CHAPTER II

THE ASSAMESE SOCIETY AND THE STUDY AREA

PART A

THE ASSAMESE SOCIETY

2.1 The Area and its Ethnic Composition

The state of Assam extends from 89°42' E to 96°E longitude and 24°8' N latitude to 28°2' N latitude. The total land area of the state is about 78,550 km sq. From a very distant past, Assam is like a highway connecting the rest of India with South East Asia. People belonging to myriad racial stocks have trespassed the area in different phases of time leaving besides their cultural elements which contributed to the growth of composite Assamese culture. The people of Assam are represented by various ethnic groups. They can be broadly divided on the basis of different criteria such as races, language and religion. As the people of rest of India, the people of Assam are also categorized under two broad divisions viz, tribal and the non tribal. (Das, 2003) One section of non-tribal category is defined as schedule caste under the schedule castes and schedule tribes order (Amendment Act 1976, (No, 108 of of 1976, dated the 18th Sept. 1976). Generally the Assamese Hindus are divided into two groups Baman (Brahmin) and the Sudir (Sudras; non Brahmin) (Das 2003,p.12; Sarma 1989, p.52). One noteworthy feature of Assamese society is the non existence of Ksatriyas and Vaishyas in its demographic scenario (c.f. Sarma1989,p.52).
The Assamese Hindus inhabit in the plains region of Assam, which is also a homeland of many tribal and peasant communities. Assamese Hindu peasantry has a distinct identity with their language, culture, religious and social milieu. While speaking of Assamese peasant society, Assamese Muslims and tribal peasants cannot be ignored. (Bhattacharyya. 1990) There are such other Assmese communities as Assamese Sikh (Medhi, 1989) and Assamese Christians also.

Bhattacharyya has noted a few significant characteristics of Assamese society of the plains of Assam. “Assamese Hindu society lies at the fringe area of the Hindu society of India and therefore some differences in certain traits have been observed from the Hindu great tradition.

Firstly, the Assamese Hindus show certain characters that are similar to the great tradition of Indo- Gangetic plains and at the same time also exhibit certain features of the Mongoloid tribes of the region.
Secondly, this intermixing has left an impact on the traditional caste system. The merger of many high caste groups with local tribal groups never really succeed in producing strict hierarchical system (Bhagabati 1989, p.56).

Thirdly in the religious sphere there are some devotional centres at the village or community level which are locally known as namghar (prayer house). The satras (vaishnavite monastaries) are the unique feature of the Assamese Hindu society, which was developed by the great Assamese saint Sankardeva in (1449-1568A.D).

The fourth interesting feature of the Assamese society is its typical agrarian system. Though Britishers entered to Assam in 1826, yet there was not any marked economic development in its economic sphere except the growth of tea industries in Assam. In the post independent period though there was the establishment of some industries in this part of the region yet the traditional agrarian system retains its basis. (c.f. Bhattacharyya,1990)

Goswami (1954) while describing the social structure of an Assamese society has applied the term social structure as “the web of relationships existing between persons and groups of persons in the same village and within a wider area. These relationships are governed by (i) the ties within the elementary or the joint family, (ii) the wider kinship relations by blood and marriage, (iii) the caste group, (iv) the organization of the khel (section, division) and (v) the satra (vaishnavite monastery) institution, of which the prayer hall nam-ghar is a replica in each village”.

2.2 Historical Background of the Assamese Society

Many studies have been conducted so far in order to bring in to light the hoary past of the region which was formerly known as Pragiyotisha or Kamarupa. But, unfortunately owing to the lack of authentic materials, the history of ancient Assam is not very vivid. But there were evidences of existence of heterogeneous groups of people and as such they could not combine together to form one unified culture. But in the medieval period the Assamese culture made its firm basis leading to the growth of the sense of national unity among the people. This period also witnessed the development of society in the spheres of culture, religion and politics. (Rajguru 1966, p.2,3).
Choudhury (1959) “The development of Assamese society and culture took place in three stages ancient, medieval and modern. The period ranging from the earliest time to the 12th century A. D is known as ancient. The medieval period started from the beginning of 13th century A.D to the beginning of 19 century A.D, i.e from the time of the advent of the Ahoms to the advent of the Britishers. At the later part of 10th and 11th century A.D., the political power of Kamrupa became weak when Jaypala of Pala dynasty ascended the throne” (ibid).

“The political history of the period after Jaypala is as obscure as disconnected and the unity of the kingdom was lost until the Ahoms after a long period of contests with their adversaries restored to a great extent the lost political unity of the kingdom”. The Koch leaders, the Ahoms and the Great Vaishnavite Movement during this period contributed towards the development of Assamese society and culture amidst much diversity. The heterogeneous groups of people living in the region were forced to form a homogeneous culture by the means of many political and cultural activities of the period. At the same time, mutual ties continued between the people of the hills and the plains (c.f, Rajguru; 1966).

