

T.R.I. POPULAR SERIES

# TRIBES OF ASSAM

## PART-II

<b>BARMANS OF CACHAR</b>	✱
<b>HMARS</b>	✱✱
<b>KUKIS</b>	✱✱✱
<b>RENGMA NAGAS</b>	✱✱✱✱
<b>SONOWAL KACHARIS</b>	✱✱✱✱✱
<b>ZEME NAGAS</b>	✱✱✱✱✱✱

**B.N. BORDOLOI**

**G.C. SHARMAH THAKUR**

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PART—II

T.R.I. POPULAR SERIES



B. N. BORDOLOI

G. C. SHARMA THAKUR

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**TRIBES OF ASSAM, PART-II, POPULAR SERIES**

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

**Published by :**

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Director, Tribal Research Institute, Assam,  
Guwahati-781028

**First Edition, March 1988.**

**Price Rs. 22.00 (Rs. Twenty Two) only.**

**Printed in India**

at saraighat printers

M. C. Road,  
Guwahati-781 003  
Assam

## PREFACE

The Tribal Research Institute, Assam, has taken up a scheme of preparation and publication of a popular series on the tribal communities of Assam. It is felt that there has been no popular write-ups on the tribes of Assam in a consolidated manner which can be read and understood by the common readers who want to know something about our tribal people. Even for administrators also such literature on the tribes is very much essential.

In one of the Conferences of the Directors of Tribal Research Institutes, held in New Delhi under the auspices of the Ministry of Welfare (erstwhile Ministry of Home Affairs), Government of India, it was decided that each of the Tribal Research Institutes in the country should bring out popular series of books containing ethnographic notes on each scheduled tribe of their respective states within fifteen to twenty pages with representative photographs covering the main aspects of their life and culture.

It is thought that the publications of such popular series in the different parts of the country would not only enable the persons with enquisitive minds to have an idea about the basic characteristics of the tribes of India, their pace of development, problems of transition and their adaptation to the new technological changes, but would also help the administrators, development agencies, research scholars and others connected with tribal development and welfare in various ways. A rational knowledge of our unknown or little-known neighbours would surely pave the way for national integration through proper understanding of the cultural parameters that govern these more or less self-managed societies.

The present volume is Part - II of the popular series containing the ethnographic write-ups on six tribal communities, four from the hills and two from the plains, namely,

Barmans of Cachar, Hmars, Kukis, Rengma Nagas, Sonowals and Zeme Nagas of N. C. Hills.

The Part - I of the popular series published in 1987 contains the ethnographic notes on seven tribal communities, five from the plains namely, Bodo-Kacharis, Deoris, Lalungs (Tiwas), Mishings and Rabhas and two from the hills, namely, Dimasa Kacharis and Karbis. We have, therefore, covered thirteen tribal communities out of 23 in these two volumes. In the Part - III of the popular series we propose to cover a few more tribal communities out of the remaining ten.

The authors of this volume is myself and one of my faculty members. The author of the ethnographic note on the Sonowal Kacharis is Dr. G. C. Sarma Thakur, Joint Director of our Institute. The ethnographic notes on the remaining five tribal communities are written by me.

Like the previous one the present publication is also a part of the popular series and as such the readers will not find scholarly treatment here. Comments received from readers, scholars, administrators and others on the Part - I of the popular series have shown that the book has been very much well received. We think that this present volume will also serve the purpose for which it is primarily meant.

**B. N. BORDOLOI**

DIRECTOR

TRIBAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE : ASSAM  
GUWAHATI

Dated Guwahati  
the 1st January, 1988

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## The Barmans of Cachar

### Introduction :

The Barmans of Cachar are one of the plains tribes of Assam inhabiting the Barak Valley. They are in fact a part of the greater Dimasa Kachari Society the members of which are found to inhabit mostly in the North Cachar Hills District of Assam. In other words, the Dimasa Kacharis who live in the plains of the Barak Valley are known as the Barmans.

Looking back at the history, we find that the Kacharis had a long standing enmity with the Ahoms. In the year 1536 A. D. the Ahoms occupied Dimapur, the capital town of the Kacharis and had driven away the Kachari king and his royalty. Having fled away from Dimapur, the Kacharis established their capital in Maibang in the North Cachar Hills. But here also the Kacharis could not live in peace. While the most powerful Ahom king Rudrasingh was on the throne of Assam, the Kachari king Tamradhaj had the courage of proclaiming his sovereignty in the year 1706 A. D. This had infuriated the Ahom king who had despatched two contingents of the Ahom armies to Maibang, the capital of the Kachari king. The Ahom armies crushed the Kacharis and even their capital Maibang was not only occupied by the Ahom armies but demolished also. The then Kachari king Tamradhaj had to flee for his life and to take refuge along with his nobles and other followers in Khaspur, in the plains of Cachar. Khaspur had subsequently become the new capital of the Kacharis. Though the shifting of the capital from Maibang to Khaspur was started during the reign of Tamradhaj, the total shifting was, however, effected in 1750 during the reign of Kartik or Kirti Chandra Narayan.

### The term 'Barman' and its significance

The Barmans of Cachar are, no doubt, Dimasa Kacharis out and out. Now the pertinent question is—why the Kacharis left in the North Cachar Hills and the Karbi Anglong are till known as the Dimasas and the Dimasa Kacharis who had migrated from these areas to the plains of Cachar are known as Barmans?

According to Mr. Upendra Chandra Guha those Dimasas who consider themselves to be the descendants of Bhima, the second Pandava of the Mahabharata, and follow the Hindu religious principles and wear sacred threads like the Khatriyas are called Barman. The Kacharis who consider themselves to be the descendants of Hidimba and who still follow their traditional religion are known as Dimasa<sup>1</sup>.

Quoting Mr. Allen, Mr. J. B. Bhattacharjee says—“In the plains the Dimasas were known as Barman who had assumed the system of wearing sacred thread like the Brahmans and the Khatriyas”:<sup>2</sup>

Mr. C. A. Soppit, on the other hand, regards the Barmans as the aristocratic class of the Dimasas. He says “About 1750 the Raja and the Barmans (aristocracy) crossed the Barail range and established capital at Khaspur.”<sup>3</sup>

Now we have got two views before us regarding the calling of the Dimasas in the plains of Cachar as Barmans. Of the two, the view expressed by Mr. Guha appears to be more logical. It is also true to some extent that a fugitive king was likely to be accompanied by the aristocratic families since their valuable belongings were likely to be plundered by the invaders

1. Guha, U. C., Kacharer Itibritta (Bengali), Guwahati, 1971, (Reprint), Pages 52 and 99.
2. Bhattacharjee, J. B., Cachar under British Rule in North East India, New Delhi, 1977, Page-219.
3. Soppit, C. A., A Historical and Descriptive Account of the Kachari Tribes in the N. C. Hills with Specimens of Tales and Folk-tales, Shillong, 1885, Page-4.

while the common subjects have nothing to lose much. But all the aristocratic families were not likely to leave their hearth and home. Those who did not accompany the fugitive king should have remained in the North Cachar Hills by retaining their title Barman. But we hardly find Barmans in the hill areas of Assam.

Secondly the fugitive king might have been accompanied by many a common Dimasas to the plains of Assam. But why have then all the Dimasa Kacharis in the plains of Cachar been called Barmans?

Mr. Guha's view that the Dimasas who consider themselves to be the descendants of Bhima are called Barmans and those who consider themselves to be the descendants of Hidimba are called Dimasa contains some truth, but not the whole truth. To think that only those who considered themselves to be the offsprings Bhima had accompanied the king from Maibang to Khaspur is unthinkable.

In all probability when the Dimasas, who on shifting the capital from Maibang in the North Cachar Hills migrated to the plains of Cachar, had come into the contact with the Hindu people and the Brahminical priests, the idea that they were the descendants of Bhima, the second Pandava, who was a Khatriya and whose place was next to Brahmin in the Hindu Caste hierarchy, might have been injected to their mind. This ultimately led to the accept Hinduism and to declare themselves to be Khatriyas by wearing sacred threads by the male members and by performing the religious rites of the Hindus. At this stage perhaps, the Dimasas started calling themselves Barmans to distinguish them from the other section of the Kacharis living in the hills and following their traditional religion.

According to Mrs. Nirupama Hagjer, the switching over the titles from Dimasa clan names to Barman by the Dimasas living in the plains of Cachar is not even hundred years old. She has stated that the Kachari king Krishna Chandra Narayan was asked by the Brahmans to change

his title to Barma after his atonement in Prayag. Although the king accepted this suggestion, the writing of title as Barma was, however, confined to the members of the royal family only. This had of course little impact on the common Dimasas. In 1830 at the death of the king Gobind Chandra, the nobles and the common people alike had changed their Dimasa titles and used such titles such as Barma, Bezbarua, Barbarua, Bezlaskar, Laskar, Choudhury, etc. But due to the constant efforts on the part of the Brahmins, the Dimasas dropped the above titles and started writing Barman after their names."\* And they also accepted the practice of wearing sacred thread by the male members in order to prove themselves to be true Khatriyas.

In the conclusion we may, therefore, assume that the title Barman, so far the Dimasas living in Cachar are concerned, is rather a product of the influence of the Brahmins on the Kachari kings, their royalties and the common Dimasas after the total shifting of the capital from Maibang to Khaspur. The process was, however, somewhat gradual.

#### Racial Affinity

From the above discussion it is seen that the Barmans of Cachar are originally Dimasa Kacharis although at present from the points of view of their material culture and religion they have much differences than likeness with the Dimasas of the North Cachar Hills and the Karbi Anglong Districts. Linguistically the Barmans of Cachar and for that matter the Dimasas belong to the Tibeto-Burman group. The scholars are of the opinion that the people belonging to the Tibeto-Burman group originally inhabited the area on banks of rivers the Yang-tc-Kiang and the Howaog-Ho in western China. From here hordes of them migrated from one place to another through the courses of the Chindwin and the Irrawady. Some of the hordes entered Assam by land as well through the courses of the Brahmaputra and started

4. Hagjer, Nirupama, Dimasa (Assamese), Jorhat, 1974, Page-74

living in the valleys of the rivers and in adjacent hills of the valleys of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries. In fact the Bodo-Kacharis living in the Brahmaputra Valley, the Dimasa Kacharis living in the North Cachar Hills and in the Karbi Anglong districts and the Barmans in Cachar refer to the same stock of people although due to separation and isolation for centuries together differences, rather than likeness, in the languages spoken and the material culture practised by the Bodo-Kacharis, Dimasa Kacharis and the Barmans of Cachar are observed.

#### History

Bereft of any written records, the early history of the Kacharis prior to the advent of the Ahoms, can be regarded as a guess-work. From their old legends it can be assumed that the Kacharis after entering Assam through the north-east settled in the hills and slopes of the upper course of the Brahmaputra. They gradually moved towards west and extended their settlement even upto the Mymensing district of present Bangladesh.

It is believed that during the pre-historic period the capital of the Kachari kingdom was at Pragjoytishpur (present Guwahati). The Dimasas who claim to be the descendants of Bhinia, the second Pandava and Hidimba, a non-Aryan princess, had their capital establishment at Dimapur (in present Nagaland) probably during the later part of the 11th century prior to the advent of the Ahoms.

The Kachari kingdom at the time of the advent of the Ahoms at the beginning of the 13th Century was extended along the south bank of the Brahmaputra from the Dikhou to the Kalang rivers. The Dhansiri valley as well as the North Cachar Hills tract were also included in it. The Ahoms who were rather a powerful race from the point of view of warfare, had gradually driven the Kacharis from the western bank of the Dikhou river and subsequently had driven them out from their capital town of Dimapur in the year 1529 after a fierce battle.

Being driven away from Dimapur and from the entire Dhansiri Valley, the Kacharis had to shift their capital to Maibang in the North Cachar Hills. But their hostility with the Ahoms did not end and it rather flared up during the reign of the most powerful Ahom king Rudra Singh. In 1706 the Ahom armies attacked Maibang and the Kachari king Tamradhavj was compelled to leave Maibang and flee for his life. The king accompanied by his nobles and some loyal subjects had taken refuge in Khaspur in the plains of Cachar where the Kacharis established their last capital. The last Kachari king who reigned from Khaspur was Gobind Chandra who unfortunately lost northern hilly region (North Cachar Hills tract) of his kingdom to his own general Tularam Senapati. King Gobind Chandra could not sail in smooth water. He was almost dethroned by two Manipuri brothers and ultimately with the help of the British soldiers he could get back his lost territory in 1824 after signing a treaty with Mr. David Scott, Agent to the Governor General, according to which he would be a protected king who was required to pay an annual tribute to the East India Company. In 1925 the protected king Gobind Chandra abandoned Khaspur and established his capital at Haritika, about 6 kms. west of Badarpur.

In 1830 the king died without leaving any legal heir to the throne. Taking this opportunity the British annexed the Kachari kingdom and Cachar to its territory.

#### Demography

As per 1971 Census, there were 13,210 Barmans in the District of Cachar out of which 6,761 were males and 6,449 were females distributed into 80 and 5 villages in Silchar and Hailakandi sub-divisions respectively. As no Census of Assam in 1981 could be conducted, we have to rely upon the projected growth of population based on the national growth rate. The estimated projected population of the Barmans of Cachar in 1987 would be 20,819. According to 1971 Census the percentage of literacy of the Barmans in Cachar was 30.45 as against the State percentage of literacy of 28.72. Their level of literacy is, therefore,

slightly higher than that of the State as a whole. While the percentage of male literacy was 39.97 as against the male literacy of the State of 37.19%, the female literacy was found to be 22.56% as against the State percentage of 19.27.

### SOCIAL LIFE

#### A. Family Structure

The Barmans of Cachar follow the patriarchal system of family structure. The father is the head of the family and the line of descent is traced through the father only. While the Dimasas of the North Cachar Hills have the unitary pattern of family structure, the Barmans of Cachar, on the other hand, prefer the joint family structure. The head of the family his married and unmarried brothers, his married and unmarried sons and unmarried daughters live under the same roof and have their food from the one and the same kitchen. Since the joint family structure is not a custom among the Dimasas of N. C. Hills, it, may, therefore, be presumed that the joint family system followed by the Barmans of Cachar is rather an impact of the Bengali influence.<sup>5</sup>

#### B. Clans

Like the Dimasas of the North Cachar Hills, the Barmans of Cachar have also 40 male clans called Semphong and 42 female clans called Julu. These clans, both male and female, are exogamous and as such marriage between the boys and the girls of the same clan or boys and girls belonging to the mother's clan and father's clan cannot take place. The clan of a new born baby is determined by its sex. If the new born is a boy he will be included in the Semphong of his father and if it is a girl she will be an additional member in the Zulu of her mother.

#### C. Marriage

The system of marriage prevalent among the Barmans of Cachar differs fundamentally with that of the Dimasas

5. Hegjer, Nirupama, Dimasa (Assamese), Jorhat, 1974, Page-19.



of the N. C. Hills. Marriage by negotiation is the prevailing practice although marriage by capture is also not totally absent. But such a marriage has to be regularised at a sooner or later date.

The Barmans barring one or two customs have completely given up the traditional Dimasa system of marriage and have accepted the Brahminical Hindu system.

Like the Dimasas of N.C. Hills, the parents or guardians of a marriageable bachelor at first send the proposal to the bride's family on a day already fixed for this purpose. If the proposal is accepted by the bride's family, the preliminary step called 'Sandi-Dang-Sengba' which means the formal acceptance of the marriage proposal is started. For this purpose three women carry about 15 Nos of betel nuts with betel leaves by tying them with seven bamboo straps in seven rows in a bundle with a hand scraf called Gamosa to the bride's house. As a second step some quantity of rice beer called Zou in gourd pots is taken to the bride's house by some male members from the village of the boy and the actual date for the marriage is fixed. After this second step, no traditional methods of the marriage ceremony are observed. The actual marriage is then performed in the Hindu way with the help of the Brahmin priests. Just like the neighbouring Bengalis the marriage ceremony is performed at night only. The newly married couple consummates their marriage on the very night itself. Next day the bride is taken to the boy's house.

Like the Dimasas of the North Cachar Hills the practice of paying bride price called 'Kalti' is also prevalent among the Barmans of Cachar. It is the responsibility of the young man to earn and save the required amount for the payment of bride price. Among the Barmans now-a-days, however, the qurdians or the parents of the girl donot insist on the payment of the bride price.

Child marriage is not prevalent among them. From the point of view of marriage they follow monogamy. The

married couple has to go through a very laborious process if one of them or the both want a divorce. Hence divorce is rather very rare. Another important thing that is observed in case of the Barmans of Cachar is the absence of the system of widow remarriage while widow remarriage is permissible among the Dimasas of the N.C. Hills.

#### D. Birth

The birth of a child, be it a male or a female, is an occasion of joy for the family. The mother and the baby are separated from the other family members till the navel chord falls and the purification ceremony is performed. At the time of delivery, help of doctors is not generally sought unless it is absolutely necessary. Elderly women of the community having the experience of midwifery help the woman at the child-birth. On the day of the purification of the mother and the child the elderly women and sometimes elderly men also are to be entertained with a moderate feast and the women helping at the time of delivery are to be offered some presents by the father of the child.

#### E. Death

The Barmans cremate the dead. Babies who die without arriving at the teething stage are only buried. When the elderly villagers confirm that a particular person would die soon, devotional songs are sung for the benefit the person in the death bed. The Barmans believe life hereafter and rebirth of the deceased in the same family. When the dead body is taken to the cremation ground singing devotional songs continuously, paddy and cotton are thrown on the entire path from the house of the deceased to the cremation ground. Moreover cotton threads are also left on the path so that the departed soul would be in a position to recognize the family and take birth again. The performance of the death ceremony for the eternal bliss of the departed soul is a must. While among the Dimasas in the N. C. Hills there is no hard and fast rule regarding the duration after which the death ceremony is to performed, among the Barmans, of course,

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it has to be compulsorily performed on the 13th day from the date of death in the Hindu way where the services of the Brahmin priests are required. Again at the end of a year the annual Sardha ceremony is to be performed.

The Barmans of Cachar are very much afraid of two special kinds of death—one is death of a woman at the time of delivery and the other is the death caused by a tiger. In fact these two death are regarded as the worst kind of death.

#### Law of Inheritance

The customary law of inheritance of the Barmans in Cachar is somewhat peculiar in nature because of the existence of two parallel clans—the male clans (semphong) and female clans (Julu). This peculiar characteristic has an impact on the customary law of inheritance. The Barmans have two types of properties—the paternal or father's property and the maternal or mother's property. The paternal property which generally consists of the real estates, weapons, cash money and the cattle can be inherited only by the sons and never by daughters even if the man leaves no male issues behind. In such a case the paternal property will be inherited by the nearest male member of the clan of the deceased man.

The maternal property consists of the jewellery, looms and their accessories, cloths of the mother, the utensils used by her, etc and these can only be inherited by the daughters and never by sons even if the deceased woman does not leave behind any female issues. Under such circumstances, the mother's property will automatically be inherited by the nearest female member of her clan. There are some common properties also such as the cooking utensils, brass metal dishes and bowls, household equipments, etc. These are however, shared by the sons and daughters equally. For a childless couple, of course, the nearest male members would again appear in the scene. Such a system, sometimes, falls heavily on a person. When a childless male person dies with a debt, his nearest male relative is required to inherit the debt also along with the other items of

paternal property not due to his own fault but because he happens to be the nearest male relative of the deceased person. Even a well-to-do man may be turned into a pauper in such a case since he cannot throw away the burden of debt under any circumstances.

#### The Village System

The village system of a community depends to a considerable extent to the ecology and environment which also include the habitat of the neighbouring people. We, therefore, find that there is a vast difference between the village system of the Dimasas of N. C. Hills and the village system of the Barmans of Cachar. The habitat of the Barmans are just like the habitat of the neighbouring Bengali people. While in a Dimasa village in the N. C. Hill houses are found in rows on both sides of the village streets facing each other, the Barmans of Cachar do not construct their houses in such a manner. Their houses are quite big and spacious and the front side of each house is found either towards east or towards the south. In the homestead land fruit trees like mango, jack fruit, guava, banana, etc. are planted. Every family has a small kitchen garden also. Besides these, a bunch of bamboos is found in every household. The well-to-do families have ponds also for drinking water purpose. Pigs and poultry are generally not reared, and sanitary conditions, therefore, are found to be quite satisfactory.

The houses are built with timber posts and thatch is used for roofing. Many families, now-a-days, have C. I. sheet roofed houses also. The walls are generally mud plastered. The main houses have three to four chambers with provisions for kitchen. Granaries for storing paddy, cowsheds, goat sheds and duck sheds are constructed separately. Some Barman families construct separate houses for accommodation of male guests.

#### Village Leadership

The traditional village leadership headed by Kunang (headman) and assisted by Dilo has now been replaced

by modern leaders. The Gaonburah or the village headman appointed by the Government, the Panchayat Members, the non-official members of the Project Implementation Committee of Integrated Tribal Development Project, Silchar, Subdivisional Tribal Development Boards, Silchar and Hailakandi, School teachers, educated youths, etc, are the most sought after persons. In case of any difficulties the common Barmans generally approach these people. Among the Barmans themselves there are very few cases of disputes, thefts, incests, elopments, etc. In the settlement of such cases the traditional leaders like the Kunang and the Dilo, and the modern leaders mentioned above and other village elders take an active part by holding the village council sessions. Cases are taken to the law-courts only when the village councils fail to settle. In this connection it may be mentioned that the Barman villages are surrounded by non-Barman villages. Inter-village disputes sometime take place. The village elders from the concerned villages try to settle such disputes mutually.

#### **Bachelors' Dormitory**

While in the North Cachar Hills the Nodrang, or the bachelors' dormitory still plays an important role in each Dimasa village, the villages inhabited by the Barmans are marked by the absence of the Nodrangs—the bachelors' dormitories. This may be due to three reasons. Firstly, the need for bachelors' dormitory in the plains might not have been felt, since the sudden attack from neighbouring tribal communities and from wild animals as well which was rather a common feature in the hill areas was absent in the plains of Cachar. Such a defence as well as protective strategy was not felt necessary. Secondly, the Brahminical influence on the Dimasas on being shifted to the plains of Cachar might have induced them to give up some of their traditional institutions. Thirdly the bachelors' dormitory where the unmarried young boys are required to spend the nights is not compatible with the modern system of education. The boys who attend schools are required to study and do their homeworks. We have already seen that

the percentage of literacy among the Barmans is slightly higher than that of the State percentage of literacy in 1971. The presence of the bachelors' dormitories might have been considered by them as detrimental towards the growth of education. Even in the North Cachar Hills the functional aspects of the Nodarang have deteriorated in the recent times at such a fast rate that only the bare Nodrangs in their dilapidated conditions stand in the middle of the Dimasa villages like the aged toothless persons.

#### **RELIGIOUS LIFE**

The Barmans of Cachar are Hindus. All the gods and goddesses of the Sakta sect that are worshipped by the other Hindus are also worshipped by them. The services of the Brahmins are indispensable. History shows us that if the king and his subjects were of the same stock of people, religion of the king became the religion of the subjects also. The Kachari kings Lakhmichandra and Kritichandra while reigning from Khaspur became completely Hinduised due to the influence of the Brahmin priests. Those Dimasas who had followed the king from Maibang to the plains of Cachar also were greatly influenced by the actions of their kings in Khaspur resulting in the acceptance of the Hindu religion fully and completely. But at the same time, it is also hardly possible on the part of a people who had been following their traditional religion from time immemorial to give up completely some of the traditional religious rituals and beliefs in the ghosts, evil spirits, etc. Moreover Lord Siva or Sibsrai who is their principal deity in the traditional religion still plays an important role in their religious life. Among the Barmans of Cachar there are, of course, no Christians.

#### **ECONOMIC LIFE**

##### **A. Principal Occupation**

The primary occupation of the Barmans of Cachar is agriculture. Since they have been living in the plains area, they are settled cultivators. Besides rice they also cultivate

crops like cotton, mustard, sugarcane, sweet potatoes and vegetables. A recent Survey carried in Barman villagers shows that largest number of families are marginal landholders having land upto 5 Bighas.<sup>6</sup>

They generally raise two principal paddy crops in a year—Ahu and Sali. While Sali paddy is cultivated by each and one family, Ahu paddy is not cultivated by all the families. It is cultivated by only those families which have irrigation facilities in their land. Mustard is cultivated on the river banks on the silts. They have in their possessions periodic Patta as well as annual Patta lands. Some families have T. B. land also, specially the land cultivated by them on the river banks.

Among the subsidiary occupations mention may be made of employment in government offices, schools, both primary and secondary, in police and defence services, weaving, sericulture, poultry farming specially of ducks, animal husbandry, manufacturing of cane and bamboo mats and other articles. Among the subsidiary occupations, however, weaving and sericulture play an important role. Weaving being a common cottage industry, not a single Barman family is found without a loom. Grown up girls and women are very expert weavers and most of the domestic requirements of their cloths are met from the family looms. Rearing of Endi which is a very common industry among the Barmans and it is rather one of the major sources of income. Cottage industries products are also primarily meant for domestic use and whatever surplus remains it is sold in the markets. The Barmans brew rice-beer for domestic consumption. They also brew distilled liquor from molasses for sale and this is one of the major sources of their income.

6. Laskar, A. A.—Land Tenure and Land Use system among the Barman Kacharis of Cachar District, Assam, in the book—Alienation of Tribal Land and Indebtedness, Guwahati, 1986, page-87.

Another important characteristic among the Barmans is their apathy towards working as labourers on wage-basis among the other neighbouring communities, although among the families of the same community they work as labourers on wage-basis readily. It is also observed that many tribal families engage agricultural labourers on contract basis from the ex-tea-garden labour communities. They are also found to be either disinterested or indifferent towards trade and commerce.

