5	6	0.01	81.8	80.00	83.33
22.	Sintheng	336	164	172	0.01	58.33	65.85	51.16
23.	Other tribes	47013	24414	22599	1.43	50.54	58.27	42.20
	Total	3308570	1678117	1630453		62.5	72.3	52.4

N. B. While determining P.C. of literacy, 0-6 age group children excluded

ANNEXURE-II

(TABLE-Ii)

Showing Population and Percentage of the literacy of the Scheduled Castes of Assam, Census 2001

Sl. No.	Name of Castes	Total Persons	Male	Female	Percentage of literacy		
					Total	Male	Female
1	Bansphor	14760	7623	7137	41.05	51.62	29.76
2.	Bhuimali/Mali	57974	29936	28038	61.28	67.93	54.19
3.	Brittial Bania	47974	24590	23384	70.39	76.79	63.39
4.	Dhupi etc.	49929	26003	23926	65.83	72.14	58.97
5.	Dugla etc.	6364	3300	3064	45.86	49.09	32.47
6.	Hira	55106	28031	27075	61.71	70.57	52.53
7.	Jalkeot	23511	12225	11286	59.41	67.91	50.20
8.	Jhalomalo	77533	40326	37207	43.51	53.07	33.14
9.	Kaibarta etc.	581559	297433	284126	60.75	67.95	53.22
10.	Lalbegi	552	305	247	45.47	54.09	34.81
11.	Mahara	1725	934	791	47.25	55.35	37.67
12.	Mehtar, Bhangi	12715	6676	6039	51.35	61.30	40.33
13.	Muchi, Richi	70954	370.33	33921	39.72	50.25	28.22
14.	Namasudra	555621	288814	266807	50.00	58.43	40.87
15.	Patni	151992	78990	73002	64.00	68.83	58.78
16.	Sutradhar	62032	32001	30031	56.77	64.58	48.45
	Generic Castes	55648	29454	26194	57.60	65.86	48.32

N. B. Whiledetermining P.C. of literacy, 0-6 age group children excluded