The social and cultural history of Assam from the thirteen to the beginning of nineteen century, covering a long period of six centuries, witnessed the rise and fall of several kingdoms and dynasties. During this period far reaching changes in political, social, cultural and religious spheres of the people interacting on each other took place. Aryanisation and Hinduisation encouraged by the rulers, the use of the Sanskrit and Prakrit especially the former in courtly transactions, the establishment of pan Indian administrative system, administrative and social laws according to Dharmasastras, performance of yajnas and other Hindu religious ceremonies and rites and the gradual evolution of the Assamese language all these as known from the epigraphic records prior to the thirteen century paved the way for the evolution for the unified and the dominant Hindu society in Assam(Sarma 1989,p.1).

It may be noted here that the name Assam is an English word rendering to the native word Acam, Acom, Asom variently spelt in medieval chronicles. The nomenclature Acam or Acham was used to denote the Tai invaders who migrated to Assam from upper Burma in the early thirteen century having vanquished the local
chiefs and tribes and thus established their supremacy in the eastern part of the country and gradually extended their rule towards the western part along the river Brahmaputra. The Tai invaders were powerful and possessed a strong physique for which they were popularly known as *Acam*, meaning undefeated or unconquerable.

The foundation of the Assamese society or Assamese culture was laid down during the first millennium A.D, by successive ruling families viz the Varman dynasty (4th to 7th centuries), Salastambha Dynasty (7th to 10th centuries) and Brahmapala Dynasty (10th to 12th centuries). (Sarma 1989, p.2)

Considering the issue of ethnic composition of the whole North east India it can be said that the area had witnessed the successive waves of migration through different routes since the prehistoric times. Anthropologists have noticed some negrito strain among the Naga tribes but no such trait is observed among the Assamese people. The next important trait is australoid trait which is noticed among the Khasis and the Syntengs. The other element in the composition of the Assamese people is the Mongoloid element represented by the Tibeto Burmese tribes and castes of Assam. In course of time some of the tribes of this stock accepted Assamese, an Indo Aryan speech but a few others still retain their own speech and dialects. The Indo mongoloids are designated as kiratas in epics and puranas and even in Yogini-tantras a work of late medieval period i.e 16th century. Apart from the mongoloid tribes of Arunachal, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Manipur skirting Assam, the predominance of Mongoloid elements are noticed in all the tribes of the present day Assam i.e, Bodos, Rabhas, Mishings, Kacharis, Chutiyas Dimasas and Karbis (Mikirs) and the Shan tribes including the Ahoms and many other numerically small communities are basically Mongoloid in origin.

After Mongoloids came the Causoids in different waves or batches. The anthropologists have noticed three different types of Caucasian strains in “Indid” Assamese, Mediterranean, Alpino- Armenoid and the Indo-aryans. The “Indid” Assamese are represented by the upper caste Hindus and the Muslims. The Alpino-armenoid are the broad headed people are themselves distinguished from the Mediterraneans. Probably they also entered into Assam at the same time but following a
different route. The characteristics of the alpino-armanoid are rarely noticed among the present Assamese people.

Lastly came the Indo-Aryans characterized by tall statured, long-headed, fair complexioned and pointed nose. They migrated to eastern India probably at the early centuries before Christ. Both Aitareya and Satapatha Brahmana refer to the migration of Aryans to the East beyond the Sadnaira (Karaotya) river. The Kalika-Purana and Yogini-tantra have also stated that the western boundary of ancient Kamrupa was marked by the river Karatoya. They arrived North Bihar by 7th century B.C and after that they flew towards the eatern part. The Caucasoids of both pre-vedic and post-vedic period contributed to the growth of Assamese language and development of the cult of Hinduism among the people (ibid).

Das divided the Assamese people into two major groups ‘Indid’ Assamese and the ‘Mongoloid’ Assamese. Both Aryans and the non Aryans contributed to the origin and development of castes, sub castes and social classes in India. The North eastern India albeit Assam, being predominantly inhabited by Indo-mongoloid people presents a picture of liberalized caste hierarchy. (c.f Sarma 1989, p.36-38)

2.3 The Concept of Family and Kinship in Assamese Society

“In Assamese society ghar (household/family) is the primary residential unit or the smallest kin group. The members of a ghar essentially share a common kitchen while the members of a pariyal (family) may or may not share a common kitchen” (Medhi 1989, p.200). Thus the term pariyal (family) is used in a broader sense than the term ghar. “A family is remained joint as long as the parents and the married sons share a common kitchen, a common household and a common property. But the most essential feature of jointness among the Assamese families is the sharing of a common kitchen. As soon as one married son starts living separately and prepares meal in a separate kitchen, then the original family breaks down that gives rise to a new family. The separation is regarded as complete when the property is divided among or between the sons” (Medhi 1989, p.208). The members of a family are tied together by the bond of kinship. There are various kinds of kin relationship found in an Assamese society. The Assamese people use different local terms to denote different sets of kin
relationship. The term *atmiya* is used in the Assamese society to refer to all the ‘affinal’ and the ‘consanguinal kins’.