So far as the problems of indebtedness and land alienation are concerned Mr. A. A. Laskar has pointed out in a paper the methods by which the Barmans at first get themselves indebted and consequent alienation of their land. The Barmans are traditionally good forest workers with their forest background. The able bodied male persons of the Barmans are, therefore, engaged by the forest contractors for cutting and logging of trees in Mizoram and Manipur hill areas on contract basis. They are paid a part of their contract money in advance. Sometimes they fall ill seriously while working in the interior forests and return home without completing the contract period. Since their failure to work for the contractors the worth of the advance amounts paid, they naturally remain indebted to the contractors. When the case is repeated for a number of successive years, the workers ultimately become heavily indebted to the forest contractors. Finding no alternative for the repayment of the amounts of debts, the concerned persons have to part with their land resulting in alienation.<sup>7</sup>

Like the Dimasas of the North Cachar Hills, the Barmans of Cachar have also a very interesting system of mutual help and co-operation called HEDARI. When a particular family finds it difficult to cultivate its land,

7. Laskar, A. A.—Land Tenure and Land Use System among the Barman Kacharis of Cachar District, Assam—in the book Alienation of Tribal Land and Indebtedness, Guwahati, 1986, page-84.

transplant paddy seedlings or to harvest paddy in the fields in time and also to store them due to some unavoidable reasons, the head of the family concerned approaches the village headman for help to be extended through the youths of the village to do the job. This system is called HEDARI or BIBA. The youths of the village do the assigned job on a date already fixed for this purpose. Such a system helps the widows, childless couples and the invalids of the village. The concerned family, of course, has to entertain the youths with food and drink.

### CULTURAL LIFE

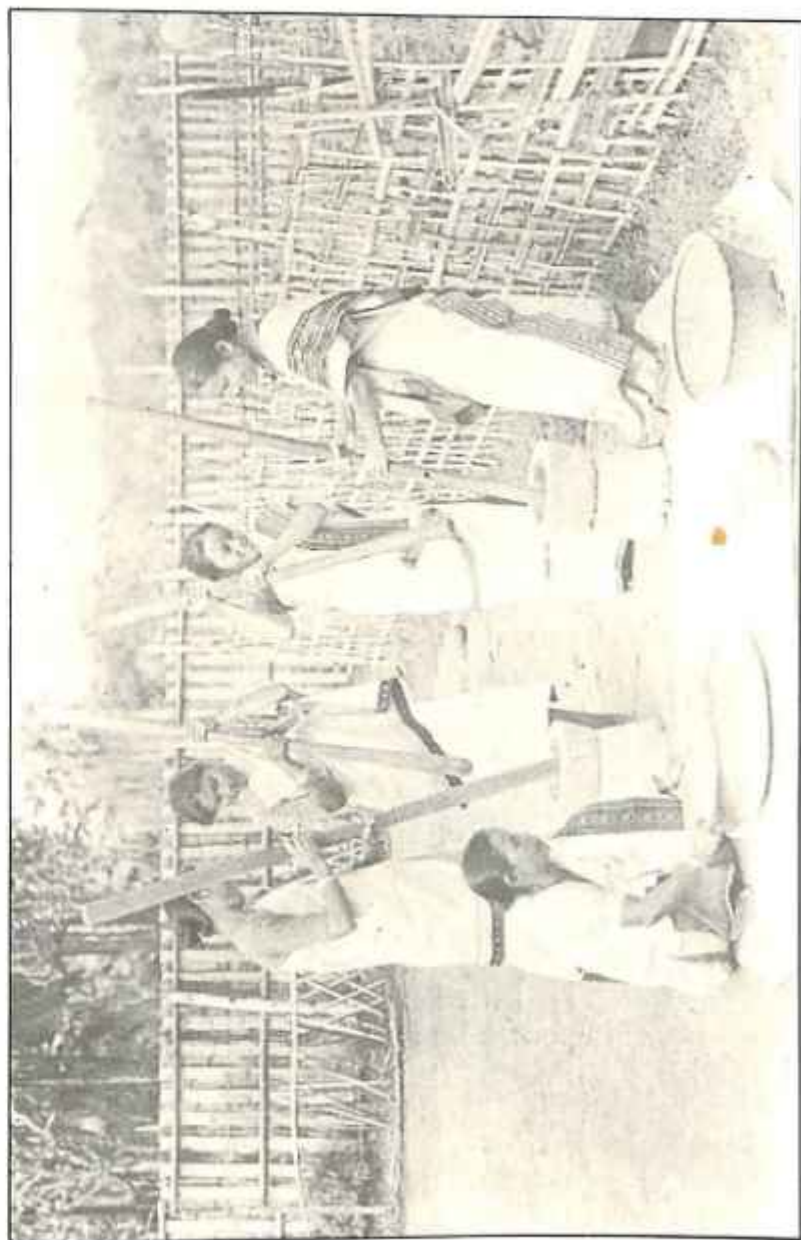
#### A. Archaeological Remains

The archaeological remains of the royal palaces, gateways, pillars and temples at Dimapur, Maibang and Khaspur and also at Kasamari Pathar prove that Dimasas are a culturally rich tribe with rare heritage. In Khaspur in the plains of Cachar, the last capital of the Kacharis, the architectural designs of the Singhadwar (main gate), the three temples of Ranchandi, the Sawan Mandir (the royal bathroom), the two storeyed palace although quite small, and the Siva Mandir (the temple of Siva) speak highly of the attainment of a stage of cultural development the Dimasas arrived at. The artistically designed cloths, the handicrafts, etc, show their love for art and artistic designs.\*

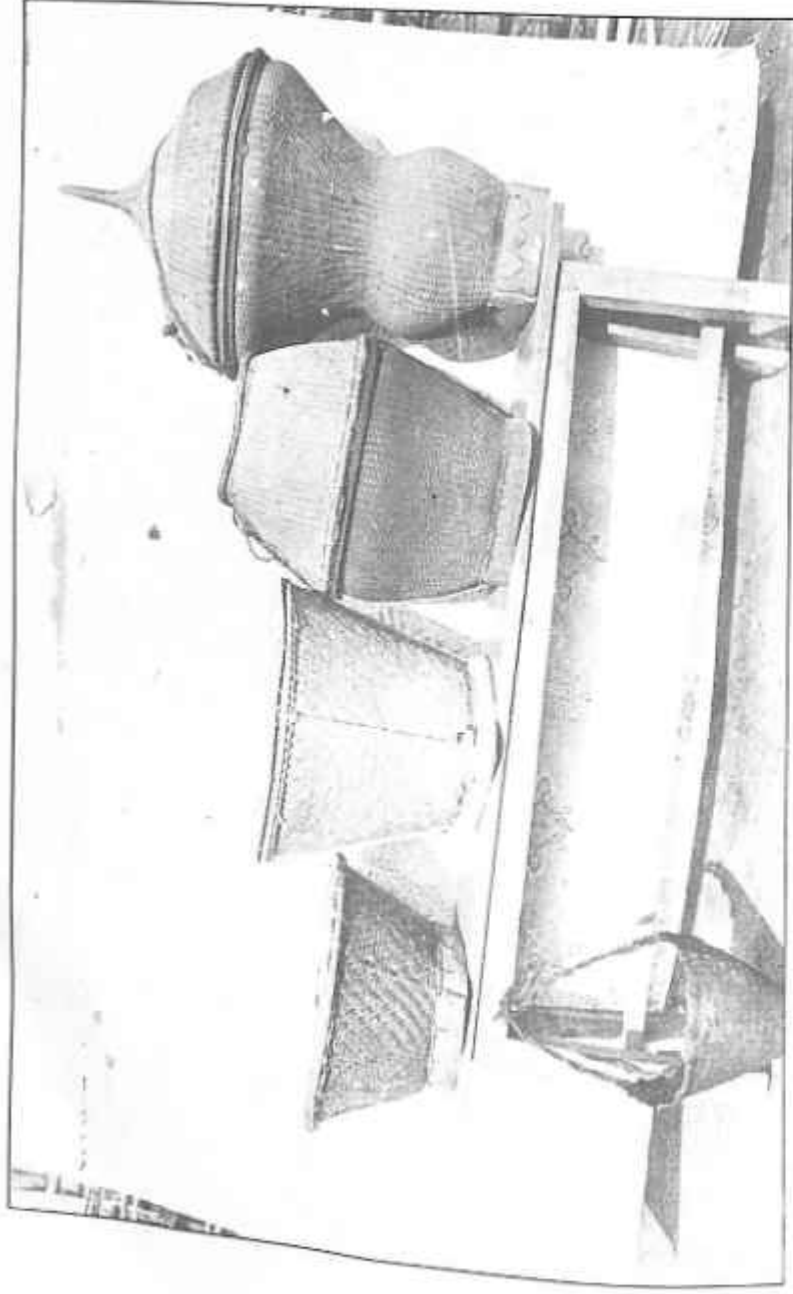
#### B. Language

Although the mother-tongue of the Barmans is Dimasa, nevertheless, due to the influence of the Bengali people, the present language spoken by them is Dimasa with frequent inclusion of Bengali words. The medium of instruction at the school level is also Bengali. While among themselves they speak in Dimasa, they use Bengali while dealing with the others.

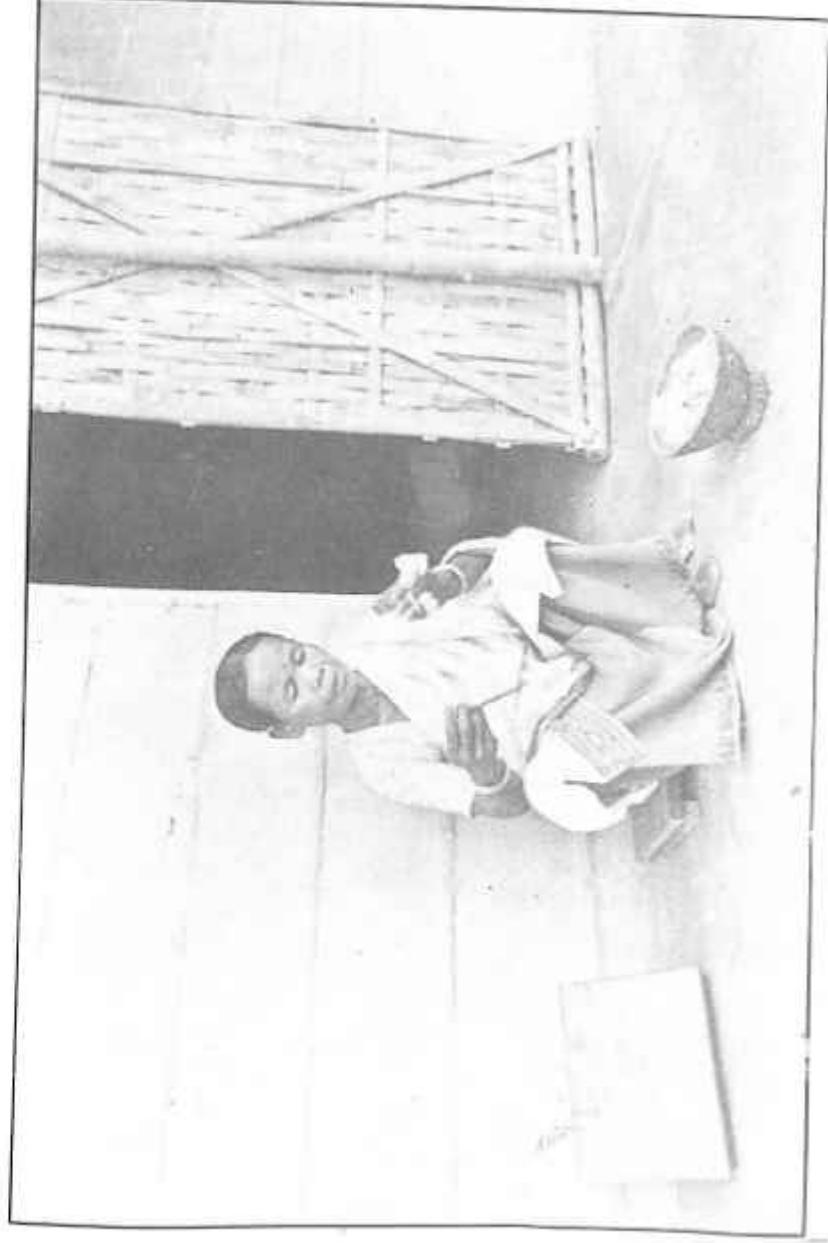
8. Bordoloi, B. N., *The Dimasa Kacharis of Assam*, Guwahati, 1984, Pages 35-37.



The Barman way of rice-pounding - a specialised work for womenfolk.

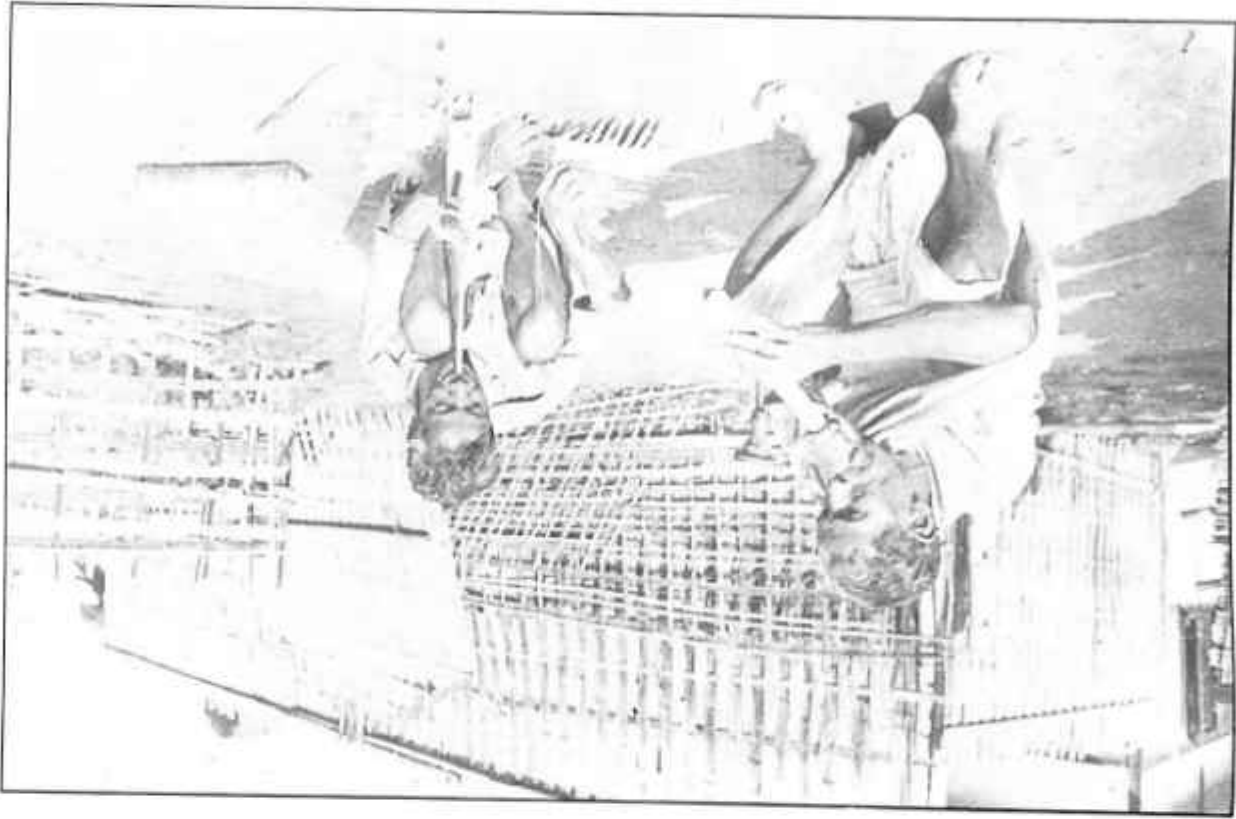


Boxes and baskets made of bamboo and cane used by the Barmams in their day to day life.

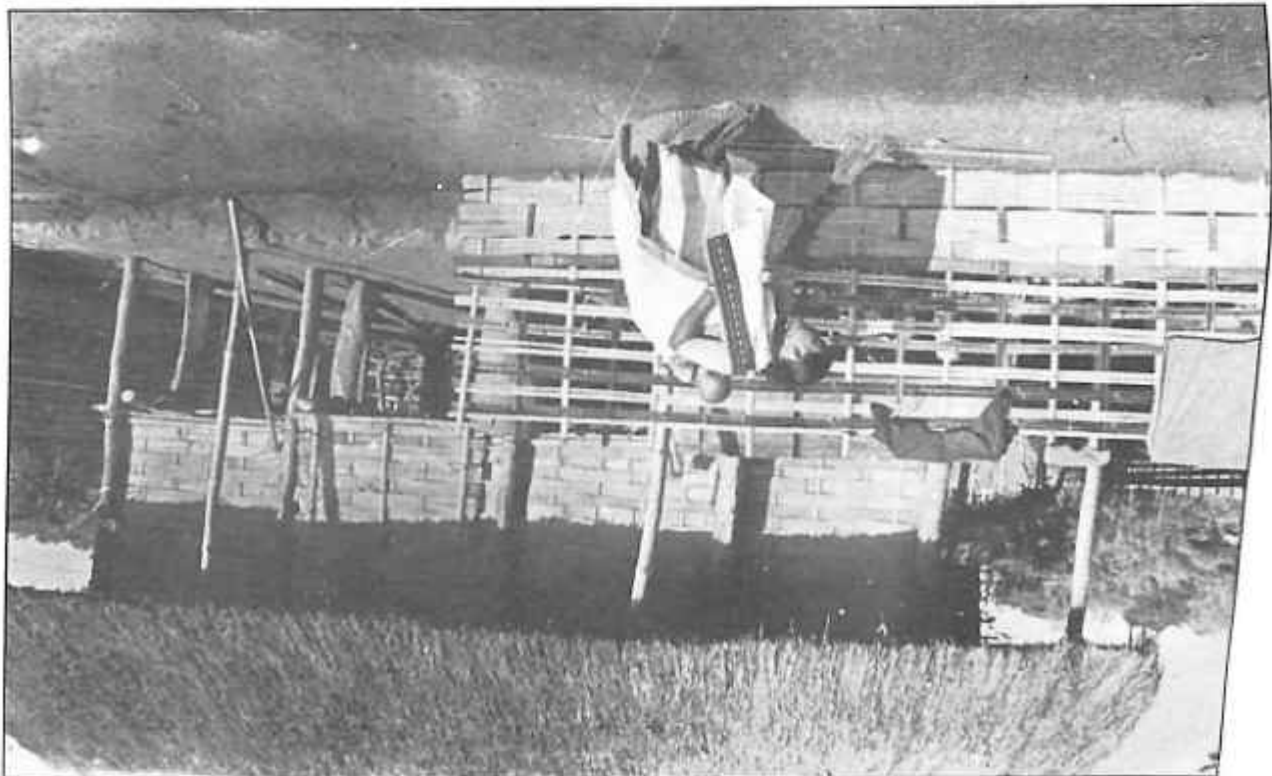


Any leisure time for a Barmam housewife is a spinning time in the traditional way

To smoke with pleasure in the traditional way an elderly Barman needs a companion of his age and liking.



A Barman woman busy in her daily score with her baby tied on the back. The granary where paddy is stored is also seen in the picture.



### C. Dance and Music

The Barmans of Cachar have almost given up their traditional dance and music. Even the traditional musical instruments like Khram (drum), Muriwaitha (bugle like flute), Suphin (flute), etc. are now replaced by Khol (Manipuri drum) Cymball and flute only. It may be mentioned here that the king Krishna Chandra married Induprabha, the Manipuri princess. As a result the Manipuri culture had penetrated into Dimasa culture. Due to royal patronage, the dance festivals like Rasaleela, Holi, etc. have made an inroad into the culture of the Barmans replacing the Bihu dances and other dances of their own culture. Mrs. Nirupoma Hagjer thinks that the absence of the celebration of the Bihu dance and festival is the result of the Bengali influence.<sup>9</sup>

### D. Dresses and Ornaments

Dresses used by the Dimasas are also the traditional dresses of the Barmans of Cachar. The males generally put on a Gomasa, a kind of homewoven towel, just like a Dhuti while at home. When they go out they put on Dhutis and shirts. In the early days they used to put on a very lengthy turban which was about 18 metres in length. But now-a-days they use turbans only on special occasions. Besides rings in fingers, they also used to put on earrings called Kri. School and college going boys and educated male persons, however, use pants and shirts.

A Barman woman puts on a piece of Mekhela like cloth called Rigu. She also uses a cotton scarf to cover the upper part of her body and it is called Rijamphai. It is of two varieties. While the common variety is used at home, on special occasions the artistically designed variety is used. It is, however, observed that the use of the traditional dresses by the Barman women has gradually been declining confining their use among the aged ones.

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9. Hagjer, N., Dimasa (in Assamese), Jorhat, 1974, P. 68.



The women are very fond of ornaments and they still put on their traditional ornaments although the ornaments used by Bengali women have also influenced them specially the younger generation to some extent. Poal (necklace made of silver coins and costly sea-shells), Khamontai (earring made of gold), Chandrawal (necklace made of silver), Rongborsa (necklace made of silver coins), Khadu (heavy silver bracelets), Eansidam (nose ring made of silver), Khamontai (earring made of silver) and necklaces made of different kinds of beads collected from nearby forests are some of the important traditional ornaments of the Barman women of Cachar.

#### E. Food and Drink

Rice is the staple food of the Dimasas. Fish caught in the nearby marshy lands and from their family ponds constitutes an important food item. Dry fish procured from the local weekly markets is also a very favourite item of food for them. Since they do not rear pigs, pork is not taken by them. Mutton and meats of home-bred birds are also taken by them occasionally specially during festivals. While vegetables are taken in each meal, Dal is taken occasionally only.

Tea either blank or with milk and sugar is taken by them twice daily. Drinking of rice-beer which they had given up earlier after their full conversion to the Hinduism and consequent observance of Hindu religions rituals, has now again appeared in the Barman society.

#### CONCLUSION

The Barmans of Cachar, like their brethren in N. C. Hills are a peace-living tribe. Living among the people of different cultures for two and a half centuries together, they have been able to maintain their ethnic identity to a greater extent, although cultural assimilation with the neighbouring Bengalis and Manipuris has already taken place to a certain degree and it cannot be avoided also.

The Barmans have thick calves, broad heads, stumpy noses and somewhat thicker lips, languish eyes with prominent cheek-bones. While the complexion of the males is almost dark-tan, the women have a fair complexion. The women are beautiful also.

The Barman villages are very neat and clean and their households are also kept very clean. Along with the developmental activities of various development agencies including those of the Silchar Integrated Tribal Development Project, changes have come to their life also. But the villages inhabited by the Barmans in the Hailakandi Subdivision being dispersed, are not included in the Integrated Tribal Development Project, Silchar.

The Barmans are very much eager to educate their children and that is why it is observed that all the children of school going age are sent to school. The people are very much adaptive and their concern about the socio economic development can be understood from the various voluntary organisations they have among them. They have availed of all the facilities extended for the improvement of agriculture, irrigation, animal husbandry, sericulture, public health and water supply, cottage industry, handloom and textiles, and so on.

Leadership from the community is always forthcoming. They have among them lawyers, Headmasters of High Schools, Secondary and Primary School teachers, etc. Their concern for the proper maintenance of the archaeological remains at Khaspur, their earnest desire to introduce Dimasa at the primary stage of education, formulation of the different cultural associations to preserve their culture and such other things clearly show that the Barmans are proud of their glorious past and they want to preserve their ethnic identity and at the same time want to develop themselves according to their own genius.

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# The Hmars

## INTRODUCTION

The term Hmar literally means north. The Hmars, therefore, refer to those people who live in the north of the Mizo Hills, the present Mizoram. Opinion differs as to the actual position of the Hmars in the Kuki-Lushai group of tribes. Many scholars regard them as a sub-tribe of the Mizos, while many others regard them as a Kuki tribe. The third group, on the other hand, regards them as a completely separate tribe independent either of the Mizos or of the Kukis. Writing on the Mizos, Mr. R. Thanlira states that the Hmars are a sub-tribe of the Mizos.<sup>1</sup> But in the same book where Mr. Thanlira has contributed his write-up on the Mizos, we find rather a conflicting view in the ethnographic note on the Kukis of the North Cachar Hills. To quote from the book—“From Chin Hills, Kukis moved in search of more fertile land into the Lushai Hills, when the more vigorous Lushai Tribes started making the same movement from Burma into Assam, the Kukis were gradually driven towards the lower and hotter northern region of the present Mizo District and came to be known as Hmars (Hmar-north). Towards the end of 18th century, the Hmars consisting of two tribes, namely, Jansens (more correctly Changsens) and the Thadous, or perhaps because their nomadic impulse had not spent itself, moved across the plains of Cachar and settled down in the North Cachar Hills and came to be known as the old Kukis”.<sup>2</sup>

1. Thanlira, R., the Mizos in the Tribes of Assam, edited by S. N. Barkataki, New Delhi, 1969, Page-82.
2. Tribes of North Cachar Hills—The Kukis—in Tribes of Assam, edited by S. N. Barkataki, New Delhi, 1969, Pages-72-73.

Writing on the Mizos, Mr. Chitra Mahanta, altogether holds a different opinion. According to him the Hmars were the original inhabitants of the Lushai Hills (Present Mizoram). They fled away to Manipur, Tripura and North Cachar after failing to withstand the atrocities of the migrating Lushais from the Chin Hills of Burma.<sup>3</sup>

As regards the affinity of the Hmars the opinions of Major Shakespear, the then Superintendent of the Lushai Hills District (present Mizoram), are found to be quite interesting. He has grouped the entire population of the then Lushai Hills District under the following fifteen heads :—

1. Lushei, 2. Khawlbring, 3 Thado, 4. Ralte, 5. Kiangte, 6. Lakher, 7. Paithe, 8. Roite, 9. Darlong 10. Pante, 11. Renthlei, 12. Poi, 13. Ngente, 14. Chongthu, 15. Hmar.

According to Major Shakespear, with the exception of Poi and Hmar, the remaining thirteen are true clan names only. He also further adds—“Hmar, which means ‘north’ is used by the rest of the inhabitants of the district to denote immigrants into the district from the Manipur state. These mostly belong to clans which are very closely allied together, speak much the same dialect, but I was unable to find a more suitable name under which to group them.”<sup>4</sup> Major Shakespear has also stated that the amount of variation between the different clans is by no means constant. The Roite, Paithe, Thado and Lakher are easily distinguishable and a very brief acquaintance with them would make it apparent that they are not Lusheis. The same is applicable to the clans which have been grouped under the name of Hmar and Poi. At the end of the note Major

3. Mizo by Chitra Mahanta in Asomor Janajati (Assamese), edited by P. C. Bhattacharjee, Jorhat, 1962, page-141.
4. Reprint on the Castes and Tribes of Assam from Chapter XI of the Report of the Census of Assam 1911 in Census of India 1961, Volume III, Assam, Part-V-A, Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes, Page-123.

Shakespear has also mentioned that the dialects spoken by the clans which have been grouped under the term Hmar are unintelligible to the Lusheis.

Major Shakespear's note on the Lushais, therefore, clearly points to the fact that the Hmars are not a sub-tribe of the Lushais and they constitute a separate tribe with their own dialect. Secondly the term Hmar simply refers to the place of inhabitation of these people and hence it seems to be a name given to them by the other neighbouring tribes.

In his ethnographic note on the Lushais, Lieutenant colonel H. W. G. Gob, the then Superintendent of the Lushai Hills, has divided the people into following nine clans :—

1. Lushai, 2. Balte, 3. Paite, 4. Hmar, 5. Thado, 6. Poi, 7. Fairai, 8. Lakher, 9. Sailo.<sup>5</sup>

However, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Lists (Modification) Order 1956, issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, vide their Notification No. S. R. O. 2477-A, dated 29th October 1956, the Hmars are regarded as a separate tribe independent of the Kukis or Lushais.

The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Amendment) Act 1976 has also enlisted the Hmars as a separate tribe in the two Autonomous Hill Districts of Assam.

#### MIGRATION AND PRESENT HABITAT

In their traditional songs and folklores reference has been made to the Sinlung Civilization of the Hmar people. It can, therefore, be inferred that the original home of the Hmars was Sinlung, somewhere in Central Asia.<sup>6</sup> The Hmars were compelled to leave Sinlung and pushed to the south by the superior Chinese immigrants. In their

5. Ibid.—Same as in foot note 4.

6. Paudaite, R., the Education of the Hmar People, Sielmat, 1963, P-21.

southward journey when they came to the Himalayas, they turned eastward as they could not cross the great mountains. It is believed that in their eastward journey they settled among the Mishimis for about a generation or so and then moved further until they came to the Irrwayady. By following the course of this river, they entered into the Shan State where they faced strong opposition from the Shans or the Tais. But the Hmars forced their way into it and settled there in peace and prosperity. The prosperity which flourished in the Shan state was followed by a great famine which compelled the whole Hmar tribe to move north and northwest in search of food and better habitable lands. The clans moved separately each following a particular route. They entered into the hitherto unoccupied areas on the Indo-Burmese frontiers and built many villages associating them with their clans' names. The Lushai and the Kuki tribes who have very strong affinities with the Hmars also moved closely with them. The Hmars were, of course, moving slightly ahead of the Kukis and the Lushais and were constantly at war with these two tribes for territorial occupations. Anyway, as these three tribes had moved closely, at one time the anthropologists regarded them as a single tribe known as the Kuki-Chins. To the Kukis and the Lushais, the Hmars were known as Khawthlang which means westerner. This means that movement of the Hmars to the west was earlier than that of the Kukis and the Lushais. The Hmars established their settlements in the Mizo Hills (present Mizoram), Cachar and North Cachar Hills districts of Assam, Tripura and Manipur States which are still in existence. In Assam they are mainly confined into the North Cachar Hills and there are some Hmar villages in Cachar also bordering N.C. Hills.

#### DEMOGRAPHY

The Hmars are a numerically small tribe having only 5,380 persons as per 1971 Census. Since no census could be conducted in Assam in 1981, we can have an estimate

of the projected population only. Based on the national growth rate during the decade 1971-81, the projected population of the Hmars in 1981 would be 7327. Out of 5,380 persons as per Census of 1971, there were 2,724 males and 2,656 females. Their percentage of literacy as revealed by 1971 Census was very high. It was 44.4 as against the state percentage of 28.72 in 1971. The level of literacy between the males and the females was 56.90% and 31.66% respectively.

### DOMESTIC LIFE

A Hmar village is generally built on a hill top which commands a better position from the point of view of defence. It is surrounded by a bamboo fencing all around. Some villages have fencing made of logs of woods. At the entrance there is a strong gate which is kept closed at night so that no outsiders can enter into the village at night. This also serves the purpose of protecting the village from the stray cattle and wild beasts.

In the North Cachar Hills a Hmar village is found to have about twenty to forty houses clustered together in regular rows. In these villages which have spacious sites, houses are built in two rows facing each other leaving an open space in the front. Each family has a nice kitchen garden at the back of the house where vegetables needed for daily domestic consumption are grown.

### HOUSES

The Hmar houses are generally built on wooden planks raising the floors one to two feet above the ground. They use wooden posts in constructing their houses and thatch is used for roofing purpose. Houses with C.I. sheet roofs are very rare. Each family has a single house the length of which is more than three times of the breadth. The house consists mainly of four parts. The open porch, called SAWNGKA, is used for dyeing clothes and as a

place of evening gossip and relaxation. The second part or the enclosed verandah of the house is called SUMPBUK. It is used for husking paddy, storing of firewood and for other household activities such as making of handicrafts, household articles, etc. It may be mentioned here that all families do not have enclosed verandahs. The third part of the house is the main room which have two doors-one at the front and another at the back. While some families have windows on the walls of the main room, others have none. By the side of the front door there are beds made either of wooden planks or bamboo mats for the children of the family and visitors. In the middle of the room there is a hearth called TAP in which meals are cooked. During winter season the hearth is kept burning throughout the whole night to keep the room warm. Next to the hearth is the bed for the head of the family which is called KHUMPVI. Beyond this are the beds meant for the other family members. Household tools and equipments are generally kept hung on the walls of the main room. The fourth and last part of the house is the back porch which is called NAMTHLAK.

### Manufacturing of Household Equipments and Tools.

The Hmars manufacture themselves most of the household equipments and tools which are in day to day use in their own homes. The household equipments are mainly made of bamboos and canes. A brief description of the equipments made of bamboos and canes are given below :

- PAIKONG :** It is a basket made of split bamboo strips used for carrying goods. A woven cane strap is fixed to it at the time of carrying goods in the PAIKONG. The PAIKONG is carried on the back by fixing the cane strap on the head of the carrier. The cane strap is called FAIBONG.
- RAEL :** It is a basket like a box used for keeping the valuable articles of the household, such

- as, ornaments, valuable clothes, etc. It has two layers the inner layer is made of cane strips while the outer layer is made of bamboo strips. It has a cover also.
- LEIKHOR** : It is a basket made of cane used for storing or keeping paddy.
- KOKTE** : It is small bamboo basket used for keeping dried chillies.
- DAN** : It is bamboo basket for measuring paddy. A full Dan of paddy weighs about 4½ kilograms.
- KONGHONG** : It is a small sized cane made basket used by women at the time of sowing paddy seeds in the Jhums. After filling the KONGHONG with paddy seeds and tying it around the waist the woman, broadcasts the paddy seeds from it.
- PAIKUL** : It is a small bag made of cane strips used for carrying small articles.
- LUKHUM** : It is a cane box used for keeping BONGPOI a brass metal made musical disc.
- SARCHINI** : It is a funnel made of very fine bamboo strips used especially at brewing of rice-beer.
- HAIFIEN** : It is a large bamboo spoon. The Hmars have very good carpenters and blacksmiths among them and most of the occupational implements and tools are manufactured by the local carpenters and blacksmiths. A brief description of the occupational tools and implements produced by the local carpenters and blacksmiths is given below :
- MUI** : It is an indigenous spinning machine. The spinning wheel is supported on the deer horns.

- THEIOT** : The cotton ginning machine is called THEIOT.
- PUNKOL** : It is the indigenous loin loom unit with all its accessories.
- WONCKHLEN** : It is very big dish made from one piece of timber from which at last 10 persons can partake meals at a time.
- THISLO** : The indigenous hoe used in Jhum cultivation is called THISLO.
- CHEM** : It is a Dao having sharpness on both sides.
- HAIE** : The indigenous axe used for felling trees in Jhums is called HAIE.
- KAITE** : The locally produced sickle is called KAITE.
- FAI** : The Hmar hunting spear is called FAI.
- THAL** : The bow and arrow used by the Hmars in their hunting are called THAL as a unit. While the pointed iron head of the arrow is made by the local blacksmith, the other parts of the bow and arrow are made by the people themselves.

Among the other articles mention may be made of **DOMBELL**, the brass made artistic tobacco pipe. The **DOMBELL** has a very lovely artistic design and it is quite costly. It is generally used by men only. The Hmars also manufacture ordinary tobacco pipe from bamboo knots. These ordinary tobacco pipes called **TUIBIR** are meant for women only.

It is very interesting to note here that the Hmar women are expert in pottery making. One of the conditions for the selection of a village site is, therefore the availability of clay suitable for making pottery in the vicinity of the village. Earthen cooking pots for rice and curry, covering

plates, eating plates, rice-beer pots, smoking pipes, are produced by them at home. The pots are meant for domestic use only and they are not so fine as those available in the markets. The entire work is done by hand and a girl starts learning this trade since her childhood days. We know that the pottery making is the trade followed by a particular community of the people whom we call potters and it requires special technique. Considered from this point of view, the Hmar women are really praiseworthy.

Now-a-days, however, they prefer to purchase pottery goods from the weekly markets and the pottery industry is gradually disappearing.

#### Dresses and Ornaments :

The Hmars have their traditional dresses and ornaments. But in the North Cachar Hills, at present, the use of traditional dresses and ornaments is confined practically to the women-folk only. Male members have almost given up their use. Of course a few old male Hmars still use their traditional dresses and ornaments.

A description of their traditional dresses and ornaments is given below.

#### Dresses :

- DARKAI** : The traditional Dhuti used by male Hmar is called DARKAI.
- PAIHAR** : It is a white Chadar used by males only.
- PONDOM** : It is a striped Chadar used by males only.
- LUKAM** : It is the artistic turban used by men only.

The Hmars have also very artistically designed headgear consisting of four parts namely (I) TUIFRIEL, (II) JAUCHAL, (III) TUKTHUN and (IV) TAMLAIRANG. This headgear is not meant for ordinary use. It is used by a Hmar warrior after defeating his enemy. Its use is, therefore, associated with victory.

**TANIAUPON** : It is a cloured, striped Chadar used by young girls and young women.

**PONKERNE** : It is a piece of artistically designed cloth tied by the women around their breasts.

**THARLAIJOM** : It is a cloured shirt for women.

**KUNLAISEN** : It is a very costly Chadar used by the women of rich family.

#### Ornaments :

**THRIFANG** : It is a pair of very costly sea-shell put on by men in their ear-lobes.

**THRIWAL** : It is a necklace made of very costly beads used by men only.

**CHANGENG** : It is a pair of bracelet made of brass used by women.

**HARBAN** : It is a pair of armlet made of Zinc used by women.

**NABE** : It is a pair of very big sized ear-ring made of silver used by women only.

**THRIPAL** : It is a necklace made of very costly beads and is used by the women of rich families generally.

**THIRDOM** : It is a necklace made of ordinary beads used by women only.

#### Food and Drink :

Like the other tribes of the North eastern India, the staple food of the Hmars is rice. The principal meal consists of cooked rice, salt and hot chillies. Vegetables and meats are taken whenever they are found available. Meats of fowls and pigs are very favourite with women. The Hmars collect wild roots and other vegetables from forests when they find that vegetables from their kitchen gardens and Jhums are quite

insufficient. They go to the forests very often for hunting wild animals to supplement their food supply. They take three principal meals in a day in the morning, at noon and at nightfall.

A Hmar is not a habitual drinker. He drinks ZU (rice beer) only when he is in leisure and when he has to entertain his friends. Besides, he drinks ZU during the celebration of community festivals and to celebrate the successful hunting expeditions. Tea is very rarely drunk and no milk is added to tea. Taking of cow's or buffalo's milk is rather an exception than a rule.

#### Dance and Music :

The Hmars have their traditional dance and music. Dances are performed by the young boys and girls in their leisure time and at the time of celebration of community festivals in accompaniment of tunes played in their indigenous musical instruments. Their musical instruments are described below :—

- KHONG** : Only one type of big and heavy drum is used by the Hmars and it is called KHONG.
- JAMLUNG** : It is a very big and heavy brass-metal gong. It makes very loud but majestic sound.
- BONPOLBO** : It is a musical instrument consisting of three brass metal discs.
- DAIAIPONG, LAIPONBO and CHONGRELBO** : They are a set of very heavy gongs made of brass metal. Each gong of this set produces a different sound. This set of gongs is the costliest musical instruments of the Hmars.
- TUMDA** : It is a very peculiar flute consisting of seven parts.
- TINGTANG** : It is the only piece of string instruments of the Hmars. It is just like a mono stringed Veena. TINGTANG string is made of fine spilt cane and it is played with a bow.

#### 4. SOCIAL LIFE

##### Buonzawl of Ster :

Like the Morungs of the Zeme Nagas, BUONZAWL or the bachelors' dormitory is the most important social organisation of the Hmar youths. But while the Zeme Nagas of the North Cachar Hills have dormitories for young unmarried girls, the Hmars of the North Cachar Hills do not have any dormitories for unmarried girls. BUONZAWL is the biggest house in a Hmar village. It is constructed at the uphill end and it has a single door only.

Like the Zemi Nagas' Morung, BUONZAWL is the training ground for all the youths of a Hmar village. All unmarried young boys who are above 15 years or so have to sleep compulsorily in the BUONZAWL at night. The boys who are less than 15 years old are exempted from sleeping in the BUONZAWL at night but they have to supply the entire stock of firewood required at the BUONZAWL for day to day use. Each youth is allotted a number of bundles of firewood which have to be supplied every month. The defaulters are punished heavily so that he might not do the same in future. As soon as the boys reach the age of adolescence, they are freed from the task of supplying firewood and at the same time they have to leave their parents' homes and to become active members of the BUONZAWL.

The official who is responsible for the training of the youths in various types of activities including games and sports is called VALUPA which means Commandant of the youths. An accomplished youth capable to maintain discipline among the members of the BUONZAWL is elected to the post of VALUPA by the village council consisting of the village elders. All the youths of the village learn the art of warfare, wrestling, handicrafts making, singing and dancing, and indigenous sports in the BUONZAWL under the direct supervision of VALUPA. Any one found breaking the discipline of the bachelors' dormitory is severely punished.

Like other Hmar houses the BUONZAWL is also constructed on wooden platform. It has a single entrance in the front wall which can be reached by a rough wooden ladder. At the middle of the floor there is a big hearth where the fire is kept burning day and night. There are sleeping platforms on the three sides of the walls where the boys sleep at night. They use wooden pillows. Male guests who happen to visit the village have to sleep at BUONZAWL at night. The aged male visitors may, of course, spend the night in their relatives' houses. But it is a matter of great regret to find that such a form of community organisation is almost in a dying state in Hmar villages of the North Cachar Hills. The Hmars who have accepted Christianity, have already given up the organisation of the BUONZAWL. BUONZAWL can be seen only in those Hmar villages where Christianity is yet to make an inroad.

#### Family :

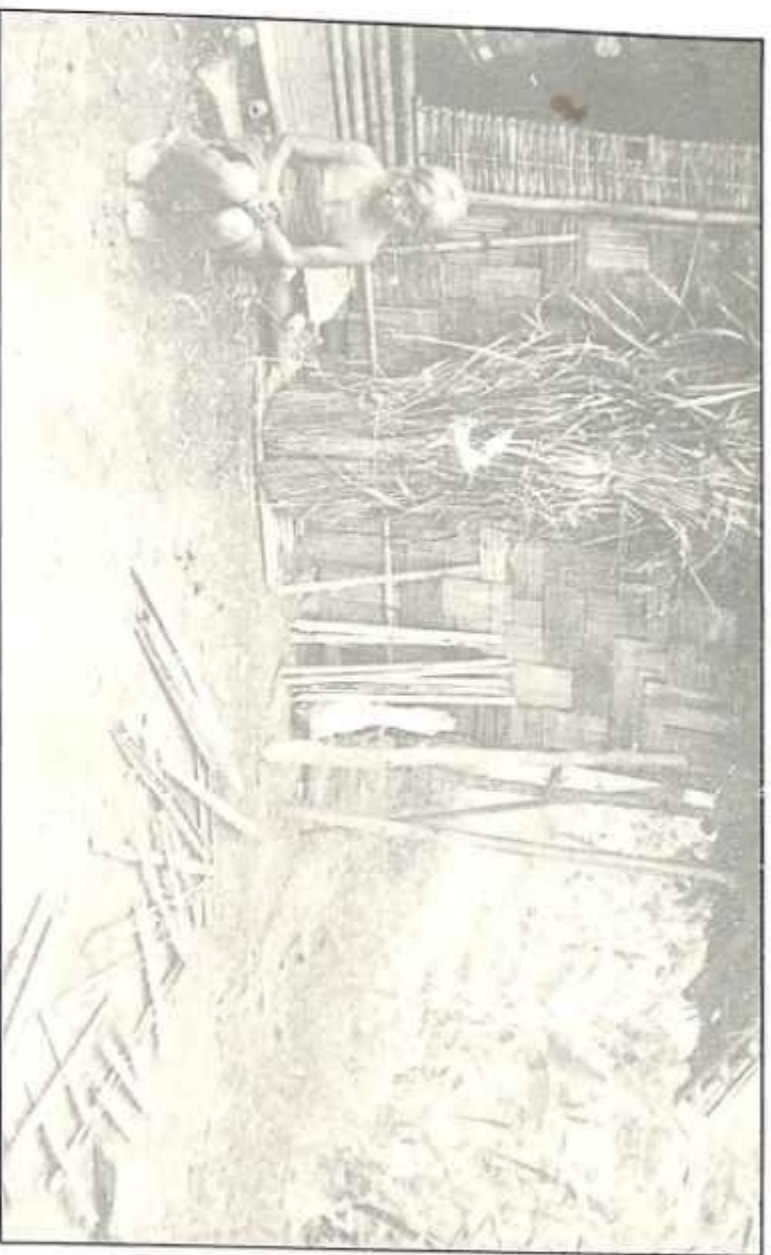
Unlike the other tribes, the Hmars have the joint family system. Therefore, when a son gets married he does not live in a separate house but lives with his parents. He lives in the house of parents till he begets several children. Then he moves into a new house constructed with the help of other family members. The Hmars consider such a family system to be congenial to the growth of fellow-feeling, mutual help and co-operation and a corporate life.

The Hmars follow the patriarchal system of family structure. The father is the head of the family and he must be obeyed by every family member whether young or aged. His words are final and decisive. In other words he is the supreme authority in the household. Being patriarchal the line of descent is traced through the father only. The chief duties of the wife of the head of the family are to raise children, prepare meals for the family, to look after the birds and pigs, to fetch water from the nearby stream or river and to look after the other household duties. Children show great respect to their parents.

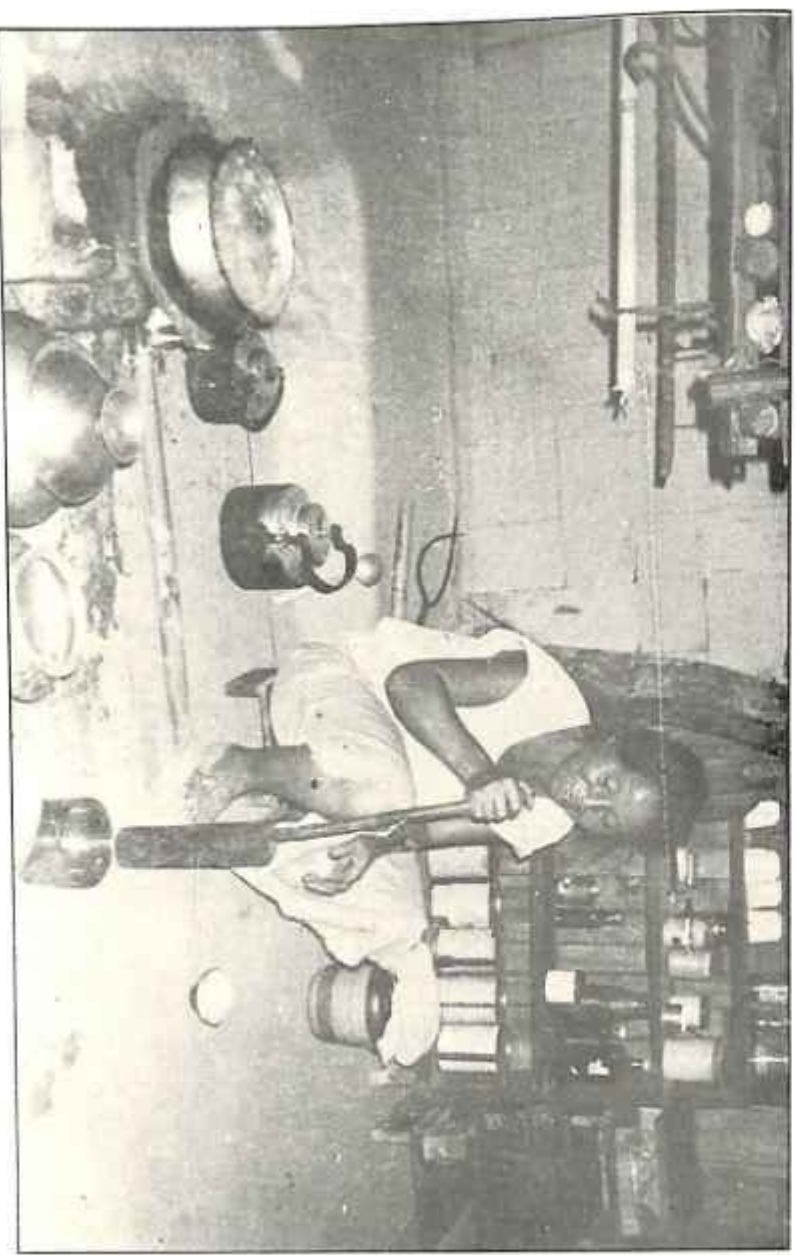


How easily and happily a Hmar wife can adapt herself to her own room.

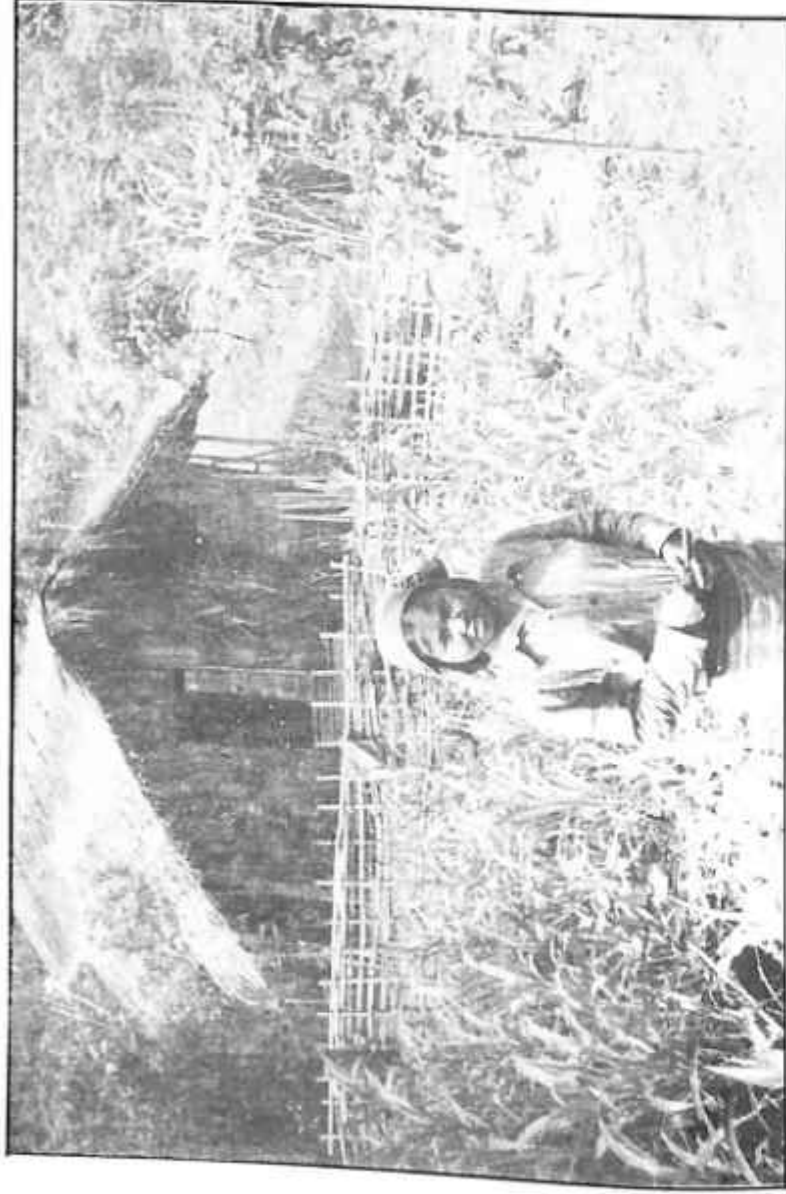




An old Hmar Woman seen sitting in front of her house as if she has no attachment whatsoever.