The term *mitir – kutum* or *mitra-kutumba* is used to refer to ‘affinal’ and ‘consanguinal’ relatives. The former denotes to the ‘affinal’ relatives while the latter denotes to the ‘consanguinal’ relatives. The members of a *kutumba* are agnatically related to each others or they belong to the same *bamsa* (lineage) and two *bamsa* tied through marriage becomes affines to one another. From an individual’s point of view his matrilateral kins are his father’s affines but he considers them as close cognates which include mother’s father, mother, mother, mother’s brothers and mother’s sisters but their spouses who are affines are not regarded as close cognates. An individual in an Assamese society often refers his mother’s brother’s children and mother’s sister’s children as elder brother or younger brother and elder sister or younger sister. Thus there are no differences between his patrilateral kins and matrilateral kins from an individual perspective. The first classification concentrates on group and second to individual. This corresponds to the distinctions made between lineage relations and kin relations the concept that was put forward by Pritchard (cf., Cantlie 1984; p.25).

The colloquial differences of the term *mitir* (affines) have been observed in the Assamese society. The term *mitir* is widely used by the people of Upper Assam while term *Kurma* (affines) is widely used in the Lower Assam region to refer to the same set of affinal relations. Another word *gyati* is used by the Assamese people which refer the patrilineal kins. These terms have been observed by Medhi in 1989 in Nowgong District and by Bhattacharyya in Kaliabor area of Nagaon District in 1990.

The word *bamsa* (lineage) is used to refer to all the members who descend from a common ancestor. The *bamsa* membership is attained at the birth of an individual and it continues through the male line which includes the patrilineal kins. Daughters and sisters are excluded from a particular *bamsa* as soon as they get married whereas the daughter-in-laws automatically become the *bamsa* member as soon as they enter into the new *bamsa* group (Medhi, 1989).

A descent group in Assamese society traces its origin through male line from 7 to 9 generations and marriage is prohibited within this range or as long as
relationship can be traced. “The members of a descent group are believed to share a common substance which is expressed in terms of *atma* (soul). The soul of three generations are same and so one’s action of good or bad deeds is said to be effected the others. The proximity of the soul becomes flexible beyond three generations, but the link continues to exist up to 7 to 14 generations. There is a belief that if an offering is made to an ancestor, all the agnates of his generations obtain the benefits, which is known as *sapinda* i.e, a rite of investing deceased with the right of relationship with the pre deceased ancestors. It is said that a man by his sins can bring seven generations of his ancestors down from heaven into hell, and there is a curse that, “I will pursue your 14 generations” (Cantlie 1984, p. 29).

### 2.4 Crisis Rites in the Assamese Society

Assamese Hindu society is divided into two sections, the Brahmins and the Sudras. In the Sudra category all the castes are included except the Brahmins. It should be noted that all the castes are to perform a good number of rituals integral to life cycles. However in addition to these the Brahmins perform some more crisis rites to maintain their caste purity.

All the caste groups of Assam perform the following rituals.

**(i) Birth**

Every society has its own way of performing the auspicious occasion of the birth of a child. As soon as a baby boy is born, fish, salt and a paste of some spices is distributed among the relatives and among the neighbours. The significance of fish and salt is that fish stands as a symbol of ‘long life’ and ‘fertility cult’ and salt stands as a symbol for ‘name’ and ‘fame’. Regarding the birth of a baby girl in the Assamese society round shaped sweets are distributed among the kins and the shape represents the symbol of ‘male’. *Ganani* (name giving ceremony) is an important occasion for a baby in the Assamese society. This is performed from 10th-12th day of the birth of a child by determining an auspicious day by an astrologer. The second important function of a child is known as *annaprasana* (solid food giving ceremony), which is celebrated at six or eight months of a baby. This is also an important occasion as the baby is offered with
the first spoon of rice. It is regarded that from the time onwards the baby is able to take solid food. On this special day the food is only taken near to the baby so that the baby can only take the smell. In Hindu scriptures there are certain mentioned days for the celebration of this occasion. The prescribed days are Sunday, Friday, Wednesday and Thursday. The birth day and the birth month are prohibited for this celebration.

(ii) Puberty

In Assamese society, there is a custom to celebrate the transitional phase of a girl from her childhood to the adolescent stage. This celebration is locally known as *tuloni biya* (puberty ceremony). As a girl enters into her first menstruation period she is kept in a separate room for three days. During these days no male member can see her even the father and the brothers are also debarred from seeing her. On the third day *ganana* (astrological counting) is done where an astrologer foresee her future. On the fourth day the female members of the girl’s maternal family come to her house with dress, sweets etc. There the family members along with the neighbouring women bathe the girl in front of a banana sapling. After that she is adorned like a bride and sat in front of a banana plant which is adopted as the symbol of the bridegroom. Many guests are invited in this occasion. The womenfolk make jokes to each other and do some merry makings which are the characteristic features of this occasion.

This occasion is celebrated much pompously among the non Brahmmins of the Assamese society wheares among the Brahmins this celebration is not conducted in such festivity.

(iii) Marriage

According to Hindu scriptures, there are four stages of human life viz, *brahmacharya, garhasthya, vanaprastha and sanyasa*. *Garhasthya* is regarded as most important among these four stages because a society can progress only when people pass through this stage of life. A society depends upon how a person performs his duties during this phase. Marriage therefore can be regarded both as a social and a religious sacrament. There are many religious rites which are to be accomplished in a marriage but besides all religious rites there are many customary rules which are performed by
every community while performing a marriage ceremony. These customary rules vary from society to society.

Negotiation is the first stage of marriage which is done by the affines generally by the mother’s brother or by a distant agnatic member. Here an investigation is done regarding the looks of the girl or the boy, the financial condition character and the other details. After this a visit is arranged to the bride’s or the groom’s house known as ghar cova (seeing the house). After these preliminary processes of marriage, the first formality is made by the groom’s father by visiting the bride’s house. This is followed by the visit of the bride’s father to the groom’s house in order to make the relationship. A few days before the wedding, the groom’s father makes the final visit to the bride’s house to make the arrangements of the wedding by placing a dish of areca nut and pan (areca leaf) before the bride’s family members. There is also a custom to offer a piece of cloth to all the bride’s relatives. (Cantlie1984, p.58, 59) According to (Bhattacharrya, 1990) in Nowgong district, there are certain customs that are noticed only among the non Brahmins of Assamese society. They are thoka pelova (finalizing marriage) and bura biya (performance of marriage ceremony after living together for numbers of years). He observed certain stages of marriage among them viz, thoka pelova, juron (an occasion before one or two days of marriage) novoa (ceremonial bathing), adhibas, daiyandiya (pre wedding ceremony), saptapadi (the bride and the groom move around the sacrificial fire for seven times), khuba-khubi (a story) and athmongola (a feast arrange by the wife givers to the bridegroom).

In Assamese society, a marriage undergoes the following stages along with certain rituals (Sarma Daloi 2003, p .156).

i. Matching of horoscope
ii. Consulting with the family members
iii. Bride selection
iv. Date fixing
v. Jatrar Sandah Khunda i.e, making of flat rice before 6-9 days of marriage.
vi. *Juron* i.e, celebration at the bride’s house before one or two days of marriage when the bride is offered with dresses, ornaments etc from the bridegroom family.

vii. *Ghat sita* (pipkin sprinkling)

viii. *Pani tula* i.e collection of the sacred water.

ix. *Mah haldhi bota* (grinding black gram and turmeric)

x. *Nakh komuwa* (cutting nails by a barber before bathing the bride or the bridegroom)

xi. *Novoa* (ceremonial bathing of the bride and the bridegroom)

xii. *Suwag tola* i.e, the female folk to observe a special ritual at the groom’s house at the time of starting of the groom’s marriage party to the bride’s house and on the arrival at the bride’s house.

xiii. *Bar bora* (religious welcoming of the groom)

xiv. *Akhoi tola* (picking parched rice)

xv. *Ag diya* (sacred welcoming of the bride or the bridegroom with earthen lights, rice and sprinkling water with mango leaves)

xvi. *Angathi lukowa* (a game after performing the marriage rituals)

xvii. *Khuba khubini* (narrating a story to the bridegroom)

xviii. *Athmongola* (a feast arrange by the wife givers to the bridegroom)

xix. *Bar kanyak ghar diya* (arrangement for living together)

In an Assamese society, matching of horoscope is an important event among certain caste groups. Among the Brahmins, the horoscope is generally given to the groom’s family by any relatives from the bride’s house. If the horoscope matches properly then the groom’s family members, specially the elderly person along with the
groom’s parents visit the bride’s house. In case of non Brahmin proposal for marriage generally initiated from the boy’s side.

Among some non Brahmins when the groom’s family members visit the bride’s house with some gifts then it is regarded that the marriage is fixed. When the groom’s family members visit the bride’s house with sweets, milk and banana, then it is regarded as a good sign which indicates a positive gesture from the part of the groom’s family. This custom is known as *thoka pelova*, in Assamese society. Before 5 or 7 days of marriage both in the bride and in the groom’s family there is a custom of *jatrar sandah khunda* (grinding rice or flattened rice). Grinding is customarily done by the married women of the family. Married women from both the paternal and the maternal side can take part but widows are debarred from participation in this function. This is an occasion of merry makings where the women usually sing traditional marriage songs *biya nam* (traditional Assamese marriage songs depicting the happy union between *Radha – Krishna* or *Rama - Sita*). Before grinding they use to put vermillion spots on the *dheki* (husking lever). The grinding products are served to groom in the bride’s house soon after marriage and it is served to the bride after she enters the groom’s house. It is also offered to the Brahmin widows and the priests.

Before one or two days of marriage a celebration is held at the bride’s house. The people of upper Assam in Guwahati termed the occasion as *juron* i.e. celebration at the bride’s house before one or two days of marriage when the bride is offered with dresses, ornaments etc from the bridegroom family, while among the people of lower Assam it is known as *telar bhar*. On this special day many relatives from the groom’s side visit the bride’s house. “There is a custom of exchanging silver areca boxes containing gold, silver and areca nuts between the groom’s mother and the bride’s mother. Severence and exchanges are the important criteria of marriage rites” (Cantlie 1984,p. 63). They carry with them some useful materials for the bride. These are hair oil, vermillion, cloths, mirror, comb along with bananas, coconuts, betelnuts, fish and a gourd. Besides three vessels full of rice, mustard oil and milk are also taken along with them. The significance of this day is that either the groom’s mother or the groom’s brother’s wife use to put *sindur* (vermillion) to the bride’s forehead and parting. This is done by pouring coconut oil to the forehead of the bride over a silver
arecanut placed over a golden ring. Then they comb the hairs of the bride with the comb taken by them and show her face in the mirror. After this the bride is adorned with the ornaments and the white silk cloths. This is followed by bowing before the assembled guests in order to receive the blessings (ibid).