Crushing of maize for family members after her day's work as shown here is also a work of love for a Hmar lady.



A Himar woman with a weeping chisel in her hand is seen standing in her courtyard plantation of maize and principle



An aged Himar ready to go to the Jium (shilling cultivation) field. In the background a glimpse of the village is seen.

According to the customary law of inheritance it is the youngest son who inherits the father's property at his death and the other sons have no claims on the paternal property. But this law is not followed by all the Hmar clans. In some clans reverse is the custom. That is to say, at the death of the father, only the eldest son inherits the father's property and the other sons get nothing. If the man does not leave any male issue, his property will be inherited by the nearest male relative, but not by his wife or daughters. A man who does not have any male issue may adopt a son if he so desires and at his death the adopted son will inherit the property of his foster father.

### **The Clans :**

The Hmars of the North Cachar Hills are divided into following twelve clans :

1. Pangamte, 2. Rengsate, 3. Pazamate, 4. Phenate, 5. Khawbung, 6. Lungthraule, 7. Lungtau, 8. Leiri, 9. Zote, 10. Ngurte, 11. Khelte, 12. Khawhkring.

These clans have sub clans also. It is very interesting to note that many Hmar villages are named after their clans.

### **The Marriage :**

The most peculiar thing about the Hmars is that they do not follow exogamy rigidly. A man can marry a girl belonging to his clan although such a marriage is not favourite with them. That is to say, there is no bar to marriage between a boy and a girl belonging to the same clan. Cross-cousin marriage is always favoured.

Monogamy is the prevailing rule among the Hmars of the North Cachar Hills although there is no bar to polygamy.

Formerly bride price was paid in terms of goods and animals. But now-a-days it is paid in cash which varies from a minimum of Rs. 200/- to a maximum of Rs. 500/-. It is very interesting to note here that the bride price for the youngest daughter is always the highest. The bride price is shared by several

relatives of the bride besides her parents. It is rather a peculiar custom. The lion's share of the bride price of course, goes to the father of the bride. The remaining amount is shared by the maternal uncle, maternal aunt, elder sisters and the nephews and nieces of the bride.

The Hmars have provisions for divorce in their customary law. These provisions are not rigid at all. A woman can get divorce provided she is capable of persuading her parents to return the bride-price. The refund of bride price by a wife seeking divorce from her husband is called SUMINSUO in Hmar. Similarly a man can divorce his wife provided he pays a lump sum to his wife and thereafter leaves her in her parents' home. This payment is called MAKMAN. The divorcees can remarry according to their choice. If the divorce takes place after mutual agreement between the couple, no payment has to be made from either side.

Widow remarriage is prevalent. The minimum marriageable age for the girls is sixteen while for a boy it is twenty or so.

Marriage by negotiation is the prevailing practice. Under the traditional marriage system when a boy wishes to marry a girl of his choice or liking, he sends his relatives to the parents of the girl with a piece of cloth having blue and white colour, a hoe and a pot of rice-beer. The acceptance of the articles by the parents of the girl signifies the fact that they are agreeable to the marriage. The refusal, on the other hand, signifies the fact the parents do not approve the marriage. In case of acceptance of the articles, the actual marriage takes place at a later date fixed by the two concerned families according to their convenience. On the day of marriage the parents of the bride entertain the parents and other relatives of the bride-groom with a feast. When the feast is over, the girl is taken to the boy's house where celebration of the actual marriage takes place. After the celebration of actual marriage the boy and the girl live as husband and wife.

The Christian Hmars, however, perform the marriage according to Christian way in the Church.

#### Birth :

The birth of a child is an occasion for rejoice for the whole family. The most important ceremony connected with the birth of a child is the name giving ceremony. In this ceremony the maternal uncle of the new-born baby occupies an important place. The name giving ceremony is performed by the parents by offering a feast to the village elders. The maternal uncle is specially invited to this ceremony to give a name to the child. Although the other people also might suggest names for the new born baby, the name given by the maternal uncle will only be accepted.

#### Death :

The Hmars dispose of the dead bodies by burying them in the graves. Death ceremony is performed within one year after the death to release the spirit of the deceased person from the bondage of this earth so that it might go to the heaven which is called VANRAM by the Hmars. When the death ceremony is performed, specially cooked meals are to be offered to the departed one at his grave. The priest also performs the last rite of the deceased person by hanging some colourful clothes and bird's feathers on the grave.

### 5. RELIGIOUS LIFE

Like other tribes, the traditional religion of the Hmars is also animism. They worship animate and inanimate objects of nature. According to their religious belief each object of nature is possessed by a spirit. Some of these spirits possessed by the natural objects are benevolent while some of them are harmful. These harmful spirits are attributed to every illness and misfortune. To propitiate these spirits they sacrifice birds and animals. The village priest finds out which spirit is responsible for the illness or the trouble and accordingly suggests what form of sacrifice would satisfy the

spirit. Even human sacrifices were also made in the olden days to appease the evil spirits.

Besides believing in the innumerable spirits, the Hmars also believe in the existence of a Supreme Being whom they call PATHIEN. PATHIEN is believed to be the creator of every object of this universe inanimate or animate. Although PATHIEN is worshipped by them, he is believed to play very little role in their day to day life.

The Hmars believe in the immortality of the soul and life hereafter. They believe in the existence of three heavenly abodes to which the spirits of the dead go after death. These three abodes are MITHIKHUO, PIEIRAL and VANRAM. The spirits go to these three places according to their merit which is determined by their actions in this world.

The spirits of those persons who did not lead a virtuous life while they were alive in this world are supposed to go to the MITHIKHUO. Here they have to work for their living and it is not a place of bliss.

The second heavenly abode called PIEIRAL is better than MITHIKHUO. The spirits of those persons who neither led a virtuous life nor a sinful life while they were alive are supposed to go to the PIEIRAL. Although it is not an abode of perfect bliss, nevertheless, the spirits who find their place in PIEIRAL, can lead a very happy life here because they need not have to work for their living. They are supposed to be fed by fair maidens with good food and wine forever.

The third heavenly abode VANRAM is the real heaven in the true sense of the term. Here perfect bliss, peace and prosperity reign supreme forever. The holy virtuous souls are expected to go to VANRAM and live in perfect bliss forever. The spirit spending considerable time in MITHIKHUO and PIEIRAL may also finally go to VANRAM. Those spirits who find place in VANRAM enjoy equal rights and status irrespective of the kind of life they led in this world while they were alive.

Now most of the Hmars in the North Cachar Hills are found to be Christian converts. They have Churches in their villages where prayers are held regularly in the Christian way. The number of Hmar people who still follow their traditional religion is found to be negligible in the North Cachar Hills district.

## 6. POLITICAL LIFE

Every society whether primitive or modern has a system of government of its own. As far as the primitive societies are concerned we can rather call them socio-political organisations.

The traditional village organisation of the Hmars is headed by the village chief who is called LAL. He is assisted in the village administration by the KHAWNBAWL UPA (Chief Assistant) and the KHAWNBAWLS (Assistants). The LAL selects the KHAWNBAWLS from among the village people in consultation with the village elders. Out of the selected KHAWNBAWLS the LAL then selects the KHAWNBAWL UPA. The Hmar village council thus consists of the LAL (Chief), the KHAWNBAWL UPA (the Chief Assistant), the KHAWNBAWLS (the Assistants) and the village elders. The LAL presides over the village council and the council decides all matters connected with the village affairs. The village council serves the purpose of a village court also as it tries all cases and settles all disputes. For trying cases, the council has to be paid a fee of a pig and this fee is called SALAM. Every member of the council gets a share of the SALAM. Besides, the plaintiff has to entertain the members of the village council with rice beer prior to lending their ears to the complaints of the plaintiff. If the plaintiff wins the case, the cost of rice beer has to be paid by the party which loses. Although the Chief (LAL) exercises great powers he does not act like a dictator. He rather acts like the head of a democratic government giving sufficient weight to the opinions expressed by the members of the village council and other people.

Another important village official is the crier called **TLANGSAM** in Hmar. The duty of **TLANGSAM** is to proclaim the orders of the village chief and his Assistants in the village so that all people of the village might know what the orders are. Besides he has also to look after the construction of the chief's house, the **BUONZWAL**, village streets, etc. As a reward for his work, he is exempted from doing any community labour.

Till the Hmars came under the British suzerainty, they fought many wars with the neighbouring tribes for their own existence. They raided the village of their enemy very often at night and returned to their own villages after capturing as many captives as possible. They also looted the raided villagers, and carried the booties with them. It is very interesting to note that they did not attack women and children in their raiding expeditions. They made surprise attack on the enemies giving very little time to get themselves ready to meet the raids. Even there were feuds among the Hmar clans themselves. The victorious Hmars warriors received great ovation when they returned to their villages. The ovation was marked by throwing a grand feast by the village people in the honour of the victorious warriors. The warriors put on special headgears having four parts namely, **TUIFRIEL**, **JAUCHAL**, **TUKTHUN** and **TAMLAIPANG**, as a sign of defeating their enemies. To such headgears the girls tied plaits of red and black cotton to signify the heroism of the warriors.

Till the end of the nineteenth century, slavery was very much rampant among the Hmar people. There were various ways of obtaining serfdom. The widows and orphans who could not support themselves sought food and shelter in the chief's house. In exchange for food and shelter, they had to work for the chief according to their ability. In case of marriage of an orphan girl or the remarriage in case of a widow under the protection of the chief, the bride price would be received by him. This type of serfdom is called **INPUI SUOK**.

Sometimes the criminals for fear of their lives took refuge in the house of the chief. Because it was only the chief who could protect the offenders from the vengeance of the aggrieved parties. Thus the criminals or the offenders would become the slaves of the chief. This type of serfdom is called **CHEMSEN SUOK**. The chief would give them no protection as soon as the offenders left the house of the chief by discarding their status as slaves. If the offence of a particular slave was homicide his safety area would be limited to the chief's house. The aggrieved family might do away with his life outside the premises of the chief's house.

During the famine those families who could not manage food, sought food and shelter in the house of the Chief. During war or feudes between tribes or clans, the weak families who could not defend themselves might also seek the protection of the village chief. Under such circumstances, the chief gave them protection, food and shelter and the protected and sheltered ones automatically became the slaves of the chief and they had to work for the chief. This type of serfdom is called **TUTLUT SUOK**. When the war, feud or the famine was over, the chief could, of course, release the persons of such families from the bondage of serfdom if he wished to do so.

The last type of serfdom is known as **SAL**. The persons who were captured in the tribal wars given the status of bonded slaves. The bonded slaves were regarded inferior human beings having no social status at all. The other Hmars did not allow them to have food in the same place. They could be bought and sold in accordance with the wills of their masters. The children born of the bond slaves would automatically become slaves of their parents' masters. The slavery or serfdom among the Hmars was a matter of the past. At present no serfdom is found to be prevalent among the Hmars of the N. C. Hills.

## 7. ECONOMIC LIFE

The principal occupation of the Hmars of the North Cachar Hills is agriculture. Like other hill tribes they also

practise Jhum cultivation in the neighbouring hills. The land belongs to the whole community and it is the business of the village council to see that each family is allotted sufficient land for Jhum cultivation. The allotment of Jhum land to a particular family does not give its ownership right forever. The allotted piece of land will remain under its possession so long the family uses it. The village council allots land to the families of the village at the beginning of the month of January. After the allotment each family will clear the land of the jungles by cutting the trees, bamboos and undergrowth and by burning them later on. Where the land is thus prepared, little holes are dug with THISLO (Jhum hoe) and a few grains of paddy are dropped in each hole. In sowing, seeds the whole village works as a corporate body finishing sowing in a number of fields in a single day. They sing as they sow making the labour joyful. It is to be mentioned here that sowing is done when the rain is expected to set in.

Although they mainly cultivate rice in their Jhums, they also cultivate other crops and vegetables like maize, castor, cucumber, watermelon, sweet gourd, beans, etc. in the Jhums. Thus they raise mixed crops in their Jhums. Weeding is done according to needs. An average family cultivates 2 to 2½ acres of land in a year. A piece of Jhum land can be cultivated only for two years and the new plots are to be selected again. If the rain comes in time they can reap a good harvest. In case of failure of rain the crops also fail and the people remain half starved. As the soil is not properly prepared, the yield is not so productive. They do wetland cultivation also wherever water logging low lying lands in between the ridges are available. But the patches of such land are very few. The Hmars of the N. C. Hills are found to be very good horticulturists. They cultivate fruit plants like pineapple, orange, lemon, etc., by terracing the gentle hill slopes. Ginger is also cultivated by them in greater extent. They sell these articles in the weekly markets and in the nearby railway stations. But the price they get for their products is not reasonable at all. The Hmars both male and female—are

very laborious and economically they are better off than the neighbouring Dimasa Kacharis and the Zemi Nagas.

Weaving is an important household industry in every Hmar family. Every Hmar woman is an expert weaver and the most of the domestic requirements of cloths are met from the family looms which are, of course, loin looms. Their skill in weaving is so superb that they can even weave cloths of artistic designs with ease. Formerly they grew cotton from which yarns were spun. But now-a-day in most cases yarns are purchased from the markets.

Besides weaving, manufacturing of cane and bamboo goods required for domestic use is also another important cottage industry of the Hmars. Most of the products, of course, are meant for domestic use. As has already been mentioned, pottery making is an exclusive trade of the Hmar women. Carpentry and blacksmithy are the two other trades followed by some Hmar people of the North Cachar Hills.

However, the economic conditions of an average Hmar, with his primitive tools and implements and age-old methods of cultivation are far from satisfactory.

## 8. EPILOGUE :

The Hmars living in the North Cachar Hills district of Assam are a colourful tribe having a distinct entity with their own language and culture. Racially they belong to the Mongoloid group. Physically they are sturdy, strong and stout. Although they are generally short, they have a muscular body. They have a broad and round face with high and prominent cheek bone. Their skin is yellow and sun-tan. They have flat noses and small eyes. The women wear hair plaits on the head instead of leaving them on the back.

The Hmars of the North Cachar Hills are adapting themselves to the rapid social changes brought about by the modern civilization. The institution of chieftainship has crumbled down. Acceptance of Christinity has brought

them to the touch of modern education which in its turn helps them to broaden their outlook. They have almost given up the traditional customs and religion associated with so many superstitions. They are gradually learning the modern methods of cultivation. To say in a word, they are now trying their best to adapt themselves to the new values of life brought about by modern civilization.

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# The Kukis

## INTRODUCTION

Among the tribes of the North Cachar Hills district of Assam, the Kukis occupy an important place from the numerical point of view. In Chinese the literal meaning of the term 'Kuki' is the people of the 'Ku' lake. While the plains people call these tribes Kuki or Kuki-Chin, the Dimasā Kacharis call them 'Thanggumsa' and in Manipur they are called 'Khom sai' by the Manipuris. In fact the Kukis in India and the Chins in Burma refer to the one and the same people. The Kukis are otherwise known as the 'Kuki-Chins'. The term 'Kuki' is not only a vague one but a vexed one too. It cannot be said precisely what the term 'Kuki' actually refers to. The term 'Kuki' includes a group of tribes and it is believed that they originally inhabited the tracts around the 'Ku' lake of China.

Here they do not settle in compact blocks but intersperse with other tribes that are found in the regions where they settle.

The Kukis have some interesting legends in regard to their migration. According to these legends the Kukis originally belong to a place called Sim-lung on the bank of the river Mekong in the South-western China. Some natural calamities had compelled them to abandon their original home and to migrate to the Shan country from where the Ahoms came to Assam. Here they resided happily for many generations till they were compelled by an unprecedented famine to leave this country also. From the Shan country they migrated to the Chin Hills and the valleys of the Irrawadi and the

Chindwin in Burma. Since their living in the Chin Hills they came to be known as the 'Chins' in Burma. In search of more fertile land they moved to the Lusai Hills from the Chin Hills and the valleys of the Irrawadi and the Chindwin. In their downward movement they came to the Bay of Bengal and even tried to enter into Bengal by sea route. But their attempts were met with failure. They then turned back towards the north by passing through Lusai Hills (present Mizoram), Tripura, Cachar, North Cachar Hills, Naga Hills and arrived at Manipur where they finally settled.

In his book 'A Cultural History of Assam' Dr. B. K. Barua stated that the original home of the Indo-Chinese people speaking Tibeto-Burma languages who migrated and settled in the north-eastern region of India was in western China near the Yang-te-kiang and the Hwang-ho rivers. From there they went down the courses of the Brahmaputra, the Chindwin and the Irrawadi and entered India and Burma. They came to Assam in swarm after swarm in the earliest period. A swarm of them settling in the upper basins of the Chindwin and the Irrawadi gradually advanced towards the south of Assam and colonised in the Lushai Hills, Cachar and even some parts of Manipur and Naga Hills (present Nagaland). These people belonged to the Lusai-Kuki-Chin Group. The Kuki-Chins belong to the Mongoloid family racially but linguistically they belong to the Tibeto-Burman family.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, two Kuki tribes, namely, the Rangkhols and the Beites, either under pressure from two other Kuki tribes, namely, Jansens and the Thadous, or because of their nomadic habits, perhaps, moved across the plains of Cachar and settled in the North Cachar Hills and came to be known there as the 'Old Kukis'. Later on the Jansons and the Thadous were also compelled by the more vigorous Lusais to leave the Mizo Hills and to seek shelter in the North Cachar Hills. This migration took place in the middle of the nineteenth century. In the North Cachar Hills, the Jansons and the Thadous who came later, came to be

known as the 'New Kukis'. Except the time elements, however, the classification of the Kukis into 'Old' and 'New' does not have any significance.

In the old census reports no clear-cut distinction was made among the Lushai (Mizo), Hmar and the Kuki tribes. They were treated as allied tribes having very little variations. Major Shakespear, then Superintendent of Lushai Hills, groups the Lushai-Kuki-Chin people under 15 heads as follows in the Assam Census Report of 1911.

1. Lushai, 2. Khawhring, 3. Thado, 4. Ralte 5. Kiangte.
6. Lakher, 7. Paithe, 8. Roite, 9. Darlong, 10. Pante,
11. Reuthlei, 12. Poi, 13. Nagente, 14. Chongther, 15. Hmar.

Major Shakespear regards them as true clan names only with the exception of Poi and Hmar. Lt. General H. W. G. Gob, the Superintendent of the Lushai Hills, on the other hand, groups the Lushai-Kuki-Chin people under 9 (Nine) heads as follows in the Assam Census Report 1911.

1. Lushai, 2. Ralte, 3. Paite, 4. Hmar 5. Thado, 6. Poi,
7. Fan-ai, 8. Lakher and 9. Sailo.

Mr. C. A. Soppitt distinguishes four main tribes among the Kukis and these tribes are the Rangkhols, the Betes, the Jansens and the Thadois. He also mentions the Langrangs and the Kelma as two Sub-tribes of the Rangkhols and the Lolongs as a Sub-tribe of the Jansens.

It is seen from the above facts that in the Old Census reports and other ethnographic notes we do not get a correct picture of the exact number of tribes that are included within the generic term 'Kuki', as these reports were based on the information furnished by the informants rather than on the basis of actual field study carried out.

#### PRESENT POSITION

As per the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes lists (modification Order No. S. R. O. 2477-A, dated, New Delhi,

the 29th October 1956 of the Ministry of Home Affairs, Govt. of India, altogether 37 number of tribes were included in the Kuki group of tribes. The constitution Order which was amended in 1976 also contains the same number of tribes under the Kuki group. A list of tribes under the head Any Kuki Tribes is shown below :—

1. Baite or Beite 2. Changsen 3. Chongloi 4. Doungel
5. Gamalhou 6. Gangto 7. Guite 8. Hanneng 9. Haokip or Haupt 10. Haolai 11. Hengna 12. Hongsungh 13. Hraugkawal or Rongkhoh 14. Jongbe 15. Khawehung 16. Khawathlang or Khothalong 17. Khelma 18. Kholhau 19. Kipgen 20. Kuki
21. Lengthang 22. Lhangun 23. Lhoujem 24. Lhouvun
25. Lupheng 26. Mangjol 27. Misao 28. Rieng 29. Sairhen
30. Semnam 31. Singson 32. Sitlhou 33. Sukte 34. Thado
35. Thangou 36. Uibuh 37. Vaiphei.

From the list it can be seen that at Sl. No. 20, Kuki is enlisted as one of the tribes. It is practically impossible to give a composite picture of all these tribes together as each of the tribes mentioned above has its own ethnic identity with a distinct cultural pattern.

#### DEMOGRAPHY

The total population of the Kuki group of tribes in Assam as per 1971 Census was 13,524 out of which 7179 were males and 6,345 were females. The number of females per 1000 males, was, therefore, 883. It is thus seen that the number of females among the Kuki group of tribes is sufficiently low compared with the number of males.

From the point of view of literacy, the percentage is more or less equal to the state percentage of literacy as per 1971 Census. Against the state percentage of literacy of 28.72, the percentage of literacy among the Kuki group of tribes was 27.51. The percentage of literacy among the males and the females was 36.54 and 19.43 respectively. Thus compared to some of the other hill tribes like the Karbis, Dimasas, Hajongs, Chakmas, Nagas, etc. the percentage of literacy among the Kukis is much better.

In this connection, it may be stated that the 1981 Census could not be conducted in Assam due to foreign nationals agitation.

#### CLAN EXOGAMY AND MARRIAGE

Each Kuki tribe has a number of clans. But these clans are not fully exogamous in the sense that although the marriage between the members of the same clan is discouraged, it is not prohibited. Hence marriage between the members of the same clan may take place with impunity.

There is also no restriction of intermarriage among the 37 number of Kuki groups of tribes.

Marriage by negotiation is the prevailing practice. Examples of marriage by capture are also not lacking. In the bygone days betrothal by negotiation by the parents of the boy and the girl was effected at a very early age. Cohabitation, however, was not permitted until the girl was fully grown. The actual marriage took place when the boy and the girl came of age. But now-a-days, marriages are fixed at grown up age only. The present bride price varies from a minimum of Rs. 50/- to a maximum of Rs. 500/- according to the means of the parents of the boy. The boy whose parents are poor and cannot afford to pay the bride price in cash has to serve in the house of his would be father-in-law for a period varying from one to three years. During this period he has to stay with his in-laws and work as a member of their family. In this case cohabitation is not prohibited.

The traditional marriage ceremony takes place on the date fixed by the parents of the boy and the girl. The marriage is solemnised by offering a feast by the parents of the bride to their village people, relatives and the bridegroom's party. Unmarried girls have considerable liberty and hence love affairs and pre-marital relations are not uncommon. But after marriage the girls must remain faithful to their husbands. Incest is, therefore, very rare and if detected, the concerned persons are very severely punished. Widow remarriage is permissible.



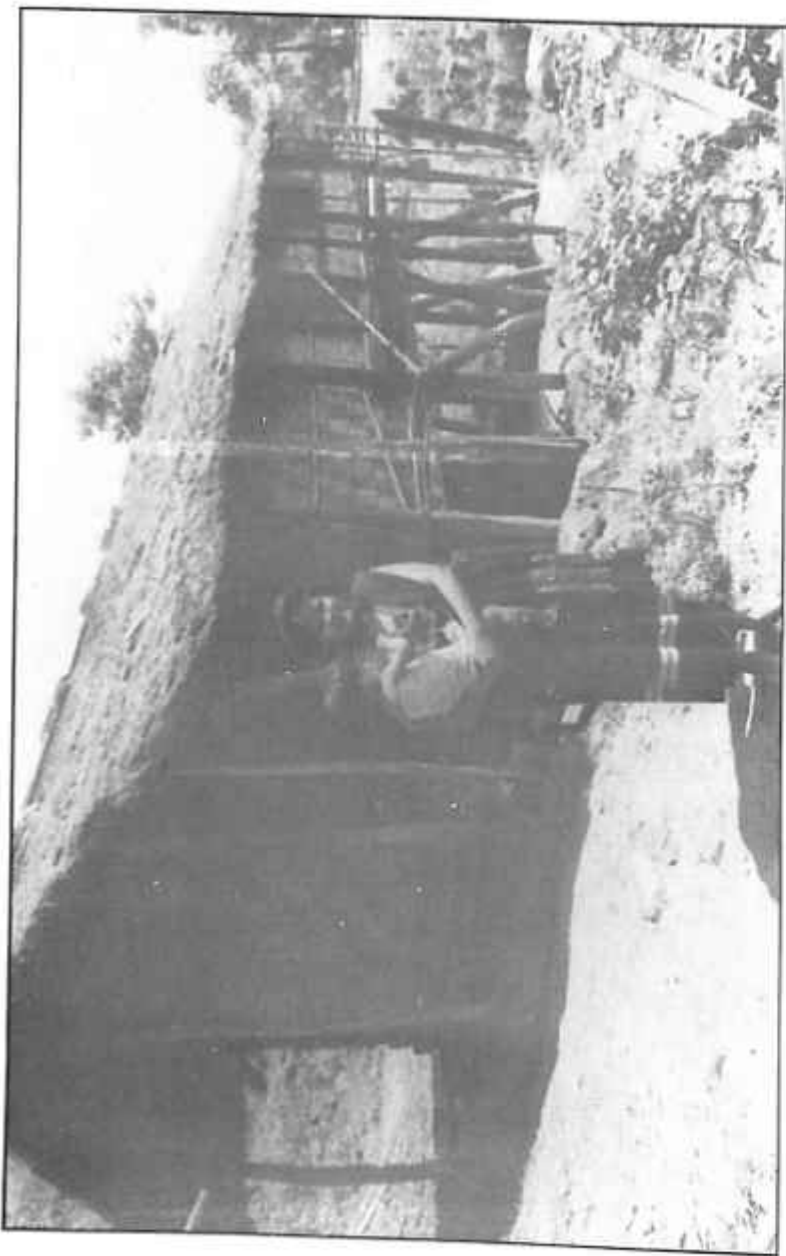
A Kuki girl returning from the Jhum (shifting cultivation) field



Cotton ginning and spinning by young women in a Kuki village.



Weaving in loom is a common sight in a Kuki village.



A traditional Kuki house



A Kuki grandmother smoking in an indigenous tobacco pipe at her leisure

The younger brother must marry the widow of his elder brother (Levirate) but under no circumstances the elder brother can marry the widow of the younger brother. And that is why, the elder brother and his sister-in-law (the wife of the younger brother) have an avoiding relationship. While a widow is allowed to enter into marriage alliance as soon as the period of lamentation is over, a man who has lost his wife is not allowed to remarry within three years of the death of his wife. Although polygamy is the prevailing practice, it is not practised by all the Kuki tribes. As for example, polygamy is forbidden among the Rongkhols. But with the Changsens it is not so. A Changsen may marry as many as three wives. Divorce is permitted only under special circumstances such as adultery or incest and when the village council is satisfied that the divorce is actually essential. In case of incest or adultery the offenders are brought before the village council for trial. If the offence is proved, the offenders are expelled from the village after tearing off every scrap of their clothes and giving a good beating. The divorces are allowed to marry the co-respondents only and no one else.

### FAMILY STRUCTURE

The Kukis follow the patriarchal system of family structure. As such the line of descent is traced through male members only. The children take clan name of their father. At the death, the father's property is inherited by his sons. But the quantum of property to be shared by each son differs from tribe to tribe and no uniformity in this respect is observed. In some tribes, the paternal property is equally shared by all the sons whereas in case of some tribes the eldest son who has to maintain his widowed mother, receives the larger share of the paternal property and the remaining portion of the father's property is shared by the other sons equally. In some tribes, on the other hand, the youngest son has to remain with the widowed mother and hence he receives a larger share of the paternal property than what is received by the other sons. It has also been mentioned earlier that

the Kukis practise levirate (marrying the widow of the elder brother by the younger brother). In case of levirate the younger brother who marries the widow of his elder brother automatically inherits the property of his deceased brother by virtue of his marriage with the widowed sister-in-law. When a man dies leaving his children minor, his brother whether elder or younger, has to look after the property and the family of the deceased brother till the sons come of age. When the sons become adult he has to handover the property of his deceased brother to them. Thus during this period he has to act as the custodian of his brother's property and this does not give him any right to inherit the property of his dead brother. When a man dies living no sons, his property will be inherited by his nearest male kin, but not by his daughter. In some Kuki tribes, it is only the eldest son who inherits the paternal property at the death of his father and the other sons do not have any claims on the paternal property. But if the other sons are still minor at the time of the death of their father, the eldest son must take the responsibility of bringing them up properly until they get married and live in separate houses.

### SOCIO-POLITICAL ORGANISATIONS

All the Kuki tribes except the Rangkhols are ruled by the hereditary chiefs. Each village has a hereditary chief who possesses unlimited power and whose authority is undisputed. In other words, he is supreme in his own village. He settles all disputes in his village, selects the Jhum sites, and decides when and where a village is to be moved. Each cultivator has to give a share of rice produced by him in the Jhum and the quantity depends on the quality of Jhum land assigned to him. The chief also receives a portion of every animal killed by any villagers of his village. Besides, he receives the fines levied on the offenders. The chief has some obligations also. He has to support the orphans and others who do not have any means of livelihood in his own house by providing food and shelter. In return they have to work for the chief. Girls

brought up in the chief's house are released when they get married. But is the chief who receives the bride price. The chief has several petty officials to help him in the discharge of his duties. But the most noteworthy fact is that although the chief has unlimited powers, he does not exercise his powers like a dictator. But these chiefs have now become more or less powerless and the chieftainship has almost become defunct due to the emergence of new leadership.

The Rongkhols, on the other hand, have democratic traditions. The Rongkhol villages are administered by a group of officials elected by the village people. And as such the question of hereditary chief like the village chief of the other Kuki tribes does not arise here. The Rongkhol village headman is called Kalim, the assistant village headman is called Kabur, while Chapia-Kalim acts as the assistant to Kalim (headman), Chapia Kabur acts as the assistant to Kabur (Assistant headman). These offices are open to all people of the village. But an aspirant for the post of the headman of the village has to start at the bottom of the official hierarchy. Kalim with the help of the other three village officials tries cases, settles disputes, selects Jhum sites, and maintains law and order in the village. If the village people are not satisfied with the work of a particular official, he may be removed from the office and another person will be selected to the post.

### RELIGION

The traditional religion of the Kukis is animism. They believe in the existence of a Chief God called Pathien and a number of minor gods and goddesses. For the appeasement of all of them, sacrifices are to be made. The value of the sacrifice decreases gradually according to the status of the deity which is worshipped. But the deities get only the heads of the sacrificed birds and animals the remaining portions are taken away and eaten. In the worship of the deities large quantities of rice-beer are also consumed. The women also participate in the performance of the religious rites and on such occasions the women drink more rice-beer than the men.

The Kukis do not have any hereditary priests. In each village there is a priest who is selected by the people amongst themselves. The main duties of a priest is to worship the deities, offer sacrifice for their appeasement and to drive away the evil spirit from a person when he falls sick.

The Kukis believe that after death a person goes to Iti-Kua, the village of death. This is a place of pleasures where the dead can live a peaceful and comfortable life without encountering any troubles whatsoever. All good men can go to Iti-Kua directly after their death. Nothing can prevent them from entering into this heavenly abode. But for a bad man entrance into this place is not so easy. After his death on his way to Iti-Kua first he has to fight and overcome the spirit of any person whom he might have injured when alive. Persons killed by animals have no place in Iti-Kua. They go to another village of death called Shara-Kua. Shara Kua is a far less pleasurable abode than Iti-Kua.

The Kukis not only believe life hereafter, but believe in rebirth also. They believe that the spirit of a dead man returns to the earth again after a number of years since his death in the body of a new-born child. All the Kuki tribes except the Rongkhols, bury their dead bodies. The Rongkhols, on the other hand cremate their dead like the Hindus. They might have adopted the practice of cremating their dead from their Hindu neighbours, as they were the earliest migrants. The influence of Hinduism on the Rongkhols is observed in case of eating of meats also. Meats of monkeys and pythons are very much favourite with the other Kuki tribes. But the Rongkhols, like the Hindus never eat them.

However, at present almost all the Kuki villages of the North Cachar Hills district are found to be Christians. But in spite of their acceptance of Christianity they have not completely given up the traditional religious practices.

#### ECONOMY

Agriculture is the main occupation of the Kukis of the N. C. Hills. Like other hill tribes they also practise Jhumming

in the neighbouring hills. Permanent cultivation is also done wherever such lands are available. Their methods of cultivation is, however, crude and primitive. Suitable land for Jhum cultivation is selected during the winter season. The jungles are cut and burnt to ashes when they dry up completely. After preparing the ground, seeds are broadcast as soon as the monsoon starts. From the cutting of jungles to the completion of harvest is a very lengthy process which requires intensive labour utilization. In the Jhums besides paddy, maize, sesame, castor, cotton and various type of vegetables are also cultivated.

Cultivation of paddy in the Jhums and in wet land forms the mainspring of the agricultural works of the Kukis. But as their method of cultivation is crude and primitive the yield is quite low. Secondly, the yield also depends on the timely arrival of the monsoon. Hence the produce is not sufficient to meet their requirement round the year. Further a considerable quantity of rice is used by every family for the purpose of brewing rice beer. Terrace cultivation depending on the feasibility has made an inroad in their agricultural practices due to constant efforts on the part of the Department of Agriculture.

The Kukis are, of course, good horticulturists. They grow orange, pineapples, lemons, ginger, etc. by terracing the hill slopes. Many families have undertaken the cultivation of cash crops like black pepper, coffee and cashewnut. But unfortunately those people do not get reasonable prices for their agricultural products because of the dearth of good communication and proper marketing facilities. As a consequence they have to sell their agricultural products at the weekly markets or to the middlemen at a very low price which is very often below the cost price.

The Kukis have very good carpenters and blacksmiths among them. They have very good craftsmen also. Bamboo and cane goods are manufactured mostly for domestic use. The women are expert weavers and almost all the necessary



cloths of the family are produced by them in their loom looms. The people rear cattle, pigs and poultry of local breeds. But they hardly earn anything from them, as these are not reared for any commercial purpose. Pigs and fowls are mainly reared for domestic consumption and also consumption during festivals. Whatever money they could save, is spent in marriages and in the celebration of festivals whether community or individual.

Anyway, the economic conditions of the Kukis are far from satisfactory. Their ambitions are limited to the satisfaction of the immediate needs. In other words they are satisfied if they have two square meals a day, houses to live in and cloths to cover their bodies. Being primarily rice eaters, the people have very little interest to find out the crops that might be more profitably grown in their land. Besides they have been facing the actual problems of communications and marketing. (In this connection it may be mentioned here that there are only seven weekly markets throughout the whole district of N. C. Hills. The markets are located at Langting, Maibong, Mahur, Haflong, Harangajao, Dittock Cherra and Garampani. People have to walk 5 to 30 kms. to sell their agricultural products at the weekly markets sometimes spending two days, one day in coming and one day in going back. Thus it is a sheer wastage of two day's labour plus painful physical exertion. The cost of enroute food and drink is also to be taken into account. By judging against all these factors we may say that what these people obtain by selling their merchandise is very nominal in terms of real money. Had it been possible for them to sell the products in their own villages at the same price or even 25% less, their monetary gain would have been much more. This will be possible only when the communication and marketing facilities are improved at a very fast rate. Establishment of marketing societies, fruit preservation centres and cold storage may help the people a great deal.

For their economic development improvement of agricultural practices both in Jhums and wet land cultivation is highly

essential. The Kuki chiefs and the Kalims should be given some sort of training so that they might act as the torch bearers in this respect in their respective villages. When the leaders can be convinced, the others will follow suit.

## DRESSES AND ORNAMENTS

The Kukis have their traditional dresses and ornaments. But their present use is confined into the old men and women of various ages only. The young generation of males has practically given up their use. A description of their dresses and ornaments is given below :

- THANGNANPON** : It is an artistically designed scarf for men. It is quite costly as sufficient time and energy are needed to produce one piece of this scarf.
- PONMONGEOM** : It is also an artistically designed scarf used by men. It is less costly than the Thangnanpon.
- PON-DOM** : It is a coloured scarf used by men and women alike.
- DERCHEN NISHAN** : It is the loin cloth used by men. Formerly the Kuki women also used loin cloths which were of bigger size and they are called Nishan.
- CHOMBOM** : It is a simple waist band for carrying money. It is used by men only.
- DERCOP** : It is a piece of fine cloth used by men as turban.
- CHAKHAOPI** : It is a bag prepared from coarse and fat cotton yarns. Its making requires great skill.
- KHAMTANG** : It is a piece of decorated cloth used by women as their skirt.
- PUNGGAISAN** : It is a decorated scarf used by women only.
- KHISANG** : It is a very costly bead put on by men on their earlobes.

- TUHPAH** : It is a kind of ornament-like thing prepared from cotton staple for fixing in the turban.
- PHISONG** : It is a necklace made of very costly beads put on by women. It is put on in two pieces.
- PATHI** : It is a necklace made of bigger sized common beads used by women only.
- KHIVAMVUI** : It is a necklace made of smaller sized common beads used by the women only.
- DIEICAM** : It is a silver made ear-ring used by women.
- HAH** : It is an armlet made of lead used by women.
- CHONBHANG** : It is a bracelet for women which contains 10 number of brass rings joined together.
- KHIMO** : It is a necklace which contains four smaller sized bead necklaces. The necklaces are tied together for making one piece.

#### HOUSEHOLD AND AGRICULTURAL IMPLEMENTS

A description of the household equipments and occupational implements used by the Kukis is given below :

- CONGWANG** : It is a cane made basket used by women for carrying paddy from the fields.
- BENGRIT** : It is a basket made of either cane or bamboo used by men and women alike. It is used for carrying fire wood, vegetables and other agricultural products and also for bringing drinking water in bamboo tubes.
- CODAL** : It is a bamboo made equipment used for winnowing paddy.
- LO** : It is a cane made basket for keeping paddy at home.
- NAMKOL** : It is a bamboo made strap fixed on bead for carrying baskets.

- LALPI** : It is a basket with a cover made of two layers-upper layer is made of cane and the inner layer is made of bamboo. It has very nice artistic designs and it is used for keeping the valuables of the household.
- SUM-SUTUM** : The wooden paddy huskar (pestle) with the stick is called Sum-Sutum.
- CHEMPONG** : It is a dao with sharpness on one side only.
- HEICHA** : It is a kind of axe used specially for felling trees in the Jhums.
- TINGAS** : It is a spear used for hunting of wild animals.
- MATTO** : It is the indigenous match-box for lighting fire.
- TUIBAH** : It is a tobacco smoking pipe used by women only. The lower part is made of small bamboo tube while the upper part is made of matel. It is artistically designed and costly as well.
- BU-KONG** : It is a very big wooden dish from which at least ten persons can partake their meals at a time.

The Kuki tribes have some common musical instruments. A brief description of these instruments are given below :

- DAIAIPONG** : It is an instrument consisting of three number of brass-metal discs of different shapes. The three discs produce different sounds. The discs are quite heavy.
- DALPABO** : It is also an instrument consisting of three number or brass-metal discs of different shapes. Like Dalaipong. the discs of this instrument also produce different sounds but here the discs are much heavier than those of the Dalaipong.

- DAPI : It is a saucer-shaped bell-metal disc (gong) weighing about 20 kg. It produces a very loud but majestic sound.
- GOSEEM : It is a flute made from iron pipe. It is very costly.
- SHELIANGDAH : It is an instrument like a veena.

### HOUSING PATTERN

Like other hill tribes the Kukis also like to live on hill tops which from the point of view of defence is always in an advantageous position. A Kuki village presents the view of a cluster of houses which are closely constructed. The houses are built on wooden platform. For super-structure timber is used. Each family has a single roomed house without any partition inside. The room is quite spacious and its length is about thrice its breadth. At the middle of the room there is an earthen hearth. There are raised wooden planks by the side of walls which are used as beds at night by the family members. The room has two doors one at the front and the other at the back and it does not have any windows. The parents generally sleep near the back door. But those who have come in touch with modern civilization and those who are literate, are changing the traditional pattern of housing and they are now constructing three to four roomed houses with windows and ventilations.

### CONCLUSION

It has already been mentioned earlier that 'Kuki' is a generic term which includes in its fold 37 numbers of tribes. Each of these tribes has its own dialect. Although there are many common words which occur in all dialects, nevertheless, each dialect has a separate entity. But the people of one tribe can very well understand the dialects of the other tribes and can freely converse also. It has become possible because of frequent social discourse and the proximity of the habitats of the tribes.

Physically the Kukis are quite strong and stout. But they are short in structure. The height of men varies from 5 feet to 5½ feet while the height of women varies from 4½ to 5 feet. The frequent ascent and descent of the hills make their legs muscular. The men tie their hair with a bun at the back of the neck while the women tie their hair into a knot above the forehead like an Apatani of the Arunachal Pradesh. Like the Hmars, the Kukis are also very much adaptive to changing situations. They have come forward to accept the development measures adopted by the Government agencies as well as the North-Cachar Hills District Council Authority.

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## The Rengma Nagas

The Rengmas are one of the major Naga tribes of Nagaland. A section of the Rengmas had migrated to the Karbi-Anglong district in the recent past and settled in the strip of hills in between Barpathar on the south and Chokihola on the north. In the Karbi-Anglong district at present there are 400 and odd Rengma families who are spread over into 12 villages and these 12 villages are located within the jurisdiction of the Naga Rengma Mauza. Their approximate population would be about 4000 or so in 1987.

### RACIAL AFFINITIES

The Rengma Nagas form one of the sixteen major Naga Tribes. There is no doubt that the Rengma Nagas inhabiting Karbi Anglong originally belong to the Rengma of Naga Hills (Present Nagaland). Mr. J. P. Mills in his book 'The Rengma Nagas' has classified the Rengma Nagas of the Naga Hills into three groups from the point of view of the dialects spoken by them. These three groups are: (1) The southern section of the western Rengmas, (2) The northern section of the western Rengmas and (3) The eastern Rengmas. These three groups of the Rengma Nagas although belonging to the same tribe, speak three different dialects. The dialect of the Rengmas of Karbi Anglong is almost similar to that of the southern section of the western Rengmas. To illustrate this fact we may take up the numerals:

Rengma Nagas of Karbi Anglong.	Southern section of western Rengmas.	Northern section of western Rengmas.	Eastern Rengmas.
1. Kome	Mo	Kesu	Ke
2. Kahu	Khohung	Keni	Koni
3. Kanshen	Khungshang	Keshang	Keche
4. Peze	Peze	Mezer	Mezu
5. Pvun	Pfu	Manga	Manga
6. Tsare	Tsare	Tuo	Tare
7. Sanye	Tsanu	Tnghn	Teru
8. Tese	Tutse	Tuza	Tuzo
9. Takhu	Tukhu	Tukhu	Tokhu
10. Tsaru	Tsaru	Taa	Tera
20. Nki	Nki	Mukkwng	Mukwe
30. Shenru	Shenru	Chaa	Chora
40. Henzi	Henzi	Zua	Zura
50. Hempvun	Hempfu	Teni	Teni
60. Hentsare	Hentsare	Apyamtughu	Rura
70. Hensanye	Hentsanu	Apyamtughu	Rura
80. Hentse	Hentutse	Apyamtuzza	Zera
90. Hentakhu	Hentakhu	Apyamtukhu	Khura
100. Cheme	Tsi	Meza	Meza

The bachelors' dormitory is called 'Rensi' by the Rengma Nagas of Karbi Anglong. The Southern section of the western Rengmas also call it 'Rensi'. The northern section of the western Rengma call it 'Azughu' while the eastern Rengmas call it 'Awikhu'.

From the above example it can be seen that the dialect spoken by the Rengma Nagas of Karbi Anglong is almost similar to that of the southern section of the western Rengmas. Hence it can be assumed that the Rengma Nagas who migrated to Karbi Anglong originally belonged to the southern section of the western Rengmas.

### MIGRATION

Although the precise period when a section of the Rengma Nagas migrated into Karbi Anglong cannot be

determined, it can be assumed that this section came to Karbi Anglong in the first part of the 19th Century. This section of the Rengma Nagas under the leadership of two chieftains named Desong Sebo and Mongkha Sebo migrated to Karbi Anglong during the reigns of the Ahom King, either Swargodeo Kamaleswar Singh or Swargadeo Chandra-Kanta Singh<sup>1</sup>. Kehung Sebo, son of Desong Sebo, who paid a tribute to the Ahom King was conferred the title of 'Phukan'. Since then he was known as Kehung Phukan. During the Ahom days the Rengma Nagas of Karbi Anglong were under the administrative control of the Marangikhowa Gohain, the Ahom administrator. When Assam lost her independence with the treaty of Yandabu in 1826 and the British came to power they started collecting from the Rengma Nagas a stipulated revenue every year and by 1848 all the Rengma villages in the Karbi Anglong were made to pay this revenue<sup>2</sup>. But in the year 1854 they refused to pay the stipulated revenue to the British Government. The British administrators then proposed to place them under Morongikhowa Gohain (as their Superintendent) so that through his influence the Government might get the stipulated revenue<sup>3</sup>.

Kehung Phukan, the Rengma Naga Chief died in the year 1861<sup>4</sup>.

From all the facts stated above it can very well be assumed that this group of Rengma Nagas migrated into Karbi Anglong in the first part of the 19th Century before Assam lost her independence.

Next we come to the probable causes of migration. J. P. Mills in his book 'The Rengma Nagas' states as follows: "The Rengma hero Vyembi was a terror to the Angamis. Naga

1. Source Halo Rengma of Akhoifuta Jangfa Gaon.
2. Mills, J.P. the Rengma Nagas, page 3.
3. Dutta, K. N. A Handbook to the old Records of the Assam Secretariat, page 248.
4. Ibid, page 256.

villages are apt to depend for their security on the powers of one or two Champions. When Vyembi met his death from the spear thrust in a sudden quarrel with a friend, it was a great blow for the Rengma village Tsoginyu because the village could not withstand the pressure of the Angamis and was driven north. One party went right across the plains into the Mikir Hills and founded the colony of the Rengmas"<sup>5</sup>.

As regards migration the version of the Gaonbura of Akhaifuta Jungfa Gaon runs as follows :

The Rengma Nagas, being expert hunters and interested very much in hunting of wild animals, very often went far away from their habitats for the purpose of hunting. One day Desong and Mongkha, the two Rengma Chiefs accompanied by a number of other hunters entered the nearby Karbi Anglong unknowingly in pursuit of preys. The low lying hills which were uninhabited at that time attracted them very much. And they, therefore, decided to migrate into these hills from their present abodes in the Naga Hills. After returning to the Naga Hills the two Naga Chiefs held discussions with the other elders and finally about 200 families agreed to migrate. Thus Desong and Mongkha, the two Rengma Chiefs along with some 200 families migrated into Karbi Anglong and settled there permanently.

Shri Khejumbe Rengma of Sarisuti village has another version of migration to narrate. His version is as follows :

Long back there were two very influential brothers among the Rengma Nagas. They were so influential that each brother had a number of loyal followers. In other words, both were regarded as Chieftains by the common Rengmas. These two brothers lived separately. The elder brother brought some improvement to a small stream known as Rengmapani for the purpose of fishing and he erected

5. Mills, J. P. The Rengma Nagas, page 7.

a bund for this purpose. He also made an absolute rule that whoever would catch fish there would have to give a share to its owner (the elder brother.) One day the younger brother caught fish there but he did not pay the due share to his elder brother on the ground that the latter was having a feast of fish every day. This infuriated the elder brother and he ordered his younger brother to leave that place immediately. The younger brother, accompanied by his followers, came down from the Naga Hills and settled in the plains in between the Naga Hills and Karbi Anglong. But as they were used to live in the Hill tops, the plains did not suit them and so ultimately they migrated to Karbi Anglong and settled permanently in their present abode known as Naga Rengma.

It is a well established fact that formerly there were severe types of feuds among the different Naga tribes. There were frequent raids, head-hunting, etc. The Rengma Nagas, being a smaller group, probably were subjected to all sorts of harassment. This might induce Desong and Mongkha, the two Rengma Chiefs, to migrate into Karbi Anglong along with their friends and followers. Hence the cause of migration adduced by J. P. Mills may be regarded as the true one.

But the other two versions also contain some elements of truth. First, the Rengma Nagas must have prior knowledge regarding the existence of such low lying hills in Karbi Anglong. They might have discovered these uninhabited hills in course of their hunting expeditions. Secondly, there were severe types of feuds among the leading members of the same clan over and above the inter tribe feuds.

As regards their path of migration it is worthwhile to mention the statement made by J. P. Mills—"The Mikir Rengmas are known to the Northern section of western Rengmas as Nxong teri Phenyau (cane path Rengmas), and to the southern section as Ntenyi awi Khiya (cane-cutting Reng-



Breast feeding even to a grown up child is a matter of pride for a Rengma woman.



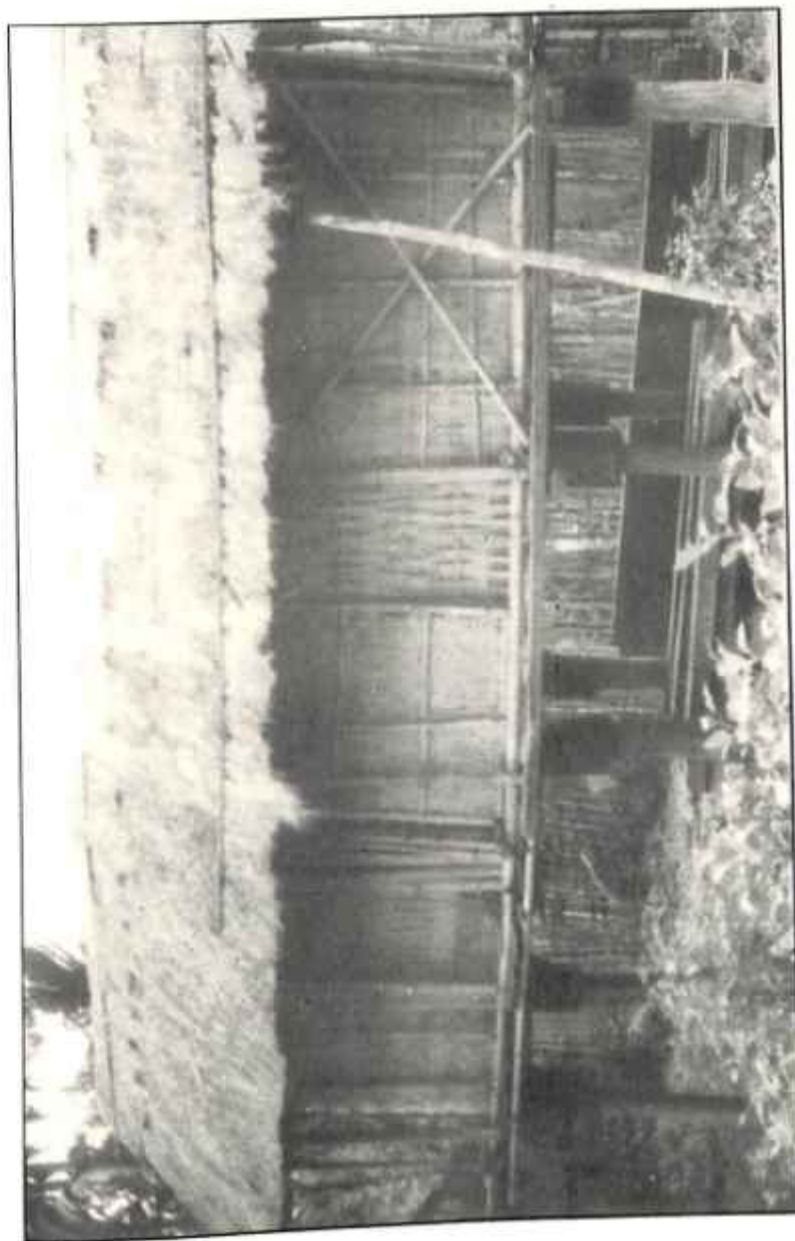
A Rengma youth in woman's apparel.