According to Uma Kanta Sarma, an erudite Sanskrit scholar, about 50 years back the occasion was known as *dabel bhar*, the womenfolk were debarred from going to the bride’s house and only the male relatives from the groom’s family used to carry the necessary requirements for the occasion. Putting vermillion which is the important function of this occasion was thus performed by the female married relatives of the bride’s family. “Those male person from the groom’s family who carried the *bhar* (required items) to the bride’ house were termed as *bhal manuh* (good person). They used to uncover the bridal cloths and ornament and the bride was adorned with these items by her female relatives” (Sarma Daloi 2003, p.156).

In the day time of the marriage day *sraddha* (a Hindu ritual of offering made to nine fore fathers’) is performed both in the bride’s and the groom’s house. Here the mother along with some other married women use to go to the bank of river or pond to fetch water which is regarded as holy water and the water is used to bath the bride and the groom along with a homemade turmeric paste. Both the bride and the groom are taken near to banana saplings by the sister’s husband or maternal uncle or by the elder brother in their respective houses. At the night time of marriage, the groom comes to the bride’s house along with his friends and relatives. He is especially greeted either by the father or by the sister of the bride. On that day the groom is considered to be the symbol of Lord Vishnu (Hindu God) The *kanyadan* (religious gifting of the daughter by the father to the groom) in an Assamese society is performed by some rituals with the help of a priest. There is a custom to offer some brass utensils (dish, bowl, glass) by the father to the groom which is known as *dan* while gifting his daughter to the groom. The bride’s younger brother has a special role where he has to offer *akhoi* (parched rice) to his sister and showers his blessings to his beloved sister.
(iv) Death

At the death of parents, it is a custom in the Assamese society that the funeral pyre is conducted by the eldest son. In case if the eldest son is unable to perform it, then the task is performed by any other son of the family. But at the absence of sons in a family the task is performed by any patrilateral kin. Regarding the death of parents, the sons, daughter in laws and the unmarried daughters have to maintain certain taboos. These taboos actually determine the proximity and the distance of relationship in a society. Traditionally in the first four days the sons, daughter-in-laws and the unmarried daughters have to observe complete fasting; even water is not allowed to drink only by the sons. But from the fourth day they are allowed to take water and in the evening time they can take jaha chaul (jaha rice) with vegetables and ghee. Mention may be made that traditionally if even one meal is taken on the day of death of the father or mother, they can break the fasting on the 5th day. Within these days they can’t even sleep on bed. The sons have to lie on ground over a cot. They are even debarred from combing and wearing sandals. They have to wear a particular white cloth dhoti (a piece of white cloth use to wear by the Assamese men folk) and can’t change it for 10 days. They have to put on the wet dhoti even after bathing. It is believed that as they are debarred from drinking water, water thus enter into the body when they put on the wet cloths. The married daughters are not obliged to follow these norms. Mention may be made that for one year the sons are to observe the taboo of taking meal anywhere outside except in their paternal or maternal families. In Assamese society, upto 10 days many kins and non kins usually visit the deceased house to express their respect to the departed soul and offer some edible food items jasa that are to be taken during this period. These food items include fruits, peas, rice, milk, ghee, brinjals, potatoes etc. On the 10th day a ritual is performed and the sons have to shave their heads. The barber who performs the task is offered with a bhojani (special offerings). The cloths that used by the sons during these 9 days are used to offer to the barber.

The Brahmins perform the adya shrandha ( first vedic ritual after death) ceremony on the 11th day and people are invited on this occasion. This ritual is performed generally by the eldest son who performs the funeral pyre of the father or the mother. In case the eldest son is unable to perform, then any other son can perform it.
Again in case of absence of sons in a family, in that case the ritual is performed by any patrilineal male kin. In case of non Brahmins of Assamese society, traditionally the ceremony is conducted on the 30th day from the death. On the 12th day the Brahmins perform an occasion called sapindan. On the 13th day among the Brahmins matsya sparsha (feast) is organized by the deceased family members. Fish and meat are the specialty of this feast. From this day all the descent members can take the non vegetarian food. In case of the non Brahmins, this feast is organized on the 30th day from the death. The 15th day is known as na-pak-jura, where the family members of the deceased start cooking as before. This custom is also popular among the Brahmins of Assamese society.