Rice-pounding in company is really enjoyable. The picture shows the traditional rice-pounding activities of Rengma girls.



A pile driving goal-shed standing in the courtyard of a Rengma home stead.



The pile-driving dwelling houses of a Rengma family.



mas) because their path of migration led through dense cane jungle bordering the plains.<sup>6</sup>

### CHIEFTAINSHIP

Since the migration into Karbi Anglong the following is believed to be the line of descent to Chieftainship : 1. Desong Sebo, 2. Kehung Sebo (Phukan), 3. Lathe Himbo, 4. Suga Nandu, 5. Yakungle Nandu, 6. Pukhu Nandu, and 7. Bidyaram Nandu.

### CLANS

The Rengma Nagas of Karbi Anglong are divided into eight exogamous clans as follows : 1. KENPUVNYU, 2. KANRJNYU, 3. RESOBINYU, 4. JISENBINYU, 5. SABINYU, 6. NYENTHANYU, 7. NANGDUNYU and 8. HENBUNYU. As regards the origin of the clans no definite and precise information could be gathered since the versions were found to be confusing. Since the pieces of information given were very much confusing it is very difficult to say definitely whether their origin referred to common ancestry or ties of marriage or some animal totems.

But it is interesting to note that the name of the clan is used as title in its short form. As for example : Instead of using SABINYU, only SEBO is used. Similarly instead of using NANGDUNY, only NANDU is used.

### MARRIAGE

The eight clans mentioned above are exogamous and hence marriage between the members of the same clan is a taboo. Violation of this taboo is regarded as a serious offence leading to excommunication from the clan besides imposition of fines in cash and kind.

Although marriage by capture was in vogue in the bygone days, at present it is practically obsolete. At present almost all marriages are performed through negotiations.

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6. Mills, J. P., The Rengma Nagas, Page-2

As soon as the marriage is settled, the youth has to serve in the farms of the would be parents-in-law for one year. This serves as the bride price. The actual marriage is performed only after one year's free service by the would be groom to his parents-in-law. During this period he may stay at his own house of his would be parents-in-law. In the latter case he is never allowed to sleep with his would be wife. But if he happens to belong to a rich family, he can avoid this free physical labour to his would be parents-in-law by offering animals like pigs, fowls and cows as bride-price to his would be parents-in-law. Formerly Mithuns used to play a great role in fixing the bride price. But the Rengma Nagas of the Karbi Anglong do not rear Mithuns at present.

The minimum marriageable age of a boy is 20 and that of a girl is 16. If a boy of marriageable age develops a liking for a particular girl of marriageable age belonging to another clan, he informs his parents regarding his desire. The parents of the boy then enquire from other neighbours whether the girl has already been betrothed. If the girl is not betrothed to any one, the parents of the boy along with other older persons of the village go to the house of the girl and offer betel nuts and leaves and rice beer to the parents of the girl. The parents of the girl then ask them the purpose of their visit as if they do not know anything. The boy's party then expresses their wish and request the parents of the girl to give their daughter in marriage to the boy. However accomplished the girl might be, her parents will say that their daughter knows nothing about managing a household and that she is quite unfit for any work. If the boy's party still insists on getting the girl married to the boy, the parents of the girl ask their daughter to express her opinion. If the girl expresses her consent, then a day is fixed for the final settlement of the marriage. In Rengma dialect this day is called 'SEMPON'. On this day of 'Sempon' the boy's father presents a 'Nze Ketong' (long dao) and a 'Nye' (spear) to the girl's father. The actual marriage takes place after one year from the day of 'Sempon'.

The ceremony connected with the actual marriage is called 'Jankhim'. In this ceremony a sumptuous feast is given by the parents of the bride to the bridegroom's party and to his own village people. The ceremony begins with dances and songs. At first the boy's party sings a song conveying the idea that the bride will be taken away to be the wife of the bridegroom. The girl's party will then sing a song conveying the idea that the bride will not be allowed to be taken away. At this there will be mock fights between the two parties. At last the boy's party catching hold of the bride will drag and carry her to the newly constructed house of the bridegroom. Thenceforth the couple start living as husband and wife. For the first three nights the husband and the wife have to sleep in separate beds. The consummation of marriage takes place only on the forth night.

The Rengma Nagas of Karbi Anglong follow monogamy although there is no bar to polygamy. Divorce, although permissible under the customary rules, is very rare. Child marriage is quite unknown to them. Widows are allowed to remarry provided they pursue the rule of exogamy in tact. At the death of the elder brother, the younger brother can marry the widowed sister-in-law. But under no circumstances the widow of the younger brother can be married by the elder brother. The relationship between the younger brother and the wife of his elder brother, on the other hand, is a very intimate one. Although their relationship is very intimate incest between them is an unknown fact in the Rengma society. The younger brother rather looks upon his sister-in-law with reverence. Besides, incest is never tolerated by the Rengma Nagas. It is viewed with great seriousness and is regarded as the most shameful act that can ever be committed by a Rengma. Persons found guilty of incest are publicly punished by the village elders by holding their session in a public place.

Another important thing regarding the Rengma Nagas is the absence of cross-cousin marriage. It may be remembered here that the cross-cousin marriage is very much preferred by many tribal societies in India.

## FAMILY STRUCTURE AND LAW OF INHERITANCE

A Rengma Naga family generally consists of the husband his wife and their unmarried sons and daughters. Unmarried brothers and sisters of the head of the family also generally live in the same house and are regarded as the members of the same family. As soon as a male member, whether a brother of the family or a son, gets married, he starts living in a separate house.

The Rengma Nagas follows the patriarchal system and as such the line of descent is traced through the male members only. The father is the head of the family and is the owner of all properties of the family. In terms of family authority next to father comes the eldest son. Under the customary law of inheritance, the eldest son inherits the paternal property at the death of the father. But under the same customary law he has to share the property equally among all his brothers. If the brothers are still minor at the time of the death of their father, the eldest son has to act as the custodian of the properties that might belong to his minor younger brothers. The minor brothers get their share of the paternal properties when they come of age. If the deceased leaves no male issue his property is inherited by the nearest male relation of his clan. A couple who does not have and male issue may adopt a male child provided the child belongs to the same clan of his foster father. The adopted child will then be the sole heir to the property of his foster father and in all practical purposes the adopted child is regarded as the true son of the couple.

### BIRTH

After the birth of a child the parents of the new-born have to observe 'Genna' for nine days continuously. During these nine days the parents are completely segregated from the whole community. They cannot talk to anybody outside their family. The villagers do not visit their house and talk with them during these nine days. On the tenth day a small

feast has to be offered to the villagers and the relations of the new born. If the baby is male, a cock is sacrificed and the people offer spear, Dao, bow and arrow, etc. to the baby as presents. If the new born is female a hen is sacrificed. After the sacrifice, the people pray for the health and prosperity of the child.

### DEATH

When a person dies, the family has to observe nine days 'Genna'. During these nine days no member of the family should work in the fields and leave the boundary of the village. It is customary for the Rengma Nagas to bury the dead bodies. The burial takes place as soon as all the relatives of the deceased arrive. The body is buried at the burial place of the village by digging a grave led by the oldest man of the clan to which the deceased belongs. During the nine days of 'Genna', the deceased has to be offered the due share of the principal food and every day his share has to kept in a bundle wrapped with plaintain leaf. On the tenth day these bundles have to be offered to the deceased at his grave. After this offering a number of stone slabs will be laid over the grave of the deceased. The Rengma Nagas believe that it is only on the tenth day that the soul leaves the body for good. On this day when the laying of the stone slabs is over, the family of the deceased has to offer a feast with a pig to the persons who attended the burial ceremony. The offering of the feast marks the closing of the death ceremony.

### RELIGION

All the Rengma Nagas living within the jurisdiction of Karbi Anglong have embraced Christianity. Before conversion they were animists. They believed in a number of gods and goddesses. Among them 'Terunyu' was the highest god. This 'Terunyu' was commonly worshipped once in a year by the people of the villages. For his appeasement pigs, fowls and oxen were sacrificed. Among the household gods and goddesses, 'Nichagy' (god of wealth) and 'Nichagy' (goddess

of wealth) were worshipped by each family thrice a year by observing 16 days 'Genna' each time.

The Rengma Nagas do not have any priest among them. But at the time of observance of socio-religious festivals the advice of the oldest members of the different clans is always sought for. They believe in magic and witchcraft and the medicineman is called 'Pethinyu'.

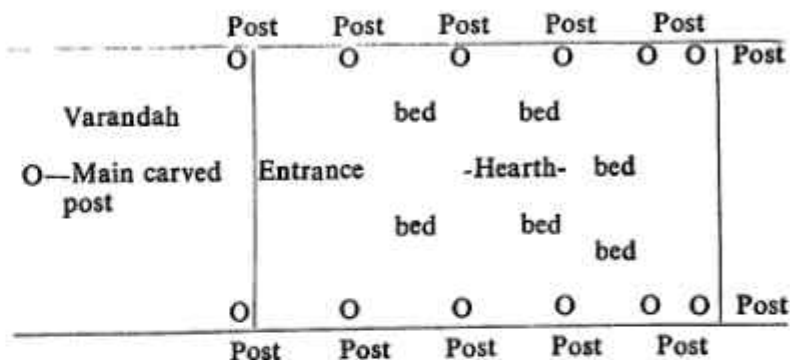
The Rengma Nagas of Karbi Anglong believe in the immortality of the souls and life-hereafter. It has already been mentioned that the soul is believed to leave the body of the deceased only on the tenth day of the death.

The observance of 'Genna' is a very important factor in the religious life of the Rengma Nagas. When a person observes 'Genna' on a particular day, it means a holiday for him. On this day he does not work. He does not leave the boundary of the village. Nor does he talk with any stranger on this day. When a whole village observes 'Genna' no stranger is allowed to enter the boundary of the village and none of the villagers crosses the boundary of the village on that day.

### BACHELORS' DORMITORY

Like other tribes, the Rengma Nagas of Karbi Anglong also have their Bachelors' dormitory. In Rengma dialect it is called 'Rensi'. The boys start sleeping in the Rensi when they find it shameful to sleep in the same room with their parents. Thenceforth they sleep in the Rensi, till they get married. Here the boys are trained and taught their duties for future life. As the training in handicrafts, warfare, singing and dancing, etc. is given, it helps the boys in moulding their character. The seniormost and most experienced boy is the leader of the 'Rensi'. It is his duty to impart training to the young ones. The junior ones have to serve him by fetching water, making his bed, etc. The members of the Rensi besides rendering joint labour, organise feasts, picnics, fishing and

hunting expeditions, etc. Handicrafts and musical instruments are kept in the Rensi. The house is built on a raised bamboo platform. Its length would be about six times the breadth and there is no partition inside. The inside pattern of the 'Rensi' is shown below :



There is no such dormitory for the young unmarried girls of the Rengma Nagas of the Karbi Anglong district.

### OCCUPATION AND ECONOMIC CONDITION

Agriculture is the main occupation of the Rengma Nagas of Karbi Anglong. Like the other hill tribes of Assam they also practise Jhumming. Wet-land cultivation is done wherever such lands are available. In their Jhum they grow rice, maize, cotton, chillies, ginger, castor, gourds, pumpkins, etc. They are good horticulturists also. Orange and pineapple are their major horticultural products. At the time of harvesting of paddy the villagers work collectively in the field of each family by turn.

The women are expert spinners and weavers. Girls are taught spinning and weaving from their very childhood. Dyeing materials required for colouring the yarns are obtained from the forests. Most of the domestic requirements of cloths are met from the family looms. Many families now use fly shuttles instead of their indigenous loin looms. The women equally share the strenuous works with their males.

Blacksmithy and manufacturing of bamboo and cane goods are two other important cottage industries of the Rengma Nagas. Besides cattle, they rear pigs, and fowls.

The Rengma Nagas are very hard working and each family tries its best to be self-supporting. And hence economically they are better off than their neighbouring Karbis.

#### CEREMONIES CONNECTED WITH AGRICULTURE

The Rengma Nagas of the Karbi Anglong perform a number of ceremonies that are connected with their cultivation.

1. **NYADA** : This festival is held in the early part of the month 'Penpho' (December). The celebration of this festival marks the end of the agricultural year. This festival continues for eight days and each day has its significance. On the first day rice beer is brewed. On the second day the graves of the ancestors are repaired by their decendants by cutting the jungles around the graves and by replacing the fallen stone slabs on the graves. On the third day the women offer rice beer on the graves of their forefathers. On the fourth day the young boys and girls sing and dance in memory of the ancestors. On the fifth day the young boys and girls collect food stuff from the families of the village to be taken in a feast on the last day of the festival. On the sixth day rice beer is drunk by one and all. On the seventh day men go out to gather thatch for repairing their own houses. On the last day, that is, on the eighth, the young men of the Rensi arrange a feast for them.

2. **PI-PE** : The Pi-pe festival is held by the Rengma Nagas at the beginning of the month 'Thui' (January). This festival continues for three days and its main purpose is to get rid of all the evils of the preceding year. During these three days all persons have to keep themselves neat and clean by washing themselves every day in the streams and the married persons must not have any sexual intercourse during these three days. Only after the observance of this ceremony new jungles for Jhum are cleared.

3. **LOTSUNG NGA** : The Lotsung Nga ceremony is connected with the clearing of burnt woods from the Jhum lands. It has already been mentioned that the new jungles are cleared for the Jhum after the observance of the Pi-pe ceremony at the beginning of the month of January. The felled jungles are then allowed to be dried. The dried jungles are then burnt in the month of 'Kero' (March). Before the observance of this ceremony the Rengma Nagas observe five days 'Genna'. During these days the whole village refrains from work and at each family men offer rice beer to the spirit of the crops so that their crops might be better than the previous year. The clearing of the burnt woods from the fields starts from the sixth day.

4. **KHONG KEPANG KENNYU** : The ceremony connected with the first harvesting of the ripening paddy is called 'Khong Kepang Kennyu'. It is one of the most important ceremonies connected with agriculture. Without the observance of this ceremony no harvesting of the new paddy takes place. An old woman of the village goes to the paddy field, from which the first harvesting of new rice is to be done at dawn. She takes with her some food and rice beer which she offers to the spirit of the crops in the field. After the offering she cuts down some rice ears and carries the ears in a basket to the village. At night she eats the new rice after cooking. The villagers may start reaping their paddy from the next day. This ceremony is similar to the Assamese new rice-harvesting ceremony called 'Lakhimi Ana'. But the Lakhimi Ana ceremony is connected with the individual family while the 'Khong Kepang Kennyu' is connected with the whole village. Secondly the new rice brought ceremoniously is not consumed by the Assamese people on the very night. It is, on the other hand, kept stored in the granary.

#### DRESSES :

The Rengma Nagas of Karbi Anglong have their own traditional dresses. The old man still use 'Nzanyan' (Lion cloth). But the young men now-a-days use pants and

Dhuties only. Their headgear is called 'Pihu'. Now-a-days it is used by men only at the time of dancing. The scarf used by the young men both married and unmarried, called 'Phehong' may either be plain or decorated. The scarf used by the old men is called 'Judu'. Instead of scarfs they now use shirts and sometimes coats. The women put on 'Ginhu' and 'Pherhe' just like skirts. While 'Ginhu' is plain, 'Pherhe' is decorated. For covering the upper part of their body the women put on decorated 'Phehong'. Now-a-days, of course, the young girls and young married women put on blouses.

#### ORNAMENTS :

The Rengma Nagas of Karbi Anglong have their traditional ornaments also. 'Benpen' is a cane made coloured armlet. Formerly each man used to put on a Benpen on each arm. 'Khajanchi' is a cane made bracelet with nice artistic designs which was worn by each man at one of his wrists. 'Phapen' is a cane made artistic anklet. It is about nine inches long. It is put on at each anklet at the time of dancing. 'Tabinyu' is an ornament for men, made of silver and meant for ear holes. 'Ten' is a silver made bracelet for men. Men also use thin nickel made ear-rings called 'Sam-em-ben'.

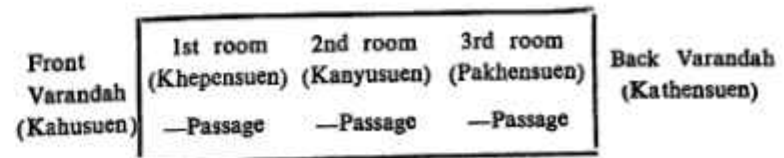
Like men, the women also use silver made 'Tabinyu' in their ear holes. The most highly valued ornament used by a Rengma woman is 'Teharou'. It is a necklace made of several costly sea-shells. Without this ornament a woman is considered very poor. The women also put on another necklace made of several ordinary seashells called 'Tesang'. Like men, the women also use 'Ten'—the brass made bracelet. But while a man puts on only one pair, the minimum number of 'Ten' used by a woman is 20. 'Benpenkhejansenpi' is also another ornament made from zink which is put on by women as armlet. This ornament is quite heavy.

#### VILLAGE STRUCTURE AND HOUSES

In Rengma dialect 'Phen' means a village and 'Kalo' means a house. As in a Dimasa Kachari village, the houses

in a Rengma village are also constructed in two rows facing each other. In between two rows sufficient space is left. Kitchen gardens are very small and many families do not have any kitchen garden at all. There is no traditional rule as to the minimum number of houses that a village should have. A village may have any number of houses. The head-man of the village is called 'Songpegyu' Songpegyu and Pethinyu (medicine-man) are the most respected persons of the village. The maintenance of law and order in the village rests with these two persons. No ceremonies and festivals can be observed in a village without the knowledge of these important persons. The village disputes are settled by the 'Songpegyu' with the help of 'Pethinyu' and with the assistance of the village elders.

The houses are built on raised platforms. Although the houses are Katcha, they are strongly built with indigenous materials from the jungles. The size of their houses is about 40' x 15'. The house is divided into three rooms. There are two open Verandahs one in the front and the other in the back. The front Verandah is called 'Kahusuen' and the back Verandah is called 'Katheusuen'. The first room in the front is called 'Khepensuen'. In this room paddy is pounded and the common occupational implements are kept. The second room is called 'Kanyusuen'. There is a hearth at the centre of the room. It is the bed-room of the old persons of the family. All the valuables of the family are kept in this room. The third room which is called 'Pakhensuen' is used as the bedroom by the young members of the family. This room is also used as the kitchen of the family. Here, the food for the whole family is prepared. There is a back door in this room. The inside pattern of a Rengma Naga house is shown below :



## CONCLUSION

The Rengma Naga villages of the Karbi Anglong District are situated more or less in isolated pockets. Only recently these villages are linked with fair weather motorable roads. Because of inadequate infrastructural facilities, these villages are lagging behind from the point of view of development. From the point of view of education also their position is not satisfactory. As per 1971 census their percentage of literacy was 15.51 out of which the male literacy was 22.55 percent and the female literacy was 8.33 percent. Phancherep where the majority of the Rengma villages are located has only one M.E. School.

People are, however, adaptive and they have come forward to accept the challenges of the modern times. Leadership in the educated youths is markedly visible. One leader from this community had occupied the Chair of the Vice-Chairman of the Karbi Anglong District Council for a term of 5 years. We firmly believe that by availing of the opportunities offered by the development departments under the patronage of the District Council authority of the Karbi Anglong District, the Rengma Nagas will march ahead towards the main stream of the national life.

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## The Sonowal Kacharis

### Introduction :

Demographically the Sonowal Kacharis form the third largest plains tribal group of Assam. They are chiefly found in the district of Dibrugarh. A few Sonowal Kachari villages are found in Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Jorhat districts also. They belong to the great Bodo group and they nostalgically trace their close relationship with the Barmans of Cachar district, Boro Kacharis of Lower Assam districts and Dimasas of North Cachar Hills district. In fact it is difficult to draw exclusive ethnic line between the Boro Kacharis and Sonowal Kacharis as both these sections originally came from the same stock. Like other Mongolian people of this region, the Sonowal Kacharis are short statured, flat nosed, almond shape eyed, straight haired and scanty bearded people. It is believed that the prefix Sonowal in the name of the Tribe came to be used during the reign of the Ahom kings when the Kacharis of Upper Assam took to the trade of gold washers and collectors of gold particles.

### Legend About the Origin :

Legends prevalent among the Sonowals reveal that a certain king (Ban Raja or a contemporary king of his time) had four sons namely Dimasa, Garo, Bhalukbir and Hogra. The Dimasas established the kingdom of Boro at Cachar or Dimapur, the Garos established kingdom at the Garo hills while Bhalukbir became a king of the Akas with Capital at Balipara. The Hogras moved towards Sadiya

along with one thousand followers and took refuge in the Miri villages. Subsequently they shifted to the banks of the river Kundil. Three of the Miri families namely Hāgu, Likām and Daḥā merged their identities with those of the Sonowals and they formed three separate clans viz. Hāgumiri, Likāmmiri and Daḥāri. They say that the Sonowal Kacharis extended their kingdom upto Hkhampti and Singpho principality of Northern Burma. They occupied the 'Saumār Pith' of Assam and established their capital at Pātsadiā. Due to the combined attack of the Ahoms and the HKhamtis they had to shift to the southern part of Pātsadiyā. In this attack Lotharā, the Singpho chief took active part. Even today the Sonowal Kacharis place a copper coin over the dead body because the southern part of the Luit (Brahmaputra) was not their original land and thus a symbolical purchase of the land for cremation/burial has to be made. The system of purchasing land for the dead is not prevalent in Sadiya. They nostalgically remember their past abode at Sadiya and sing 'Hemāli Oi, Lālow, Lālow, Lālow Loyā' (meaning oh, my, bright glorious kingdom, how bright, how bright, how bright thou art).

They believe that they were the descendants of great Bhāskararmā, Narakāsur, Bān, Bhagadatta, Hirimbā, Ghotokos, Bhim, Prahlad and Bali. Although it is not definitely known about the origin of the Sonowal Kacharis, yet it can be assumed that their ancestors were 'Manick-Mukutā'. Late Sarbananda Rajkumar who studied the Sonowal Kacharis reveals—"Sadiyā Anchalat Thakā Tāmreswari Mandir, Kesāikhāti Gosanir Mandir Āru Nadi Bilākar Nāmar parā Chutiya Sakalar Āgate Tāt Kachari Rājya Āsil Buli Anumān Kariba Pāri". Meaning—The Tāmreswari temple, the temple of Kesāikhāti and the names of the river at Sadiya testify the existence of a Kachari kingdom at Sadiya before the

Chutiyas. Dr. Lila Gogoi, opines that a Sadiyal Kachari king named Manick ruled at Sadiya some time in 11th/12th century A. D. Folklores of the Sonowal Kacharis have ample references of Manick. The tale runs as follows.

Obtaining the blessings of Khiring Rājā (Mahadeo) the wife of a Kachari named manick gave birth to a cat. The cat was put inside a mustard loaded bamboo basket ('Sariyhar Duli') and surprisingly the ordinary cat was turned into a golden cat. Due to his heavenly gift Manick could become the king of Sadiya (Hālāli). Later on he bequeathed the kingdom to his son-in-law Mukutā. Even today the members of Mānikīāl and Mukutāl clans refer to their glorious ancestors.

The origin of the Kacharis and for that matter the Sonowal Kacharis is shrouded in uncertainties. Even Endle, who spent some years with the Kacharis and published a Monograph entitled 'The Kachari' as early as 1911, could not give us exact information in this regard. "The origin of the Kachari race is still very largely a matter of conjecture and inference in the absence of anything entitled to be regarded as authentic history. .... It is possible that there were at least two great immigrations from the North and North East into the rich valley of the Brahmaputra i. e. one entering North East Bengal and Western Assam through the valley of the Tista, Dharla, Sankosh etc. and founding there what was formerly the powerful kingdom of Kamarupa and the other making its way through the Subansiri, Dibang and Dihong valleys into Eastern Assam, where a branch of the widespread Kachari race, known as Chutiyas undoubtedly held sway for a lengthened period." It is quite probable that the latter immigrations might include the Sonowal Kacharis. The 'Saranias' referred to by Endle might include the Sonowals.

2. Gogoi, Lila—Asam Sāhitya Sabhā Patrikā, 20th year, Vol. III.

3. Endle, S.—The Kachari, 1910, P. 4.

1. Rajkumar, Sarbananda—Chutiya Jāti—Asam Sahitya Sabhā Patrika, 20th year. Vol. 1.



Opinions differ regarding the origin of the term Sonowal. Some authors opine that the Kacharis who worked with gold ('son') were known as Sonowals. Sonowals were experts in collecting gold particles from the sands of the river Suwansiri. Prof. Mahesh Chandra Bhuyan writes— "Āji Kisu Basarar Āgaloi ke Ekhon Pradhān Son Kamowā Noi Hisābe Ei Suwansiri Asamiya Mānuhar Etā Āpurugiyā Sampad Rupe Pariganit Hoisil Suwansiri Pārar Sonowal Sakalar Esamayāt Ei Son Kamowā Etā Arthakari Britti Hisābe Pratisthit Hoisil".<sup>4</sup> Meaning—A few years back the river Suwansiri was considered as a treasure for the Assamese people. The Sonowals living on the banks of the river Suwansiri considered collection of gold as a most lucrative source of income.