(v) Tonsuring Ceremony

This ceremony is particularly confined to the Brahmins of the Assamese society which is locally known as surakaran. The hairs of a Brahmin boy is not cut normally before this ritual. Instead is kept long. At the age of two and half or five years of the boy, a religious function is held in the family for the cutting of hair. On the day of the function some rituals are done. In the morning shradha of the napurusha (nine forefathers) is performed by the father of the boy with the help of a priest. After that holy water is collected from a nearby pond or river by the women folk in earthen pots covered by gamosa (Assamese traditional towel) and these pots are kept in the place where the vedic rituals are done. The father under the guidance of a priest cut a portion of hair from three sides of the head. Then only the barber after performances of the rituals shaves the head clean. The barber is offered with a bhojani (special offerings). Thereafter the mother along with the other womenfolk of the family take the boy to a banana sapling which has already been planted for the purpose. There he is bathed with the holy water at first by the mother and then by the other womenfolk of the bamsa. The boy is dressed in anakata (hand woven single piece of cloth), dhoti (traditional dress of Assamese boys), and gamosa used as turban and a garland prepared by the priest is put on the head of the boy. After that some rituals are performed by the priest in presence of the father and the mother of the boy and thus the ceremony is completed.
Sacred Thread Ceremony

Like surakaran, sacred thread ceremony (literally known as sub eye ceremony) and locally known as lagundiyani is also practiced by the Brahmins of the Assamese society. This ceremony is marked by putting a sacred thread by the Brahmin boys which is also termed as dwija (second birth). Adhibas i.e, a especial rite performed on the eve of some auspicious occasion; is done on the previous day. The boy is made to wear the sacred thread by the father by performing the vedic rituals by the guidance of a priest. Bhikha (alm) is offered by the mother and then by the other women members of the family. The items of bhikha include rice, potatoes, ghee, brinjal and dress like dhoti, gamocha etc. The dress offered by the mother is made to wear by the boy. He wears dhoti and takes a branch of palas tree as support while walking. The boy wants to leave the house for learning. But his father tempts him to stay at house by offering many luxurious things as well as to arrange his marriage etc. Gayatri mantra (vedic hymns) is taught by the priest and the father covers themselves by a large piece of cloth so that others cannot see them. The sacred thread is prepared by the grand mother or some elderly lady of the paternal family from raw cotton beforehand. The boy is to remain in fasting on the day time taking one meal in the evening prepares with the alms, sleeping on the thatched bed on the floor in a separate room. In these days he cannot be seen or touched by any women. He is to bathe three times a day and chant gayatri mantra. On the fourth day the fasting period ends and the guests are invited for the occasion.
PART B

PROFILE OF THE STUDY AREAS

The study on Assamese family structure and kinship network has been conducted in two contexts urban and rural. For the urban aspect of the study, data has been collected in Guwahati which happens to be the only metropolitan city of Assam as well as the entire North East India, and the rural sample is collected from a village called Dobok 1 situated in Kamrup Rural District of Assam.

GUWAHATI

![Map 2.2: Map of Guwahati](https://www.mapsofindia.com)

2.5 Location

Guwahati is popularly known as the ‘gateway to North East India’, ‘city of Temples’ or the ‘Light of the East’. The city falls within the state of Assam and is included in the lower Assam region under Kamrup Metropolitan District. The area is 216 km² (83 sq mi). Guwahati is now the largest city of Assam and can be regarded as one of the fastest growing cities of India.
In ancient time the city was known as Pragjyotishpura. Guwahati lies between the banks of Brahmaputra River and the foothills of Shillong plateau. L.G.B airport is situated at the west, Narengi at the east, Noth Guwahati in the North.

The local Govt. of Guwahati is Guwahati Municipal Corporation covering an area under its administration of 216 km (83sq km). Guwahati Municipal Development Authority is a planning body of the metropolitan area. Guwahati is the second largest metropolitan city after Kolkota in Eastern area.

2.6 Etymological Meaning

The name Guwahati is derived from the two words Guwa meaning areca nut and hati meaning market. In the historical time the place was known as Pragjyotishpura which means the Light of the East.

2.7 Geography

Lying between the Brahmaputra and Shillong Plateau it stretches the river Bharalu which is a small tributary of Brahmaputra. The city Guwahati is surrounded by hills around its three sides except where the Bharalu discharges into Brahmaputra. The Nilachal Hills lies at the eastern side, Chitrachal Hills at the northern side and Narakasura Hills at the southern side.

2.8 History

From the epigraphical account the city was also the capital of the ancient kingdoms. According to Mahabharata it was the capital of the King Narakasura and Bhagadutta. Many impotant temples are situated in Guwahati which withhold their own myths and legends. The great Kamakhya temple lies in the Nilachal Hills is an important seat of tantric and Vajrayana Buddhism. The famous Navagraha temple in the Chitrachal Hills is well known as astrological temple. Many such other temples are there in Guwahati which have their own significance.
(i) Ancient Period

The city had its origin probably during the 4th century A.D, according to the evidences of excavation of Ambari site. During that time the city was known as Pragjyotishpura, and was the capital of Assam under the Varman Dynasty. From the account of Hieun Tsang during the 7th century A.D, the city stretched about 30 li, under the ruling period of Bhaskar Varman of Varman Dynasty. The city remained as the capital of Assam till 10th-11th century A.D. From the archaeological remains of the Ambari site another noteworthy feature that was revealed was that the city was the centre of many economic pursuits from 9th-11th century A.D.