"Many people were engaged in gold washing. They had to pay to the royal exchequer one 'tolā' of gold per head per year. Gold could be procured from the sand at all places on the bank of the Brahmaputra. According to the Reports on the Administration of Assam 1892-93 and 1901-1902, the rivers of Assam which yielded gold were those of the Darrang and Lakhimpur districts, north of the Brahmaputra, the Brahmaputra itself in its upper course, the Noa Dihing and Buri Dihing and a small stream called Jagle which rises in the Tipam hills and falls into the Buridihing. In Sibsagar district the Dhansiri, the Desai and the Jhanji were said to be auriferous. One of these streams, the Bhoraloi, Dikrang and Suwansiri in Darrang and Lakhimpur seem to have formerly given the largest quantities. Gold washing was done by a guild known as Sonowal Khel."<sup>5</sup>

A folk story prevalent among the Sonowals tells us about the origin of the term Sonowal. During the reign of Ahom king Swargadeo Gadadhar Singha, the Kacharis lived near Sadia. At that time one Goswami named Keshdeo accom-

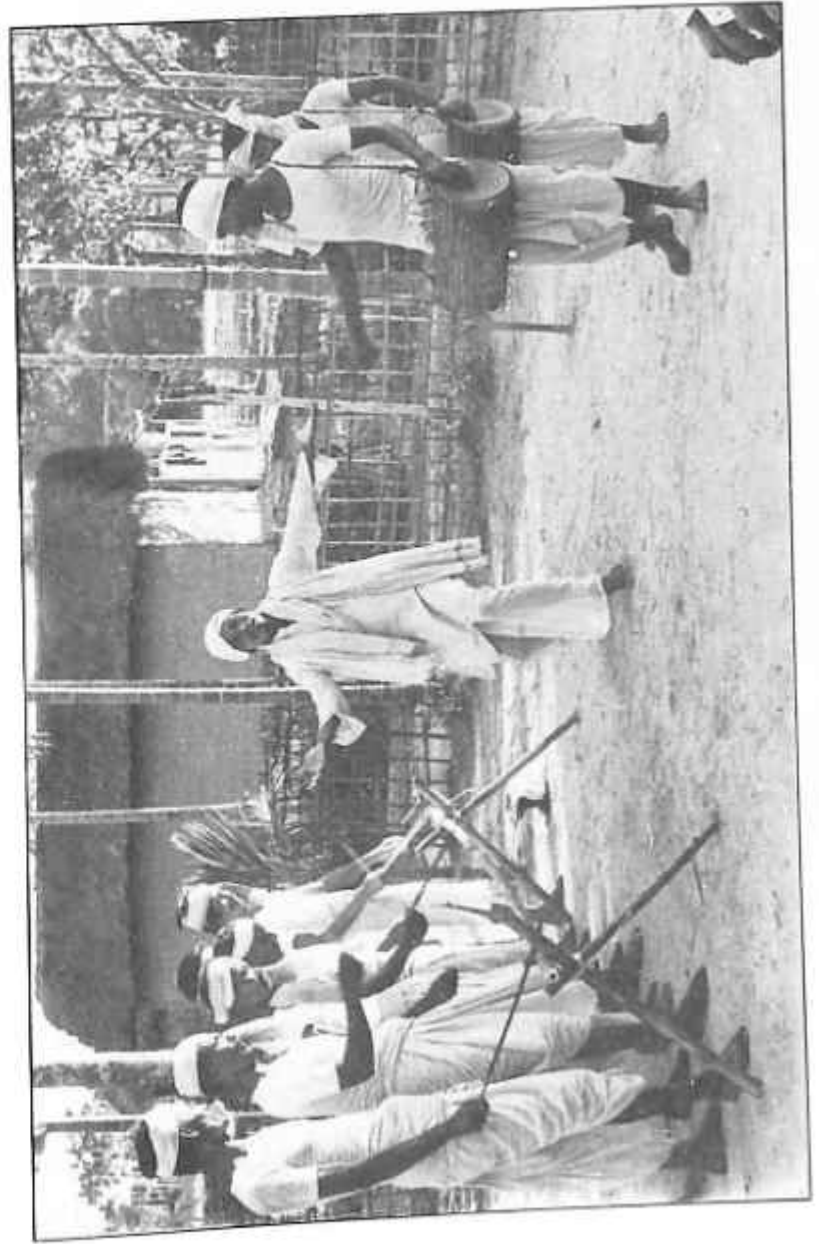


Two elderly Sonowals — a close-up view.

4. Bhuyan, M. C.—Bhowgalik Dristit Suwansiri Noi—Sāptā-hik Nilachal, Vol. 113, Saka 1892.
5. Gait, E. A.—A History of Assam, 1963 (Third Edition), P. 272.



A Sonowal woman with her child. The simplicity of her dress, of course, does not deprive her of the smile.



The singing of 'Huchari' by the Sonowals in perfect rhythm and grace during the observance of Bihu festival.



Community threshing of paddy by the Sonowal women after harvest. In the background the granary can be observed.



Bihu Dance performed by the young Sonowal girls called 'Gabhari Bihu'.

panied by his disciples fixed his tent near Āthukarhā Mājuli on the bank of the river Tengāpāni. The Goswami possessed supernatural power and under his influence initially two Kachari families became disciples. They were known as 'Bhaktiyāri' and 'Pingrāri'. A blind boy of the former family regained eye sight and a lame man of the latter family was cured by the blessings of the Gosāin. The news of supernatural power of the Gosain spread like wild fire and other Kachari families were eager to get the blessings of the Gosain. But they first tried to measure the godly power of the Gosain and put 'tola' of gold inside a small container which was sealed in a half burat bamboo container ('Chungā'). The bamboo container was placed in the down stream with the intention that the Gosāin's divine power will attract the container if he really possessed such power. Surprisingly the bamboo container came near the ghat where the Gosāin was fixing his tent. In spite of their best efforts the disciples of the Gosāin could not catch hold of the bamboo container. They reported Gosāin about the matter who came to the ghat and collected the gold. In the meantime the Kacharis got the news and they enblock came to the Gosāin for proselytisation. Those Kacharis who offered gold ('Son') for conversion to Hinduism were thenceforward known as Sonowal Kacharis.

According to 1971 Census the Sonowal Kacharis constitute the third largest plains tribal group of Assam with a total population of 1,98,619. The estimated population of the Sonowals as in March 1987 is 3,18,717.

We have already mentioned the socio-religious cause of their conversion to Hinduism and today very few tribal traits are noticed in the community. Dalton's description of the Kacharis (Saraniās) fit well with that of the Sonowal Kacharis. "They are in comparison with the average run of the people of the plains, their neighbours, a fine athletic race industrious and thriving, of light olive complexion and rather strongly marked Mongolian features..... The majority call themselves Saraniā that is purified Kacharis to indicate that they have

adopted the custom of the Hindus and abstained from forbidden food.”

#### Social Structure :

By and large, the social structure of the Sonowal Kacharis has marked similarities with that of any other non tribal communities of the neighbouring villages. The Gaonbura or the village headman is the keyman of the village who is entrusted with the day to day village administration. He commands respect from all and presides over the village assembly. Besides the Gaonbura there are other office bearers namely 'Bārik', 'Pāthek', 'Āsirbadiā Burā', Gitghāi; Medhi; 'Tāmuli' and 'Rāndhani'. There is specific assignment for each office bearer. Thus 'Bārik' remains in charge of the Namghar and the allied functions held in the Namghar. He also acts as the treasurer of the public fund. In some villages separate treasurers are appointed. The 'Pāthek' acts as reader of the religious scriptures in public or private functions. Only the 'Āsirbadiā Burā' can shower blessings at the end of the religious ceremonies. The 'Gitghāi' is an expert in 'Husorigit' and other religious songs. The 'Medhi' is regarded as the chief in all religious functions. The 'Bāyan' is a special instructor who imparts training to others in the art of 'Gāyan Bāyan' ('Gāyan Bāyan') is a religious dance sequence propounded by Mahapurush Sri Sankardev). Similarly the function of the Tāmuli is to supply betel leaves and nuts to the audience and participants of a religious function. The 'Rāndhani' or 'Bilaniā' is entrusted with cooking and distributing the feast.

The Namghar is also the centre of solving disputes of the villagers. Complaints regarding anything social or religious are brought before the village elders who deliver judgement and punish the offenders. Punishment depending upon the nature of offence range from imposition of fine in money which is deposited in the public funds or in kinds i. e. excommuni-

6. Dalton, E. T.—Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal, Calcutta, 1872, (Reprint 1960), P. 81.

cation ('Khutimarā'). Ex-communication is considered to be the severest form of punishment the village elders can inflict upon any villager for a serious crime.

#### Agriculture :

Agriculture is the sole means of their livelihood. They are wet cultivators and Sail and Ahu paddy are grown in their fields. Besides paddy, they grow mustard, potatoes, sweet potatoes, 'Matimah' and other winter vegetables mainly for local consumption. Modern method of agriculture is resorted to by a few families only. Fertilisers and pesticides are rarely used and the villagers depend upon cowdung as manure.

#### Food :

Rice is the staple food of the Sonowals. All kinds of vegetables and pulses are included in their menu. Their great delicacies are fish, mutton and chicken. They do not take pork nor the people rear pigs. Ricebeer is locally prepared by a few families and the people take it occasionally. Today, however, the consumption of rice beer is restricted and educated sections prefer tea to ricebeer. Formerly the first item to entertain guests was betel leaves and nuts and ricebeer and the host seemed to be offended when the guests refused to accept their hospitality. This trend is fast disappearing and now-a-days tea is offered to the guests. Of course betel leaves and nuts is a must item which precedes or follows the cup of tea. For their tiffin they use special variety of rice ('Komal chāol' and 'Borā chāol') which is used by other non tribal people also.

#### Dress :

The dresses of the Sonowal Kacharis of both male and female are similar to those worn by other rural Assamese men and women. Most of their clothes used in day to day life are woven by the womenfolk and almost every house possesses a loom.

### House :

A typical Sonowal Kachari house has similarity with that of the non tribal house in rural areas of Assam. They construct separate shades for cattle, ducks and poultries. The granary is generally constructed towards eastern direction and in a corner in front of the house. The well-to-do sections construct pucca or semi-pucca Assam type house with C.I sheet roofing. Every household must possess a spacious courtyard for threshing and processing paddies and the campus is neatly maintained. Almost all the families have their basti lands, some portion of which is used as jungles which provide them with house building materials like bamboos and firewood. The houses have apartments and the first room is used as a drawing room to which outsiders have easy access.

### Social life :

Co-operation is the salient feature of their social life. Whether harvesting paddy or constructing or renovating a house of an individual family, all the villagers co-operate. Both male and female are very labourious. They reap a bumper crop of Sali paddy by the strenuous labour of both sexes. Just as menfolk are experts not only in agriculture but also in other household chores like housebuilding, gardening etc. similarly the womenfolk are also experts in their own fields. The womenfolk help their men in the fields, weave clothes and prepare meals for all the members of the family. The unity is scrupulously maintained and inter family disputes are amicably settled in the village. The youths play active role in the smooth running of the individual or community festive or religious occasions. No woman will formally join the 'Mel' (village council) though she does not hesitate in making her voice heard or her opinion felt. The distinction of man and woman makes itself manifest in the behavioural pattern of the families which is reflected in the character and outlook of the young boys and girls.

### Family :

A Sonowal Kachari family consists of a nucleus of father and mother with separable units of sons and daughters. Both

primary and joint family systems are prevalent. The eldest male member of a family runs the house. Within the family the sphere of man is clearly distinguished from that of the woman. There is no segregation nor is any seclusion of woman observed but each has a special sphere of activities clearly demarcated. The oldest male member of the house is highly regarded and his orders are not violated. The division of labour between the sexes is scrupulously observed and both the man and the woman accept the traditional pattern without any question and grumbling. From early childhood a girl knows the typical work assigned to her and the boy also knows his assigned duties. Thus a boy always looks up to his elder brothers and father for guidance in regulating his behaviour. In the same way does a girl derive her instructions from the female relatives and builds up her behaviour on the pattern of her mother and sisters.

### Inheritance :

Their system of inheritance is patrilineal. The land belongs to the family and the head of the family is the owner of the lands. After the death of the father the land is divided equally among the sons. The house is considered as immovable property and after the death of the father generally the eldest son becomes the owner of the house. Every house has its movable property in the form of utensils, implements, livestock and poultries, ornaments, cycles, radios, wrist watches etc. which are owned by individuals.

### Clan :

The Sonowal Kacharis are divided into seven exogamous clans ('Bangshas') viz. 'Bāli Khitiāri', 'Chiri Puriyā', 'Amara-bamiyā', 'Dhuliāl', 'Ujani Kuchiya', 'Nāmanj Kuchiya' and 'Tipamiyā'. These clans are again subdivided into fourteen subclans ('Khels'). They are 'Hagrāl', 'Muktāl', 'Mādan', 'Manikiyāl', 'Āhmal', 'Formāl', 'Bor Hājoāl', 'Saru Hājoāl', 'Kumrāl', 'Dhekiāl', 'Dingiāl', 'Lothiāl', 'Dangrāl' and 'Chetiāl'. There are again branches of these subclans viz.

'Mākrāri', 'Daphlāri', 'Nezkatāri', 'Daimāri', 'Khākhāri' etc. It may be mentioned that these divisions are not carried to an extent leading to any social disharmony and breach of cohesion. Except on marriage occasion reference to clans is hardly made. In their day to day life there is no feeling of high or low clan members.

The origin of the clans may be traced to certain characteristics of their ancestors. For Example the members of 'Muktāl' and 'Mānikāiāl' clan trace their origin to their benign ancestor king Manick and Mukuta.

#### Title :

Since their conversion to Hinduism and because of the large scale contact with the non Sonowals, the Sonowals used to write non tribal titles like Hazarika, Saikia, Bora in their process of assimilation. Today, however most of the Sonowals write Sonowal as titles.

#### Marriage :

The Sonowal Kacharis feel that an unmarried man is socially incomplete and therefore marriage is considered as indispensable for the adult boys and girls. A boy usually marries at the age of 22-25 years while the marriageable age for girl is 18-22 years. Marriage in the same clan is strictly prohibited, a motto postulated in the remote past is scrupulously adhered to even today. Once a girl is married she belongs to her husband's family and the children born of their marriage in all cases bear their father's surname. Marriage ceremony takes place at the girl's house. Monogamy is the general rule and the second wife is taken only after the death of the first wife. But having more than one wife is not treated as a breach of marriage rules provided one can afford to maintain a big family. In case of a second wife permission from the first wife is essential. If a second wife is taken without prior permission from the first wife then the latter can file a case before the assembly of village elders. In such cases the second wife shall have to live in

a separate house. Polyandry is quite unknown although divorce, widow remarriage can be made effective if the parties so desire.

The Sonowal Kacharis, have four distinct forms of marriage viz. (1) 'Nowā Dhowā or Bor Biyā' (2) 'Hom Diyā' (3) 'Gandharba' and 'Churchuriā' or 'Rabhā' Sarakāi Diyā'. Considerable non tribal influence is noticed in their marriages particularly in the former two types which entail huge expenditure and long drawn formalities. These are usually arranged by the parents of the prospective couple. Only in the 'Hom Diyā' marriage they may employ Brahmin priests.

The widely prevalent form of marriage is 'Gandharba' where the couple concerned takes the initiative. The reasons for preponderance of Gandharba form of marriage are that traditionally Sonowal Kachari marriages are held under this system and this system therefore entails no social stigma. Social approval is accorded provided the marriage takes place within the society's matrimonial norms. Besides, the formal marriage requires long drawn formalities and many families try to avoid this. Another reason may be the comparative lesser expenditure in 'Gandharba' type of marriage. Generally Gandharba marriage is the outcome of love at first sight and the boy and the girl decide this course as they apprehend doubt about their parents' agreeableness to the formal marriage. The socio-cultural occasions provide ample scope to the young boys and girls to develop love at first sight. If the boy is uncertain about the acceptance of the marriage proposal from the parents of the girl as well as from his own parents, "then one night he takes away his sweetheart to his residence with the help of his friends. After three days of the incident information must be sent to the parents of the girl which is called 'Jānanidiyā' or 'Chordekhādiyā'. The boy is required to bear the expenses of a sumptuous feast culminating the marriage. The 'Rabhā Sarakāi Diyā' or 'Churchuriā Biyā' is also a popular type of marriage where the runaway couple is formally recognised

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as married couple, with an unceremonious feast to a few village elders.

#### Bride Price :

Every girl in a tribal setting is considered an asset in the family to which she belongs. So depriving a family of a girl by taking her away in marriage has to be compensated by payment which is known as bride price. Bride price, however, must not be taken as return for dowry. "But it would be wrong to minimise the economic aspect of the proceedings. The bride's kindred are losing a valuable labourer hence her mother wails—'who will henceforth fetch water and kindle the fire, who will relieve me of the burden of grass'.<sup>6</sup> Now a days brideprice is charged only in 'Gandharba' form of marriage. There is no fixed bride price. It may vary according to the status of the groom and the goodwill of the girl's parents towards the groom's family. In some Sonowal Kachari villages a nominal bride price (Rs. 5.00) is given. It is reported that in no case does the bride price exceed Rs. 300.00 even in the case of 'Gandharba' marriage.

#### Religion :

The Sonowal Kacharis are the devout followers of 'Mahapurushia Baisnav Dharma'. All the Sonowals are the disciples of 'Auniati Satra' with the only exception of a few Sonowal Kacharis of Lakhimpur district who owe allegiance to the 'Checha Satra'. Among the villagers there are two broad religious divisions namely 'Saraniā' and 'Bhajaniā'. All the Sonowal Kacharis above the age of sixteen may be regarded as 'Saraniās' and those who are on the other side of the fifties follow the strict rules of Dharma, thus upgrading themselves in the socio-religious ladder. They are known as 'Bhakats'. These 'Bhakats' have various grades and the senior may be a 'Medhi'.

6. Lowie, R.H.—Social Organisation, 1966, P. 101

Although Vaisnavism takes its root deep into the heart of the Sonowal Kacharis, yet the people maintain much of their traditional religious beliefs and practices. Goodluck, flourishing agriculture, misfortune, natural calamities etc. in the village are attributed to the pleasure and furies of various benevolent and malevolent deities. Like other Kacharis, the Sonowals, too, worship Lord Siva, and observe 'Bāthow Puja'. During the month of 'Fagun' or 'Chot' (March-April) the Sonowals worship 'Bāthow' in the 'Bātho' or 'Bāthow Sāl' at Borpathar village near Dangari. Sacrifice of animals is resorted to in this puja. A special song called 'Hāidāng' is sung during this puja. Although basically it is a religious song, yet this song contains considerable historical significance in respect of the past life of the Sonowal Kacharis. Worship of household deities is also prevalent among them. Some of the household deities are 'Burā Pohā', 'Saragdeo Puja', 'Pir Diyā', 'Morāk Diyā' and 'Lakhimi Diyā'. It is believed that unless these household deities are worshipped, peace will not prevail in the family.

During a year the Sonowals observe various religious ceremonies in their village Namghars. The important ceremonies are Janmastami, the 'tithis' of Sri Sankardev and Sri Madhabdev, 'Sengeli Māsor Sabāh' ('Garakhiā Sabāh') 'Lakhimi Sabāh' and 'Norāsigā Sabāh'. Besides these, they observe 'Gāti Giri Bhoj', 'Gajāi Bhoj', for the welfare of the villagers. These are held in the forest or in a bank of a river. In order to contain any probable epidemic or natural calamity in the village, they observe 'Bhur Utowā Sabāh' in a river. The womenfolk observe 'Ai Sabāh', 'Apeśwarā Sabāh' at Namghar to appease the female deities. 'Ai Sabāh' is specially performed when pox appears in the village. 'Māh Prasād' (grams and fruits etc.) is offered to the Goddess.

#### Festival :

The most important festival of the Sonowals is the Rangali Bihu which falls on the 'Sankranti' of 'Chot' (14th April) and continues for a fortnight. Like other Assamese

people, the Sonowals, too, consider the Rangali Bihu as their traditional community festival. The main trait of this Bihu is the dance of young boys and girls in separate groups along with beating of drums and pipes. On the eve of the Bihu the womenfolk clean the clothes and prepare special Bihu delicacies like 'Chirā', 'Pithā' etc. The menfolk remain busy in collecting necessary items such as 'Tarā' Paghā (ropes for the cattle prepared out of slices of 'Tarā'—an indigenous creeper) and vegetables such as raw turmeric, bringel, gourd etc. for the next day's 'Garū Bihu'. The first day of the Bihu is dedicated to the cattle, as cows and bullocks provide them with means of livelihood. On this day early in the morning the cows and bullocks are ceremonially bathed in a river and cut pieces of the said vegetables are thrown to them. In the afternoon they are roped with 'Tarā Paghā' and entertained with cakes specially prepared for them. The young boys and girls wear new clothes on this day and after enjoying the special preparations of the Bihu, spend the time in egg fight ('Kani juj'). Next day is the 'Manuh Bihu' and on this day the 'Bihu Husori' is formally inaugurated at the Namghar. Regarding the origin of the 'Husori' the Sonowal Kacharis have a legend which runs as follow. "Brahma had a daughter by an Apsara or celestial maiden. The unrestrained God later set his eyes on his grown up daughter and wanted to enjoy her. King Dharma (another name for Yama or king of death) took up the matter and weighed his scales of justice. He found the girl guilty and drove her out of heaven. She came to earth and roamed about. When spring came there was thrill of new life throughout the universe and the gods remembered this girl who was pinning away in misery and loneliness. They went to Vishnu and spoke to him about her. Vishnu sent them to 'Bāthow' or 'Mahādeva'. Sitting under a peepal tree 'Bāthow' gave them lessons in Husori dance and music. The God then went to each divine household, danced and sang and thus collected various articles. With these they rehabilitated Brahma's daughter. The girl looked up again in all her youthfulness and sense of joy. She started dancing while the gods accompanied her on their instruments. Her bewi-

tching dance softened the heart of king 'Dharma' and she was recalled to her divine home. But the dance and music remained on earth to be performed by the Kacharis every spring." Only after the formal inauguration, the 'Husori' party can visit the house-holds. During these Bihu days the entire village is astir with joy and merry makings know no bounds. The entire atmosphere is surcharged with beating of drums and sound of pipes and melodious songs and dances.

The Sonowals have a folk belief regarding the origin of the Bohag Bihu. It is believed that during Bohag Bihu the demon king Bali who was consigned to the Hell (Sutal) along with the demons, returns to the earth on the 'Bisuva Sangkranti' day after completing a year and the Sonowals therefore rejoice on the advent of the demon king.

The dancing party carries one piece of long bamboo and placing the same over three bamboo posts in the courtyard of the households beat rhythmically with bamboo sticks singing simultaneously Bihu songs and dancing merrily with the tunes. Due respect is shown to the 'Husori' parties by offering betel leaves and nuts, cash and 'Seleng chādar' in a 'Sarāi' and in return the party blesses the inmates of the house for a prosperous new year. The money thus collected is spent in various socio-religious occasions held in the Namghar.

Magh Bihu and Kati Bihu, the two other Assamese Bihus are also observed by the Sonowals on the 'Puh Sangkrānti' (14th January), and 'Ahin Sangkrānti' (17th October) every year.

#### Death and Attendant Ceremonies :

The dead bodies among the Sonowals are cremated. In the past the Behari section of the Sonowals practised 'Perādiyā' (coffin system). But since 1921 the system has been abolished. In this type of burial a coffin was made

7. Goswami, P. —Essays on the Folklore and Culture of North Eastern India, 1983, p 2-3

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7. Goswami, P. —Essays on the Folklore and Culture of North Eastern India, 1983, p 2-3

of two boats specially prepared for the occasion. One boat was used for the corpse while the other served the purpose of a cover.

Dead bodies of children below the age of five, pregnant women and epidemic cases are buried. Dying inside the house is not considered as ominous.

Purificatory ceremonies are almost similar to those of the neighbouring non tribals with the exception that the Kacharis generally do not employ a Brahmin to preside over the purificatory ceremony. The 'Medhi' presides over all the functions relating to death. They observe a three tier purificatory ceremony namely 'Tilani' on the third day, 'Dahdiniā Dahā' on the tenth day and 'Kuridiniā Kāj' on the 20th day. Ancestor worship is also prevalent among them. 'Nāmkirtan' and a general feast for the villagers are held in the purificatory ceremony.

#### Changing Trend :

The socio-economic set up of the Sonowal Kacharis has undergone tangible changes. There have arisen a number of semi urban growth centres due to infra-structural developments in the post independent period. The people are more conscious about economic and educational improvement. Individualism has overtaken the old corporate living. The roads connecting the villages served as catalyst in spreading the modern cultures and value systems generated in towns. The people are seeking after new avenues of employment. The occupational mobility takes place along with the movement of the people from one area to another. Due to spread of education, the youths fancy white collar jobs. The leadership pattern also changes. The educated persons are gradually replacing the traditional leadership.

Change is also noticed in the material culture including dress and food habits. The people prefer to build modern Assam type houses. The younger generation prefers modern dresses. Ricebeer habit is fast disappearing from the educated sections. Only in festive occasions rice beer is prepared.

The religion and culture of the neighbouring non Sonowal Hindus had made tangible impact on their socio-religious life and process of assimilation is visible. The Namghar which is the centre for all community religious activities in the rural areas of Assam finds a respectable place among the Sonowals too. Many of the Hindu deities and worships attached to them are finding their place in the Sonowal Kachari pantheon. Similarities are noticed in rites and rituals also. In fact the concept of God, birth and death, beliefs relating to transplanting of paddy and harvest, disposal of dead and attendant ceremonies etc. are almost similar with those of the non tribal rural Assamese people.

Of late a trend towards revivalism is noticed in respect of their traditional culture.

The Sonowals are not lagging behind in politics. We find Sonowal representatives in the Lok Sabha and State Assembly. Even an educated Sonowal girl is accepting the challenging task of representing the community in the present Assam Legislative assembly.