(ii) Medieval Period

During this period the Ahom Kings appointed the Borphukans to undertake the civil and military charges of the lower Assam region. The residence of the Borphukans was located in the present Fancy Bazar Area and the office or the council hall known as Dopdar was situated at the west of the Bharalu stream. The personal secretary of the Borphukans was the Mazindar Baruah. The residence of the personal secretary was the present day Deputy Commissioner’s residence. The Ahoms therefore succeeded in setting up the administrative machinery in the region. During their reign the Mughals attempted to invade Assam seventeen times but were defeated at the hands of the Ahom rulers in the battle of Itakhuli and the Battle of Saraighat. Lachit Borphukan fought valiantly in the battle of Saraighat in 1671 to drive away the Mughal counterpart from capturing Assam and thus his name became famous in the history of Assam. There was a boatyard at the Brahmaputra which was probably used by the Ahoms. The Ahoms also constructed many temples, ramparts etc. in the city.

(iii) Modern Period

The Burmese invaded Assam in 1817 and continued their rule till 1826. The Burmese rule in Assam continued for a very short span of time. During this period the Britishers invaded Assam and the Burmese were defeated by the Britishers in the first Anglo Burmese War. Thus the city became a part of British Empire through the Yandaboo Treaty signed in 24 February 1826.
After that the city witnessed the freedom movements under the active participation of many freedom fighters as Tarun Ram Phukan etc.

2.9 Urban Morphology

The city Guwahati is a developing city and it has been expanding its area in course of time. The older areas of the city are Panbazar, FancyBazar, Paltan Bazar and Uzan Bazar. From these centres place the city has curled a good seizure of area towards east, west and southern side. The southern Guwahati region covering the area as Ganeshguri, Beltola, Panjabari, etc., forms a sub centre. On the other hand Fancy Bazar is the hub surrounding the capital area Dispur. The other areas like Ulubari, Lachit Nagar, Chandmari, and Silpukhuri are also considered as newly developed areas. The older areas still act as the facilitator to the urban growth. Panbazar is regarded as the educational hub, while Paltan Bazar is the hub of transportation and hotels. On the other hand Fancy Bazar is the hub of commercial activities. Uzanbazar consists of the administrative units and is regarded as the oldest residential area in the city.

One of the most important corridors of the city is the (G S) Road, Guwahati Shillong Road which is 15 km away from the centre. Many commercial units have developed along this road, besides many newly developed residential complexes.

The other important corridor extends towards east which connects Noonmati and Narengi. The VIP road similarly connects Zoo Road to the eastern corridor which leads to the development of many residential areas in and around.

Recently under a Project undertaken by Ministry of Urban Development, Guwahati is planned to develop into a smart city, with the continuous electric supply, developed transportation system, advance medical amenities and other hi-tech facilities. Guwahati is one of the 98 Indian cities which are planned to develop into smart cities, which will certainly enhance the lifestyles of the city dwellers to a great extent.

The High Court is situated in Guwahati which controls the judiciary system of the whole of Assam including Nagaland, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. The high court was first established in Shillong in 5th April 1948 but in 14
August 1948 it was shifted to Guwahati. The court of District and Sessions Judge also exist in the city.

Table no 2.10 Guwahati city populations 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City + Out Growths</td>
<td>962,334</td>
<td>498,450</td>
<td>463,884</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City Population</td>
<td>957,352</td>
<td>495,362</td>
<td>461,990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literates</td>
<td>793,360</td>
<td>423,122</td>
<td>370,238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children (0-6)</td>
<td>90,029</td>
<td>46,401</td>
<td>43,628</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Literacy (%)</td>
<td>91.47 %</td>
<td>94.24 %</td>
<td>88.50 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the provisional reports of the census of India 2011, the total population of Guwahati city is 957,352 of which 495,362 are males and 461,990 are females respectively. But the Guwahati Metropolitan population which includes the city’s out growth is 962,334 of which 498,450 are males and 463,884 are females.

Table no 2.11 Guwahati religions 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>815,499</td>
<td>84.74 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims</td>
<td>119,825</td>
<td>12.45 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jain</td>
<td>9,193</td>
<td>0.96 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>8,913</td>
<td>0.93 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Stated</td>
<td>3,813</td>
<td>0.40 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikh</td>
<td>3,449</td>
<td>0.36 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>1,495</td>
<td>0.16 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>0.02 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source of data: census of Assam 2011

As per as the 2011 census report Hinduism has the highest followers of (84.74%), the next is the Islam with (12.45%) followers. (0.93% ) Christian population
is present in the city followed by (0.96%) Jainism, (0.36%) Sikhism and (0.36%) Buddhism. (0.02%) mentioned as ‘other religion’ and approximately (0.40%) are mentioned as ‘No particular Religion’.

**The Rural Setting: Dobok 1**

The village is known as Dobok 1, which is 60 km away from Guwahati and 13 km away from Rangia town. The village is one of the 90 villages that falls within the jurisdiction of Rangia Police station. It is the 10th most populous village under the Rangia Police station. The area of the village is roughly about 3.2 km. The four boundary of the village are Ghotola or Maguri village in the east, Sanmaguri village in the west, Issha Koniha in the north and Dimu Guruka village in the south. The Boromboi River passes near the village.