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# The Zeme Nagas of the North Cachar Hills

## INTRODUCTION

The hill areas of Assam are inhabited by two numerically small Naga groups. While there are about 20 Nos. of Rengma Naga villages in the Karbi Anglong District almost equal number of villages are found to be inhabited by the Zeme Nagas in the North Cachar Hills District in the Barail ranges starting from the boundaries of Nagaland and Manipur to Maibang and the river Kapili. Sometimes the Zemes are equated with the term Zeliangrong which is only partially true. Zeliangrong is rather a common term which is used to denote three kindered tribes, namely, Zeme or Zemei, Liangmei and Rongmei and thus Zeliangrong is a combination of Ze+Liang+Rong.<sup>1</sup> In Manipur, however, the Zemes and the Longmeis are commonly known as Kacha Nagas, in Nagaland these two kindered groups are known as Zeliang. The Rongmeis are known as Kabui Naga also.

## MIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT

The Zemes, being one of the Mongloid tribes, had migrated to the North-East India, long long back along with the other Naga groups and settled in the Naga Hills (present Nagaland). The migration of a section of the Zemes to the North Cachar Hills is not so old. In the 18th century, they migrated to the North Cachar Hills via Manipur and settled

1. Saha, N., Ethnographic study of the Zeliangrong Tribes of North-East India in the book. The Tribes of North-East India, edited by S. Karotemprel, Shillong, 1984, Page-218.

down in the North-eastern part, the present North Cachar Hills district. At the time of their migration the entire North Cachar Hills region was within the Kachari kingdom and the Zemes, therefore, had to live under the Kachari suzerainty for many many years continuously. Along with the decline of the Kachari power, the Zeme Nagas became an easy prey to the warlike Angami Nagas who raided and harassed them constantly. As a consequence some of the Zeme Naga villages situated on the border of the then Naga Hills and Manipur migrated towards west and settled in the hills beyond the Diyung valley up to the banks of the Kapili river.<sup>2</sup>

The Zemes inhabiting the North Cachar Hills district has a peculiar system of migration which can be regarded as cycle-migration. Perhaps topography of the Barail range is itself responsible for it. The hills are extremely steep with abounding cliffs and crags. Land, suitable for Jhumming (shifting cultivation) is found in scattered patches only. Because of insufficiency of suitable Jhum land, a village must have an abnormally large territorial jurisdiction at its disposal. At the initial stage of the migration and settlement in the North Cachar Hills region, the Zemes might have selected several village sites for each village keeping in view not only of the topography of the terrain but also the future need of each village. When in course of time a stretch becomes exhausted, the entire village or a part of the village is shifted to one of its preselected sites. When the whole village is shifted to a new site, there is every likelihood of the village being shifted to the original site again when the regeneration of vegetation in the old Jhum site is complete. Thus leaving of a particular village site by the people of the village for another site does not practically mean its abandonment since the original village site with the graves of their ancestors and their hallowed memory have a great impact on the Zeme life and culture. Sooner or later they would come back to the original village

2. Bordoloi, B. N., District Handbook, United Mikir and North Cachar Hills, Shillong, 1972, Page-23.

site from the other village sites and the rotation or for that matter cycle-migration would be complete. But this cycle-migration is too slow a process which can be measured in terms of generation rather than years.<sup>3</sup>

## SOCIAL LIFE

### A. Family Structure :

The Zemes of the North Cachar Hills follow the patriarchal system of family structure. As such the father is the head of the family and the line of descent is traced through the male members only. They have the nuclear type of family. A Zeme family generally consists of the head of the family, his wife, unmarried sons and daughters and also unmarried brothers and sisters. As soon as a son or a brother gets married he is required to stay separately. However, the joint family system is also not totally absent. In a Zeme family, next to his father, the eldest son exercises his power.

### B. Clan.

The Zemes of the North Cachar Hills have six clans of equal status. They are Npame, Nkuame, Heneume, Nriame, Sogame and Panme. These clans are exogamous and as such no marriage can take place between a boy and a girl belonging to the same clan. Marriage between the members of Npame and Nkume is also not encouraged because of the fact that these two clans are considered to be allied.

### C. Marriage.

Marriage by negotiation is the prevailing practice among the Zeme Nagas. In most cases love results in marriage if the parents or guardians of the boys and girls raise no serious objections and the customary law of clan exogamy is not violated. The parents of the boy are required to take initia-

3. Bordoloi, B. N., Land Ownership and Cycle-Migration among the Zeme Nagas, in the North East India, edited by S. M. Dubey, Delhi, 1977, Page-410.



"In our traditional dresses and ornaments how beautiful we look!" That is what the four Zeme youths, one boy and three girls, want to convey.



The front view of a Zeme boys' Morung.



A Zeme woman with her child in a pensive mood.



The Zeme youths are expert dancers. The photo shows a dance recital by four Zeme youths.



Two Zeme girls in their traditional dresses and ornaments.



tive in case of negotiated marriage. Payment of bride price is a must. It may, however, be paid either in cash or in kind or in both in accordance with the decisions arrived at by both the parties. The kind includes necklace, cattle, Mithun, paddy, etc. The bride price is called 'Hemipaibe' in Zeme.

On the day of marriage the bridegroom and the bride must put on their traditional dresses and ornaments. The bridegroom takes an oath before the village priest and the other villagers present to the effect that he would keep the bride as his wife during his life in this world. Prior to this the priest worship Tingwang by sacrificing a hen for the well-being of the couple. Next day the newly wed couple leave for the bridegroom's house where a grand feast with buffalo and pig meat along with rice-beer called Inaduijang is to be offered to the villagers of the boy as well as of the girl.

Divorce called 'Kalak Sakbe' is permissible with the approval of the village council presided over by the village headman. If the divorce is permitted at the request of the wife, the bride price is required to be returned to the parent or guardians of the husband. If the divorce process is initiated by the husband, he is required to part with one half of his property in favour of his divorced wife.

Cross-cousin marriage is a preferential one.

#### D. Birth.

At the time of delivery, the expectant mother is helped by the old and experienced women of the village. The mother has to remain inside the house upto the fifth day from the date of delivery. On the sixth day the baby is taken out of the four walls of the house and shown to the sun. Shaving of the head is also done on this day. A suitable name is given to the child by the children who assemble there to witness the sun-showing ceremony of the baby. The purification ceremony of the mother and the new born baby takes place on the 11th day by sacrificing a cock in case of a male child

and a hen in case of a female child in presence of the village elders. It is expected that such a sacrifice would ensure a better life of the child in this world. The elders and others who remain present on this occasion have to be entertained with rice beer.

#### E. Death.

In the Zeme society death is regarded as a natural process from which none can escape. A person is allowed to die inside the house. As soon as a person dies a son of the deceased goes out of the house with the weapons of war by striking the both sides of the front door to drive away the evil spirits responsible for the death. In the courtyard he utters the names of his forefathers loudly accompanied by high jumps. His shouting attracts the villagers who immediately arrive at the residence of the deceased for the performance of the last rites.

The Zemes believe life hereafter and they, therefore, think that when a person dies, he or she is making a long journey to the spiritual world. As the journey is a long one provisions for food and drink have to be made for his or her use on the way. The relatives of the deceased person, therefore, prepare a small feast and offer a share to the deceased in a small basket. The dead body is then bathed and new cloths are also put on. It is then buried in a grave in front of the house along with the articles used by the deceased while he was alive. A flat stone slab with some marking is then placed on the grave as a symbol of identification of the grave of the deceased. The death ceremony is performed with the help of two village priests called 'Tingko' at the completion of one year by offering a feast to the villagers.

#### F. Customary Law of Inheritance.

It has already been mentioned that Zeme Nagas have the patriarchal system of family structure. As such the sons should inherit the property at the death of their father. But

according to the customary law prevailing among the Zemes only the eldest son can inherit the father's property and in return he has to look after his younger brothers and sisters till they come of age and get themselves married. If a man dies without leaving any male issue, his property will be inherited by his brother and not by his daughters. If the deceased has no brother also, the property will automatically go to the village council. The eldest daughter is allowed to inherit the cloths, ornaments and the looms of her deceased mother.

#### G. The Village system and Village Leadership :

The Zeme Naga villages are found to be located in the breezy hill tops. In the past when frequent village raids by other Naga groups was a rather a regular feature, the villages situated at the hill tops provided a better defence strategy. Although their villages are on the hill tops, nevertheless, their granaries are located in the hill slopes half to one kilometre away from the inhabited villages.

The houses are constructed on the ground with timbers and bamboo with thatched roofs in two rows keeping sufficient open space between the rows. A Zeme house is sufficiently high in front but gradually its height goes down towards the rear in such a proportion that a person has to bend his head when he is required to go out by the back door. That is to say, in the rear side the roof is kept only about a metre above the ground. The houses are very artistically designed and constructed with locally available construction materials in such a manner that they last for years and years together. While constructing their houses, the direction in which the wind blows constantly is always taken into account so that the velocity of wind cannot damage the structure of the house. The technology used in construction of the Zeme houses is simply marvellous.

The house generally consists of two chambers with a protruding verandah in front. In the inner chamber there

is a hearth in the middle and about a metre above it a bamboo Machang is kept hanging where the newly manufactured cane and bamboo made articles, seeds of vegetables, grains, dry fish and meat and many other things are kept. The constant smoke coming out of the hearth serves as a kind of preservative.

In each Zeme village within the jurisdiction of the North Cachar Hills, there is a village council which is entrusted with various important works like the maintenance of law and order, trial of cases and disputes observance of community and village festivals, selection of Jhum sites and their distribution thereof and so on. This village council is headed by the village headman called Matai. The order important members of this council are Kadaipeo or the land owner, Paitingko, the priest and the assistant village headman called Mataichepeo. All other village elders are also the members of the village council.

#### H. Morungs—Dormitories for boys and girls.

The Morung system of the Zeme Nagas of the North Cachar Hills by itself is unique in nature and perhaps it is the most outstanding aspect of their social life. Morung is a common term used by all the Naga group of tribes to denote the traditional youth clubs for unmarried boys and girls.<sup>4</sup> In Zeme dialect the Boys' dormitory is called Hangseuki and the girls' dormitory is called Leoseuki. Each Zeme village in the North Cachar Hills District has two or three Morungs for the boys and equal number of corresponding Morungs for the girls. Of course, from the point of view of status all Morungs are equal.

As a customary rule as soon as a boy or a girl crosses the age of eight he or she has to sleep in his or her dormitory at night. As one Morung for boys and one Morung for

4. Bordoloi, B.N., Morung System among the Zemi Nagas of the North Cachar Hills district of Assam, Bulletin of the T.R.I., Vol-1, No.-II, Guwahati, 1983.

girls are not sufficient to accommodate all the youths of the village, a Zeme village is found to have double or triple Morungs for boys as well as for girls. The members of Hangseuki are collectively known as Kienga while those of Leoseuki are known as Keleona.

As soon as a child is born it becomes a member of one of the Morung depending on the sex and the acceptance of an egg offered by the parents by the members of one of the Morungs. Since these Morungs are not based on clans, sons and daughters of the same parents might be the members of different Morungs.

Another important thing that may be mentioned here is the fact that the first loyalty of the Zeme youths is always towards the Morungs. Their loyalty to their family and clans is of secondary importance.

The boys Morungs present a very spectacular sight and they are the most beautiful and gorgeous buildings in the village. The front porch of the boys Morungs are always visible even from a distance. Generally the height of a Hengseuki is about 13 metres at the front porch and at the back its height is about 2 metres only. The length, of course, varies from 13 to 20 metres. The breadth is about 10 metres. On one side of the Morung there is a big hearth which is kept lighted throughout the whole wintry night to minimize cold inside. The boys sleep at night on the planks raised all around the four walls. The construction of the Hangseuki is so superb that one's mind is bound to be filled with awe and admiration at such indigenous skills. The gigantic timber posts are decorated with the heads of Mithuns, buffaloes, deer, boars, etc. There are fixed places for keeping the weapons of war and hunting implements of the Zeme bucks.

There is an owner-cum-caretaker for each of the boys Morungs who lives with his family at the end of the Morung in a spacious room. It is he who teaches them the arts of wrestling, fighting, hunting, dancing, singing, making of handicrafts, etc. The owner-cum-caretaker, therefore, must be an

experienced and capable man who can command the members of a Hangseuki on all occasions. This ownership is hereditary and the youngest son succeeds the father. For the useful services rendered by him, the owner-cum-caretaker does not receive any financial benefits. But he has a very high social status and he is held in high esteem by the entire people of the village. And in a tribal society the social status is much more important than material gains or wealth.

The Leoseukis or girls' Morungs are not constructed like the boys' ones. The girls may select any house of any person for their dormitory. The girls generally select an old couple for this purpose. While the big front room is used by them as their Morung, the old couple and their family members live in the back portion of the hut. The girls work in their respective fields during day time and use the dormitory for sleeping at night. The owner of the house and his wife act as their guardians at night only. Like the Hangseuki the girls' morung is also a training ground for singing, dancing, spinning and weaving.

The boys Morung is the best school for practical life of the Zeme bucks. The Morung life makes them self-reliant, disciplined, and also instils in them a sense of service to corporate body.<sup>5</sup>

As a corporate body, Hengseuki maintains the village pipelines, makes new reservoirs for storing water, clear the village paths of jungles besides participation in the socio-religious festivals observed in the village. The members of a boys' Morung can also be hired by well-to-do villagers for works like carrying harvested paddy from the fields, building houses, etc. The earnings from these sources are deposited into Morung's fund and are utilized at the time of feasts.

5. Bordoloi, B.N., Morung system among the Zeme Nagas of the North Cachar Hills District of Assam, Bulletin of the Tribal research Institute, Vol-I. No.-II. Guwahati, 1983, Page-5.

Another very very important aspect of the Morungs is the responsibility of their members towards a girl married to another village. When a Zeme girl is married to another village, all the youths of her village irrespective of Morungs have to work in the Jhum of her husband for one season from cutting of jungles to harvest. In return the husband has to entertain them with rice beer and a pig.

Thus as a traditional tribal institution, the Morung system of the Zeme Nagas of the North Cachar Hills district is unique in character and its influence is so pervasive that a Zeme life cannot be thought of without the Morung system.

### RELIGIOUS LIFE

From the point of view of religion, the Zeme Nagas are animists. They believe in one supreme God whom they call Tingwang. It is this God who guides the other deities benevolent as well as malevolent. Tingwang, therefore, is worshipped so that they could be protected from the epidemics and other evil spirits. The village priest who worships Tingwang and other deities by sacrificing buffaloes, pigs, birds, etc, is called Paitingko. Worshipping of Suhprai, the god of crops, is a must since their cultivation entirely depends on him. Many rituals are also performed in each family in order to get rid of diseases and other calamities. Entering into one's house at the time of celebration of a religious ritual by outsiders is a taboo. On the day of full moon the Zeme Nagas following traditional religion observe Genna and they do not do any works on that day. They believe in life after death and also in rebirth.

A section of the Zeme Nagas of the North Cachar Hills has already embraced christianity.

### ECONOMIC LIFE

#### A. Agriculture :

The main source of livelihood of the Zeme Nagas of the North Cachar Hills is agriculture based on shifting cultivation

otherwise known as Jhuming. In the Jhum lands they cultivate mixed crops. Besides paddy they raise maize, millets, ginger, brinjals, sweet gourds, oil seeds, and vegetables also. Cotton is also grown by them in the hill slopes. The Zemes are also good horticulturists. They cultivate pineapples, oranges, guava, pomegranate etc. in the hill slopes.

The Zemes observe a peculiar festival known as Heiduarateube. The family which reaps the highest quantity of paddy from its cultivation is respected by the villagers by erecting a timber post called Etungsa in the courtyard. The family has to entertain the well-wishers with a feast preferably by killing a Mithun or two to three pigs in absence of the former.

The most important factor in respect of agricultural practices in the Zeme Naga society is perhaps the land system which is rather unique in character because of the fact that such a system is not found to be prevalent among the other hill tribal communities of Assam. Our conception that the Jhum lands are owned by the community only is also belied when we examine the Zeme land system.

The Zemes of the North Cachar Hills have three types of land, the land owned by the Kadepeo, the land-lord, land owned by the six clans and land owned by the community.

Each Zeme village in the North Cachar Hills district has one or two traditional land owners who are called Kadepeo. The Kadepeos' land consists of the entire village sites and some neighbouring hills. For the occupation of village sites for homesteads, the villagers are not required to pay any revenue or rent to the Kadepeos. For the cultivation of Jhum land owned by the Kadepeos, however, each family has to pay a basketful of paddy to the concerned Kadepeo measuring about 5 kg. per annum. In case of natural calamities and on other humanitarian considerations, the payment of revenue may be exempted also. The Kadepeo system is hereditary.

The second type of land system is the clan ownership of land. Each of the six Zeme clans inhabiting the village has

got its own private land demarcated by some natural boundaries. Only the clan members have the exclusive right of cultivating such land.

The third type of land is the Jhum land owned by all the families of the village and on which each family has a right to cultivate.\*

Another important thing which can be observed in the Zeme society is the fact of allowing some families of one village to cultivate Jhum land in another village with the consent of the council of elders. Thus in the Zeme land system although private ownership plays a very significant role, nevertheless, the system is based on mutual help and understanding and also on democratic principles rather than despotism.

It is also very interesting to note that many Zeme families cultivate coffee and tea although the area of cultivation is not so big.

Weaving in loom looms with yarns spun from home grown cotton is a very important cottage industry among the Zeme Nagas. In the Zeme society we can hardly find a woman without having the knowledge of spinning and weaving. Their cloths are full of intricate designs and so they are very beautiful. All the domestic requirements of cloths are met from family looms.

The Zemes rear Mithuns, cows, pigs, goats and birds. These are reared mostly for the purpose of meeting the family requirement of meats for domestic consumptions, observance of religious rituals and socio-economic festivals in the village. Animals and birds in excess to their requirements are sold to the needy villagers and also in the weekly markets.

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6. Bordoloi, B. N., Land ownership and Cycle Migration Among the Zeme Nagas, in the book North East India, edited by S. M. Duby. Delhi, 1978, pages 405-409.

The Zeme Nagas of the North Cachar Hills have been able to maintain their ethnic identity through their distinctive cultural life. Their cultural life finds its manifestation through the celebration of community festivals, their folklores and folk songs, dances and music, traditional dressess and ornaments, etc.

#### A. Festivals.

The Zeme Nagas of the North Cachar Hills observe a number of community festivals which are more or less connected with their primary occupation of agriculture. In the observance of these festivals the members of the Morungs, both of boys and girls, always take the leading parts. Two of the most important community festivals celebrated by the Zemes are described below :

##### (I) Heleibambe.

This festival is celebrated by each Zeme village according to the convenience of the villagers prior to the starting of Jhum cultivation sometime in mid April when monsoon is likely to set in. The Heleibambe festival is celebrated for two days continuously. On the first day Tingkupeu, the village priest, sacrifices a buffalo for the appeasement of Suhprai, the god of crops. The meat of the sacrificed animal is then distributed among all. After a feast in the boys' morungs, the members of the Hengseuki and Leuseuki start dancing and singing which continue throughout the whole night in presence of the villagers. On the second day the young boys and girls sing and dance in the village streets stopping for sometime in front of each household. Prior to the village street singing and dancing, the boys and the girls of the Morungs collect wild plaintain leaves from the nearby forests and distribute to all households in the villages. The main purpose of holding this festival is to appease the crop god Suhprai so that they could have a bumper crop.

##### (II) Siami.

Siami is the harvesting festival observed by the Zeme Nagas of the North Cachar Hills. It is in fact a festival organised by the members of the boys' and girls' Morungs of the village. Like the Bishu festival observed by the neighbouring Dimasa Kacharis, in this festival also the youths are required to get themselves prepared for the observance of this festival much ahead of the time of the actual celebration. Holding of grand feasts with the meats of hunted animals and birds with rice-beer, dancing and singing are the main components of this festival. The earnings of the Morungs by doing physical labour are spent in this festival. In some villages the youths cultivate a patch of Jhum land themselves and whatever earning they could get from the cultivated land, is spent for the celebration of this festival.

This festival continues generally for four days. Brewing of rice-beer in large quantities in the name of each of the family members of a family and drinking it in the bowls made from plaintain leaves on the first day, feasts for the villagers in the Morungs for three days and three nights, presents of self-woven cloths to the boys by the girls, singing and dancing continuously throughout the days and nights by the members of the boys' and girls' Morungs are some of the special features of this festival.

Another interesting episode of this festival is the competition among the boys and girls of the Morungs is to recapitulate the names of plants, trees, flowers, creepers, orchids, medicinal plants, etc, and this is perhaps the most educative aspect of this festival. Those who want to join in this competition must have a liking for all types of vegetation as well as a fair knowledge of them. And this in turn is sure to instil in them a special liking for the objects of nature and indirectly this helps in the preservation of the eco-system as well a environment.

## B. Folk Songs.

The Zeme Nagas of the North Cachar Hills have a good number of folk songs composed by their singers and poets and these have been handed over by one generation to another orally. They have folk songs to besit each occasion and each festival. For example:— they have songs of romance as well as songs of separation, they have songs which are sung by the youths of the boys' Morung while they keep vigil at night addressing the young girls of the village, songs sung in the Jhum cultivation, songs singing the glory of their deities, songs sung in the accompaniment of Endra, a Veena like string instrument, etc.

There are duets also which are sung by the groups of boys and girls. There are war songs and there are songs which describe the individual heroism and adventure. The most popular songs are, however, those which are related to romance.

## C. Dance

Singing and dancing are a part and parcel of the Zeme life. Their dances performed by wearing traditional dresses and ornaments are really colourful. They are quite vigorous with slow rhythmic movements at the beginning and ending with the quickest rhythmic movements. Their dances depicting hunting of wild animals and also of wars are rather dreadful for those who have very little knowledge of their life and culture.

## D. Musical Instruments

The Zeme Nagas have only a few musical instruments of their own. Their drum called Som is quite big in circumference but the length would be about half a metre only. While the crust is made of wood, the covers are made from the buffalo skins. The drum beater is called Somtang. They have two kinds of wind instruments, the flute called Metiam and the flute made from buffalo horn called Buike. They have

only one kind of string instrument like Veena and it is called Endra. They also use a pair of heavily weighted brass metal discs (Gong) called Towai and their sound could be heard even from a long distance.

## E. Dresses and Ornaments

The Zeme Nagas have their own traditional dresses and it has been mentioned earlier that these dresses are woven by the womenfolk in the family lion looms. Most of the cloths they produce are artistically designed. The dye required for colouring the yarn is produced by themselves from the herbs collected from the forests.

They have common as well as separate cloths for unmarried boys and unmarried girls, and for married persons of both sexes.

The unmarried Zeme bucks use a very nicely designed chadar called Npokpai while the married men generally use an artistically designed chadar called Paitek. Male persons use two kinds of Dhutis covering above the knees—while the black one is called Enjingui, the white one is called Heni.

The Zeme women while working in Jhums and at home use a kind of white cloth called Mini like a Skirt or a Mekhela. The unmarried girls use a cloth to cover their head and it is called Npaimang. During dances the girls use Nphaimang to cover the upper part of their body. The women use two types of Chadar called Nphaitik and Imphai. The costliest and the most beautiful chadar used by women is called Nheigianue.

The Zemes' liking for ornaments can be felt only and it can hardly be described. Men and women both equally like to wear their ornaments at all times. One of the costliest ornaments worn by men is Teuba—a necklace made of costly beads and sea-shells. However the costliest ornament worn by men is the Luiteo, a necklace which is also made of very costly beads and sea-shells. The men

also put on a ring necklace made of crowries. Earring made of ordinary beads and several coloured yarns called Kunsai are also put on by them. They not only put on armlets and bracelets made of brass, but anklets made of cane straps called Heke. Among the ornaments used by women mention may be made of Telateu made of different kinds of materials like costly sea-shells, crowrie, beads, etc. It is the proud possession of every Zeme woman. They put on earrings made of coloured yarns. Each Zeme woman also puts on two pairs of heavy bracelets called Ghita.

#### F. Food and Drink.

The staple food of the Zeme Nagas is rice. Rice is generally taken twice daily. Vegetables are taken with rice but Dal is taken scarcely. Meats of hunted animals are preferred by them. Meat of the Mithuns, is, however, the most favourite item. Tea is drunk twice or thrice daily without milk. Rice beer called Ijaduijang is the most favourite drink. It is required for the entertainment of guests, home consumption, in the performance of religious rites and during the community feasts. Food items produced from tender bamboo shoots and preserved in bamboo tubes are very much popular among them.

#### CONCLUSION

The Zeme Nagas of the North Cachar Hills District of Assam are a colourful tribe with their distinctive culture. They have their own dialect. While dealing with the non-Zemes the men use broken Hindi. Educationally and economically their condition is far from satisfactory. Modernism has made very little impact on them. But this does not mean that they are too orthodox and conservative to accept something new. In fact they have come up to accept the development schemes implemented by the N.C. Hills District Council. Scheme like special enrolment drive in the L.P. Schools located in their areas has produced good results. Leadership in the form of District Council

Members, has already emerged. The rugged terrain in which they live has created a sort of geographical isolation and their contact with the outside world is more or less confined to the weekly market days only. Since these markets are situated far away from their habitations, only a certain percentage of the people could attend them at the week ends and are thus exposed to the outside world.

Although the Zemes are somewhat short in their physical structure, they are quite strong and stout. Their complexion is fair. The male persons cut their hair in a round style. The girls also cut the hair in their forehead keeping only a few inches.

Since the Zemes are adaptive to the developmental schemes, it is expected that their economic and educational backwardness will be a thing of the past in due course of time. The name of Rani Gaidulu who fought against the British and who represents the entire Zeliangrong group is a living legend among the Zemes.

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