![Map 2.3 Notional map of Dobok 1](image-url)
2.12 Etymological Meaning

According to the oral history of the people in the ancient times a good number of people inhabited around the ‘Toragiri Beel’ which was a marshy land at that time. Thus the village was later on nomenclatured as Dobok which means pitani (marshy land). The village was surrounded by paddy fields all around and thus the agriculture was the main source of income of the people. But unfortunately the agricultural fields were inundated by water in the rainy seasons and the agriculturists had to face an undepictable plight. But under the ministership of Siddhi Sarma Bengeri Jan was erected in the area which brought a sigh of relief to the people. The other important tasks during his time was the construction of two PWD roads from Rangia to Hajo and from Baharghat to Kamalpur. These two major developments in the area enabled to change the life styles of the people to a great extent.

2.13 Description of the Village

The village Dobok 1 comprises of both the Assamese Hindu and the Assamese Muslim population. The whole population is distributed under number of hamlets. But the present study is concentrated only to the Assamese Hindu population of Dobok 1. There are 10 hamlets that spread over the area. They are Hira hamlet, Muslim hamlet, Borolimara hamlet, Saloi hamlet, Suparhati hamlet, Pukhuripar hamlet, Dighartola Saloi hamlet, Fakirtola Muslim hamlet, and L.P School Hamlet and Koch hamlet.

The roads of the village are gravel roads except the main road of Dimu Dobok. The village lies in between the marchy land.

(i) Dwellings

The houses lie lineally at both the sides of the roads. Maximum houses in the village are of the Assam type pattern and lie close to each other. There are a few families who dwell in thatched house belonging to poor economic background. There are numbers of lanes and bylanes leading to the interior of the village.
(ii) Flora and Fauna

Different types of trees like banyan, kadam, moz, simalu, jori, mangoe, star fruit, jack fruit, coconut, arecanut, and bamboo grooves are abundantly found in the village. Besides every household is seemed to have its own bari (vegetable garden) and the orchard at the backyard.

The commonly available fauna in the village are cows, goats, pigeons, ducks and hens. The hens are not domesticated by the Assamese Hindus of the village but are especially domesticated by the people belonging to Muslim community of the village.

(iii) Educational Institutes

There are four primary vernacular schools and one Madrassa School in the village. The children of the village are admitted to these schools. Many passed out students from these schools are now holding white collar jobs even in different parts of India. Dobok primary School is one of the oldest of all the primary schools under the Rangia sub-division established in 1866. There is also one library that exists in the village.

(iv) Health Care Centers

Koniha Prathamik hospital is situated 1 km away from the village. A primary health centre is at a reachable distance from the village. There are also two 108 services. Therefore the villagers use to go these centers for any health related problems.

(v) Places of Worship

Two Bisohori (Goddess Manasa) temples are found in the village, the reason is that some years back a section of villagers made themselves separated from the rest of the villagers by constructing the temple in the same village. The front part of the temple is termed as sabha ghar where the villagers use to perform nam prasangas (devotional songs) on different religious occasions. There are a few families who are the disciples of Krishna Guru and they debarred themselves from entering into the temple premises.
The important religious functions that are performed by the villagers are the Basanti puja, Manasa puja and Shiva puja (Hindu rituals). One interesting feature of the village is that they practice the cult of ‘animal sacrifice’ especially the buffaloes which is termed as bor boli (big sacrifice) but it takes place only at the request of any family which is known as manas kora. But the Brahmin families of Dobok use to make yearly sacrifice. In such yearly occasion, they generally use to sacrifice the goats, gourd and pigeon.

(vi) Village Shops

There are three shops in the village where the goods of daily needs of the people are available. The items include biscuits, snacks, soap, tooth paste, tooth brush, match box etc. But the prices are slightly higher than the price of the shops in the village centre and the weekly markets. Therefore the villagers use to go to Dimu Dobok sak (village-centre), which is 1 km away from the village in order to hire a tempo or a bus. Numbers of shops are also there in the area wherefrom the people can cater their basic needs. Pawara market which is a periodical market sits in every Tuesday and Saturday where people gather in large number to purchase their necessary items.

(vii) Water supply

There is a public water supply facility which was introduced in 1970. Two communal ponds are also there in the village. Besides every household have its own ring wells or tube wells in the compound.

(viii) Sanitary Condition

The sanitary condition of the people of the village is almost good. The villagers maintain a healthy and clean sanitation system.

(ix) Burial Ground

Most of the people of the village have a large amount of homestead land. The villagers therefore use to perform the funeral rites at the backyard of their homestead land. Thus there is no cremation ground in the village.
2.14 Kamrup District Population Trend 2011

Out of the total population of Kamrup District according to 2011 census 9.38% resides in the urban area while 90.62% population lives in the rural areas.

The total population of the urban area is 142,394, of which 72,321 are males and 70,073 are females. The actual number of literates in the urban area is 113,537, of which 60,612 are males and 52,925 are females respectively.

In case of rural population of Kamrup District according to 2011 census report, the total population is 1,375,148 (90.62%) of which 706,140 are males and 669,008 are females. Among the total literates 80.10% are males while 67.96% are females. In actual number 881,782 people are literates in the rural areas of which 489,607 are males and 392,175 are females respectively.

Sources of data: census report 2011

Fig. No. 2.1 Rural urban Kamrup